

UNTIL HIM  
BOOK FOUR

# TALON

*until*

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AURORA ROSE  
REYNOLDS

UNTIL TALON

*AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS*

**Published by AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS**

**2020**

## **Table of Contents**

[Until Talon](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Books By Aurora Rose Reynolds](#)

[About The Author](#)

*until*  
**TALON**

UNTIL HIM BOOK FOUR

NEW YORK TIMES AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AURORA ROSE  
REYNOLDS

Copyright © 2020 ARR-INC. E-Book and Print Edition

Cover Image by Michelle Lancaster

Cover design by Letitia Hasser

Designs Formatted by CP Smith

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used factiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons or living or dead, events or locals are entirely coincidental.

The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/ Use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owner.

All rights reserved.

*Jessica, I appreciate your support and friendship more than you know.*

# CHAPTER 1

MIA

I TAP MY pen against the top of my desk as I watch the couple across the room argue. The man shaking his head, the woman waving a hand around, while the little boy on her hip kicks his tiny feet to get down so he can run around with his two sisters currently playing a game of tag. I've been working with Annie and Sam for a month. Every single week, they come in, ask me to take them for a test drive, and have me run numbers on the minivan Annie has her eye on, and every week, they leave after arguing for twenty minutes. If Annie had her way, they would be driving home today in her new car. If Sam had his way, his wife would stop bugging him for a new car and be happy with the hooptie she currently owns, and then she'd hand over the down payment she saved, so he could get the truck he's been eyeing.

*If I were Annie, I would tell Sam to shove it and get myself a new car and maybe a new man.*

"What do you think the chances are they're going to buy today?" my sales manager Ken asks, leaning his hip against my desk while crossing his arms over his chest, watching the couple across the room.

"She won't pull the trigger unless he gives her the go-ahead. So I'd say it's not going to happen," I admit, looking at her dream ruby-red hybrid minivan on my computer screen. I wish she would put her foot down and tell him that she deserves a new car. She's the one in the relationship who makes the money, and she's still kicking ass at being a mom. If the roles were reversed and he was the breadwinner, she would tell him to get a new truck or whatever he wanted.

But that's the difference between men and women. We women are always bending and breaking to take care of the people we love, and that isn't always reciprocated. Maybe in another hundred years things will actually change.

A hand rests on my shoulder, and I look up at Ken. “Tell her I’ll give her three thousand toward her down payment. Maybe that will help sway her,” he says before pushing off my desk. “I’m gonna go get lunch. Want anything?”

“No, thanks. I brought lunch with me,” I tell him, and he dips his chin before walking away. I watch him go while letting out a breath. I never thought I’d be selling cars, but then again, I never thought I’d be living in Tennessee. I moved here after my sister called, telling me that she needed me after her husband confessed to cheating and she kicked him out of the house. I came thinking I’d be here for a few weeks, I’d help my sister get situated, and then go back to Montana. That was six months ago.

The first month, I used up my savings, because Cece was behind on bills, and a roof over your head, electricity, and food are kind of a necessity. My second month, I knew I needed a job, but my CNA license wasn’t easily transferable, so I applied anywhere and everywhere. Back home, I worked at an assisted living facility and had no sales experience whatsoever. Still, Ken took a chance on me and offered me a job, and surprisingly, I’ve done okay for myself.

The sound of thunder pulls me from my thoughts, and I get up from behind my desk. I’m not sure any amount of money will change Annie’s mind, but it won’t hurt to let her know about Ken’s offer. I head across the tile floor and cringe when I hear Sam hiss at Annie for being stupid about wanting such an expensive car. “Annie? Sam?” I cut in, and they both turn to look at me—Annie with a forced smile, Sam with the same pout on his face his son is currently sporting. “My boss just wanted me to let you know he’s willing to give you three thousand toward your down payment,” I say then smile down at one of their daughters as she uses me to protect herself from her sister.

“Really?” Annie whispers before looking at her husband. “That’s amazing, isn’t it, honey?”

“Yeah, amazing,” he mutters, looking at his son when he reaches for him. He takes him from his wife and places him on the ground.

“He doesn’t have shoes on, Sam.” Annie glares at her husband before chasing after the boy and picking him back up to hold him on her hip once more.

Feeling the tension coming off the two of them, I say quietly, “I’ll give you two a few minutes to talk about it.”

Annie blows a chunk of her blonde hair out of her face. “Thanks, Mia.”

I nod and walk away, when all I really want to do is take her kids with me to give her a break for a few minutes. I sit at my desk and watch them continue to argue then jump when a shrill siren begins to blare. I grab my phone, the source of the sound, and when I look at the screen, my eyes widen as I read the tornado warning for the area. I jump up with my heart pounding, not sure what to do.

When I notice no one else reacting, I walk quickly to my coworker Scott’s cube when I see him at his desk. He holds up his finger when I pass through the door as he continues to talk on the phone.

“There’s a tornado,” I hiss at him, holding up my cell for him to see the screen.

He covers the mouthpiece of the phone and smiles at me. “’Tis the season. It’s fine, Mia, just a warning. You’ll learn they happen all the time.”

“Oh.” I rest my hand over my pounding heart, willing it to calm to normal as he goes back to his call.

I leave his cube and walk across the tile floor to look outside through the glass at the black sky and heavy rain. In Montana, we don’t have tornados. We have huge snowstorms in the winter, but besides that, we don’t normally have to worry about natural disasters. I guess this is just one more thing I’m going to have to get used to living here in Tennessee.

“Mia.” Annie touches my arm, and I turn to look at her. “Are you okay?”

Darn, she really is sweet. “Yeah, I’m fine.” I reach out to touch her son’s cheek, and he latches onto my finger with his little hand. “Did you and Sam have a chance to talk?”

Her chin drops to her chest, and she looks at her son, saying in that tone babies seem to love, “I think we’re going to wait a little longer.”

“That’s okay,” I assure her, tickling her son under his chin, and smile when he giggles. “I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

She looks at me once more then at her husband, who is on his phone, with their girls a few feet away stuffing their pockets full of the snacks we have out. “I’m sorry, Mia. I don’t want you to feel like I keep wasting your time.”

“You can come see me every day, and I still wouldn’t feel like you’re wasting my time,” I assure her.

“Thank you.” She sighs when her son tugs down the top of her shirt so he can grab her boob.

“Mom life is no joke,” I repeat something my sister says almost daily.

She laughs, grabbing her son’s hand, then asks, “Do you have kids?”

“No, but my sister has three, and she’s a fricking rock star in my eyes. I don’t know how you guys do it. I can barely take care of myself and my two dogs.”

“Dogs are harder than kids.”

“I’ll have to agree to disagree with you on that one. I’ve seen the damage my three nieces can do in five minutes. While it takes my pups Mercury and Retro five minutes to get up off their beds most days.”

She laughs, lifting her son up to her shoulder, and he rest his little head there as his eyes fight to stay open. “Thanks for putting up with us today. I’m going to get him and my girls home.”

“Tell your husband to put the kids to bed tonight and take a bath or do something for yourself.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” she lies with a smile then shouts her girls’ names along with her husband’s. A few minutes later, the five of them run across the parking lot, trying to avoid getting soaked, and then I watch them squeeze into her tiny car.

As they drive off, I scan the still dark sky then pull my attention away from it when the doors to the dealership ding as they open. The first thing I notice is a blue Grateful Dead T-shirt stretched across a muscular chest, the short sleeves showing off a full arm of tattoos. My eyes travel up, and my heart skips a beat. I’ve seen good-looking men before. I’ve even dated a few of them. But I’ve never had a man make me want to pinch myself to see if I’m dreaming. I don’t know if it’s his sun-kissed skin, dirty-blond hair, chiseled jaw, the dimple in his chin, or his blue eyes, but the man with his gaze locked on mine looks like the kind of man you’d see on the cover of a rock and roll or Harley magazine. He walks toward me slowly, his boots sounding heavy on the tile floor, the sound putting me on edge. I shift uncomfortably as his eyes search mine like I’m somehow familiar.

“Hi, can I help you?” our receptionist Mandy greets him, stepping in front of me.

I blink as our connection is severed and release the breath I didn’t know I was holding. I hear him rumble something, but I can’t make out his words over the sudden sound of the glass windows shaking and the doors banging open. I turn, and my stomach bottoms out as I watch through the haze of

windblown rain as a car stopped at the stoplight on the road gets lifted off the ground and slams into a truck next to it.

“Oh my God.” I stand stuck in place as people yell around me to take cover. I try to get my feet to move, but the chaos outside has me frozen. When one of the cars in the parking lot is lifted off the ground, I turn to run, but before I even have a chance to pivot, I’m lifted off the ground, my stomach hitting a shoulder, making my breath come out on a grunt as my body bounces.

I latch onto the waist of the man holding me upside down as what sounds like a waterfall gets louder and my hair whips around me. I hear people yell and scream, and I squeeze my eyes closed. Then a door slams, and I’m dropped to my feet. When I open my eyes, I blink against the dark then whimper as I’m pushed to the ground and crushed under the weight of the man who was holding me.

The building around me groans, and the walls seem to shake as I latch onto my savior and bury my face in his chest. One large hand cradles the back of my head, the other circling my neck, holding me secure. The fear in my chest begins to decrease as the deafening sound dies to a low rumble, but my heart still pounds like it’s attempting to escape the confines of my ribcage.

“It’s over.” The soft words spoken against the side of my head let me know I’m okay, but fear has me unable to move, unable to release my hold on the shirt I’m clinging too. I hear people moving around, and then a moment later, light filters into the dark room when the door is opened. A car from the lot is on its side right outside the door, and the wall beyond it is gone. The man on me gets up and I glance around realizing that we are in the storage room in the middle of the building, one of the few rooms in the dealership without windows.

“Is everyone okay?” My voice shakes as I look around at my coworkers, all of them looking shell-shocked but alive and unharmed.

“Come on.” The man who was holding me urges me to my feet, and then before I can take a step, he picks me up.

Without thinking, I wrap my arms around his neck and hold my breath as he carries me over and around the debris littering the ground. “Thanks,” I say quietly as he places me on my feet in the middle of the sales room, and his large, warm hand finds mine, giving it a squeeze.

I look around, stunned by the destruction surrounding me. Cars are upside down, one whole side of the building is gone, and the recently planted trees and shrubs that surrounded the newly built dealership are uprooted and now lying about, some through car windows, others stuck in the walls like odd pieces of art.

My feet start to move me into action the moment I hear sirens off in the distance, a reminder that others might've been hurt. This area of town is bustling with traffic, shoppers and people traveling through to get to the restaurants and stores nearby.

"Hold up."

I stop when I'm pulled back and look over my shoulder to meet a set of concerned blue eyes. "We need to help." The words come out harsh because of the tightness in my throat, and his eyes soften on mine.

"All right, but stick close."

I nod, and he moves with me out the doors that are shattered, then we both head toward the road to check the people in their cars.

The first car I come to has an elderly woman behind the wheel with a gash above her eye. I open her door and quickly strip off the blouse I'm wearing over a tank top. "Ma'am," I call, my heart pounding. I can see she's breathing, but she hasn't even flinched. "Help is coming." I press the cream material against the wound and start to squat down just outside her open door but freeze when she quickly grabs onto my wrist.

"Please don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere," I assure her, smoothing her hair away from her pale, wrinkled face, relieved she's awake.

"Fuck," I hear the guy still behind me hiss, and I tip my head back toward him. When his eyes meet mine, my heart flutters. "Stay here. I'll be back."

"Okay." I nod, and a moment later, he's gone. With a shake of my head, I focus on the woman still holding onto me like I might disappear.

"It's okay. Help is coming," I say the only thing I can, hoping it will bring her some comfort.

"I don't want to be alone." Her words make my heart ache.

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise." She nods then lets out a tired breath and closes her eye. "What's your name?"

"Grace." She opens her uninjured eye to look at me once more. "What's your name? You don't sound like you're from around here," she says then

continues on a mutter, “not that it matters anymore. Nowadays, no one is from around here.”

I smile. “I’m Mia, and you’re right. I’m not from here. I’m actually from Montana.”

“Big Sky Country.”

“Yeah.” I laugh.

“I always wanted to see Montana.”

“It’s not too late.” I blot her chin when blood dribbles down the side of her face.

She laughs, patting my hand and reminding me of my own grandmother. “I’m old, darlin’. It takes me days now to work up the courage to face traffic to go get groceries. I couldn’t handle getting on an airplane.”

“You’re only as old as you feel.”

“Well, I feel old as dirt.” She sighs, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the headrest. Not sure what to do, I tip my head back to look at the sky above me, finding it blue with a few fluffy clouds, like the storm was something I imagined. I bite my lip nervously then look around to see if there is anyone nearby, but no one is close.

“Grace,” I call her name, but she doesn’t respond, and my stomach fills with unease. “Grace?” I grab her hand and squeeze.

“Yeah?” she answers, peeking at me, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I think I need to go get you some help,” I tell her, not feeling even a little comfortable leaving her, but I think I need to. I can see the cut above her eye, but she might be more injured than I know. “I promise I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay,” she agrees, and I lift her hand to hold my blouse against her eye.

I start to stand, but a hand rests on my shoulder, stopping me. I tip my head back, coming face-to-face with an older man in a police uniform. “She needs help.”

He nods then leans into the car over me and touches Grace’s cheek. “Ma’am, can you open your eyes?”

“I can, but I don’t want to,” she answers, making me smile and the officer chuckle.

“Can you try for me?” he asks.

She lets out a huff as she opens her good eye then asks, “Are you happy?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

*Damn, why didn't I ask her that?*

"I don't think so. But my head is killing me."

"Did you knock it on the steering wheel?"

"Yes." She lets my hand go to reach out and touch the steering wheel. "The Beast was lifted off the ground when the tornado came down, and when he dropped, I hit my head." *The Beast*. I smile at the name of her car. It does look like a beast. The baby-blue Buick Century must be at least twenty-seven years old if not older and is the size of a boat. "Thank God I didn't listen to my son and get one of those little cars that are all the rage. If I had, I'd be across town."

"You're probably right about that," the officer agrees before asking for an ambulance in the little speaker attached to his shoulder. "I'm going to have you taken to the hospital. That cut above your eye is going to need stitches."

"Will you stay with me, Mia?" Grace asks, grabbing my hand so hard it hurts.

"Yeah, Grace, I'll stay with you," I assure her.

"Thank you," she says quietly, closing her eye once more. I hold her hand as we wait for the EMTs to arrive, and once they do, I get into the ambulance with her. As the doors are being closed, I spot the man who saved me earlier standing with a group of men, his hands on his hips. Like he feels my eyes on him, he lifts his head, and I ball my hands into fists as our eyes lock.

I watch his eyes narrow right before the doors are slammed closed, and then a moment later, I feel the ambulance move. I let out my breath and shake off the feeling of regret in my chest. The last thing I need right now is to become infatuated with a man, especially when I have learned over and over that men are a waste of time. My father let me down time and time again while I was growing up. My ex proved his worth when he let me go without even a little bit of a fight. And my sister is now trying to get her life back after her husband went looking for something between another woman's legs.

I don't need another man to come in and reinforce my ideas about the male species. I need to focus on the good things I have going for me and work at creating a life for myself, one where I know I will never ever be dependent on a man.

## CHAPTER 2

MIA

I PARK MY car in my sister's driveway and turn off the engine. As soon as silence settles over me, I let my head fall back to the headrest. The last few weeks have been a whirlwind, and I'm exhausted. I've talked to Ken every week, and he's assured me that as soon as he gets approval from the structural engineer that the dealership can open, I'll have my job back, but so far, that hasn't happened. In the meantime, I've been working at the bar where my sister works, taking the lunch shift, which means I've taken a huge pay cut. Then again, I'm lucky to have a job at all, even if the money I make is eaten up quickly with just day-to-day costs and helping my sister out right now.

I let out a cleansing breath then open my eyes. As much as I want to just stay here in the silence for a few minutes longer, I know that in the house a few feet away, my sister is surrounded by chaos. Before her husband's affair, she was a stay-at-home mom with only a high school diploma. Now, she bartends in the evenings and is going to school online during the day to get her teaching license, something she always wanted to do. I'm proud of her, proud she is taking control of her life and working on bettering herself. Still, I'm pissed she's let Mike—who is still technically her husband—off the hook by denying any help from him. Part of me resents it, but I have to give him props, because he is still a great dad, and every month, he pays what he's supposed to and even asks if more is needed. Not that my hardheaded sister will accept anything extra from him.

With a frustrated sigh, I pick up my bag from the passenger seat then open the door. I slam it closed with my hip then head up the sidewalk to the front door of the four-bedroom brick house my sister lives in. The first time I saw her house, I thought it looked like a smaller version of the house from *Home Alone*—red brick, with black shutters and white pillars out front, accentuating the entryway.

The closer I get to the front door, the louder the shouts and laughter from inside become. I smile as I punch in the code for the lock, and when it clicks open, I walk inside. “Hey, my babies.” I squat down to greet Mercury and Retro who are both lying in Retro’s bed near the door, neither of them even attempting to get up, probably exhausted after playing with the girls when they got home from school. I rub them down as their tails and chubby bodies wag in excitement.

I adopted both my girls five years ago from a guy parked at the grocery store with a sign saying he had free puppies. I didn’t plan on getting a puppy that day but couldn’t help taking a peek. The guy told me they were bulldogs and something else. I didn’t care what breed they were; I just knew I had to have them when I fell instantly in love. My girls are nearly twins, except where Mercury is all white, Retro has one beige-colored ear.

After I give them both head rubs, I drop my purse on top of the growing pile of bags, jackets, and other odds and ends just inside the entryway then walk down the long hallway that leads into the kitchen and living room. As soon as I reach the end of the hall, I see my sister Cece in the kitchen with her back to me and her phone to her ear. My six-year-old niece Ruby is standing at the counter, mixing something that is bright green in a glass bowl. My nine-year-old twin nieces Lola and Kate sit across the island from her, each of them on their iPads, Kate probably playing a game while Lola is most likely reading.

“Mimi!” Ruby shouts when she spots me, and I squat down as she hops off the stool and runs toward me then laugh when she hits me at full force.

“Hey, Little Miss Trouble.” I kiss the side of her head as she wraps her arms around my shoulders, and I palm the back of her head as I stand. “Have you been good today?” I ask, and she leans back, smiling her crooked smile and showing off her one missing front tooth.

“I’m always good.” I raise a brow, and her smile grows. “What? I *am* always good.”

“Liar.” I tickle her as I walk to her sisters, who are both smiling. “Hey, my sweet girls,” I whisper, then kiss each of their heads, gaining a “Hey, Mimi” in return before I carry Ruby around the counter. I place her on the stepstool she was standing on then watch over her shoulder as she picks up the whisk from the bowl and starts to spin it through the green goo again. “What are you making?”

“Slime.”

“Slime,” I repeat on a horrified whisper, spinning around to look at my sister. When her eyes meet mine, I raise a brow, watching her shrug one shoulder in response. *Weak*, I mouth, and she rolls her eyes before going back to her call. She is weak, if you ask me. When I saw slime had come back, I was the first to buy it, having no idea that the fun gunk from my childhood had mutated and become something that no one can control. I gave a half-gallon bucket of the stuff to my nieces, as any good aunt would do. It was a disaster. The neon-pink goo had spread from one end of the house to the other, getting stuck to places and *in* places slime has no business being. After that last experience, Cece and I vowed we would never let the girls have slime again. I guess that didn’t include Ruby making her own.

I take the whisk from my niece and tap it on the side of the bowl before setting it on the counter, ignoring the puddle it’s leaving. “How about,” I start without acknowledging her pout, “we let this sit for a few, so it can reach maximum stickiness, and watch a movie?”

“*Frozen 2?*” she asks with a happy look on her face while both her sisters groan in disapproval. I don’t blame them. I think I’ve watched the movie more than anyone ever should. No matter how adorable Olaf is or how catchy the songs are, there is only so many times one person can watch it before they are admitted into an insane asylum.

“I was thinking we should watch something new.” I carry her around to the couch and pick up the remote for the TV.

“Like what?” she asks. Standing on the cushion while wrapping her arms around my neck and bouncing. I drag her down into my lap as her sisters join us then flip through the movies that have been recorded on the DVR. When I see *Adventures in Babysitting* on the list, I smile and press Play.

“You’ll love this one.” I kiss the top of her head then hold her against my chest with Lola leaning into me and Kate snuggled into her twin.

“I’m gonna go get ready for work,” Cece says, stopping at the end of the couch as the movie starts, and I meet her gaze, noticing the ever-present shadow of sadness in her eyes. These past few months have been an adjustment for her. It’s not just her marriage ending; it’s that she no longer gets to spend every possible moment with her girls, which is something she loved doing.

“You okay?”

At my question, she glances at the kids quickly, and I want to kick my own ass for asking her that question in front of them. She doesn't want them to worry; she doesn't want them to know any more than they do about what happened between her and their dad, and I admire her for that.

"I'm good. I just wish I was staying home and watching movies with you four."

"You can stay with us, Mommy," Ruby says in her sweet little voice as she stands. I grasp onto her hand as she walks across the cushions to the armrest then cringe with worry as she jumps down to go to her mom.

"I wish, baby girl," Cece says, picking her up. "But I'll be home with you guys on Friday night." She tucks her face into Ruby's neck, closing her eyes. When Cece leans back, Ruby touches her forehead to her mom's, and my heart melts. I love seeing my sister with her girls, and seeing her with them always makes me question what I want for myself.

The idea of having a child freaks me out. It's not just carrying a living human inside my body for nine months, but the whole being responsible for another person for the rest of my life is too daunting to even think about. For the past few years, I've lived my life day-to-day with no real thought of the future, and with a child, you don't have a choice but to think about what will happen in a week, a month, or in a few years. Plus, there is the fact that I have yet to find a man I would even think about having a kid with. That doesn't mean I don't hear that clock with egg-shaped numbers constantly tick-tick-ticking away.

"Go cuddle with Mimi and watch your movie, and I'll see you in the morning." She kisses Ruby's forehead before she places her on the ground.

When her eyes meet mine once more, I give her a smile along with a look that says "*We'll talk tomorrow before the girls get up*" and I hear her sigh. Her girls aren't the only ones she likes to keep things from. She is forever attempting to keep things from me, my mom, and anyone else who cares about her. The only difference is I don't let her off the hook when she tries to avoid my questions, and I sure as hell don't buy it when she says everything is okay.

I let my sister's gaze go when Ruby crawls back up onto my lap, and then I rest my chin on the top of her head while I close my eyes, just wanting to rest for a moment.

"Mimi, can we make popcorn?" Lola asks, and I blink my eyes open then twist my head to the side and look down at my niece, noticing then that her

eyes are the exact shade of brown as mine. The bronzy color almost exactly matches our hair.

“Sure, honey.” I move Ruby off my lap and get up. I walk into the kitchen and dig through the cupboards until I find a box of popcorn. I pull one out then shake my head and grab another, because salty, buttery popcorn sounds good right about now. Once I have a bowlful of goodness, I go back to the couch and sit with my nieces. Not long after, Cece comes down and says goodnight before leaving for work.

After she’s gone, I spend the next hour laughing and reminiscing through a movie that was one of the small parts of my childhood that didn’t have anything to do with outside drama, just pure and simple happiness. When the movie comes to an end, I order us a pizza for dinner, and after we eat, I lead the girls upstairs, where I usher one after the other into the shower while each of them takes a turn talking to their dad on the phone, something they do every night before they go to sleep.

Seeing the content smiles on their sweet little faces when I finally tuck them in, I know my sister is doing everything right. Yes, her life is upside down. Yes, she is working more than she was before, and she doesn’t get as much time at home as she used to. But her girls are happy, healthy, and most importantly, they know their dad loves them, even if he’s not under the same roof.

---

WHEN THE ALARM I set on my cell phone starts to ding, I fight to get my arm out from under the covers and Mercury’s heavy weight. Once I grab it, I quickly turn it off, resenting that it pulled me from the dream I was having, a dream involving a man I can’t seem to forget.

I keep my eyes closed and try to pull up from memory some of the details about him, but no matter how hard I try, none of them seem to do him justice. I’m not sure if it’s gratitude or something else, but an hour hasn’t gone by in which I haven’t thought about him. Even in my sleep, he finds me.

A cold nose against my cheek pulls me from my thoughts, and I open my eyes, finding Lola’s glitter-star-covered ceiling above me before I focus on a set of warm brown eyes.

“Are you ready for breakfast?” I hold onto Retro’s round face, and she leans forward, licking my cheek and making me smile. Then I laugh when Mercury joins her sister in giving me some morning love. “All right, girls. Let’s get up.” Once they both jump off the bed, I toss back the unicorn-printed sheet and blanket covering me and sit up, placing my feet on the rainbow carpet on the floor.

I look around Lola’s room and wonder how much longer I’ll be able to stay here. I know my sister and the girls like having me around, but there’s going to come a point when everyone will need to find some normalcy, and that includes me getting a place of my own so Lola can get her room back. I force myself to stand then shuffle to the door and open it for my pups. The house is quiet, with the girls still asleep across the hall, but the smell of coffee lets me know my sister is already up and downstairs after getting home late, making breakfast and lunches—something she does every morning.

I listen to my girls’ paws as they go down the stairs, and when I hear Cece greet Mercury and Retro, I go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, and put on a bra, leggings, and an oversized shirt so I can drop the girls off at school. I slip on a pair of flip-flops then quietly leave my room, desperately needing a cup of coffee.

I walk right to the back door to let my girls in then listen to them follow me into the kitchen, where Cece is standing at the island, making sandwiches. She lifts her head when she hears me, and I can see the sadness and exhaustion she tries to hide. My sister has always been beautiful without really trying, but the weight she’s lost and heartache she’s felt is etched in her pretty features.

“Morning.”

“Morning, I already fed Merc and Ret, and let them out.”

“Thanks.” I walk past her and head straight for the coffee pot. I fill up my favorite cup, add my vanilla creamer, and take it to the island. “How was work?” I ask her as I take a seat, blowing across the top of my coffee mug.

“Good,” she mumbles, slathering a slice of bread with peanut butter before placing it carefully on top of another slice covered in jelly.

I wait for her to say more then set down my cup. “Have you spoken to Mike?”

“We talked yesterday. He’s picking up the girls Saturday morning, and they are going to stay the night with him.”

“They are?” This news surprises me. Mike has been staying with his parents since he came forward about his affair, and both he and Cece agreed that the girls wouldn’t spend the night with him there. His parents only have a two-bedroom condo, and the spare room at his parents’ house only has the air mattress Mike’s been using while staying with them. Neither of them wanted the girls to be without a real bed to sleep in.

She finishes slapping together another sandwich then meets my gaze. “He got a two-bedroom apartment in town and bought the girls bunk beds with a double on the bottom and a single on the top, so they can all sleep in the same room when they stay with him.”

“Oh,” I say, studying her and seeing her eyes begin to water. “That’s good, right?”

“They need their dad. They miss being with him.” She ducks her head in an attempt to hide her tears. I chew the inside of my cheek as I try to figure out what to say. This entire situation is a mess, and once more, I resent Mike for not keeping his dick in his pants. If he had been faithful or at the least been man enough to say he wasn’t happy before moving along, things would have been hard, but not as hard as they are now.

“Are you crying because the girls are going to be staying with him?”

“Yes.” She shakes her head, looking at me. “No.” She shakes her head again. “I don’t know. I think I thought we would work things out and he would eventually move home.” She looks away briefly before meeting my gaze again. “Now he has a place of his own, so I think that means we really are done.”

I blink, completely dumbfounded. “You wanted him back?”

I don’t know what the look she’s giving me means, but still I hold my breath as she speaks. “I want what we promised each other when we started dating and got married.” She wipes the tears off her cheeks. “I don’t want him, not the man he is now. I just wish that... I just wish things were different. I wish he didn’t do what he did. I wish I didn’t have to think about starting over, really starting over. I wish my babies didn’t have to jump between his house and mine and that they didn’t have to experience what we did growing up.”

“Cece.” Her name comes out on a whisper, because my throat feels like it’s closing up. “They aren’t growing up like we did. The only thing they know is that both their parents love them and are devoted to making sure

they are happy. I know this is all hard on them, but I don't think they've ever felt what we did growing up."

She drops her chin to her chest, and her shoulders shake. "I'm just so mad at him."

"You have a right to be pissed. That doesn't make you a bad person. I know this isn't easy for you, but I do know you are an amazing mom, and even if Mike is an asshole, he's still a good dad."

"I hate him," she whimpers, and I get up and walk around to her, pulling her into my arms.

"You don't." I rub her back and rock her from side to side. "That's why you're so mad."

"You're right, but I really want to hate him." She buries her face in my neck.

"I know you do, and that's okay. It's okay to hate him or love him. You can feel however you need to feel. There are no rules."

"I just don't want my babies hurting because of this."

I close my eyes, wishing I had the power to make her wish come true, but I know it's not possible. At the end of the day, the girls are going to experience their parents' divorce, and at their age, they will see and hear more than they probably should. Not because their parents aren't protecting them, but because they are kids, and no matter what you do, they always have a way of finding things out and coming to their own conclusions. "It's going to be okay. No matter what happens, it's going to be okay."

"Yeah." She snuffles, leaning back. "You're right." She tries to smile, but her eyes widen, and I know why a moment later when we both hear the sound of little feet pounding down the stairs and tiny paws going to greet one of their favorite humans. I watch Cece quickly turn away from me with her hands going to her face, where I'm sure she's wiping the tears from her cheeks. Wanting to give her a few more seconds to get herself together, I turn toward the stairs and smile at Ruby as she bounces off the last step only to be attacked with puppy kisses.

"Hey, trouble." I block her before she can run to her mom, and I pick her up.

"Mimi!" She giggles as I spin her around, tickling her sides.

"Mimi what?" I keep tickling, listening to her laugh as I carry her farther into the kitchen. I glance at Cece, and when I see her soft smile, I know she's okay. With one last giggle from Ruby, I hand her over to her mom

then stand back and watch the two of them embrace like they've been separated for years rather than hours.

As they cuddle in the middle of the kitchen, I take a seat, pick my coffee back up, and take a sip. Before I even swallow, I hear Lola and Kate coming down the stairs, and then the two of them get the same treatment from Mercury and Retro before joining their mom and sister. Knowing this moment is theirs, I go back to my coffee as the four of them huddle together in a group hug. As I sip, I watch them, knowing for certain that even though they're going to face some hardships as things unfold, they are going to come out stronger and closer than they've ever been.

When the moment between them is over, Cece looks at each of the kids and asks, "So who wants pancakes, and who wants eggs?" The girls quickly rattle off their breakfast orders, and then for the next forty minutes, I help my sister feed them.

Like I've done for weeks, I load them up into her minivan and take them to school so she can go back to bed for a couple hours before she has to get up for her class. After I drop each of them off, I stop at Starbucks for an iced coffee and a warmed cranberry orange scone—one of my few vices. I devour both on the drive back to the house, and then once I'm home, I quietly make my way upstairs, careful not to make too much noise. I don't want to wake Cece if she's asleep; I know she needs rest, even if she will never admit it.

After I shower, I grab my cell to check the time and notice I have a missed call from Ken. Hoping he has good news for me, I dial his number then put the call on speaker as I open my makeup bag.

"Mia."

"Hey, Ken. How's it going?" I ask, dotting my face with concealer.

"I have some good news."

"Well, I need some good news." I smile at the phone when he laughs.

"I know you do, which means I'm happy to make this call. We got approval and will be opening our doors on Saturday."

"Really?" My nose stings and my eyes water.

"Really."

"Is it weird that I want to cry right now?"

"Please don't. I can't do tears, not even over the phone," he says, and I start to laugh.

"So I'll see you Saturday?" he asks.

“You’ll definitely see me Saturday.”

“Good, see you then,” he replies, and the line goes dead.

After a few deep breaths, I finish my makeup and get dressed for work in a pair of jeans, a deep-blue tee with **Winston’s Bar and Grille** across the chest in white writing, and my Converse. If I were going into work anywhere else to give my notice, I would feel bad, but Cece’s boss Winston gave me a job as a favor to my sister, who I’m pretty sure he has a crush on—at least that’s my guess, since he’s always asking about her when I’m working.

Thinking about it now, I wonder why Cece never mentions him. Then again, maybe she’s still so heartbroken that she’s oblivious to the forty-year-old seriously attractive man who signs her paychecks. Knowing I might never have the answer to that question, especially given my sister’s history with secrecy, I go downstairs to take my girls out one last time. After I toss the ball for them for thirty minutes, I head back inside and scribble a quick note to Cece, letting her know about Ken’s call, and then I get in my car and head to work, feeling happier than I’ve felt in weeks.

## CHAPTER 3

MIA

I PASS OVER the contract in my hand along with a pen to Annie, who is smiling like she just won the lotto. Then I glance at her husband and press my lips together to keep from laughing, something I know would be completely unprofessional. As I watch Annie sign for her brand-new van, her husband watches her with a crestfallen expression.

I can't say I was surprised when I saw them come into the dealership today for our grand reopening, but I was shocked when Annie marched up to me with her little boy on her hip and announced they were buying her van today and that they didn't want another test drive. I'm proud of her for taking control and love that, even though her husband doesn't like it, he's still here.

*Maybe he knows the old saying "Happy wife, happy life."*

"I'm so excited." Annie grins, handing me back the paperwork once she's completed it.

"I'm excited for you." I smile, resting my hand on my desk phone. "If you're ready, I'm going to call Judy to make sure she's ready for you in her office."

"We're ready." Annie nods while Sam sighs.

Ignoring him with my smile still in place, I press 7, and when Judy answers, I confirm with her that she's free. I walk Annie, Sam, and the kids back to her office and leave Annie with a hug and Sam with a pat on his stiff shoulder as their girls run circles around us. Knowing they're in good hands, I head back to my desk to wait for Mandy to let me know when I have a client.

Unlike what I watched in movies, we don't aggressively pursue potential clients; we work on rotation. I know some of the employees don't like it, but I do. I don't want to feel like I have to be overly assertive with the people coming in, just to get a sale. As I wait, I grab my cell and find a text from my mom waiting for me.

**Mom: How are my girls?**

**Me: We're fine, just missing you. I hope you can come visit soon.**

I press Send, thinking it's so strange how time seems to change your perspective. Growing up, my mother placed me and Cece smack-dab in the middle of hers and my dad's problems, using us as a sounding board and pawns when needed. At the age of nine, the same age as Kate and Lola, I knew my father cheated, knew how many times, and with who, and Cece knew even more than I did. She was fourteen at the time, and my mom leaned on her for emotional support, thinking of her as a best friend instead of her child she should've been protecting. Because of that, my mom's and my relationship was strained, and I resented her for not being strong enough to leave my dad, even after he kept doing things that were making her unhappy.

It wasn't until I was older that I understood she would have left if she could've, but she was financially dependent on him and afraid of what life might be like without him in the picture. When my dad asked my mom for a divorce so he could marry another woman, she didn't have a choice but to face life head-on. She moved us into a small two-bedroom apartment, got a job as a secretary at a law firm in our town, and after a year, she started dating Chaz, her now husband.

That's when things changed for us. Chaz gave her someone else to share her pain with while she figured out how to be happy and trust again. Things at the beginning of their relationship weren't easy for me or Cece. It took a long time for us to figure out we could trust the man my mom was falling in love with, while dealing with the loss of our father, who was starting a new life that didn't involve the two girls he already created.

Although I can still acutely remember the pain I felt during that time in my life, I don't wish things turned out differently. My mom grew and became a better mother, and Chaz showed me with understanding, love, and support what I should expect from any man I get involved with.

Thinking about my stepdad, I send him a quick **I love you** text. I don't speak to my biological father—not because I haven't tried to have a relationship with him, but because he's a self-centered asshole who only cares about himself.

Okay, so I might still hold a little resentment toward my father, but I figure that's normal, given what I went through as a kid.

“Mia speaking,” I answer my desk phone when it rings and drop my cell back in my bag.

“You have a client,” Mandy snaps, then before I even have a chance to thank her, she hangs up. I’m not surprised by her shortness. It’s been crazy today, crazier than normal. It seems everyone was waiting for us to reopen, and I’m sure she’s been on her heels all day instead of lounging like she normally does.

I stand and straighten out my cream blouse and smooth my hands down the front of my high-waisted navy-blue slacks. Ken doesn’t care what we wear to work, but the guys who work here dress in slacks and button-downs, and the other women dress up, so I always try to appear as put together as them, hoping customers will take me a little more seriously.

I leave my cubical with my eyes on my feet, refusing to look at the boarded-up wall of windows to my left. We might have been able to open, but there is still work to do, and those wooden panels blocking out the light only remind me of the fear I experienced weeks ago.

“Mia.”

I lift my head when Mandy calls my name and stumble when I see the man who’s been haunting me standing near the front podium with his eyes on me. My heart pounds as he takes a step toward me. Good Lord, he’s even more handsome than I remember. And with the sun shining through the doors, he looks like some kind of modern-day Greek god with his black boots, jeans, and tight white T-shirt accentuating his muscular torso. His dirty-blond hair is mussed like he’s ran his fingers through it, and the tattoos on his arms seem more vibrant against his tan skin. As I watch him get closer, I feel overwhelmed—with fear, thankfulness, regret, and longing. The mix of emotions makes me want to run, only I don’t know if I want to run away or into his arms.

“Mia.” Mandy steps in front of me, cutting off the view I have of him, and I blink at her annoyed expression. “Steph is up next for a client, but Talon asked for you.” She shakes her head. “Well, he didn’t ask for you, but he described you and was adamant that he see you, so he’s yours.”

“Talon,” I repeat, liking that I finally know his name after weeks of giving him random names, none of them as perfect as the one he was given at birth.

“She’s worked with him in the past, so she’s going to be mad.”

“Okay,” I acknowledge, not really caring that she’s going to be mad, since she seems to be mad a lot. With everyone working on mostly commission, there is a lot of competition. Personally, I have no desire to be the top salesperson at the dealership. I just want to make enough money to pay my bills, and if I have a little extra, that’s okay too.

Her eyes narrow, and then she mutters, “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She spins on her heel and sashays back toward the podium.

I glance at Talon to see if he checks her out when she walks past him and am surprised he doesn’t. Mandy is pretty, very pretty, and most people recognize her, since she’s in every one of the local commercials for the dealership. Heck, men sometimes come in just to try to get her number.

With her gone, I swallow and turn toward the man who saved me when I feel him get close. I slowly lift my gaze to his and remind myself to breathe when our eyes lock. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone with eyes as blue as his, so blue it feels like I could dive into them like the ocean I jumped into once on a trip to Jamaica.

I shift on my heels as he scrutinizes my face like he’s trying to memorize every one of my features, then lick my lower lip and say the only thing I can think of. “You saved me.” He doesn’t reply, but his eyes drop to my mouth, and in response, my nails dig into my palms. “Thank you. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t done what you did.”

“That girl said your name is Mia.” He lifts his eyes off my mouth, and I nod. “I tried to find out who you were after you left in the ambulance, but it was like I imagined you. No one knew who I was talking about.” He shoves his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “I told you to stick close, and you left.”

My brows dart together at his tone. “I left with Grace. She didn’t want to be alone.”

“I know. I went to the hospital, and after I tracked her down, I talked to her.”

“You went to the hospital and tracked Grace down?” My stomach dips, and my heart flutters.

“She told me that you disappeared when her son got there and that you didn’t say goodbye or leave your number.”

“I didn’t want to be in the way,” I murmur, feeling guilty. I should have told her goodbye, but her family was there, and I knew she was in good hands.

“She gave me her number to give you when I found you.” He pulls a piece of tattered paper from his pocket, and I wonder if he’s been carrying it around with him this whole time.

“Thank you.” My eyes meet his as I take it, and I fight the urge to lean into him. His scent reminds me of home, deep and rich, like the forest in Montana after a summer storm, or sitting on the porch of my parents’ house after dark, listening to the crickets chirp.

“Yeah.” He looks over the top of my head, something that is easy for him to do since he’s tall, over a foot taller than me in my flats, and then his eyes meet mine once more. “Do you want to give me a test drive?”

A tingle slides down my spine, and my cheeks warm as my nipples pebble. Good Lord, I need to get away from this man before I throw myself at his feet and offer to have his babies. “Umm...” I glance around quickly, looking for an excuse to get away, and spot Steph eyeing me from across the room with a frown on her pretty face. “I think Mandy said you’ve been working with Steph.”

His brows drag together. “Who?”

“Steph,” I repeat and wave my hand out in her direction. “She’s the blonde over there.” He doesn’t even look. “I’ll get her, and you’ll remember.”

I turn to walk away, but he stops me by grabbing my hand. “I don’t want her. I want you.”

My eyes widen. “Oh. Well, okay.” I tug my hand from his, which isn’t easy to do. “What car did you want to test drive?”

“The black Jeep at the front of the lot.”

“The one parked half on the boulder?” I ask, and he lifts his chin in an affirmative.

“What’s that look?” he asks quietly.

I realize I’m frowning and smile. “It’s a great Jeep.” It’s also the only car on the lot I’ve wanted since I started here... even though I will likely never be able to afford it unless I start competing with my fellow employees and become lead salesman. “I just need to see your ID to make a copy of it, and then I’ll just grab the keys and meet you out there.”

“I’ll come with you,” he states.

I laugh while shaking my head. “I can get them and meet you out there.”

“I’d rather come with you so you don’t try to pawn me off on someone else.”

Offended, I prop my hands on my hips. "I'm not going to pawn you off on someone else."

"You just tried to pawn me off a minute ago."

"I was not pawning you off," I lie, my cheeks feeling warm from being called out. "I was going to let the person you've been working with continue to work with you. People around here take their clients very seriously."

"Does the client get a say in who they want to work with?"

I wave my hand out between him and me. "Obviously, I'm working with you now, aren't I?"

He shrugs. "Still, I'd rather not take any chances. I'll come with you."

"Fine." I grit my teeth then stomp toward my cubical. Once there, I go behind my desk, and after he enters, I hold out my hand and wiggle my fingers. "I need your ID."

"Right." He grins, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket. I watch his long fingers tug out his card then narrow my eyes on his when he chuckles and hands it to me.

"What's funny?"

"You're cute when you're pissed." His gorgeous smile stays firmly in place, and he really does have a gorgeous smile, and really nice teeth, which is something odd to notice about someone.

"I'm not pissed."

"Hmm."

"I'm not. I'm annoyed. You're annoying me," I snap, taking his ID and placing it in the little copy machine on my desk. Once the red light appears on the device, I know it's been sent wherever the info is stored. I hand his card back to him and grab my purse. "Let's go get the keys."

"Lead the way." He motions for me to leave ahead of him, and I hear him chuckle as I walk past him. I take him back to the main office and quickly punch in the information for the test drive into the computer before I grab the keys from the box on the wall. Once I have them in my hand, I spin around, and come face-to-chest with him, then look up. "You don't have to stand so close."

"I like standing close to you."

More frustrated with myself than him for how my body seems to be reacting to his proximity, I growl under my breath and push him back an inch before I move around him. I don't even look to make sure he's

following me—not that I need to. I can feel his eyes boring into my back as we head out of the building to the lot.

When we get outside, I pull in a lungful of air, wishing it were cooler out, since the humid air makes me feel stifled rather than refreshed. That’s one thing I miss about Montana; the summers are perfect. Most days are warm enough to wear shorts but cool enough to wear a sweater if you feel like it.

“Shit,” I mutter when we reach the Jeep. The way it’s parked on two big boulders looks cool, but the bottom of the driver side door is at least three feet off the ground, and since I’m only five one, I don’t know how the hell I’m going to get in. With a few curse words to whatever idiot parked it here, I walk around to the passenger side. It’s better, but I’m still going to have issues getting in. Resting my hands on my hips, I look at the man next to me and watch him cross his arms over his chest as he turns his head my way.

“You want me to help you up there?”

My nose scrunches. “Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I can’t get up there on my own.”

“All right.” He shrugs one shoulder.

More determined now than I was before, I hand him my purse. “Please hold this.”

“Sure.” He takes it, and I climb up onto the smaller boulder on the passenger side, thankful I wore a pair of flats today instead of my usual heels. Once I’m up on the rock, I turn to give him a smug smile, and when he smiles back, my heart flutters and my stomach dances. With a deep breath, I turn toward the door and carefully open it, but when I look at the driver seat, my stomach drops. I know logically that the Jeep is not going to tip over when I climb in, but still the angle is harsh, and if I’m honest, I’m a chicken. I can’t even jump off the diving board into the pool because it seems like too much of a risk. “You okay, Mia?”

“I’m fine, totally fine,” I call, forcing myself not to sound like I’m freaking out. With a deep breath, I hold onto the safety bar above the glove box and pull myself up then gasp when the Jeep rocks. “Oh God.” I squeeze my eyes shut while falling into the seat as I hold on for dear life.

A hand rests on my thigh, and my eyes spring open. “I’m learning a lot about you today, Mia.” Talon sighs, standing on the boulder outside the door. “Come on. Get out, and I’ll back the Jeep off the rock.”

“I don’t need you to do that. I can climb over and move it myself, and Ken likes us to take each client out then hand over the keys after we’ve shown them how the car can drive.”

“You can take over once I get it down.”

I try. I really try to let it go, but honestly, I can’t. It’s like my hands have attached themselves to the bar.

“Come on.” He rests his hand over mine and slowly pries my fingers away one by one, and then he places my free hand on his shoulder. Once he has my other hand free, he wraps an arm around my waist and helps me out then down off the boulder. I feel like an idiot as he hands me my purse. “Can I get the keys?”

I take them off my wrist and hand them over, then back up to watch him easily maneuver himself into the Jeep like some kind of ninja. Once he has all four wheels on solid ground, he parks with the driver side door next to me. He gets out and holds it open for me to get in, and I roll my eyes at the look of male pride on his face.

“Thanks,” I mutter, trying to look as graceful as him as I climb up behind the wheel, but I know I look like a baby deer who’s just learning to walk, because the Jeep is jacked up and still way too high off the ground for me to easily get into. Once I’m behind the wheel, I don’t look at him as he shuts my door or when he gets in on the passenger side. As I put the engine in drive, I tell him, “I’m going to take us out of town. There’s a couple back roads we can go down where you can test out some of the off-road features.” I flip on my turn signal and switch lanes. “Then you can drive us back to town, so you can experience how it feels on the highway.”

“Are you going to be okay if I test out some of the off-roading features?”

“Do you think you’ll be okay if I shove you out the door going seventy on the highway?” I chirp while entering the highway and speeding up.

“It’s just a question.” He laughs, and the sound vibrates against my skin, making me warm. “Have you ever gone off-roading?”

“I dated a guy who had a Jeep. Every weekend, him and a group of his friends would get together, and they’d take their Jeeps or trucks up into the mountains to go off-roading, and when I started seeing him, I went with him a few times. I can’t say I loved getting stuck in the mud and having to wade out through the muck while his Jeep was towed, but it was fun.”

“You’re not dating him anymore?” he asks, his tone sounding odd, but since I can’t look at him, I can’t read his expression.

“No, when I told him that I was coming here to help out my sister, he told me he couldn’t handle a long-distance relationship and broke up with me.”

“Where are you from?”

“Montana. I grew up there.”

“I’ve been to Montana a couple times. It’s a beautiful state.”

“It’s beautiful here too.”

I see him shift in his chair out the corner of my eye. “So is your plan to stay in Tennessee?”

“Yeah, or I think so anyway,” I reply, wanting to say more, but it feels weird to have a conversation about my plans for the future with a complete stranger especially when I haven’t spoken to my sister or parents about officially making Tennessee my home.

“You said you’re helping out your sister. Is she okay?”

“She’s good,” I say while getting off the highway and stopping at a red light behind a long row of cars.

“You’re really an open book,” he jokes, and I look at him.

“This isn’t a date. We’re not getting to know each other. This is me doing my job.”

“Fair enough. How about I take you on a date?”

“I’m not interested,” I lie. I doubt there’s a woman alive who wouldn’t be interested in him. That said, I don’t need the distraction of a man right now.

Holding my gaze, he tips his head to the side with a look of determination in his eyes. “Light’s green.”

I take my eyes off his and press on the gas, wondering why I feel like I just waved a red flag in front of a bull.

## CHAPTER 4

### TALON

AS I WALK toward Mia's office, I spot her at her desk, the guy across from her leaning forward like he's trying to get as close as possible, even with the desk between them. As I get closer, I hear him ask her out, and when she shakes her head, he places his hands together like he's praying, making her laugh. Jealousy makes my hands ball into fists, and even if I have no rights to her, I step into the room.

"Hey, babe," I greet, and her eyes widen as she looks up at me, but I don't spare her another glance. I look down at the man, swearing he looks familiar. "How's it going, man?"

"Uh... good." He looks between Mia and me then stands, straightening out his tie. "Thanks for letting me test out the truck, Mia. I'll be in contact after I get the loan set up."

"Sure, Harry. I look forward to hearing from you." She reaches out to shake his hand, and my jaw twitches when he lifts it to place a kiss on her knuckles.

"Have a good day." He smiles at her then turns to me. "Later."

"Yeah, later," I grunt.

"Do I need to get a restraining order, Talon?" Mia asks, taking a seat, her warm brown eyes on mine as I lean on the edge of her desk.

"For that guy, most definitely," I say, watching her full lips tip up into a slight smile. Fuck, she's beautiful—stubborn as fuck, but still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and it kills me that I can't walk up to her, pull her into my arms, and kiss her like I want to. It's been a week of this, a week of me coming in almost daily, trying to convince her to go out with me, only to have her give me shit and turn me down.

"Seriously, Talon, this is getting ridiculous." She sighs, tossing her long hair that reminds me of my favorite dark chocolate ice cream with swirls of caramel over her shoulder.

"I'm just here for a test drive, Mia."

“Right.” She rolls her eyes as she stands, allowing me to see her curves accentuated by the tight skirt and top she’s wearing. “You know if I miss out on an actual sale by taking you out again, I’m going to be annoyed.”

“If you’d just agree to go out with me, I’d sign the papers for the Jeep right now.”

“Why do I feel like I should be offended by that offer?” she asks, wrapping her fingers around the dip in her waist, and I grin while her eyes narrow.

“Put away your claws, kitten. I just want you more than I want the Jeep,” I say, watching her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink, and my dick twitches behind my zipper.

“Don’t call me kitten.”

“Why not? You remind me of a cute little kitten that shows its claws when it’s riled up.”

Eyeing me for a moment, she sighs as she drops her gaze from mine. “I need to get the keys for the Jeep.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“Of course you will.”

I catch a hint of her soft vanilla scent when she walks past me and fight the urge to reach out and touch her. Fuck, I’ve never been obsessed with a woman before, but the moment I saw her, I felt like I had been sucker punched. With one look, I knew exactly who she was and that I would do anything to have her.

“Mia,” I call her name, having no idea what I’m going to say, just knowing I need to say something.

Stopping suddenly, she spins around to face me, catching me off guard. “You know what? Fine.” She holds a hand up, palm out between us. “I get it. I’m a challenge, and your fragile ego is bruised. How about we go have lunch now and get this over with?”

My jaw twitches in frustration. Fuck, things would be a lot easier if this were just about my ego. “No.”

Her brows draw together. “No? You don’t want to go out with me?”

“I want a date, a *real* fucking date. I want to pick you up for dinner and take you home after.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, she sighs. “Fine, I’ll go to dinner with you, but I’ll meet you wherever you want me to.”

“No.”

Her nostrils flare, and she stomps her foot. “Why not?”

“I just told you why not.”

“Fine, but I can only do Saturday after five.”

“That works for me.”

“Okay.” She uncrosses her arms then starts back toward her office.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m going to write down my number for you, and then I’m going back to work.”

“You still need the key for the Jeep.”

“Why?” she cries, tossing her hands in the air as she spins back around. “I agreed to go out with you. You got your way. There is no need for me to take you out on another test drive, where you’ll ask me to go out with you and I’ll turn you down.” Christ, she’s stubborn.

“I still want a test drive.” I know it’s selfish, but I need my fix of her.

With a loud groan, she turns on her heels and stomps past me, her hips swaying. It’s a good thing I know she’s attracted to me, ‘cause if not, the ego she just mentioned would be seriously wounded right now.

I wait for her to grab the keys to the Jeep then follow her out into the parking lot. I open the door for her then go around to get in on the passenger side. Before we leave the lot, she turns on the radio, something she does every time we’re together. As “I’m a Sucker for You” starts to play, my cell phone buzzes. I want to ignore it but know I can’t when I pull it from my pocket and see it’s my mom calling.

“Hey, Mom,” I answer.

“Talón.” The fear in her voice has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Your dad.... Your....” Her voice cracks. “He was in an accident.”

“Is he okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where are you?” I try to keep my voice soft, but I know my question comes out harsh, because out the corner of my eye, I see Mia jump.

“I....” She sobs. “You-your aunt’s picking me up and taking me to the hospital. He’s being taken to West.”

“I’ll meet you there,” I say, resting my elbow on my knee and dropping my head to my hand.

“Okay, honey. Drive carefully please.”

“I will, Mom.”

With my heart pounding, I hang up and lift my head, noticing then that Mia has parked the Jeep on the side of the road not far from the dealership.

“I need to get my truck.”

“I’ll drive you.”

Running my fingers through my hair, I shake my head. “No, just take me back. I’ll get my truck and you can get back to work.”

“I’m driving you. Just tell me where we’re going.”

“Just take me to my fucking truck!” I shout, and she reaches out, wrapping her hand around my fist and pulling it toward her.

“You’re shaking, Talon. I’m driving you, so tell me where I’m taking you.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, willing myself to calm. She doesn’t deserve me lashing out at her. “I’m sorry, shit.” I scrub my hand down my face. “My dad’s being taken to West. Do you know where that is?”

“Yes. I get it, and it’s okay.” Her hand rests on top of mine as I look at my cell.

I don’t want to be the one to call my family, but I’m not sure who all knows what happened or if my mom will be in a place mentally to call everyone. As Mia pulls out into traffic, I make phone call after phone call, letting everyone know what I know, which isn’t much.

The drive that is only a few minutes long feels like it takes forever, and when we get to the hospital, Mia pulls up in front of the emergency entry and puts the engine in park as I open the door. “Thanks.”

“Wait, give me the keys for your truck!” she yells before I shut the door, and without thinking, I grab them out of my pocket and toss them to her. I watch her catch them, and then without a backward glance, I slam the door and head through the automatic doors, praying my dad is okay.

With my siblings and some of their spouses seated on either side of me in the long row of chairs outside the surgical doors, and the rest of our family gathered around the room, I watch my mom pace back and forth while chewing on her bottom lip. My hands ball into fists on the arms of my chair, and I close my eyes. My dad is the strongest man I know, but he’s not invincible.

Today, he decided to ride his bike to work, a gift my siblings and I got him when he turned fifty. The black Harley was his dream ride, and our

mom loathed it but never deterred him from riding when he felt the urge. From what we were told, a car hit him as he got off to exit the highway. The driver of the car never checked before they changed lanes and side-swiped him. In his truck, he would have been fine, but on his bike, he didn't stand a chance—broken bones and internal injuries. Gritting my teeth, I open my eyes, refusing to think about what could have been. Right now, I just need to trust the doctors who are currently working on him.

Feeling restless, I get up and go to my mom, and when she sees me get close, she stops and tips her head back. The pain I see in her eyes makes my chest ache. If she loses my dad, I don't know if she will survive, and I know Dad would feel the same if the situation were reversed. They can't live without each other; they are two halves of a whole. The love they have for each other goes beyond just to have, to hold, and to keep; it's everlasting and something that can never be replaced.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her against me like she would do when I was a kid whenever I needed comfort. Her tears start to wet my shirt, and I fight through the pain in my chest. I know she's worried, but I also have faith that everything will be okay, and right now, I need to be strong for her and Dad.

"Sophie Mayson." I turn at my mother's name and watch a short, older man who looks exhausted step farther into the room.

"I'm Sophie," Mom says, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Can we talk?" he asks, glancing around before looking at her once more.

"These people are Nico's family. You can talk here," Mom replies, and he nods once.

"Your husband is doing great, and he's being taken to recovery as we speak." At his statement, Mom sags against me, and the knot in the center of my chest eases. "We thought his liver sustained more damage than it did, which would have made things more complicated. He's very lucky." He glances around at everyone. "Not to say it's going to be an easy road, but with time and some physical therapy, he should make a full recovery."

"Thank you," Mom chokes out, burying her face against my chest.

"When can we see him?" I ask, knowing Mom would ask if she weren't sobbing.

"A nurse will come down once they have him settled."

“Thank you,” I say, listening to that sentiment echoed behind me from everyone else in the room.

“You’re welcome.” He pulls a card from his pocket and hands it over to Mom, whose hands are shaking. “That has my cell number on it. If you have any questions or concerns, don’t be afraid to call.”

“Thank you,” Mom responds, and he gives her a reassuring smile then turns and leaves. Once he’s gone, the energy in the room lightens and everyone gets up to gather around Mom to share in her relief. A few minutes later, a nurse comes in to let us know that only two people at a time will be allowed in the recovery room, but once Dad is moved to a private room, he can have a few more visitors. My uncles, their wives, and my cousins decide to head home then, saying they will be back in the morning. So that with Mom understandably sticking to Dad’s side, my siblings and I can take turns visiting him in recovery.

Time seems to drag as the night wears on, and by the time Dad is situated in his room, it’s after seven at night, and I feel like I’ve spent the day on a roller coaster. Exhausted, I put my feet up on the window ledge next to where Bax and Sage are sitting and scrub my hands down my face.

“You guys need to go home.” Dad’s gruff voice breaks through the silence in the room, and I turn to find him focused on Mom, Willow, and Nalia, who are all curled up together on the bed one of the nurses made up next to his.

I get up and walk toward him as he attempts to sit up. “We want to be here.” I hold out my hand so he can use it for leverage, and he pulls himself up in the bed.

“I know.” He flinches, I have no doubt he’s in pain, even with the drugs he’s been given. A broken leg, three broken ribs, plus being cut open would be too much for even the strongest person to handle. “You can all come back tomorrow. You don’t need to stay the night.” He looks at my brothers Bax and Sage, then my sisters Nalia, who just flew in this afternoon, and Willow. The only one of us not here is Harmony, and that’s only because she’s pregnant and Mom kicked her out after her husband brought sandwiches earlier.

“Your dad is right.” Mom sits up, brushing her hair out of her face. “It’s getting late. Visiting hours are going to be ending soon. You can all come back tomorrow.”

“Babe, you should go home too,” Dad says, and Mom looks at him, narrowing her eyes.

“I’m not going home.”

His jaw clenches. “I don’t want you sleeping on that thing all night. You should go home.”

“This is not even up for discussion, Mr. Mayson. I’m not leaving your side,” she hisses then looks at her kids. “You guys do need to go home.”

“Dad,” Nalia calls, and his eyes soften on her.

“Go get some rest. You can come back tomorrow, sweetheart,” Dad repeats, and she looks at him with tears in her eyes. “I’m happy you’re home.”

When my sister starts to sob, Mom pulls her against her chest, and I look at Sage, noticing his jaw clenching and unclenching. Unlike the rest of us, he doesn’t understand why she moved away or why she’s been so adamant about having a relationship with their birth mother, a woman who neglected them as children. I can’t say I truly understand her reasoning, but I do know how it feels to search for something, never really sure what that something is. I also know my sister feels guilty for being so torn, and I feel it’s my duty as her brother to make sure she knows that no matter what, we will be here when she figures things out.

Once her tears die down, Mom lets her go, and she stands, going to the bed and carefully giving Dad a hug before looking at Sage when he calls her name.

“Your nephew will be happy you’re in town. You’re welcome to stay with me and Kim while you’re here.”

“Aww, can I come sleep over too?” Willow asks.

Sage rolls his eyes. “Are you going to keep my kid up all night like you did the last time you stayed over?”

“It wasn’t all night, and we were watching *Trolls*, not playing beer pong. You make it seem like I’m a bad influence.”

“You are a bad influence. You spoil him.”

“He’s my nephew. It’s my job to spoil him.” She sighs, getting up off the bed before leaning over to hug Mom then going to Dad to kiss his cheek.

“Whatever.” Sage shakes his head then goes to Mom, mimicking my sister, before going to Dad and resting his forehead to his. After that, the three of them leave, and I wait until Bax says goodnight to do the same.

Like Sage and Bax, I rest my forehead against my dad's, something we've done since I can remember. My chest tightens when his hand wraps around the back of my neck, and tears burn the back of my eyes. I don't know what I would do if I lost my dad, and it's not something I ever want to think about. After we say our goodbyes with plans to come back tomorrow, Bax and I leave the room, and I reach into my pocket for my keys then groan.

"What?" he asks as we get into the elevator.

"Mia has my keys," I mutter then curse, because I don't even have her cell number. "You mind giving me a ride home?"

"Who's Mia?"

"She works at the car dealership," I tell him, leaving out the fact that the feisty, strong, independent, stubborn-as-fuck woman is also the girl who was made for me. I'm not ready to tell anyone who she is, not until I convince her to give me a shot.

"You having second thoughts about the Jeep?" he asks as the elevator stops and the doors open.

"Something like—" My words die off when I spot Mia sitting on a bench just outside the now open doors, with her eyes on me and a book resting on her lap.

"You okay?" Bax asks, and then I catch him glance between Mia and me, and grin. "Never mind. I'll see you tomorrow. I'm gonna head to the jobsite in the morning to make sure everything is okay before I come back to check on Dad."

"Yeah, I'll meet you there," I say, and he lifts his chin at me then must wink or make a face at Mia, because she smiles at him and laughs.

As he walks away, I close the distance between us, and she stands. "Hey."

"Hey." I shove my hands into the front pockets of my jeans to keep myself from pulling her into my arms. "How long have you been here?"

"A while." She shrugs, taking a step closer to me. "Is your dad okay?"

"He's good. He got sideswiped on his bike and is pretty banged up, but he's going to be okay."

Her eyes search mine for a long moment, and then she steps into me and wraps her arms around my waist. "I'm glad he's going to be all right," she tells me, and when she doesn't pull away, I hug her back, and my eyes close

as I rest my chin on the crown of her head. Fuck, she fits perfectly in my arms. “I’ve been worried about you all day.”

“I think that means you like me.”

“You just don’t give up, do you?” she asks, tipping her head back so her smiling eyes twinkle at me.

“Never.” I shrug, letting her go when she steps out of my hold, shaking her head.

“I drove your truck here. Do you mind giving me a ride to my car? Also, I’m starving, so can we stop and get something to eat?”

Shit, how long has she been here waiting for me?

“Will me eating with you now count as our date?”

“If I say yes, will you make me starve?” She raises a brow.

“No, I’ll buy you a hamburger from the drive-thru on the way to the dealership.”

Her nose scrunches adorably, and she taps her chin. “I don’t know. I do love a good ol’ fashion cheeseburger and fries.”

“Smartass.” I grasp her hand and tug her with me toward the door.

“You do know you can’t exactly lead me when you don’t know where I parked.” She laughs when we get outside. “Come on, big guy.” She walks ahead of me across the lot, and when I see my truck, I must tighten my hand still holding hers as I cringe. “You should know I parked it three times, and that was the best I could do,” she says, motioning to my truck that is half on the curb. “I should also tell you it’s not because I can’t drive; it’s because this was the only spot available, and the car that was parked next to yours was over the line. I didn’t want some little old lady or man not to be able to get in their car, so I was left with no other option.” I look around the empty lot and then at her. “It was busy here this afternoon.”

“This afternoon?” I raise a brow as she hands me my keys.

“I told you I was here a while.”

“Babe, you should have just left my truck at the dealership. I could’ve gotten it tomorrow,” I tell her, feeling guilty she was here all damn day waiting for me.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay. Besides, I was able to get coffee and a book from the gift shop.” She holds up said book. “I don’t get to read very often, so that was nice, and the lady who works there would take over waiting for you whenever I needed to use the bathroom.”

“How would she know who I am?” I ask, opening the door for her.

She gets in, and once her ass is in the seat, she smiles down at me. “I described you to her.”

“You described me?”

“Yeah, I said just look for the guy with the biggest head around and she couldn’t miss you.”

“You’re an evil woman.” I slam the door, listening to her laughter as I head around the bed of the truck. When I open my door, I squeeze in behind the wheel, the distance between it and the seat shoving my knees in my chest and making it hard to breathe. “You’re also short.” I press the button to put my seat back in place.

“Short feels like a derogatory term. I like to think of myself as vertically challenged.”

“Sorry, babe, no matter how you try to fancy it up, you’re still short.” I fight back a smile when she huffs and put the key in the ignition. As the engine roars to life, I turn toward her. “How do you feel about pancakes?”

“Pancakes are always a win in my book.”

“Pancakes it is then,” I say, placing my hand on the headrest behind her head and backing out of the parking space. Once I leave the hospital lot, I drive us to one of the few twenty-four-hour restaurants in town. When we arrive, I park and then go around to help her out. I take her hand, because it feels good to touch her, and I’m happy as fuck that she doesn’t try to deter me.

We enter the restaurant side by side then find a quiet booth in the back. I don’t sit next to her, even though I want to, but I can’t complain that I get to sit across from her and look into her pretty golden-brown eyes.

“I’m guessing you’ve been here before?” she prompts while taking the small menu out of the holder in the middle of the table, looking it over.

“I grew up here, and even though the town has changed a lot since I was a kid, there’s not too many places me and my family haven’t been to eat at least once or twice. This is one of our favorite places to get breakfast anytime day or night,” I tell her as an older woman approaches our table with a pot of coffee in hand.

“Coffee?” she asks, looking between Mia and me, and I wait for Mia to answer first.

“I’ll just have orange juice if you have it.”

“We do. What about you, handsome?”

“I’ll have water.”

“All right, do you need time to look at the menu or are you ready to order now?”

I look at Mia. “Are you ready?”

“If you are.” She sets the menu back in the holder.

“Order away,” I say, and she rattles off some kind of cinnamon chip pancakes, and I order a double stack of chocolate chip. As the waitress walks away, Mia’s cell phone rings, and she pulls it from her bag sitting next to her.

“Sorry, it’s my sister. I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.” I lift my chin then watch her get up and head outside.

She’s not gone long, only a few minutes, and when she comes back, she slides into the seat across from me once again. “Sorry about that.”

“Is everything okay?”

Studying me, she chews the inside of her cheek, and I can see the wheels in her head turning as she tries to figure out if she wants to answer my question and/or how. “I think I mentioned moving here to help out my sister.”

“You did.” I wait for her to continue, not wanting to ruin the progress we’ve made, since the last time I attempted to get her to open up didn’t go so well.

“She has three daughters and is separated from her husband.” She bites her lip then lets out a deep breath. “She umm... well, he moved out of the house they shared together, and he was living with his parents until recently.” She fiddles with her napkin, and my fingers twitch, wanting to reach across and hold her hand. “So he got a place of his own, which is good, but... well, last weekend, the girls stayed with him overnight, and tonight when my youngest niece was on the phone with him, my sister overheard her ask if his girlfriend is going to come to dinner on Saturday when they stay with him again.”

I flinch, knowing that had to be painful to hear. “Why’d they split?”

She looks away briefly then says quietly, “He admitted to her that he cheated.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.” She sighs. “The thing is, I think she thought they were going to work things out, but things are becoming clearer to her that’s not something he wants to do, and she’s having a hard time dealing with it.”

“Do you need to go home?” I ask, and her head jerks back as her eyes widen.

“I....” She licks her lips then shakes her head. “No, it’s okay.”

“I’m good if you want to be with her right now,” I tell her quietly, holding her gaze.

“You’re serious?” she whispers, studying me.

I lean across the table, grasp her hand, and run my thumb over her pulse. “I know we don’t know each other, but I understand that family comes first, especially when times are hard.” I let her go and lean back. “We can get our food to go, and if Saturday still works for you, we’ll have dinner then.”

“I don’t *want* to say yes, but she’s upset and—”

“You don’t have to explain, Mia. I get it. Your sister needs you right now, so that’s where you should be.”

“Thank you.”

I signal for our waitress when I catch her eye and ask her if they can box up our food as I hand over my card.

“Can I ask you something?” Mia says when the waitress walks off.

“Anything.”

“Are you real?”

Not sure what she’s asking I frown. “Pardon?”

“It’s just... I don’t know. I’ve never met a guy like you before, and I’m having a really hard time accepting that you’re real and this isn’t some kind of elaborate scheme to get in my pants.”

“Not to sound like a dick, Mia, but if I wanted to get laid, I’d go to any bar in town and find a chick willing to put out.” Her nose scrunches, and I reach across the table, grasping her hand once more. “What I want is to get to know you, and if at some point you feel like letting me in your pants, I’m down for that too.” I smirk, and she presses her lips together to keep from smiling.

Of course at that moment, the waitress shows up, so I grab the bag she hands me then take Mia out to my truck and drive her back to the dealership. When we hit the lot, she directs me to where she’s parked, and I get out with her and make sure she’s inside her car before I hand her the bag of food.

“Don’t you want your pancakes?”

“I think your sister’s gonna need chocolate chip pancakes more than I do.”

Her expression softens, and she licks her lips before asking, “Do you have your phone?”

I pull it out of my pocket, and she takes it from me, tapping on the screen, but then she starts to hand it back to me when it asks for my password. “The code’s 1-2-3-4.”

“Of course it is.” She laughs, typing it in before she clicks on the icon for my phone book. With one hand on the doorframe above her head, the other on the back of her seat, I watch her add her name and number to my contacts then hear her phone ring a moment later.

“Now you have my number and I have yours.” She smiles, handing me back my cell.

I shove it in my back pocket then touch my fingers to her chin, watching her eyes flare. “Call me anytime,” I tell her, and she nods as her eyes drop to my mouth. Fuck, I want to lean in and kiss her, but I hold myself in check. I know there’s chemistry between us. I know she feels it too, but I need her to understand there’s more than that, especially since she’s the one who’s been so gun-shy about even going on a date with me. As much as it kills me, I tap the roof of her car then step back, keeping hold of her door with my eyes locked on hers. “Get home safe, and let me know you got there okay.”

“S-sure,” she stutters, looking a mixture of surprised and disappointed.

“Night, sweetheart.” I shut her door and step back then wait until she pulls out of the lot before I get back in my truck. Once I’m behind the wheel, I smile. Despite the way the day started, it was a really fucking good day.

## CHAPTER 5

MIA

I WAKE TO the smell of bacon, with my head pounding and my face being licked as heavy paws land on my chest and arm. Groaning, I grab hold of my girls to stop them both from attacking my face with good morning kisses and open my eyes, only to squeeze them shut a minute later to block out the light. With more strength than I seem to have, I sit up and rest my face in my hands, regretting my impulsive decision to drink last night.

When I got home, I found Cece in the kitchen with a bottle of vodka and decided to join her for shots, which was probably stupid, since I rarely drink anything other than a glass of wine every now and then. The only positive is Cece finally opened up to me over vodka and Talon's chocolate chip pancakes about how she felt during her marriage, which had apparently been crumbling long before Mike decided to cheat on her.

She explained that they had been fighting for a couple years, each argument seeming to focus on how she wasn't doing enough around the house or how she should be doing more with the girls. Then she told me that before he came out about his affair, they hadn't been intimate in months, and before that, they would go weeks between any kind of physical contact. I tried to reassure her that, with kids and life, sometimes that's normal, but she told me that even when he initiated sex, she would push him away, because she just wasn't interested.

I didn't want to tell her that she probably didn't want to be intimate with him because of the way he was acting—like a douche—but I kept my mouth closed, because I knew that wouldn't help. I did tell her that even if he was unhappy, he should have come out and told her that he wanted out before sleeping with someone else. I hated listening to her cry, and as much as it sucked that she was cutting open old wounds, I think it helped her to reflect and face the hard truth about her marriage and to realize that maybe things were not great before it ended.

Uncovering my face, I look around the living room. I remember Cece heading upstairs last night while I was cleaning up the kitchen. I don't remember choosing to sleep on the couch instead of going upstairs to my bed. It's probably a good thing I didn't attempt to make it up the stairs, considering the fact that I don't even recall passing out on the couch. I slowly get up and shuffle to the kitchen, where the smell of bacon is strong enough to make me want to gag.

"Morning." Cece beams, and my eyes narrow on hers. I don't know how she can be so chirpy when I know for a fact that she drank just as much as I did last night.

"Morning." I lead my girls past her to the back door and let them out.

"Coffee?" she asks when I reach the island, and I nod once and settle my ass on the stool, wanting nothing more than to curl up in a ball and sleep for at least twenty-four hours.

"Thanks for last night. I needed that," she tells me, setting a cup of coffee right between my hands.

I take a sip, eyeing her over the rim of the cup and wondering how it's possible she looks like she had the best sleep of her life, when I feel like I got hit by a Mack truck then ran over by a line of cars following it. "I'm glad you feel better," I mumble, setting my cup on the counter, too tired to hold it any longer.

"I do." She smiles, but then the expression falls away as she tips her head to the side. "Are you feeling okay? You look a little green."

I feel green. The sip of coffee I took is currently swirling in my stomach and fighting to get back up my throat. Closing my eyes, I wonder if I'm still drunk or just hung over.

"Maybe you should go lie down. I'll take the girls to school. I was planning on doing that anyway."

"I have work," I tell her, resting my head in my hands and pushing my hair away from my face, not admitting I'm pretty sure I'm still drunk and wouldn't have taken the girls anyway. The only reason work is still possible is because I don't have to be there for a few hours.

"I think you should call out and go back to bed," she says sympathetically. "It would also be smart to eat something and take some Tylenol." At the mention of food, my mouth floods with saliva, not because I'm hungry, but because the idea of eating makes me want to hurl.

“Okay, so no food.” She reads my expression. “Not yet anyway, but you do need to hydrate and sleep.” She pulls one of the biggest cups from the cupboard and fills it with water from the fridge. Then she assists me upstairs and into the shower, promising it will help. When I get out, she’s gone, but I hear her across the hall, attempting to keep the girls quiet before I listen to her usher them downstairs. I don’t bother getting dressed; I put on my robe and fall into bed, and within seconds of my head hitting the pillow, I pass out.

“Mimi.” I open one eye as my shoulder is being shaken aggressively and find Ruby with her face an inch from mine. “Mimi, wake up.”

“I’m awake. Is everything okay?” I ask her, sitting up, relieved the pain in my head is gone along with the constant turning in my stomach that I was feeling earlier.

She steps back, looking at me with wide eyes and an awkward smile curving her cute little mouth. “A boy is here for you.”

“What?” I look for my cell phone to check the time, but it’s not on the bedside table where I normally keep it. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Almost dinner time.”

My eyes widen, and panic lands in the pit of my stomach. “Dinner?” She nods, and I groan. I slept all day and then some, and I never called work to let them know I wouldn’t be in. Shit, I’m so going to get fired.

“Come on.” She tugs my hand. “Mom said to come get you.”

With a shake of my head, I follow her out of the room and down the stairs, wondering if Ken came to check on me when I didn’t show up for work. We hit the bottom landing, and Mercury and Retro circle my feet. Normally, I would stop to give them some attention, but the man sitting at the island in the kitchen in jeans and a long-sleeved dark-blue tee that is stretched across his broad chest has stopped me in my tracks. I want to turn and run right back upstairs, but he turns and looks at me over his shoulder then spins his stool around to face me, pinning me in place with his beautiful blue eyes.

“Hey, babe.” My toes curl and stomach dips at his soft tone and warm expression.

“Hey.” I lick my lips then ask the question on the tip of my tongue. “What are you doing here?”

“I stopped by the dealership to see you. They said your sister called to say you were sick. I tried calling you a few times, but you didn’t answer. I

was worried, so I came to check on you.”

“Oh.” I shake my head then blurt, “How did you find out where I live?”

“I asked that girl at the front desk.” He shrugs.

“She just gave you my address when you asked her for it?” I mean, I believe him because Mandy doesn’t seem to be that bright, but I’m pretty sure that’s against the law, and if it’s not, it should be.

“If it makes you feel better, after she gave it to me, I told her she could get fired for giving out employee information to clients,” he grins.

I hear my sister laugh, and look around his broad shoulder, narrowing my eyes on her and watching her shrug. I roll my eyes at her when she points to him while his back is turned and fans her face in a silent *he’s hot*. I know he’s hot. The entire female population of the world and probably the galaxies surrounding ours know he’s hot.

“So, Talon, do you like spaghetti?” she asks him, and my stomach drops, because I know what’s coming next.

“I do,” he answers, turning toward her.

“Well, I always make enough to feed an army, so please feel free to join us for dinner,” she invites.

“I’m sorry. I can’t tonight.”

Closing my eyes, I say a silent *thank Goodness*.

“Mimi.” Ruby tugs on my hand to get my attention. I open my eyes and tip my head down toward her. “Your boob is out.” She pokes said boob, and I look down, seeing one breast spilling out of the gap in my robe.

I gasp, grasping my robe across my chest. “Umm... I’m go-going to g-get dressed. I’ll be back,” I stutter out right before I spin on my heel and rush upstairs with my girls following behind me.

When I reach the bathroom, I look at my reflection in the mirror. I look like I feel—exhausted and still slightly hung over. Even with the headache and nausea gone, I feel out of it, like I slept too long but still need to sleep longer. I quickly turn on the tap and splash some cold water on my face, brush my teeth, then rip a brush through my hair before giving up and tying it up in a messy bun. I don’t even bother trying to find something decent to wear. I pull on a pair of bicycle shorts and a baggie long-sleeved tie dye shirt with the logo for Def Leppard printed across the chest then look at Mercury when she whines.

“Sorry I’ve been neglecting you, girls.” I get down and give her some love then do the same to Retro when she pushes her sister out of the way.

Not feeling great but knowing I can't leave my sister and Talon alone too long, I whisper, "Come on."

I head back downstairs, and when I reach the bottom step, I find Ruby sitting on her shins next to Talon, showing him something on her iPad. "Sorry," I say to him as he turns toward me and he quickly says something to Ruby before he stands. "Do you want to go outside?" I ask, fiddling with the bottom of my shirt.

"Sure," he replies, and turn to look at Cece.

"Be right back."

"Actually, you two can stay in here. I'm going to load Ruby up and run to the school to pick up Lola and Kate. They decided to join the school play, so today is their first practice," she responds.

"Oh... okay, do you need me to do anything with dinner?"

"Nope, it's pretty much done. I'll finish when I get home." She places the lid on the pot on the stove then turns off the burner. Once that's done, she looks at Ruby. "Come on, honey, let's go get your sisters."

"I'll stay with Mimi," she tells her mom, and Cece gives her a look that has her sighing as she hops off her stool.

"Be back in about twenty minutes," Cece informs me, wiggling her brows at me behind Talon's back, and then she plasters a smile on her face as she comes out of the kitchen. "It was nice to finally meet you, Talon." Since last night was the first time I opened up to her about him, I roll my eyes at her comment.

"You too," he says, and then his eyes drop to Ruby. "Thanks for hanging with me, kid." He holds out his fist, and she bumps hers against it, and then he ruffles her hair, making her laugh.

"You're welcome. Bye, Talon."

"Bye," he says, and a minute later, I listen to the front door open and close. A nervous flutter fills my stomach, and I fidget, not sure what to do with myself.

"Are you feeling better?" he asks quietly, taking a seat on one of the counter stools, which is a good thing, because his size and presence is overwhelming.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm just tired."

"You're probably dehydrated. Your sister mentioned you two drank last night and that she forgot you don't really drink." Damn, my sister has a big mouth. "Have you eaten anything?"

“No, I slept all day,” I admit, knowing he’s right, that I do need to hydrate. I grab a cup from the kitchen and fill it with water. I gulp it down and fill it again then walk to the opposite side of the counter from him. “Thanks for coming to check on me. You didn’t have to do that.” I chew the inside of my cheek.

“I know I probably overstepped, but I was honestly worried.” He sighs, rubbing a hand down his face.

“Why?”

“Why was I worried?” he clarifies, and I nod. “I didn’t hear from you last night, and let’s just say if you knew my family and some of the shit that’s happened, you’d understand why I was concerned.” Okay, that’s vague and weird, and honestly doesn’t make me feel warm and fuzzy. And now I feel bad I didn’t message him last night that I got home okay. I don’t know why I didn’t. I debated about it but didn’t do it. “One day, I’ll explain it to you.”

“Okay,” I agree.

“Your sister seems to be all right.”

“I think last night with the help of vodka she came to terms with some stuff she wasn’t willing to admit to herself before.”

“That’s good.”

“It is,” I agree. “How’s your dad doing?”

His expression warms. “Better today. Mom’s driving him nuts. She’s refusing to leave the hospital, and he doesn’t like that she’s spending all day and night there with him. My mom’s stubborn, so until he gets home, it’s going to be a battle, but I’m sure Mom will win.”

I smile at that, because in the short time I’ve known him, I’ve learned how stubborn he is, and now I know he gets that trait from his mom. “I’m glad he’s doing better. Did the doctors say when he would be released?”

“Not yet. They want to wait a couple more days, just to make sure all his numbers are still looking good and his pain is under control.”

I nod and shift on my feet. It’s weird having him here. For so long, he was like a figment of my imagination, and then he became the person I looked forward to seeing every day, even if I would never admit that to him. And now... well, now it feels like things between us have shifted, and I’m not sure what to do or how to act around him.

A cold nose nudges my calf, and I look down at Retro then at the clock. It’s close to five. Damn, I really did sleep all day. I’m sure Cece fed my babies, but she doesn’t like taking them out on walks, because they don’t

really walk. They meander at their own pace and stop to smell everything, and then they take even longer to get home, because by that point, they've worn themselves out.

"Do you feel like taking my girls on a walk with me?" I ask Talon, and at the mention of a walk, Mercury rushes to me and attempts to jump up on me, only to fall back to all fours and try again.

"If you make a piece of toast to eat as we walk," he says, and I meet his gaze. My first instinct is to deny his request, but the look I see in his eyes lets me know he's not telling me what to do because he wants control, but because he is concerned. And given the fact that I haven't eaten since last night, I know it would probably be smart to put something in my stomach.

"I don't really like toast."

"You don't like toast?"

I smile and shake my head. "I like bread, because bread is awesome, but I don't like toasted bread. Well, I should say unless it's slathered in Nutella, I don't like it."

"Good to know," he replies, and I give him another smile before I go to the cabinet and grab the loaf of bread. I take two slices out along with the peanut butter then get the jelly from the fridge. Once I have my sandwich made, I take a bite and turn to him. "Can we go on a walk now?"

"Yeah." He chuckles, unfolding his large frame from the stool as I grab a paper towel. "So the dogs are yours?" he asks, squatting down to give them each some love when they make their way over to him.

"Mercury and Retro are mine." I look down at my girls, who are soaking up his attention. "But you should be prepared before we go out." My eyes widen when he looks up at me. "I mean on the walk." I clear my throat. "They don't really walk. They stroll and are normally too lazy to walk home, so... um... if you have somewhere to be, you might rethink coming with me."

"I'm right where I want to be." He stands and towers over me, so I have to tip my head back to meet his gaze. "Where are their leashes?"

"Next to the front door." I swallow hard, trying not to give his mouth too much attention when it curves into a smile. It's harder than it should be, because his lips look soft, and I really want to know how they would feel against mine.

Knowing I don't want to do something stupid like lean up on my tiptoes and press my mouth to his, I turn and head for the door, listening to his

heavy foot falls and the tap of my girls nails clicking against the hardwood as they follow me. I grab their leashes, and because they know what that means, they get a burst of energy and start bouncing around at my feet.

“Sit,” Talon orders, and like my girls always do at that command, they fall to their bottoms with their tails wagging. He takes their leashes from me then, like a pro, hooks them to their collars and stands. “Lead the way.” I grab the house keys then open the door, step outside, and then lock up behind us before I follow him down onto the sidewalk. “Eat.” Talon nudges my shoulder with his, so I take a bite of my sandwich. “My cousin Ashlyn lives a few blocks from here,” he tells me as I chew. “She and her husband run a dental practice in town.”

“Do you have a lot of family around here?” I ask after I swallow, and he laughs, so I look up at him. “What’s funny?”

“If you were from around here, you would know how many Maysons live in this area. My family has been here for generations, long before this town was even a town. They lived here when this place was just a place to get gas before you went into Nashville.”

“That’s how it was where I grew up in Montana. My family had all lived there forever. My great, great, great-grandparents and before them.”

“Was your sister the first to leave?” he asks as I finish my sandwich.

I wipe my mouth with the paper towel in my hand and nod. “Yeah. Well, she and Mike met when he was graduating college and she was graduating high school. His family is from here, and she didn’t want to be without him, so they got married at the courthouse in our town. She turned down her admission to MTSU to follow him here.” I wave my hand out to encompass the area around us. “Not even a month after they were married, they found out they were pregnant with twins. I’m sure there are still rumors swirling around the town I grew up in that it was a shotgun wedding—which it wasn’t, but you know how people chat.”

“I do,” he agrees, reaching for my hand and lacing our fingers together.

My skin tingles where our hands are connected, and my stomach twist and turns as his thumb smooths across my wrist. I’ve never felt this kind of attraction to anyone before, and it’s unnerving and invigorating, a combination that is confusing. “So what are you doing tonight?” I ask, needing to fill the silence and curious since he said he couldn’t stay for dinner. Unless he said that because he didn’t want to make me uncomfortable.

“My brother and I are building a log home just outside of town. It’s been difficult finding contractors who show up, so we’ve been doing a lot of the work ourselves.” He gives my hand a squeeze. “So tonight he and I are going to be laying the tile in the master bath.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“I don’t know about fun, but we need to get this house done. It’s our first build, and it’s important we finish by our deadline, which is starting to feel like it might not be possible.”

“Can you push your deadline back?” I ask.

“Our cousin, April, who is a realtor, got us a spread in some big real estate magazine for high-end homes, and she scheduled stagers and photographers to come out. I’m sure we could push the date back, but there is no guarantee we would be able to get that kind of exposure again.” I hear the stress in his tone.

“Well, I don’t know much about laying tile, but I can wield a paint brush or push a broom if you need some help.”

“Thanks, I might take you up on that offer at some point.” He slows when the girls do, allowing them time to sniff the grass on one of the lawns. “Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yeah... well, if I don’t get to the dealership and get fired,” I say as we start to walk again with the girls leading the way.

“Why would you get fired?” He frowns.

“I should have called into work to let them know I wouldn’t be there before I went back to bed this morning. I doubt my boss will be impressed with my sister calling in for me.” Thinking about it now, I probably should have called him when I got up, but finding Talon in my sister’s kitchen threw me off my game. I’ll send him a text when we get back to the house.

He laughs, and I frown. “Sorry, babe, but you’re not going to get fired. I watched your ass strut toward me and saw the men in the room watching you, hoping you’d be their salesperson. Your boss is not going to want to lose you.”

My nose scrunches. “That’s a lot sexist, and Ken doesn’t care about that. We get clients on rotation, so it doesn’t even matter if someone wants to work with you—unless you’ve worked with them in the past or they’ve had a problem with the person they are working with.”

“All right, so how many cars have you sold since you opened back up after the tornado?”

I think about it for a minute then shrug. "I think twelve."

"Again, you're not getting fired."

"Whatever," I mumble. He's probably right, but not because I've gotten a ton of sales or whatever, but because Ken likes me. "I think we should probably turn back for the house," I say when Retro falls to her rump on the sidewalk and Mercury sprawls out on someone's lawn. "Unless you're up to lugging two forty-pound dogs a few blocks."

"Are they always like this?"

"Are you asking if they are always this lazy?"

"I was going to say 'chill,' but yeah." He smiles as we head back toward the house.

"When they were puppies, they would rather sleep than do anything else. I got lucky with them. They were easy to train and always okay with just cuddling and hanging out rather than being into any and everything and all over the place."

"You did get lucky. My parents have two dogs that are constantly running around yapping and hard to control when strangers come over."

"What kind of dogs do they have?"

"A Yorkie and a Chihuahua."

I laugh, knowing he's not exaggerating. "My mom has a Yorkie too, and he acts the same way. His personality is huge, and he thinks he's bigger than he is. The only good thing about him is that when he's getting out of hand, he's small enough that you can just pick him up and hold him."

"You got a point there." His thumb smooths across my wrist, and I shiver. When we get back to the house Cece's minivan is in the driveway, so I stop near Talon's truck. "So are we still on for Saturday?"

"Yeah, I'm working until two then watching the girls, since Cece is working that night. But their dad is supposed to pick them up around four."

"All right, I'll be here at five, if that still works for you?"

"It should. Can I ask where we're going, so I know what to wear?"

"My place." I raise a brow, and he grins. "I'll be on my best behavior, promise. I just know I want to spend time with you without interruption and figured I'd barbeque. And since the weather's nice, we can hang on the deck and take a walk down by the water behind my house. You can bring Retro and Mercury if you want."

"That actually sounds really nice," I admit. I mean, I like going out to a nice restaurant as much as the next girl, but I prefer jeans and sneakers to

dresses and heels, and I doubt after working all day then taking care of the girls that I'll be up to putting in the effort to go out someplace nice.

"Good." He leans down, and I brace as his face gets closer to mine. "I'll see you Saturday, Mia." My eyes slide closed, and I grasp his arm when his woodsy scent wraps around me then brace as he brushes his warm lips against my cheek.

When he pulls back, I open my eyes, finding him looking at me with an expression I can't decipher. All I know is it makes me feel warm and safe and important. "I'll see you Saturday," I echo.

He steps back and releases the hold he has on my hand only to fill it with the two leashes he'd been gripping. "Also, call me. I'd like to hear your voice, and if you can't do that, send me a text." He opens the door to his truck and slides in behind the wheel.

"You're very demanding."

His look turns wicked as his eyes roam over me, making my spine tingle. "Oh, you have no idea, sweetheart." He slams his door, starts the engine, and rolls down the window. "Call me."

"I'll think about it," I sass.

"Bye, babe."

"Bye." I lift my hand to wave, and he winks before putting the engine in drive. I watch his truck until it's out of sight then tap my hand to my thigh. "Come on, girls," I call, and they slowly get up from where they're sprawled on the grass then unhook them from their leashes when we reach the front porch. When we get inside, they go to their beds, obviously too worn out to even check to see why there is music playing along with laughter and singing coming from down the hall.

When I reach the kitchen, I find a dance party happening to Taylor Swift's song "Me." I watch my sister spin in circles with her girls, a smile on her face, and the girls looking like they don't have a care in the world.

"Dance with us, Mimi." Kate grabs my hand, and I laugh as I twirl her around. We dance and sing at the top of our lungs for four more songs, and then we eat spaghetti, and ice cream for dessert, while sitting on the couch watching reruns of *The Goldbergs*.

When we finish one last episode, we take the girls upstairs and usher them through showers and their nightly call to their dad. Once we tuck them in, I want nothing more than to go back to bed, but Cece signals for me to follow her downstairs, so I do. We reach the kitchen, and I take a seat at the

island while she goes to the cabinet, grabbing two cups and filling both with water from the fridge.

“So... Talon.” She grins, leaning against the counter across from me and placing the cups between us. I bury my face in my hands. I should have known this conversation would happen, but I didn’t mentally prepare for it. Honestly, I haven’t had a chance to mentally prepare for anything today. “I know you told me how hot he was, but I so did not believe you.” I lift my head and meet her gaze. “I mean, he even gives my boss Winston a run for his money, and that’s really only because his name is Winston, and no man who looks like him should be named Winston.”

“You think Winston is hot?” My brows drag together. I mean, I know he’s hot. I’ve been in his presence more than once, but I didn’t think she noticed.

“Everyone thinks Winston is hot. It doesn’t matter if you have a vagina or a penis.”

“This is true,” I agree. “But I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Umm, how could I not notice? He’s Winston. He kind of steals the spotlight, even if he’s not trying. But he’s also married.”

“He’s married?” I gasp. That’s news to me. I’ve never seen a ring on his finger or heard him mention his wife.

Her expression turns guarded. “He is. His wife came into the restaurant the other day making a scene, and let’s just say she’s not very nice.” She waves her hand out like she’s trying to wipe away the memory. “But we’re not talking about Winston. We’re talking about Talon, who is as hot as his name and totally into you.”

“Do you think so?” He’s made it clear that he is, but at the same time, I’m not sure I really believe him. It’s hard to trust that he’s real. I know how most men operate. They tend to do, say, and promise the world, but it’s rare for that to last for very long. And given my experience, I find it hard to believe that his attraction to me will last longer than the first time I allow him in my pants.

“How many men do you know would show up at a woman’s house when they find out they’re sick? *Especiallly*—” She emphasizes the word. “—when they aren’t dating. They aren’t even really seeing each other. Not to mention the fact that he looks at you like...” She closes her eyes for a moment then sighs. “God, I don’t even know, because I’ve never had a man

look at me that way. All I know is he's totally into you, and if you weren't my sister, I would be so jealous right now."

"We have a date Saturday."

"So you're going?" she asks. I frown, and she rolls her eyes. "Last night, you kept talking about how you didn't know if you should go. It happened every time you picked up your phone, wondering if you should message him. We really need to work on your alcohol tolerance."

"I think I'll be happy to never drink again. And I didn't know if I should message or go, because I don't know if I trust that he's real. But as you put it, how many guys would most likely illegally get your address and show up at your house to check on you when you don't call to let them know you're okay?"

"I'm pretty sure a stalker would do that," she jokes, and I sigh. "But seriously, Mia, like I told you last night, what do you have to lose if you spend some time with him? Plus, if you're lucky, you'll have the memory of his penis. I just hope it's not small, because that would really suck—not only for you, but for the population of women in the world who are drooling over him."

I shouldn't laugh, but I do, and when I sober, I let out a deep breath. "I'm going out with him. Well, not out. He's taking me to his house and..."

"Banging your brains out?" she cuts me off.

"Oh my God, what's wrong with you? He's just making dinner."

"Well, I still hope he bangs your brains out."

"Can you please stop?" I groan.

"Sorry. You're right. I'll stop." She pretends to zip her lips closed.

"Thank you. Lord... I think you need to get laid. Maybe it's time for you to sign up on a dating app or order a new vibrator."

"Already done. Not the first option, but the second. I don't need another man."

"Right now."

"What?" she asks.

"You don't need a man *right now*."

"Ever." She takes a glug of water. "I... I just want my girls to be happy and to get myself sorted. I don't want another man."

I study her for a moment, wanting so badly to tell her that not all men are the same, but I know I would sound like a hypocrite. She and I have the same issues when it comes to trusting the opposite sex, and I know hers run

deeper than mine, given what she has just been through. “I love you,” I tell her instead, and I see her eyes water.

“I love you too.” Her expression softens to a look I’ve seen her give her girls. “I see good things with you and Talon, so I hope you let him in and actually give him a chance,” she whispers then she clears her throat before walking her cup to the sink. She turns back toward me. “I’m gonna head to bed, and don’t worry about getting up in the morning. I’m taking the girls to school, since I don’t have class until after noon and didn’t work tonight.” She comes around the counter, and I turn my stool toward her as she wraps her arms around me. “Love you.”

“Always.” I hug her back, and as soon as she lets me go, she then turns on her heels and heads upstairs. I watch her go, wondering if I should have said something different, wondering if I should’ve tried to convince her that one day she will find love. But then again, it’s hard to try to convince someone else that love exists, when you don’t really believe in it yourself.

## CHAPTER 6

### TALON

“I DON'T WANT to hear any more excuses. I want to know when the fuck my order will be here,” I growl into my phone while looking at the two-million-dollar log home my brother and I have been working on for months. The house that is supposed to get our business off the ground, a build we hope will set us apart from other builders in the area. Something that would be a fuck of a lot easier to do if we didn't keep getting hit with delays, setbacks, and suppliers constantly fucking us over. We haven't been in business long, and we don't have the pull some of these bigger builders have, which we never considered would be a problem until we broke ground.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Mayson. I'll get you a delivery date on your flooring as soon as I have one,” the man on the other end of the phone says, and I scrub my hand through my hair. With just a couple more months before our deadline left, and another fucking delay, I'm losing faith in finishing on time for the open house we've had planned for months.

“I want it here tomorrow. I know it's been delivered to your warehouse. Find it and get it to me, or I'll find another company to purchase from.” I end the call and shove my cell into my back pocket.

“Do you have another supplier I don't know about?” my brother Bax asks from my side as I stomp toward the house.

“No,” I bite out.

“Just asking.” He sighs as we head up the steps to the porch.

I walk through the front door with him following, and our footsteps echo in the mostly empty space. “Aren't you tired of them fucking with us?” I glance at him over my shoulder.

“You know I am.”

“Maybe if they think we'll find someone else, they'll deliver the shit we ordered on time.” I stop at the large island in the middle of the open kitchen

and smooth my hand over the top of the newly laid granite countertop, with rich veins of gold and copper running through the cream of the stone.

“You might be right, but we’ve been dealing with this kind of thing for months, and I’ve never seen you react like that.”

“Have you looked around?” I wave a hand out to encompass the kitchen and living room, the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over a fifteen-acre forested area the house is on, the glass fireplace in the center of the room, which will be a focal point when finished, and the rough-cut wood walls. Even with all the beauty around us, there’s a lot of shit that is unfinished, and most of it is because we have continued to have problems with deliveries and employees.

“We’ve had to beg and plead for every single item to get delivered.” I shake my head. “Shit, we just got a crew that we can depend on, and I don’t know if you remember, but we have an open house in less than two months. If things keep going like they are now, there is no way we will be able to finish on time, which means we might as well start tossing money out the fucking windows.” I meet his eye and shake my head again. “I’m tired of the bullshit.”

He glances around, his eyes focusing on all the unfinished work as they move around the room. I know he sees what I do—missing stone in the floor around the fireplace because our order wasn’t delivered in full, unfinished woodwork above the fireplace and doors, and lots of small things that add up to big problems. When his eyes meet mine once more, he looks as frustrated as I feel.

I’m determined to see this shit through. I want to prove to everyone that we have what it takes to build a home that stands out against the competition. An energy efficient, ecofriendly smart home that is unlike anything anyone else is building in the area. A home that will be around for hundreds of years, and a home a family will be proud to own. But in order to do that, something needs to change.

“I’ve been thinking,” he says, and I hold his gaze, hoping he’s not going to tell me he’s throwing in the towel, giving up like we’ve both done so many times in the past.

“About what?” I lean into the counter as I wait for him to continue.

“The Mayson name holds a lot of weight around here. Maybe we can ask Uncle Asher about T&B merging with Mayson Construction. If we have the

Mayson Construction Company backing us, people might start taking us a little more seriously.”

He’s right. Mayson Construction has been around for years. Everyone in the area knows about them, not just through their catchy advertising with slogans like “Get Nailed,” but because of word of mouth. My uncles and dad, when he was a part of the business, built a company based on honesty and hard work. They always did what they said they would, on time or before, and the work was and is the best around.

“All right, let’s call Uncle Asher and ask to talk to him and everyone tonight,” I say, and he lifts his chin. “While you do that, I’m going to go pick up the Bobcat from town so I can get the backyard leveled. I want us to be able to start on the deck tomorrow.”

“I’ll let you know when we’re meeting with everyone,” he replies, and with a lift of my chin, I head out of the house and across the yard for my truck.

When I’m halfway to town, my cell buzzes, and the screen on the dash flashes as an automated voice tells me it’s a text from Mia. For the first time today, I smile. I press the button for it to relay it then smile bigger. “It’s me. Just sending you a text, because... well, just because. I hope you have a great day.”

When I get to the rental place, I text her back, letting her know I won’t be in to harass her at work today but will call when I have a chance. An hour later, when I get back to the house, I don’t bother going in to check on the progress inside. Instead, I unload the Bobcat and get to work. I spend the day leveling out the land, thankful for the distraction of Mia’s texts as they come in.

By the time I’m finishing up, all I want to do is to go home, have a shower, drink a beer, and talk to Mia before I go to bed. But my plans are foiled when Bax tells me that we’ll be having dinner tonight with our uncles, each of them equally invested in Mayson Construction.

Two hours later, with a cold beer in my hand, I look at the men gathered around the table at Winston’s, a close family friend’s restaurant aptly named after him. I watch my uncles’ expressions as Bax lays all our cards on the table, telling them about the house, the setbacks we’ve had, and how much we are expected to make if we sell the house at the price we have set with our lenders. Even with these men being family, this is still business, so I hold my breath as I wait for their reaction when Bax stops speaking.

“I think we’d be stupid not to merge with you boys,” Uncle Asher says, and I take a breath.

“I’m thinking the same thing,” Uncle Cash agrees, sitting next to me and patting my shoulder. “Fuck, I wish we thought about going high-end a few years ago.”

“I gotta agree,” Uncle Trevor inserts, lifting his beer in our direction.

“All right, let’s do this. We’ll back you and make sure you have whatever you need, and tomorrow, we’ll come by the house so we’ll know who we need to call in,” Uncle Asher says, looking between Bax and me.

A weight I didn’t even know I was carrying lifts from my shoulders, and I look at my brother, knowing all the shit we’ve done, all the jobs we’ve had, have led us here. “We’ll make you guys proud.” I glance around the table.

“You already have,” Uncle Asher states firmly. “It says a lot about a man who’s willing to ask for help when he needs it. I’m proud of you boys.”

I swallow hard and tip my beer toward him before taking a swig. Knowing we have the men around us at our backs brings me relief, but we still have a few more hurdles to get over before I’ll be able to breathe easy.

“Isn’t that the girl from the hospital?” Bax nudges my shoulder, and I follow his gaze across the room to a table where Mia is sitting with three girls surrounding her. She told me earlier that she was taking her nieces out to eat. I didn’t even think to ask her where.

“It is.” Like she feels my gaze on her, she lifts her head, and her eyes flare in recognition, then she tips her head to the side, smiles, and lifts her hand, wiggling her fingers. Fuck, every time I look at her, it feels like I’ve been sucker punched. And when she’s cute and a little dorky, it only makes me want her even more. I don’t wave back; instead, I push my chair away from the table and stand. “I’ll be back.”

“Who’s that?” Uncle Trevor asks. I turn toward him, and before I can answer, his lips tip up into a grin. “Well shit.”

“Well shit what?” Bax asks, confusion apparent in his tone.

“I’ll explain it to you,” Uncle Cash says.

“All I’m gonna say is... *Boom.*” Uncle Asher laughs.

I shake my head at them and leave the table, carrying my beer with me across the restaurant. When I reach the table Mia is seated at, she smiles up at me while Ruby gets up on the cushion and shouts, “Talon!”

“Hey, kid.” I hold out my fist, and she bumps hers against mine, and then I look at her aunt. “Hey.”

“Hey.” She looks at the girls sitting on her left. “Kate.” She squeezes the girl closest to her. “Lola, this is my friend Talon.”

“Hi,” they say in unison, and although the two girls look a lot alike, you can still tell them apart by the beauty mark on Kate’s cheek and the dimple in Lola’s.

“Nice to meet you both.” I pull out a chair and take a seat.

“Funny seeing you here,” Mia says softly as the girls go back to playing on the iPads in front of them, and Ruby jumps from chair to chair around the large table until she’s standing on the one next to mine.

“I got a new game,” she tells me, plopping her device down on the table at my side and putting her knees on the cushion. “Do you want to watch me play?”

“Sure,” I reply, and she grins then ducks her head and goes back to playing.

Once she forgets I’m supposed to be watching, I look at her aunt. Jesus, how long will it be until I get used to looking at her? “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“Cece works here.” She lifts her chin, motioning in the direction of the bar, and I turn to look over my shoulder and see Cece chatting with a customer. “The girls and I were in the mood for burgers, so we decided to come here.”

“The best burgers in town.” I smile, and she nods. “Winston is close with my family. When he moved to town, my uncles built his house, and they’ve been tight ever since.”

“I worked here while the dealership was shut down and got to know him a little. He seems like a good guy.”

“He is.” Fuck, I hate that I can’t touch her right now.

“So who’s the table of men eyeing us from across the room?” she asks, a blush creeping up her cheeks, probably because they’re all watching our interaction.

“My uncles and my brother. You probably remember seeing Bax with me the night you were at the hospital.”

“I do.” She bites the inside of her cheek, something she seems to do when she’s nervous. “Your food just got to your table.”

I look that direction and see our waitress there with our meals—not that any of the men at the table seem to notice, since all their eyes are on us. Fuck.

“You mind if I join you guys for dinner?” I turn back to her, and she looks at her nieces, who are all occupied.

“I would like that, but—” She looks over my shoulder. “—do you think your family will mind?”

Personally, I don’t give a fuck if they do, but I know they won’t. All of them will understand. Bax might not, but he will when he feels what I do right now. “They won’t.”

I start to stand but stop when a hand lands on my shoulder. “Talon.” I tip my head back and see Cece’s smiling face. “Mia didn’t tell me that you were coming with her and the girls tonight.”

“That’s because he didn’t come here with us. He came here with his uncles and brother,” Mia states, and her sister eyes her for a moment before looking around the restaurant.

I know the instant she spots the table where my family is, because her mouth forms a soft O and her eyes widen. “Umm... wow, okay. So you get your hotness honestly.” Her cheeks turn an endearing shade of pink. “I mean... I mean.... Never mind. I’ll be back. I need to go check on my kids’ dinner.”

I chuckle, hearing Mia giggle as we watch her rush off. But then I frown. Winston steps in front of Cece, taking hold of her shoulders and ducking his face close to hers. My frown grows deeper when I see her shake her head, and his expression softens. I know Winston and know he’s married—not because he talks about his wife like my dad, uncles, and cousins talk about their wives, but because she’s made a point to show up whenever my family has invited him to an event. She’s also always made an impression, and not a good one.

“Oh my God,” Mia whispers, and I turn toward her, watching her shake her head. “He’s totally into her, and she’s into him.”

“I really fucking hope not,” I state, and her eyes widen as she meets my gaze.

“Umm,” she mumbles, and I narrow my eyes on her, only to have her glance quickly over my shoulder. “I think your family is trying to get your attention to let you know your dinner is at the table.”

I want to tell her I don't give a fuck about that, but I know with her nieces at the table that I need to at least attempt to watch what I say. I push back from the table, and Ruby's eyes fly to me. "Be right back kid."

"Okay." She smiles, and I stand.

I leave my half-empty beer and head across the restaurant to where my uncle and brother are seated. When I reach their table, I look through them. "I hope you don't mind that I'm gonna join Mia for dinner."

"We don't mind," my uncles all say, but not hearing the same from my brother, I look at him.

"Go have dinner with your girl." He smirks. "Glad it's you and not me."

"Aw, bud, when it happens to you, you're going to be singing another tune." Uncle Cash laughs.

"Fuck no, I won't. I know exactly what happens when a Mayson bites the dust, and I want no part of that kind of drama."

My stomach knots, because my brother is not wrong. Every time one of my family members finds love, shit is not all fucking hearts and roses. It's more like kidnappings, stalkers, fucked-up family shit, or a whole lot of other drama. Not wanting to think about what might be coming my way, I grab my plate off the table. "If you're all good, I'll see you tomorrow morning at the house."

"See you then," I hear echoed behind me as I walk across the restaurant with Mia watching.

When I reach the table, Ruby's eyes light up as I take a seat, and then she nabs a fry off my plate. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." I grin at her, and she grins back.

"Dinner is served," Cece announces behind me, and Ruby quickly pushes her tablet across the table so her mom can place her plate before her. I help Cece with the other plates, and once they're all passed out, she tucks her tray under her arm. "Are you guys good?"

"I think we're good for now," Mia answers as I grab the ketchup from the middle of the table, squirting some on Ruby's plate.

"I'll be back to check on you guys after I check on my tables." Cece pats my shoulder before walking off.

"Are you Aunt Mia's boyfriend?" Lola asks, eyeing me as Mia takes the ketchup I hand over.

I start to open my mouth to answer, but Mia gets there before me. "He's a friend, honey."

“I know.” Lola rolls her eyes. “But is he also your boyfriend?”

“No.” Mia laughs.

I chuckle at the disappointed look on her face then brace when her eyes narrow on mine. “Don’t you like her?”

“Of course he likes her,” Ruby chimes in. “Everyone likes Mimi.”

“Do you?” Kate asks.

“I do,” I say, and Kate seems to believe me right away, but Lola studies me for a moment before seeming satisfied with whatever she sees.

“All right, girls, eat,” Mia orders, and the three of them dig into their meals.

I pick up my burger to do the same but notice Mia’s attention shift to something over my shoulder, and her expression become concerned. I turn and scan the room. That’s when I see a man heading toward Cece with anger clear in his features. Without knowing, I understand the man is Cece’s ex, Mike.

“No, no way,” Mia whispers as he approaches her sister, putting his finger in her face, which pales as he speaks.

I start to get up to intervene, when Kate cries, “Daddy!” She bolts from her seat and runs across the room.

“Shit.” Mia’s eyes fly to me as she stands. “Can you stay here with the girls for a minute while I go get her?” she whispers.

“I’m here.”

She nods then looks at Lola, who is still sitting, seeming torn between following her sister and staying at the table. “Stay here please, honey,” Mia begs.

“I won’t move,” she replies quietly, looking at her aunt, who then leans in, kissing her cheek before moving her gaze to Ruby. “Stay with Talon, trouble.”

I can tell she doesn’t want to, but she nods.

My hands ball into fists as Mia walks quickly across the room, and it takes everything in me to stay put as her sister’s dickwad ex shakes his head at Mia. She shakes her head back then reaches out her hand to Kate, who reluctantly takes it. As she and Kate walk back toward us, Winston steps up to Cece’s side and crosses his arms over his chest as he glares at the man trying to get in her personal space.

“Why’s Daddy here?” Lola asks quietly, and I look at her, seeing her worried expression as she watches her parents.

“He and your mom are just talking,” Mia says, ushering Kate back into her seat. I move my chair to block the girls’ view then grab Ruby’s iPad and flip it on, quickly finding something for her to watch that will distract her.

“You mind if we join you guys?” Uncle Trevor asks, setting down his plate and taking a seat, then Uncle Cash follows suit. I expect my brother and Uncle Asher to join us but turn and catch a glimpse of them walking out of the restaurant, with Cece, Mike, and Winston walking ahead of them.

I turn back to the table and make introductions then focus on Mia, who’s watching the door while my uncles—who’ve had kids and now have grandkids—distract the girls like pros. When Mia’s gaze comes to me, I reach my hand across the table, and without delay, she hooks her index finger with mine. I want to ask if she’s okay, if she knows what’s going on, but with the girls so close, I don’t. Instead, I try to act like everything is okay, and after a couple minutes, she does the same.

Neither of us touches our food, and since I’m sitting at an angle, I can’t see the door, but I know the minute her sister and everyone comes back in, because Mia’s muscles tense and her eyes fill with anxiousness. I look over my shoulder and watch Uncle Asher and Bax with Mike leading the way, coming toward us. Cece and Winston are nowhere in sight. When the three men reach the table, Ruby and Kate get up to greet their dad, but Lola doesn’t move until Mia whispers something in her ear that has her nodding.

“I didn’t know you guys would be here tonight,” Mike says, looking at Mia with regret in his eyes, and then he kisses the top of Kate’s head. “You girls finish dinner with Aunt Mia and her friends. I love you, and I’ll see you tomorrow.” Without protest, the girls find their seats at the table, and then without another word, Mike turns and disappears.

“Eat, sweet girls,” Mia urges her nieces softly, and Kate ducks her head while Lola rubs her lips together. The two of them might not know what happened, but they’re obviously old enough to come up with their own ideas.

“How about this?” I start, and the two of them shift their attention to me. I feel Ruby, who had been distracted by her iPad, do the same. “If you girls scarf down your burgers, I’ll convince your aunt to take you to get frozen yogurt.”

“Yay! Ice cream!” Ruby shouts, and her sisters both smile at her before they begin to eat.

“Really?” Mia asks, raising a brow. “I hope you don’t have plans after dinner, because I’ll need your help. Three kids and FroYo is a process.”

“I’ll be there to help,” I assure her.

“You look like you’ve got this handled,” Uncle Cash states, gaining my attention. I meet his gaze as he stands, not really understanding the look in his eyes. All I know is it makes my chest feel warm. “See you at the house tomorrow.”

“See you then.” I touch my fist to his then feel a hand on my shoulder and tip my head back to peer at Uncle Asher. He doesn’t say a word, but the look he gives me only makes that warm feeling in my chest expand. Then it grows warmer still when I lift my chin to Uncle Trevor and Bax before they walk away. Fuck, I have good men in my life.

“*Done!*” Ruby shouts around a mouthful right before she starts to cough. I laugh while I pat her back then hand over her drink. Once she chews and swallows, she grins at me. “Thanks.”

“It’s not a race.” Mia shakes her head, picking up her burger and taking a bite.

“But I want ice cream.”

“Sweetheart, we all have to eat before we get dessert,” I tell her, and she sighs.

With a smile, I pick up my burger and take a bite. Even cold, it’s still good.

“Are you guys okay?” Cece asks, and she must surprise even Mia with her presence, judging by the way she jumps. When I look at her, I can tell she’s been crying but has taken time to fix her makeup, which is a good thing, because her girls are already on edge.

“We’re going to get ice cream!” Ruby tells her mom.

“You are?” Cece looks at Mia.

“Talon bribed the girls so they would eat,” Mia admits.

Cece looks at me, and her eyes soften. “That sounds like fun.” She smooths her hand over the crown of Ruby’s head before leaning down and kissing her hair. “I gotta work, but I’ll see you girls in the morning for breakfast.” She walks around the table to Kate and Lola, giving them each a kiss.

“See you when you get home,” Mia states, the warning clear in her tone. The two of them hold a silent conversation as they stare at each other before

Cece glances around the table, ordering softly to her girls that they be good, before she disappears.

After the girls finish eating, I follow Mia to one of the frozen yogurt places in town, and we eat outside. The mood is light, even with the events of tonight fresh on the girls' minds. When we finish our ice cream, I leave Mia at the door to her car with a promise from her to call me after she gets the girls tucked into bed, and I kiss her cheek.

I get in my truck and start the engine, my brother's words from earlier tonight ringing in my ears. I'm not looking forward to whatever drama is about to unfold, but I know without a doubt that I'd deal with anything if at the end I have Mia at my side.

## CHAPTER 7

MIA

WITH A TIRED sigh, I close the door to Lola and Kate's room. Getting them to bed tonight was a little harder than it's been, and the call they had with their dad didn't seem to help things. I didn't listen to their conversation, because I was getting Ruby to sleep, but by the time I got to their room to tuck them in, both girls had questions about their parents' marriage that made me uncomfortable. I'm not sure what their father told them, but I could tell by their questions that it had something to do with their parents divorcing and the house they grew up in.

I grab my cell from my room where I had it charging and take it with me downstairs, where I plan on waiting for Cece to get home. It's obvious to me that something has happened and she has once again left me in the dark. I don't want to be mad at her, but I am so over her not being honest until it's too late. When I reach the kitchen, I go to the fridge and grab a Diet Coke then take a seat at the island. I crack it open and take a sip then tap the screen of my phone, finding a text from Talon waiting for me. I don't read it; instead, I dial his number and put my phone to my ear.

"Hey," he answers on the first ring.

"Hey."

"Did you get the girls to bed?" he asks quietly, and I soak in the way just the sound of his voice makes me feel.

"I did."

"That bad, huh?" he prompts, and I wonder how he knows. "What time does your sister get off?"

"I think eleven." I glance at the clock, seeing it's 8:30, which means I still have a few hours before she's home, and I'm already tired.

"Are you waiting up for her?"

"Yeah, she has some explaining to do. I'm not sure what tonight was about, but when I put the girls to bed, they were asking about their parents getting divorced and where they would live when that happened." I rub the

spot between my eyes that is starting to throb. “I didn’t know what to tell them, because Cece hasn’t talked to me. So I’m pretty sure I didn’t make them feel any better, which sucks, because now they’re trying to sleep with that on their minds.”

“You think maybe she asked him for a divorce?”

I shrug then remember he can’t see me. “I don’t know. The last time we spoke about it, she didn’t have money for the divorce papers, and he was refusing to put up the cash.”

“Maybe he wants her back.”

“Maybe, but then why have a woman at your house when your kids are there? To me, that is a clear statement that you’re moving on.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” he says, sounding annoyed, and I smile. “You still good with coming to my place tomorrow for dinner?”

My pulse flutters at the reminder that I will be alone with him in his home tomorrow evening. “I’m still good, but I think I should drive myself to your house. That way, if something comes up, I’ll be able to leave without you being inconvenienced.”

“If something comes up? You already working on a way to ditch me?” I hear the smile in his voice.

I can’t help but laugh. “I’m not going to ditch you.”

“I’m also not going to be inconvenienced if I have to take you home, but I get it. So if it makes you feel better, I’ll text you my address.”

“Thanks.” I smile. “And let me know what you want me to bring.”

“Yourself, but you can let me know what you drink so I can pick it up when I hit the store in the afternoon. I got some beer and whiskey, but no wine or anything like that.”

“After drinking with Cece the other night, I’m taking a break from any kind of alcohol for a while,” I say, and he laughs. “I’ll be good with soda or tea.”

“Got it.” He goes quiet, and then I hear the shuffle of fabric and what sounds like him lying down.

“Are you going to bed?”

“Yeah, I gotta get up early to meet my uncle and my brothers at the house so we can come up with a game plan to get done in time for our deadline.”

“Let me know when you’re ready for me to wield a broom.”

“So damn sweet,” he says roughly, the deep sound making my stomach muscles bunch. “Gotta let you know, babe, if you were in front of me, I’d

have a really hard time not kissing you.”

With my toes curled and my chest warm, I clear my throat. “Go to sleep, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Try to get some rest yourself, and if you need me, my cell is on.”

“Night, Talon.”

“Night, baby.”

I hang up and close my eyes, trying to remind myself that I don’t really know him, so I shouldn’t trust the way I feel. But that doesn’t change the fact that I like him. Actions always speak louder than words, and in the short time I’ve known him, he has shown me the kind of man he is. A man who would step in to save a stranger, a man who has a deep love for his father and mother, a man who was concerned enough for me to show up when he found out I didn’t go to work. And a guy who tried to make three little girls smile when he saw how worried they were.

So yeah, I don’t know that I should trust the way I feel, but for once, I’m not going to think too much about it. I’m going to just see what happens, and if I end up hurt, it won’t be the first time. My phone ringing pulls me from my thoughts, and I open my eyes and sigh when I see my mom is calling. I want to answer, because I miss her, but I know she’s going to ask me questions I have no answers to, and given what happened tonight, that is even clearer.

I let the call go to voicemail then start to worry a moment later when it begins to ring again. Chaz, my stepdad, has a history of heart problems, and I would hate myself if my mom was trying to call me to tell me he’s in the hospital and I didn’t answer.

I slide my finger across the screen and put it to my ear. “Mom.”

“What the heck is going on there?” she cries dramatically, and my head falls back to my shoulders. “I just talked to your sister when she was on her break, and she told me that Mike let some woman come to dinner with the girls. And then when she had him served with divorce papers, he came to her job and made a big scene.”

Well, I guess that answers why he showed up at the bar tonight. “Mom—”

“I thought you guys were okay. Then I find out she’s behind on bills and would probably be losing the house if you weren’t there.”

Okay, that is news to me. “Mom—”

“I just do not understand why you girls refuse to ask for help until it’s too late. I just do not know why you’re both so secretive.”

“Mom!” I shout.

“What?” she shouts back.

“Can you please calm down?”

“Calm down? How can I calm down when you and your sister are always stressing me out?”

“We are not stressing you out.”

“You’re not? You’re *not*? If I went and checked my blood pressure right now, it would be through the roof.”

“Mom—”

“Chaz was so upset that he couldn’t even stay in the house. He went out to his shop, where I’m sure he will be for the rest of the night, probably building another birdhouse. How many birdhouses do we need? At this point, we have more birdhouses than birds.”

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. Growing up, anytime Chaz got upset, he would disappear to his shop for hours, and a few days later, you’d see a new birdhouse in the yard.

“Mom—”

“We’re coming to Tennessee.”

Oh, Lord. “Mom, I don’t—”

“We leave the day after tomorrow,” she cuts me off once again. “We’re driving so we don’t have to worry about a car while we’re there, and we can stay as long as we’re needed, since Chaz can work from anywhere, and I work for him.”

“Umm... did you talk to Cece about this?”

“Do you think there is room for us at the house, or should we look for a place to rent?” she asks, ignoring my question.

“Mom, does Cece know you’re coming?” I repeat, unwilling to give up, because I already have things I’m not looking forward to talking to Cece about, so there is no way I want to tell her that our mom and Chaz are coming for God only knows how long.

“I mentioned us coming for a visit when we talked.” So that would be a no.

“I think you should wait to talk to Cece before you come, Mom.”

“Mia honey, I love you. I love that you always think you can take care of everything on your own and that you never need help. I’m sorry, but you

can't, and neither can your sister." My lungs seem to freeze, and it feels painful to even take a breath as the truth of her words sink in. Her voice softens. "Chaz and I will be there in a few days."

"Okay, Mom. The couch in the entertainment room pulls out. I'm sure you and Chaz can sleep there."

"Okay," she says, sounding like she is on the verge of tears. "I love you, honey."

"I love you too." I rest my forehead on the top of the island. "I know it might not seem like it, but I'm happy you're coming. I miss you and Chaz."

She snuffles then clears her throat. "We miss you too, and we can't wait to meet your guy. Cece says he's very nice."

Good to know my sister has no issues telling people my business when she can't even tell me hers. "I haven't even gone on a date with him, Mom, so he's not really my guy."

"Hmm," she hums, and I sigh. "I love you, honey. We'll talk soon, and kiss my grandbabies but don't tell them that Grandma and Grandpa are coming, we want to surprise them."

"I won't tell them," I agree then listen to her say she loves me once more before she hangs up. I lift my head off the counter and grab my Coke to take it with me to the living room. I grab the remote then look for something to watch while I wait for my sister to get home.

"Mia." I blink my eyes open to find Cece standing over me. "I was just waking you up, because I didn't think you'd want to spend the night down here," she says quietly.

"I was waiting up for you." I sit up and notice the TV has gone to a hold screen. "What time is it?"

"A little after midnight."

"Oh." My nose scrunches. "I thought you got off at eleven."

"I did, but I ended up talking to Winston and kind of lost track of time."

"It's good you're talking to *someone*." I don't even try to hide my frustration.

"What is that supposed to mean?" She frowns.

"What happened tonight?" I ask, and she wrings her hands together. "Cece, I love you. You know I love you. But honest to God, if you don't start talking, sharing, and being honest about shit, I'm going to lose my mind."

"I—"

“Do you realize that when I moved here, I left my whole life behind? I had an apartment, friends, a boyfriend, and a life in Montana. I gave that all up, because you needed me. I think I deserve to know what is going on.”

“You said Shep was a jerk, and that you were glad he showed who he is and that you weren’t with him anymore,” she rambles.

“He was a jerk, but that’s not the point,” I groan. “The point is that I deserve to know what the hell is going on.”

“You’re right. I... I got the money together and asked Mike for a divorce.”

“I know that.” I shake my head when she looks confused. “Mom told me. She also told me that you’re behind on bills and would probably be losing the house if I weren’t here. So I’ll ask you again, what is going on?”

Her bottom lip wobbles. “The money Mike gives me doesn’t cover everything, not even close.” She rests her elbows on her knees and drops her face to her hands. “I was so set on not wanting to take anything from him and wanting to do this on my own that I maxed out my credit cards, which was stupid. I’ve been so stupid.” She lifts her head to look at me. “I realize now that I can’t do this alone and provide for my girls.”

She clears her throat. “Tonight, he came into the bar, because I had him served with divorce papers, and the lawyer put in how much I’m requesting he pay me each month, which is about four times what he’s been giving me.” Tears fill her eyes. “He didn’t have a problem with giving me the divorce; he had a problem with the money and wanted to let me know that he’s going to fight me for custody rather than pay and that he wants us to sell the house.”

Tears stream down her cheeks, and my heart aches for her. “Why didn’t you tell me that you were going to file?” I grab her hand. “Why didn’t you tell me that you were getting behind on bills? I would have helped.”

“I’ve felt like a failure, Mia. The only thing I have to show for the last ten years of my life are three beautiful girls. I don’t have a college degree. I’m working for the first time since I was in high school, and soon, I will be divorced. I know you would’ve helped if I asked, but that’s... You’ve already done so much.” She wipes her cheeks. “I never thought it would be like this. I thought he was going to come home,” she finishes on a sob.

“You’re not a failure, Cece, and you might not realize this, but you and Mike at one point or another decided together that your *job* was to stay home and take care of the kids. He did his job, which was to take care of

you guys. And I don't care what bullshit he spewed, you did your job and are still doing it, and I know it's the hardest job in the world. He can say all day long that he's going to take custody from you, but you know that's not how that works. A judge will decide what happens, and everyone who knows you has witnessed the kind of mom you are. Mike is a good dad, but he works sixty hours a week if not more, and right now, he's only seeing the girls one day a week by *choice*. You tell me how he's going to suddenly change that."

I squeeze her hand to make sure I have her full attention. "The house isn't important. If you have to move because you can't afford it, then you and the girls will find somewhere else you can afford. And if you want to stay here, I'm sure Mom and me can come to some kind of agreement to help you cover the mortgage until you can afford it."

"I don't want that," she whispers. "I don't want people covering for me anymore."

I let out a big breath. "I know you don't want that, but it's like Mom told me tonight—sometimes we can't handle everything on our own. Sometimes we need help, and there is nothing wrong with asking for help or accepting it when it's offered."

"I don't care about anything but my babies."

"They are fine. Confused, but fine," I say, and she frowns. "Kate and Lola talked to their dad tonight, and judging by the questions they asked when I tucked them in, I'm guessing Mike mentioned the divorce and selling the house."

"He didn't," she hisses.

"I don't know for sure, because while they were on the phone with him, I was putting Ruby to bed."

"That piece of.... God, he's a dick. How did I never realize he was such a dick?"

"I'm sure you noticed; you just didn't overthink it, because he was—or is—your husband."

"You're probably right," she mutters.

"So I'm going to guess that right now isn't the best time to let you know that Mom and Chaz are going to be here in a few days."

"Seriously?" She closes her eyes before falling back against the couch. "I should have thought about that before I had a lapse in judgment and called

Mom tonight when I was on break. I just... I needed Mom. I needed her to tell me that everything would be okay.”

“I get it, and I really think it will be a good having her and Chaz here. They can help take the girls’ minds off things for a few days or months.”

“Months?” Her eyes widen.

I shrug. “Mom reminded me that she works for Chaz and he works for himself. I don’t know how long they’re going to be here, but my guess is it will be until they know you and the girls are okay.”

“Right.” She sits forward then stands. “On that note, I’m going to go kiss my girls then lay in bed and figure out what I’m going to say to them in the morning over pancakes.”

“I know it’s easier said than done, but you shouldn’t stress too much about the conversation you’re going to have in the morning. The girls know how much you love them, and they trust you and Mike.” I tip my head to the side. “Maybe just be truthful. I know you hate the idea of them knowing what is happening, but sometimes not knowing is worse than the truth. It’s not going to be easy for them either way, but at least they will understand what’s going on and what might happen.”

I watch tears fill her eyes once more then hear her take a harsh breath. “You’re right.” She steps up to me, and I stand to wrap my arms around her. “I love you, and I’m so thankful for you.”

“I love you too.” My nose stings, but I fight back the tears. Right now, she doesn’t need to see my cry. Right now, she needs me to be strong and show her it’s okay, because she has people who she can lean on. “I’ll see you in the morning for pancakes, unless you want to have your talk with the girls alone.” I lean back to meet her gaze.

“I think it might help them having you there.” She lets me go.

“Then I’ll be there,” I promise before turning off the TV and grabbing my cell and empty can.

“Mia,” Cece calls as I’m dumping my can in the recycle bin.

“Yeah?” I meet her gaze.

“Thank you... for everything.” She rubs her lips together as her eyes fill with tears once more. “I never want you to feel like I’m taking advantage of you.”

“What you need to get, Cece, is I’m your sister. If you need me, I’ll be here. I will always be here.” The tears filling her eyes skim down her

cheeks, and she nods before quickly heading upstairs. I watch her go, with my chest feeling funny.

I don't know exactly what just happened, but I do know it was something big, and I'm really praying it's something good.

And on that thought, I head up to bed, because tomorrow is going to be another challenge—not just the girls, but me letting my guard down with Talon.

## CHAPTER 8

MIA

WHEN THE DOORBELL rings, I let out a breath. Mike called about ten minutes ago to say he was on his way to pick up the girls. I didn't talk to him; Lola answered the house phone and let me know after she hung up. I told her and her sisters to head up and grab the bags their mom packed and anything else they might want, even though I really don't want to let them go.

This morning during breakfast, we found out Mike asked Kate and Lola last night who they would want to live with, before saying he would really like the two of them and Ruby to move in with him. He also said after the house gets sold, they could look for a house together. I was surprised he did that, especially after he's seemed to be on the same page as Cece when it comes to protecting the girls from everything going on. And honestly, I was disappointed he didn't think about how that would make the girls feel. So no, I really don't want to let them go with him.

"Kate, Ruby, Lola, your dad's here!" I shout up the stairs as I walk toward the front door.

"We're coming!" they yell back as I open the door.

"Hey, Mimi," Mike greets.

"Mike." I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him, because even if my sister has to be nice, I don't.

"Are the girls ready?" He shoves his hands in his pockets as he shifts on his feet, seeming unsure.

"They are," I say shortly, leaving off the word *dick*.

"Look, Mimi, I'm—"

"Mike, I know you and Cece talked—"

"We did," he cuts me off. "I promised—"

"No." I shake my head quickly, and he snaps his mouth shut. "I mean during your marriage. I'm sure you two talked during your marriage about how we lived before our mom met Chaz." Realization fills his eyes. "We

resented our mom for dragging us into her and our dad's failing marriage then divorce."

"Mimi." His expression gentles.

My throat gets tight, because I'm reminded why I used to like him, but I fight through the pain and refuse to let him off the hook. "Don't do that to your girls, Mike. They don't deserve that. They love you and their mom. It's hard enough that things have changed for them. Don't make it harder."

His gaze stays locked with mine, and he swallows as the sound of the girls coming down the stairs fills the house. When he nods, I release the breath I was holding.

"Daddy!" Kate shouts first, and Ruby's happy shout follows. I turn to look for Lola, wondering if she's still upstairs, and then I spot her behind her sisters, walking slow.

When I see a look on her face that fills the pit of my stomach with unease, I go to her and get down on my knees so we are face-to-face. "Hey." I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Are you okay?"

She quickly glances over my shoulder toward her dad before dropping her eyes to the ground. "I'm okay, Mimi."

Pain fills my chest as I remember being where she is now, overwhelmed, hurting, and confused, because the world as I knew it was ending and there was nothing I could do. "I love you, sweet girl," I whisper as I wrap her in my arms. I wish I could hide her from this. "I promise it will be okay." I kiss the side of her head and stand after she nods.

When I turn toward Mike, pain and understanding is stark in his expression, but he wipes it away and places a smile on his face. "Hey, honey," he says gently to Lola, reaching out to hug her. "I've missed you." I hear her say she's missed him too then he lets her go and takes her bag, grabbing Ruby and Kate's too. "We have a busy night of pizza, ice cream, and movies, so we should go," he tells the girls then looks at me. "Thank you, Mimi."

I lift my chin then give each of the girls hugs before stepping out on the porch and watching them load into their dad's car. When they pull away, I go inside and shut the door, hoping like hell I got through to Mike. I hope he realizes by my reminder and Lola's demeanor that he can't use his girls as pawns unless he wants to lose them. And that loss will be the worst of his life, because it won't be immediate. It will be something that happens slowly over time as Kate, Lola, and Ruby begin to see their father isn't

trying to protect them like he should be, but instead using them to get one over on their mother, who they love.

---

I FLIP ON my signal and turn into a dirt driveway. The two-story red wooden house not far off the main road surrounded by trees is eye-catching, with an entire room made up of nothing but windows that must be twenty feet high. With my heart picking up speed, I park next to Talon's truck and shut down the engine to my seven-year-old Subaru Legacy, a car that was necessary when I lived in Montana but somewhat out of place here in Tennessee, where it hardly snows.

I glance at my reflection in the mirror as I drop my keys into my bag, and my stomach bottoms out. When I got home from work, I changed into bike shorts and a T-shirt, took off my makeup except my mascara, and tied my hair up into a ponytail. I never went up to change or fix myself up after Mike came. I didn't think about it, my mind so consumed by what happened with Lola and letting Cece know, and then my mom called to say she and Chaz were on their way. Now... Now, I look like I didn't even bother, which I didn't but it wasn't on purpose...

"What the hell am I going to do?" I mutter, unhooking my seatbelt before I grab my bag. At the bottom, I find a tube of cheek and lip stain and quickly apply it before sliding the elastic from my hair and running my fingers through my dark locks, feathering it over my shoulders. I look a little better than I did, but as my nerves kick into overdrive, I debate running home to change into a dress or something cute. "No, no, no. It's too late," I mumble to myself as I pick up the pink box holding some of my favorite cookies and miniature cakes from Julia's, a local bakery, off my passenger seat. With my hands full, I turn to the door and squeak when I see the cause of my anxiousness standing a few feet away with a grin that clearly states he's been there awhile and witnessed me being an idiot. *Great.*

Before I can open the door, he does, and I tip my head back to see his still smiling face.

"Please tell me that you haven't been out here long," I beg as embarrassment makes my cheeks feel hot.

“Babe.” He reaches out toward me, taking the things from my hands. “You’re cute when you’re nervous. I really thought for a minute that you might decide to take off.”

“I would have been back,” I mumble as I get out of my car, and he laughs.

“Come on.” He takes my hand. “I was just about to start the barbeque.”

I let him lead me toward the house, the size of the glass room seeming even larger up close. “Is this your house?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s beautiful, and this property is gorgeous.”

“I didn’t plan on buying anything, but this land came on the market, and I knew I had to have it. I should prepare you though, because the house isn’t much.” He opens the front door, and the moment we step inside, a black cat jumps down off a thin table and circles our feet while meowing.

“You have a cat? You never told me that you have a cat.”

“Soma’s not exactly mine. I’m fostering her.” He shrugs. “Her kittens are in the laundry room.”

“You have kittens?” I don’t even try to hide my excitement as I smile up at him.

His eyes drop to my mouth, and he smiles back. “They aren’t mine. At some point, they will be adopted, but yeah, there are kittens in the house.”

“Why are you adopting them out?” I ask as I squat down to pet Soma, who purrs as I run my hand over her silky fur.

“My cousin is a vet. Soma and her kittens were dropped off to her not long after the kittens were born. She tried to take them to her house, but her cat wasn’t having it, so she asked me to help her out until they’re old enough for her to find homes for them.”

“So you don’t plan on keeping her?” I ask, scratching Soma behind her ears.

“I didn’t.” He gets down next to me, and Soma loses interest in me and goes right to him, lifting her front paws to his jean-clad thigh and beginning to purr loudly. “She’s grown on me, even if she has ripped the shit out of my furniture with her claws.”

*Could this man be any more perfect?*

“You should get her a scratching post; that might help.” I rub her head then turn to look at him, finding his face inches from mine. “I always wanted a cat, but my sister and mom are allergic. Then I got Mercury and

Retro, and by the time I thought about it again, I was moving here,” I end on a whisper.

“Hmm.” His gaze drops to my mouth, and overwhelmed by my own emotions, I clear my throat.

“Umm... can I see the kittens?”

“With the way Soma is purring, I doubt she will mind. Let’s drop this stuff in the kitchen, and I’ll take you to the laundry room.” He holds out his hand to me and helps me stand.

We walk through the house, which is like he said—not much. The walls are bare, and as we pass by a living room, I see a few pieces of tattered furniture along with a too-big TV and nothing else. Then we get to the kitchen. It’s been updated recently, with new appliances, white cabinets, and a large island with cream-colored granite.

Past the kitchen, it opens up, and I’m stunned. The glass room that is so eye-catching from outside is just as gorgeous inside. Bright light and nothing but forest as far as I can see, with a comfortable-looking couch and a round table with chairs. If I lived here, I don’t think I would ever leave this room.

“This is beautiful.” I spin around to face Talon, realizing then I’ve wandered across the room, and now he’s leaning against the island in the kitchen, watching me.

“When I bought the house, the windows were boarded up and the kitchen had a family of raccoons living in it.”

“Really?” I smile.

“Really.” He walks toward me slowly, and my breath sticks in the back of my throat. “I thought about just letting it sit and building something closer to the lake in a couple years, but every time I came here, I would take down a board, and each time, more light came in.” He stops in front of me, and my stomach muscles flutter as his fingers wrap around my hip. “I already knew how perfect this house was, but the more I showed up, the more its beauty shined through.”

He dips his chin, and his lips touch mine ever so softly. The sigh that escapes is out of my control. It feels like I’ve been waiting my entire life for the moment he would kiss me. I sense him pull back, and my eyes flutter open, finding his eyes roaming over my features like he’s trying to memorize them before he lowers his head and kisses me again.

My lips part when his tongue touches my bottom lip, and I don't hold back. I cling to him; my nails dig into his sides where my fingers have twisted in his shirt, and I open my mouth when his tongue seeks entry. The kiss isn't hungry or greedy. It's slow and sensual and nothing I have ever experienced before. It's all-encompassing. I feel every pass of his tongue across mine, the way his hands part at my back, one traveling up to cup the back of my neck, the other dragging me closer. My skin tingles, and my nipples pebble.

A groan escapes his throat when he pulls away to rest his forehead against mine, and I whimper at the loss of his mouth. "Christ, I've wanted to do that since the moment I first saw you."

"I wanted the same thing."

He cups my cheeks, looking pleased by my admission. "Are you ready to see the kittens?"

Disappointment fills me, because what I really want is to kiss him again.

He chuckles then leans in, touching his lips to mine. "Good to know my girl likes my mouth."

"Don't be smug." I try to shove away from him, but he wraps his arms around me and captures my mouth once more, nipping my bottom lip before sucking the top and licking into my mouth. I get drunk on his taste and the feeling of being surrounded by his strength. I should feel powerless in my need for him, but I know he's feeling exactly what I am.

When his hands slide down my back and over my bottom to squeeze, my core clenches and stars dance behind my closed lids. I've never felt this before, this overwhelming desire for another person. He lifts me off the ground and holds me up under my thighs then. A moment later, he sits with me straddling his lap on the couch, our mouths never separating. I rock against his hardness without thought, and he pulls his mouth from mine.

"Jesus." His eyes roam my face then drop to his hands as they move up my thighs. "I don't know what the hell these things are called, but it's agony seeing you in them and fucking torture feeling your heat so fucking close but so far away." His hands curve around my inner thighs, and his thumbs move in unison over my covered pussy, making my hips jump. I watch his jaw tic then his gaze meets mine as he moves his hands to rest on my hips.

"Talón." God, I sound needy. I *feel* needy, and wet, and so damn turned on.

Chest heaving, he shakes his head. "Baby, I—"

“Please touch me,” I cut him off before he can say something so him, like “I think we need to slow down,” or “This is just supposed to be dinner.” With any other guy, I would be thankful for that out, but right now, my body is on fire, and he’s not just any other guy.

“Fuck it.” He moves his hands up my shirt swiftly, and I lift my arms to help him out before he pulls the cups of my sheer bra down. When his hot mouth wraps around my nipple, my breath hitches and I slide my fingers into his hair. So lost in the sensation of his mouth on me, I’m not prepared for his hand to slide under the waistband of my shorts and down into my panties, where he zeros in on my swollen clit, and I cry out his name.

“You’re so goddamn wet, Mia.” He circles my clit then groans, sounding frustrated. “I love these shorts, but you gotta lose them.” Before I can prepare, he flips me to my back then stands over me and adjusts the large bulge behind his zipper. My mouth waters, and I reach for him, only to have him shake his head and move between my legs, where he fists my shorts and drags them and my thong down my thighs. “This is about you.” He spreads my legs, and I attempt to fight him, suddenly feeling vulnerable in my nakedness with him fully clothed. “Don’t try to hide from me. You’re perfect.” He urges my legs apart then smooths two fingers between the lips of my pussy. “So pretty.” His eyes lock with mine as he lifts those two fingers to his mouth. “So sweet.”

He pulls my hips off the couch then lifts one of my legs to his shoulder. I bite my lip so hard I taste blood when he kisses my pubic bone then hold my breath when he holds me open so his tongue can thrash against my clit. I writhe against him then cry out his name as he enters me with two thick fingers. The heavy weight that has been building in my lower belly releases when he sucks my clit, and just like that, my mind blanks of everything but the tidal wave of my orgasm. I shake when another one builds and follows the first like an unexpected tsunami. Slowly, I come back to myself as I’m moved, and then Talon wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. As my orgasm fades and the reality of what I just did sinks in, I close my eyes.

I’ve never done anything like that with anyone. The guy I dated for a few years didn’t get me to the point where I would beg him to take me. God, Talon didn’t even get undressed, and when I reached for him, he said, “This is about you,” like... like I don’t even know.

“I should—”

“No,” he cuts me off and tightens his arms around me when I try to get up. “While you’re sitting here on my lap, in my arms, freaking yourself out, baby, I want you to know that was the hottest shit I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“What?” I whisper, tipping my head back to see him, and his hand comes up to cup my cheek.

“Mia, I want you. I think I’ve made that pretty clear,” he says, and I swallow against the intensity in his stare. “Having you so hot for me that you get off almost the minute I get my mouth on you is not something I consider a problem.”

“Oh God.” My cheeks heat. “That’s never happened to me before.”

“I’m not going to be upset about that shit either, but while we’re on the subject...” His fingers smooth over my jaw. “I know you’ve got a past. I have one too, and if you have questions for me, I will answer them, but I don’t want to talk about the men you’ve been with.” He gives me a squeeze, which feels just as possessive as his next word. “Ever.”

I lick my lips then nod. “Got it.”

“Good, are you okay now?” His fingers continue to skim my cheek.

“If I’m honest, I feel a little overwhelmed about everything.” I mean, I knew he liked me, but I realize now that he *really* likes me, and that makes me feel scared as hell but even more sure about pursuing things with him.

“I get that.” He smiles gently. “A lot has happened since you got here.”

“You can say that again.” I shiver, and he leans forward, brushing his lips across mine before very sweetly adjusting my bra and leaning over for my shirt, which he helps me put on.

“As much as I’m enjoying you right here—” His palm moves up my bare thigh, reminding me how exposed I still am. “—I need to feed you, which means I need to get started on dinner.”

“Okay,” I say softly, then following my gut, I lean forward to kiss him before I stand on shaking legs, thankful my shirt is long enough to cover my bottom. “Umm... can I use the bathroom?” My cheeks warm, because just from the look he gives me, I know he knows how wet I still am, and judging by him adjusting himself, he’s still very much turned on.

“Come on.” He grabs my shorts then takes my hand and leads me back to the kitchen and down a short hall before opening the door at the end. When we walk into his room, I’m surprised once more, because all there is, is a bed that looks half made and a dresser, nothing else. He leads me to an open

door I can see is a bathroom then grabs a towel and washcloth off a shelf. "I'll be in the kitchen." He kisses my forehead then disappears.

I make quick work of cleaning myself up, and when I catch my reflection, I blink in surprise. I don't know if it's Talon's honesty or the mind-blowing orgasms I just had, but I look content, happy even, instead of scared or maybe panicked like I think I should be, like I would normally be after experiencing that level of intimacy with a man I'm just getting to know. I finish getting dressed, run my fingers through my hair, then go in search of Talon. I find him on the back deck, and when I step outside, his eyes warm as they roam over me from my hair to my toes before he holds out his hand. I walk toward him, and the moment I'm close, he tucks me under his arm, using his free hand to place steaks on the grill.

"It smells delicious," I say, and my stomach growls in agreement.

"A buddy of mine taught me how to make the marinade when I was in Alaska."

"What's in it?" I ask when he closes the lid on the grill.

"Beer, orange juice, lime, garlic, oregano, Worcestershire sauce, and a few other things I can't tell you."

"Already keeping secrets?"

"After we get married, I'll tell you." He turns toward me so we're front-to-front then tucks some hair behind my ear. "So damn pretty." They're both throwaway comments; I know that by the way he easily says them. That doesn't mean they don't hit me right in the gut as I stare into his gorgeous eyes. Good Lord, I hardly know him, and he's already crawled under my skin and made himself at home there.

"Cece asked Mike for a divorce," I blurt, wanting to cover the panic suddenly swirling through my system.

"Pardon?"

"Umm..." Clearing my throat, I rest my hands on his warm, hard chest when he doesn't step back. It feels like so much has happened since I drove away from him last night at the ice cream place, and I didn't have time to explain everything that happened while we were texting. "He showed up at the bar because she asked for more child support, and he thinks it's too much, so his great idea was to tell her he's going to go for full custody and to talk to the girls about who they wanted to live with and selling the house."

"Dick."

“Right?” I nod then take a step to the side toward the banister at the edge of the deck. “How’s your dad?” I look at him over my shoulder, and like anytime I’m in his presence, I seem to have his full attention, something that sends a thrill down my spine.

“He’s good. Should be getting discharged tomorrow, which is a good thing, since I doubt him and Mom could manage another day in the hospital together.”

“They aren’t getting along?” I tip my head to the side, studying him.

“They love each other and worry about each other, so while Mom is rightfully worried about him, he’s stressed about her spending all her time at the hospital not sleeping and hardly eating. They’ll be fine when they get home, but right now, they are at each other’s throat.”

“Sounds like my mom and Chaz.” I lean over the ledge of the banister and notice that the back of the house is on a slope, and this part of the deck is at least ten feet in the air, if not higher.

“Chaz?” His hand rests on my back then the bottom of my shirt is tugged, and I turn to find him holding it in his fist.

“I’m not going to jump.” I roll my eyes then laugh when he shrugs one shoulder, like *“that might be, but just in case you try, I’m not letting go.”* “Chaz is my stepdad. Him and my mom have been together since I was around eleven. The only time I’ve ever really heard them fight was when he was in the hospital after his heart attack. He did not want Mom there, because he knows she hates hospitals and is a worrier, and she was mad that he kept trying to get her to leave.” I let out a breath, and he releases my shirt when I lean my hip against the bannister. “They should be here in a couple days.”

“They’re coming for a visit?”

“Cece called Mom to tell her what’s been going on, and Mom being Mom decided it was time for her and Chaz to step in, so they’re driving from Montana.”

“It’s good they’re coming. I’m sure your sister could use them right now.”

“It will be good for the girls to have them around. Kate seems to be handling everything in stride. Ruby is Ruby; she’s always happy. But Lola is... Lola is not okay.” He hooks his index finger with mine, and my body seems to relax from the contact. “My parents’ marriage and divorce were ugly. I remember feeling scared and torn, because regardless of what was

happening, I loved my dad and my mom, and I didn't want to have to choose between them, but I always felt like I had to."

"I hate that you experienced that, baby."

"I hate that Lola might be feeling that now too." I drop my gaze to our joined fingers. "She didn't want to go with him today. I saw it all over her face. The only good thing is he saw that too and knew he caused that."

"Maybe that will be the motivation he needs to change."

I lift my eyes to his. "I hope so," I agree, and he lets my finger go to open the grill and flips the steaks before leading me inside to the kitchen. "Is there anything I can help with?"

"You can open me a beer and pick what you wanna drink, while I grab the baked potatoes from the oven." I open the fridge and grab him a beer and me a bottle of sweet tea, and while I still have it open, he calls out, "Pull out the salad, babe, and whatever dressing you want." I do then follow him back outside and set everything in my hands on a small plastic table as he sets out two plates holding potatoes wrapped in foil and some silverware. "How do you like your steak?"

"Medium rare." I twist the top off his beer and open my tea. He comes over with a plate holding two steaks and places one on mine before taking a seat. I unwrap my baked potato carefully when he does then grin when I find it filled with cheese, sour cream and bacon bits. "Stuffed baked potatoes, steak, and salad. Did you call my sister to ask her my favorite meal?"

"You're a Montana girl, so I figured you ate meat, and who doesn't like stuffed baked potatoes?"

"Crazy people." My mouth waters, because everything in front of me smells delicious. "I don't even remember the last time I ate an adult meal. The girls live on a diet of pizza, pasta, chicken nuggets, and macaroni and cheese, and I feed them most nights, so I eat what they eat, which is probably why my clothes have started to get tight."

"You're not going to hear me complain. You have a beautiful body, and I love your ass, especially in those shorts."

"I feel like you mentioned that before." I laugh, and he grins.

"Dig in, babe. When we're done, I'll clean up, you can play with the kittens, and then we'll go for a walk down by the water if you're up for it."

Four hours later, still full from an amazing dinner, tired from a hike around a small lake a hop, skip, and a jump from the back door, and happy

to the point of giddy after kitten cuddles, I lay with my head on Talon's chest. I didn't have much say when he placed me in this position, but I have to admit I like it a lot.

"You falling asleep on me?" he asks softly as my eyelids seem to grow heavier, the show on the TV not even making sense.

"Yeah." I plant my hands on his chest and lift my head so I'm looking down at him. "I should probably head home." I cup his jaw, feeling the stubble there, then smooth my finger over his lips that I've felt against mine more times than I can count this evening. "Just so you know, you won the award for best first date ever."

"Good to know." He smiles, turning his head to kiss my palm. "So does that mean I get a second date?"

"You for sure get a second date." I laugh, and he tangles his fingers in my hair at the side of my head.

"Tomorrow?" He uses his hold to bring my face closer to his.

"Tomorrow?" I repeat, no longer surprised he doesn't seem to be doing what some other men I've known would do in his situation.

"Breakfast in my bed?"

"Are you asking me to come over first thing in the morning?"

"I'd prefer you stay the night." He lifts his head to brush his mouth across mine. "But I'd be good with you coming over in the morning."

My belly dips. I should say I'll see him tomorrow, but that's not what comes out of my mouth. "I don't have anything to wear to bed."

His lips quirk. "I'm sure I can find something for you to wear."

Oh goodness, I'm really doing this. "I don't have a toothbrush."

"I have extra heads for mine. You can use one."

"Do you snore?"

"Do you?" He raises one brow.

"I guess you'll find out." I smile, and he laughs as he pulls my mouth down to his.

# CHAPTER 9

## TALON

I BLINK MY eyes open, finding my room pitch-black with the woman I'm curled around warm and soft, the scent of her shampoo filling my nostrils. Fuck, I've never cuddled a day in my life, but I know I must have chased her across the bed in sleep, because this isn't my normal side.

Last night after she agreed to stay, we made out on the couch until I was in pain then I slowed things down and settled her back against my chest, where she slept while I watched the news. I wanted to fuck her, and I know that if I had instigated it, she would have gone there willingly, not only after I ate her out, but while she was grinding against me on the couch. I also know there's a chance that could have backfired on me.

She might act like she can handle any and everything, but I'm starting to see it's all for show. She's softhearted, sensitive, a worrier, and so fucking sweet. So instead of taking her to my room and fucking her like I wanted to, when the news ended, I woke her up, ushered her into my bathroom, handed her one of my shirts and a toothbrush, then closed the door to give her space.

When she came out, she called her sister to let her know she wouldn't be home, while I went in and changed then joined her in bed, where I held her until she fell asleep—something that took a while. Now awake, hard and aching, I carefully move my arm out from under her head and lift my hand from her waist. I scoot off the bed and go to the bathroom, shutting the door before I flip on the light and turn on the tap.

I bite back a groan as I tug my cock out over the waistband of my pajama bottoms. With the visual of Mia in my head and the memory of her taste on my tongue, I jerk off, hoping like hell it will be enough to hold me over, but something tells me it won't.

---

“YOU DON’T SNORE.” At that quiet statement, I come fully out of sleep, open one eye, and look at the woman with her hip over mine, her foot trapped under my calf, and her wrist in my hand held against my side. “But you do cuddle and you’re controlling in sleep.” She flexes her wrist to prove a point.

“You sleep wild, babe.” Normally, I fall asleep in one spot and wake up there, but she wouldn’t stop moving around and eventually I got tired of chasing after her, so I trapped her in the position we’re in now.

“What?”

“You were all over the place last night.” I kiss the top of her head then bring her hand up to the center of my shirt-covered chest. “Are you always so restless?”

“I don’t know.” She frowns. “I’ve been sleeping in Lola’s room, and she only has a twin, so I don’t think so.”

“Hmm, maybe it’s because you had space.” I close my eyes in pain when she moves her thigh and nudges my hard-on with her knee.

“Are you okay?” She opens her palm on my chest and leans up on her elbow, a move that places her soft breast against my side and chest.

“Fuck.”

“What?” She moves again, and I grab her hip to hold her still.

“Don’t move,” I order on a growl, and her eyes widen. “Please.”

“Talon.”

“It’s morning,” I half-ass explain.

“I don’t...” she starts then her pupils dilate and her lips part, the look doing nothing to help my current situation, because it’s sexy as fuck. “Oh.” Her eyes drop to my waist and then she presses her lips together.

“Do not even think about laughing, Mia.”

“I’m not going to laugh, Talon.” She ducks her head right before a giggle escapes her lips.

“Jesus, even your fucking laugh makes me hard,” I mutter, covering my eyes with my elbow and trying to think of anything to make my erection die down.

“Sorry.” She snorts.

“Right,” I grunt.

“Really, I’m sorry,” she says as she tries to move my arm, but I hold firm. I find out that’s a mistake when she moves again, this time to straddle my hips, the position placing her hot-as-fuck pussy right over my hard-on.

“Mia.” I move my arm and take hold of both her hips.

“Oh good, I got your attention.” She tips her head to the side. “So when did you convince yourself that you needed to protect me from your penis?”

“Pardon?”

“That’s what you’re doing, aren’t you? I’m learning that protecting me is kind of your thing, so I’m guessing at some point last night you convinced yourself that you need to protect me from your penis.”

My lips twitch, and I shake my head. “I’m giving you time.”

“That’s sweet, Talon.” She leans forward, resting one hand against my chest, which spreads her open over my shaft that throbs in response. Her other hand moves to my jaw, and her middle and index finger slide down the center of my mouth, catching on my bottom lip. “So do I get a say in what I want?” She rolls her hips forward. “Or do you get to make all the decisions for me?”

“Mia.” My voice is gruff with lust and frustration.

“I’m just asking a question.” Her tongue slips out to wet her lips as her breath catches. “If I get a choice, I’d tell you that I want you.” She slides forward once more, and I don’t even attempt to stop her. “But if that’s not what you want....” She moves like she’s going to get off me, but before she can, I flip her to her back and settle myself between her thighs.

Moving to my knees, I take off my shirt. “Are you sure?” I ask as she stares at my chest and abs. “Mia.” She doesn’t answer, so I repeat, “Mia!”

Shaking her head, she blinks up at me. “You can’t ask a woman that question after you take off your shirt. You need to ask it before.” My chuckle ends on a groan when she lifts her hands to my chest and smooths them down over my abs to the waistband of my sleep pants, tugging them down. “If you need my verbal agreement, my answer is yes, I’m sure.”

Having the confirmation I need, I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and pull her up so I can take her mouth. I skim my free hand up her thigh, under my shirt she’s wearing, and finding that, at some point, she lost her panties.

“Surprise,” she whispers, and then her back arches and her mouth opens on a silent cry when I slide my fingers between her legs, finding her soft, wet, and hot. “Oh God, Talon.” Her nails dig into my shoulder as I circle her clit.

“Get the shirt off, Mia,” I demand roughly, and she makes quick work of taking it off. The moment her breasts are exposed, I lick my lips. Her tits

are perfect, not too big, not too small, with dusky-pink nipples that tighten against the chill in the room. Dipping my head, I nip one then the other, listening to her moan, then dive two fingers inside her. Finding that rough patch of flesh that makes her pussy clench, I curl my fingers against it and latch onto one breast, sucking hard.

“I’m going to come.” Her nails dig into my scalp, and I hiss out a breath, torn between wanting to fuck her and wanting to eat her through her next climax. My cock throbs as she soaks my hand, and being inside her wins out. Once her body relaxes, I kiss her while I remove my hand from between her legs then roll us again so she’s straddling my waist, kicking my pants off the rest of the way. “Condom,” she whimpers, wrapping her hand around my cock and pumping twice.

I keep hold of her hip and pray as I reach for my jeans on the floor. I grab my wallet, and when I find a single condom, I thank my lucky stars. I rip it open with my teeth, and she takes it from me and quickly slides it down my length. “Slow down, baby.” I cover her hand with mine when she attempts to position herself over the head. Her heated gaze comes to me, and she licks her lips. Fuck, I’ve never seen anything more gorgeous than Mia when she’s turned on. But when her cheeks darken, I know she’s overthinking, so I flip her to her back and lick into her mouth while working my fingers between her legs, bringing her to the edge once more.

“Oh God.” She starts to squirm, looking for more, and I position myself at her entrance just as she raises her hips.

The moment her tight heat surrounds the head of my cock, we both groan, and then slowly I sink into her until I bottom out. I lean back, smoothing her hair away from her face, and when our eyes lock, my chest constricts from the amount of trust I see in her gaze. “Christ, Mia.”

“Talon,” she pants, swirling her hips and lifting her legs higher up on my waist as her neck and back arches. “I’m so full.”

I nip her chin, her neck, then lick down between her breasts before I capture one nipple between my lips and pull out only to slide back in. “Jesus, baby.” I cup her breast then slide my hand up to collar her throat. “Look at me, Mia,” I order, and she dips her chin. The moment her eyes hit mine, I pull out and slam back in, over and over. When her eyes that are already dark grow darker and her breathing speeds up, I move my hand between us to circle her clit. Her walls start to contract around me, and with

two more hard thrusts, I plant myself inside her and slant my mouth over hers, drinking down her cries as we both ride out our orgasms.

With my heart pounding hard and my breathing harsh, I drag my mouth from hers and rest my damp forehead against her chest for a moment before rolling to my back, never losing our connection. As our breathing evens out, I run my fingers through her hair then ask quietly, "Are you freaking out?" I feel her body still for a moment and hold my breath.

She lifts her head and rests her chin on my chest, and I study her smile. "I'm not freaking out, so you don't need to talk me out of running off."

"Progress."

"Progress." She lifts her fingers to my mouth, and I kiss them when they rest against my lips. "I really like your lips."

"Yeah?" I smooth my fingers over the apple of her cheek.

"Yeah, and this." She touches the dimple in my chin.

"Good to know."

"And your tattoos." She moves her hand to my chest then arm. "I want to get another tattoo sometime."

"Another?" I raise a brow.

"I have a small one." She smiles.

"I obviously wasn't very thorough if I missed a tattoo."

She laughs then grins while muttering, "Obviously, so I guess we're going to have to do that again."

"Damn, sucks to be me." I haul her up my chest and lose our connection, which sucks. What doesn't suck is seeing the look on her face at the loss. "So where is this tattoo?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"Challenge accepted." I sit up with her still on my lap, and she wraps her arms around the back of my neck. "I think I'll have better luck finding it in the shower." I stand, and she laughs as I carry her into the bathroom. It takes me awhile to find her hidden tattoo, but eventually, I find the small infinity symbol on the inner bicep of her right arm then reward myself with eating her out until she's screaming my name.

---

WITH MIA IN nothing but my T-shirt and her ass on the counter in my kitchen, I slide my hands up the tops of her thighs, and she parts her legs. I groan against her tongue then pull back and watch her lashes flutter open, and her tongue comes out to touch her bottom lip. “Pancakes are gonna burn,” I rumble.

Laughing, she puts pressure on my shoulders and pushes me away. “I was minding my own business when you came over here to attack me.”

“You’re just too tempting.” I flip over the last pancake then look at her over my shoulder as she fiddles with the bottom of my tee, and my cock twitches. It’s baggie on her, but still her legs are showing along with her nipples through the thin material. “What time do you need to be home today?”

Laughing again, she shakes her head. “I don’t have a curfew. Just let me know when you’re tired of me, and I’ll go home.”

“Does your sister work tonight?”

“No, she has the day off, and Mike has the girls until this evening, so I’m sure she’s catching up on schoolwork today.”

“Wanna see the house Bax and I are building and have dinner with me?” I ask as I pull out two plates from the cupboard and take the pancakes off the griddle.

“I’d like that,” she says, hopping off the counter, grabbing her coffee and mine, and carrying both to the table. “I just need to run home and change.”

“How about we leave your car here, I’ll drive you to your sister’s, and we can leave from there?” I set our plates down, and she smiles up at me from where she’s sitting.

“That works.” I touch my mouth to hers in approval then go to the fridge to get the butter. I take a seat in the chair next to hers, and she takes the bottle of syrup, drenching her pancakes.

As I take the syrup from her, the doorbell rings. “Shit.”

“Are you expecting someone?” she asks, looking somewhat nervous.

“No.” I push back from the table, and she glances toward the door when the bell rings again. “Eat, I’ll be right back.” After I get her nod, I head to the front of the house, and the moment the front door comes into view, I see Bax standing on the other side of the glass. Fuck. I pull the door open and raise a brow. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been trying to call you for the last hour.”

“Mia’s here.”

“I figured that was her car when I pulled up.” He runs his hand through his hair, and I notice he looks freaked or pissed, maybe both.

“What’s going on?” I step outside and shut the door.

“The house.” He pauses, scrubbing his hands down his face. “Fuck, man, the house is completely trashed.”

“What do you mean the house is trashed?”

“I decided to go over there to make sure Uncle Asher’s guys had enough grout and tile to finish the rest of the bathrooms this week. When I got there, the door was open, which happens sometimes with the lock, but when I went in....” He shakes his head. “I called the cops. They’re still there along with everyone else.” My stomach sinks and my hands ball into fists as he continues. “Someone took a fucking sledgehammer to everything inside the house—the counters, cupboards, windows, sinks. Anything they could smash, they did.”

“Who?”

“Do you think if I knew who did that shit that I would be standing here with you?” he bites out.

“Goddammit, we are so fucked,” I growl, then turn and open the door and stomp down the hall.

“Is everything okay?” At that softly spoken question from Mia, some of the rage I’m feeling dissipates. I go to where she’s still sitting at the table, only now she’s wearing her shorts and one of my sweatshirts with her hair still slightly damp from our shower earlier.

“I’m sorry, baby. I gotta go with Bax.” I get down on my haunches in front of her and take her hands, hoping the contact will calm me down enough to think clearly.

“Okay,” she agrees, looking nervously over my shoulder. “Umm... we haven’t met officially, but it’s nice to meet you.”

“You too, babe,” Bax mutters, and I squeeze her hands to get her attention.

“I still want to have dinner with you tonight.”

“Sure.” She licks her lips then asks quietly, “Is everything *really* okay?”

“Someone broke in the house we’re building and did some damage. The cops are there now along with my uncles.”

“What?” Her hands convulse in mine. “Who?”

“I don’t know.” I lean forward and touch my mouth to hers then dip my chin toward her plate. “Eat and hang as long as you want. I’ll leave a key on

the table next to the door for you to lock up, and I'll text when I know I'll be back here." She nods, and I drop her hands and stand then head back to my room to throw on some clothes. When I come back out, I find Bax sitting where I was earlier, making Mia laugh while he eats my pancakes. "Stop flirting with my girl and eating my fucking breakfast." I narrow my eyes on my brother, and he grins in reply, which makes Mia laugh. "Don't encourage him."

"Don't you know you should never leave a pretty woman or food at a table unsupervised?" he asks before shoving the last bite of pancakes into his mouth.

"You know I can still kick your ass, right?"

"You can try." He shrugs as he stands then looks down at Mia. "Have you noticed he's a little possessive?" He holds his fingers an inch apart.

"A little." She fights back a smile and I walk over to him, shoving his back, and listening to him laugh while I pull Mia from her chair. The moment she's standing in front of me, I cup her face.

"I'll see you tonight."

"Text me and let me know everything is okay."

"I will." I dip my head and kiss her, sweeping my tongue into her mouth. When I pull away, I touch my lips to her forehead then look at my brother.

"Let's go."

He moves to leave ahead of me then stops and turns to look over his shoulder and winks. "Later, Mia."

"Just fucking go, you idiot." I shove him forward, listening to Mia laugh as we head out of the house.

"I can see why you like her," Bax mutters as he backs out of my driveway.

"Yeah."

"So it's legit?" he asks softly after a few minutes.

"Is what legit?"

"The whole curse bullshit?"

I smile. "I don't know, man. All I know is the moment I saw her, I knew I had to talk to her. Then I knew talking to her wouldn't be enough, that I wanted more. And I don't think that feeling's going to go away until I have all of her."

"Couldn't you have waited until we were done with this house to find her?" he grumbles, turning onto the road that will lead us to the house. "I

mean fuck, man, look at the history of bad luck anyone with our last name has when it comes to settling down.”

“Are you trying to say that you think me getting with Mia is why someone trashed our house?” I ask in disbelief.

“All I’m saying is it’s a pretty big coincidence,” he mutters, and I start to laugh, but the sound dies in my throat as we pull up to the house where police cruisers and about six trucks are parked.

I get out with Bax and greet my uncles and cousins with chin lifts, not bothering to join their huddle with the officers they’re talking to. I go up the steps to the front porch and head inside. All the rage I was feeling earlier comes back tenfold when I see the damage that’s been done. As I look around, I realize it had to be more than one person; either that or someone was here a long time, which seems unlikely, because they wouldn’t have wanted to stick around too long and risk getting caught.

Bax didn’t lie; everything that could be destroyed is, even down to some of the hardwood flooring.

“It will be okay.” I turn to face my uncle Asher. “The insurance people are already on the way along with a security company. We’ll put cameras out here, get this all cleaned up, then start over. The house is still standing. That’s what’s important.”

He’s right. I know he’s right, but that doesn’t help the fury building inside me. “I want to know who did this.”

“We’ll try to find out,” my cousin Cobi says, walking into the room. “I’ll also ask the guys if they mind doing a run down here when they’re in the area, just so people know we’re keeping an eye out.”

“Thanks, man.”

“You know I got your back.” He pats Uncle Asher’s shoulder. “I’m gonna head out. Hadley’s home, and I have the day off.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Uncle Asher mutters, and Cobi lifts his chin in my direction before they both disappear.

Alone, I scrub my hands down my face then remind myself that after I deal with this bullshit, I get to go home and spend the evening with Mia, which means my day will end just as good as it started—in other words, spectacularly.

## CHAPTER 10

MIA

I SLIP ON my Toms, grab one of my thin, oversized sweaters from my closet, and head down the stairs. Talon called an hour ago to let me know he'd be home by four and that I could meet him there any time after that. I should play it cool and wait until at least 4:30 to leave, but I've been pacing for forty-five minutes and know I won't be able to make it that long. When I reach the kitchen, I find Cece sitting at the island on her laptop looking at real estate, the same thing she was doing when I got home early this afternoon.

"Any luck?" I ask, nodding at the listing she has open.

"I've found a couple places that might have potential. I'm just not sure I can afford a four bedroom right now," she says as I squat down to give my girls some love when they circle my feet.

"I'm sure Lola and Kate will be okay sharing a room. Why not look for a three bedroom?"

"What about you?" she asks, sounding nervous, and I stop what I'm doing to really focus on her.

"Even if you guys end up staying in this house, I'm going to eventually want my own place. I love you, but please don't worry about me while you're making this decision."

"Are you sure? I mean, you came here because—"

"Because I love you and my nieces," I cut her off. "I don't regret moving here."

"Okay," she says quietly.

"When Mom and Chaz get here, maybe they can keep an eye on the girls one day, and you and I can go check them out."

"I'd appreciate that," she agrees, looking relieved, and I stand. "Are you heading out now?"

"Yeah, Talon said he'd be home at four," I tell her, and she looks at the clock then returns her gaze to mine, raising a brow after seeing it's still

thirty minutes before he will even be home. “Don’t even start.”

“I didn’t say anything.” She smirks then asks, “Are you staying the night with him again tonight?”

“No, I’ll be home.”

“Don’t feel like you have to come home. I planned on taking the girls to school in the morning tomorrow.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I roll my eyes. “What are you going to do until the girls get home?”

“Laundry, and I might order Thai for dinner. Besides that, I’m going to catch up on schoolwork so I won’t feel overwhelmed this week.”

“Fun.”

“So much fun.” She laughs, and I smile then look at the clock to check the time. “Wow, you’ve really got it bad.”

“I know.” I don’t even try to lie.

“Go see your guy. If I don’t see you tonight, I’ll see you tomorrow.” She gets up and walks with me toward the door, and I stop to give my girls some more love.

“If you need me, my cell will be on.”

“We’ll be fine without you.” She opens the door, and as I step out onto the front porch, a large truck that looks somewhat familiar pulls up to park behind Cece’s minivan.

“Who’s that?” I ask then my eyes widen when I see Winston get out holding a large paper bag. “Seems you’re keeping secrets again,” I hiss at Cece, and she meets my gaze, shaking her head and looking panicked. Damn, she didn’t know he was coming over. I turn back toward Winston and smile at him as he walks up the sidewalk. “Hey, Winston.”

“Mia.” He dips his chin in my direction then focuses on my sister. “I’ve been calling you.”

“I know.” I look between the two of them and wonder what the hell happened. It has to be something, because he’s looking at her like he wants to devour her and wring her neck, and she looks like she wants to kiss him and kick his ass.

“We need to talk,” he states.

“No, we don’t,” she denies.

“We damn well do,” he growls.

“We most certainly do not have anything to talk about.”

“You know that’s a lie, Cece,” he replies with his jaw ticking.

“Umm... what’s happening here?”

I motion between them, and Winston turns his attention to me while Cece says, “Nothing.”

“Your hardheaded sister thinks I’m married, which I am fucking not.”

“You’re not?” I frown, because not only did Cece tell me he was, but Talon did too.

“I’ve been separated from my ex for three years.”

“Separated, not divorced, which means you are very much still married!” Cece cries.

“By law only,” he replies, sounding pissed and annoyed.

“Yes, Winston, in the eyes of the law, you’re still married, which means you are *married!*” Cece tosses her hands in the air, narrowly missing hitting me in the face.

“Umm... I’m going to head out.”

“What?” Cece cries, trying to reach out for me.

“It’s obvious you two have some stuff to talk about.” I hurry down the steps before she can stop me. “Call if you need me.”

“I hate you!” she yells.

“You don’t!” I call over my shoulder. When I get into my car, I watch them continue to argue and only start the engine when Cece finally opens the door to let him inside.

If she’s up tonight when I get home, I’ll ask her about it, but something tells me Winston’s been pursuing her. And even if she might be interested, the fact that Mike cheated and Winston’s technically married means she won’t go there.

Twenty minutes later, I pull into Talon’s driveway and park then grab my cell to send him a text, not knowing if he’s home. Before I can even finish typing out my message, my door is opened and Talon is leaning over me, unhooking my belt so he can drag me out of my car. I don’t hesitate to wrap my arms around his neck, and when he covers my mouth with his, I touch my tongue to his bottom lip and whimper when he takes over the kiss, thrusting his tongue into my mouth.

Logically, I know I should be concerned by my need for him, but that doesn’t stop me from falling into the kiss with abandon or wrapping my legs around his waist when he lifts me off the ground. When we get inside, he stops in the hall, turning to press my back against the wall, and I claw at

his shirt until he quickly takes it off, dropping it to the floor as his mouth finds mine once more.

I grind myself against him as he carries me through the house, and when we reach the door for his bedroom, he rips his mouth from mine. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“What?” I lick his neck and nip the underside of his jaw.

“Condoms.”

“Condoms?” I repeat in a daze, meeting his heated gaze I’m sure mirrors the look in my own eyes.

“I don’t have any condoms.” He drops his forehead to rest against mine while squeezing his eyes closed.

“Oh,” I whisper, digging my fingers into his shoulders and sounding as disappointed as he looks.

“I got carried away.” He gives my ass a squeeze then loosens his hold, and I unwrap my legs from his waist.

“I think...” I laugh, realizing this is the first time we’ve spoken since he dragged me from my car. “I think we both got carried away.” I drop my forehead to his chest, and my shoulders shake, and then a snort of hilarity I can’t hold back escapes.

“Babe.” He gives me a squeeze.

“Sorry.” I tip my head back and smile. “It’s not funny. It’s just I didn’t even get to say hi.”

His eyes soften, and his lips twitch into a smile of his own as he drags his fingers through his hair. “Sorry about that.”

“I’m not.” I rest my hands against his chest, and he covers them with his.

“How about we go out to dinner?”

“Dinner sounds good.”

He takes a step back, releasing the hold he has on me, and I drop my eyes to his chest and the deep V that disappears into the top of his jeans, licking my lips.

“I’m gonna grab a shirt.” I hear the smile in his voice, but I don’t even lift my head to see it. Instead, I take that time to watch his back muscles flex as he walks into his room.

When he’s out of sight, I take a deep breath then wander down the hall to the laundry room. I step over the baby gate meant to keep the kittens in and settle my ass on the tile floor, picking up one of the two gray kittens that’s awake, the other two being almost pure white. Soma hops over the gate to

join me and rubs against my knee, so I give her some love as the other three babies, who must sense their mom, start to move around.

When they all begin to cry, she lies down, and I smile as the kitten in my hands starts to wiggle. I place him or her near Soma and watch as they start to feed, the momma pulling them away one at a time to clean them—something they don't seem to like very much.

"I figured you'd be in here." I look up and find Talon with his shoulder against the doorjamb, watching me with his arms crossed over his T-shirt-covered chest.

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself." I stand, dusting off my bottom, then take his hand to step back over the gate. "When they're a little older, I should bring the girls over. They would love playing with them, and it would be good for the kittens to have some experience with kids."

"You also need to bring your dogs over, so we can make sure Soma and them get along before I talk to my cousin about keeping her," he says as he leads me through the house.

I open my mouth to ask him why it would matter if my girls get along with her, but then my stomach somersaults as I realize he wants me and my dogs here often enough that my girls will factor into his decision. "Holy cow."

"What?" He turns to look at me when we reach the front door.

"Umm... holy cow, I'm hungry," I lie, and his eyes warm right before his mouth touches mine. When he pulls away, I want to wrap my arms around his neck and rise up on my tiptoes for more, but I have a feeling that if I do, neither of us will be able to pull away, so I hold myself in place.

"Let's get you something to eat."

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "That would probably be smart."

"It would definitely be smart," he agrees, dropping his gaze to my mouth before shaking his head and opening the door to let me out.

When we reach the driveway, I grab my purse and cell phone from my car then get into his truck. As soon as I'm buckled in, he kisses me—wet, hot, and deep—before pulling away and slamming my door. I watch him as he prowls around the hood and squeeze my thighs together to ease the unfulfilled ache that has settled between my legs.

"How does a guy who looks like you not have any condoms?" I blurt when he opens the door to get in behind the wheel, and he pauses with his hand on the steering wheel, his eyes on mine. I hold my breath, because he

doesn't look happy about my question. Actually, he looks annoyed by it. "Sorry, I don't even know why I asked.... I mean, I do know why, but I shouldn't have asked it," I ramble, shifting in my seat.

Without responding, he gets in, slams the door then turns over the engine, and backs out of the yard. When he pulls onto the main road, I watch his jaw twitch before he glances at me quickly. "Since I've been back in Tennessee, I've been focused on my business, not getting laid." His knuckles turn white as he holds the steering wheel. "Even before that though, I was never about hooking up with random women. It's never been my style to fuck without there being some kind of connection."

Nausea turns my stomach, and my hands ball into fists. I really didn't want to know that. It makes me feel like what we have isn't actually special; it's just a part of who he is, which isn't surprising, given what I know of him.

"What we have is different, so don't try to use that information to build your walls back up and push me away. You asked the question, Mia. I'm just giving you honesty," he growls.

"Okay," I agree quietly.

"Hell, if you knew even half of what I'm thinking when it comes to you, you'd be jumping from my truck."

"You don't know that," I defend myself.

He glances at me, raising a brow. "It took you weeks to agree to go out with me. You ready for me to start talking about the future?" I chew the inside of my cheek instead of responding with *no*, and he mutters, "Thought so."

Silence settles between us, and my jaw clenches as I try to fight back the tears filling my eyes. I wish I wasn't so messed up, but the truth is I've always found a reason to escape every relationship I've been in. I found something wrong with every man I've dated to make it easier for me to walk away before I get in too deep. Before I end up hurt. I've also never felt what I'm feeling now or wanted anything more than I want this.

"Most of the men I've known have cheated, lied, and walked away without so much as a backward glance." My throat aches as I swallow. "My dad taught me at an early age that I was easy to forget, so I always leave before I get left," I admit to him as he pulls into an angled parking space in front of a small café in the middle of town. "I want to believe this is real; it's just hard for me to."

“You won’t find out this is real if you have one foot out the door, baby.” He takes my hand.

“You’re right.” I take a shaky breath. “You’ve been so sweet, and I’m a mess. You don’t deserve my drama.”

“Come here.” He unlatches my seatbelt then lifts me with ease over the console between us and settles me on his lap.

“See? Even now, you’re being nice,” I cry, and he chuckles. “It’s not funny, Talon. I’m trying to warn you that I’m crazy.”

“I like your crazy.” He sifts his fingers through the hair at the side of my head, and his expression softens. “The men you’ve known have been idiots, babe. I won’t ever make it easy for you to walk away or allow you to push me away without a fight.”

My chin wobbles, and I drop my forehead to his collarbone to hide the tears filling my eyes. I should feel embarrassed about breaking down in front of him, but all I feel is relieved, like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders now that he knows some of my fears.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, leaning away from him when my tears have subsided, and his expression softens as he runs the pad of his finger under my eyes to swipe away the tears that are still wet on my cheeks.

“You don’t have to be sorry.” His eyes roam my face then his fingers skim my jaw. “My dad always told me that everything good in life is earned not given, Mia, and I plan on earning every part of you, even your trust.”

“Oh God, I’m going to cry again,” I whisper as my throat burns with a fresh wave of tears.

“No more crying, you need to eat something.”

“Stop being sweet and making me *want* to cry,” I demand.

“All right, I’ll stop.”

“Liar,” I mumble, and he smiles then leans forward to brush his mouth against mine before asking softly, “We good now?” I nod, and his eyes warm. “Good.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how messed up is my makeup?”

“You’re still beautiful.”

I roll my eyes and turn on his lap then adjust his mirror. When I see the mascara running down my cheeks, I sigh.

“I don’t suppose you have a wet wipe or something I can use, do you?” I ask as I try to rub the black from under my eyes and cheeks, but it doesn’t budge.

“Not really something I carry in my truck.”

My nose scrunches at the idea of facing people looking like I do, and I turn to look at him. “Do you mind if we just go through the drive-thru somewhere and take food back to your place to eat?”

“That works for me.”

“Thanks.” I kiss his lips then the dimple in his chin before I climb over the console and back into my seat. Once I’m buckled in, he backs out of the parking space and heads to a hamburger joint where we load up on burgers, fries, and milkshakes. Then on the way to his house, he makes a detour to the drug store, and when he walks out five minutes later carrying two full plastic shopping bags of condoms, I burst out laughing.

---

WITH MY EYES growing heavy, I tell myself I should get up, go home, and check on Cece, but Talon’s fingers skimming up and down my spine are making it hard to do anything but lie here. It also doesn’t help that my belly is full, I’ve had five orgasms, and the man I’m lying on feels more comfortable than any bed I’ve ever been in. “I think something happened between Cece and Winston.”

“What?” he asks, his fingers pausing at the bottom of my spine.

Lifting my head, I rest my chin on his chest, and he tips his chin down to meet my gaze. “When I was leaving this evening, Winston showed up at the house, and I could tell something happened between them, because they were arguing about him saying he’s not married, when technically he is, even if he has been separated from his wife for three years.”

“I haven’t been home for three years, babe, and I can tell you Winston’s been invited to a couple of my family’s barbeques since I’ve been back, and his wife always shows up, making it clear he’s her man.”

“But maybe—”

“No buts,” he cuts me off and rolls me to my back so he’s looming over me. “If he’s interested in your sister, then he needs to divorce his wife and cut ties with her completely before pursuing her. Your sister and those girls do not need that mess right now, and if he cares about her at all, he should know that.”

My heart pounds as his words wrap around my insides, and I circle him with my arms and lean up, placing my mouth against his. When I fall back to the bed, I capture his jaw with my hand and run my fingers across the scruff there. “I just want my sister and my nieces to be happy.”

“A new man coming into their lives isn’t going to make them happy, baby. That is going to be another hurdle they’ll need to get over. And if that man has a shit-ton of baggage, things are only going to become more complicated.” His eyes lock on mine as his fingers smooth the hair back away from my face. “I’m sorry, babe, but I don’t think it’s smart for your sister to get involved with Winston right now.”

I don’t want to admit that he’s right, but I know he is. Winston is still married, and that will only complicate things when it comes to building a relationship with Cece and the girls. That doesn’t even factor in what Mike might be able to use against her as they go through the process of their divorce. If Mike was to find out she is having an affair with a married man, everything she said about him cheating would go out the window. “You’re right, I’ll talk to Cece and see where her head is.”

He kisses me then rolls to his back and adjusts me until I’m resting against his chest with my ear over his pec. I listen to the beat of his heart and close my eyes as the sound reminds me that he’s real, that this is real, and he’s not some dream I will wake up from. I never knew men like him exist, but now that I do, I don’t know that I will ever be able to move on. He’s ruined me for anyone else with his honesty, sweetness, and affection. And as scared as I am by that realization, I wouldn’t change anything. I’d jump headfirst, eyes closed off a cliff if he told me that I would be safe in his arms when I landed. Maybe that’s the point though, trusting someone enough that you know your heart in their hands will be safe, that they would rather hurt themselves than hurt you. As my eyes grow heavy and my body relaxes, I hope I’m right.

## CHAPTER 11

MIA

STANDING IN THE open door to my car, with the early morning air chilling my skin and my lips still tingling from Talon's kiss, my hands resting on his chest and his arms wrapped around my waist. "You know in order for me to leave, you have to let me go."

"I know. I'm trying to talk myself into it," he says, making me laugh while my insides flutter with happiness. "I'll be home around six tonight if you wanna come for dinner."

"I'm not sure I can." I fiddle with one of the three small buttons at the collar of his thermal. "My mom and Chaz should be here this afternoon, and I don't know if Cece is working." I lift my chin and meet his gaze. "But if I can get away, I will."

Giving me an approving squeeze, he bends his head and touches his mouth to mine before releasing me. I get into my car, and as he shuts the door, I start the engine and roll down the window.

"Message me when you get home."

"I will," I agree, smiling against his mouth when he leans in to kiss me once more. When he steps back, I reverse out of my spot and head for the road, giving him a wave as he lifts his chin. I don't know how I can miss him already but I do.

I get home at ten to seven, early enough that the girls are probably still in bed, which will make it a little less awkward. I let myself in, and both Retro and Mercury spring up to greet me, so I squat down and kiss their squishy faces. "I missed you too. Next time, you guys will come with me." I stand after giving them one last rub and stop when I see Cece standing at the end of the hall.

"Look what the cat dragged home." She gives me a knowing smirk before turning for the kitchen, where it smells like she's cooking bacon.

After setting down my bag, I follow her and take a seat on one of the stools, accepting the cup of coffee she passes me. "I should have called you

last night to tell you that I was staying out, but honestly, I passed out and —”

“I’m sorry,” she cuts me off, looking down at herself. “Did I suddenly become your mother that you need to check in with?” she asks, and I roll my eyes. “Mia, you’re a grown woman. You don’t have to check in with me, and it’s not like I didn’t know where you were or who you were with.” She turns for the stove, where bacon is sizzling in a pan. “So I’m guessing, since you’ve stayed with him two nights in a row, things are getting serious?”

I pick up my cup and take a sip of coffee, needing a moment to think about how to respond. The truth is we’ve only really had two dates, but in the short time I’ve known him, I’ve opened up more than I have with any other man I’ve been with. “Is it weird I want to say yes?”

“Why would it be weird?” she asks, looking at me over her shoulder. “If it’s how you feel, it’s how you feel.”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “I haven’t known him long.”

“How long do you think you need to know someone before you know them?”

“I don’t know. A while.” I shrug again.

“Mia, you can think you know someone and not have a clue who they are. Do you think I ever in my wildest dreams thought Mike would cheat or start dating someone else before we’ve even signed divorce papers?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“About what?”

“Mike’s dating? Like really dating? I mean, I knew he had that woman over last weekend, but I didn’t know he had a girlfriend.”

“He’s in love.” She rolls her eyes as she takes the bacon out of the pan, placing it on a paper towel. “Tammy was over again yesterday for lunch with the girls. Ruby is obsessed with her, because she likes the same games she does, and Kate thinks she’s pretty.”

“And Lola?” I ask, watching her expression fill with concern.

“Lola is having a hard time with all this, but she’s also my girl who has rooted for every Disney princess to find her Prince Charming. She’ll be okay.”

“And are you okay about him dating and having someone around the girls?” I ask, and she comes to stand in front of me and leans into the counter.

“I’m not exactly okay with him having a woman around my girls, but we talked about it, and he assured me they aren’t alone with her and that if it wasn’t serious, he wouldn’t have her around them. I don’t want to make things harder for the girls by getting ugly or petty. They’re dealing with enough. They don’t need to see or hear their dad and me fight. Truthfully, I’m just trying to focus on my future and happiness.”

I watch her for a minute, then ask quietly, “Is Winston going to be a part of the future happiness?”

“No.” Her response is immediate and firm.

“Yesterday seemed pretty intense.”

She licks her lips then closes her eyes. “Before I knew he was married, Winston and I hooked up. I... I don’t even know how it happened, but it did, and it was amazing. *He’s* amazing.” She opens her eyes and gives me a sad smile. “But he’s not for me. I can’t... I won’t be with someone who is married to someone else, and he’s not going to divorce his wife anytime soon, so it doesn’t matter how much I like him or how much he likes me. It’s never going to work.”

“Why are they still married if they aren’t together?”

“It’s a long story, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter, because he is married, even if they aren’t living together or sharing a bed.” She blinks as tears fill her eyes. “It sucks, because I really do care about him, but I won’t settle. I will never settle again.”

My throat gets tight as the pain she’s trying so hard to hide seeps into my skin. “I’m sorry, Cece.”

“Me too.” She pushes away from the counter. “I’m going to go wake up the girls and get them ready for school.”

“I’ll come up and help.”

“I got it. Finish your coffee, and if you don’t mind, add some water to some pancake mix.”

“Sure.” I smile.

“Thanks.” She kisses the side of my head, and I turn to watch her disappear upstairs. Once she’s out of sight, I let out a deep breath and get up to make my nieces some pancakes, hoping like hell that what I’ve found in Talon is real, because I never want to be where Cece is now.

---

“GRANDMA! GRANDPA!” RUBY, Lola, and Kate shout as they run up the sidewalk toward Mom and Chaz, who arrived when Cece went to pick them up from school.

“My babies!” Mom cries, dropping to her knees and opening her arms wide. “Oh, I missed you all so much.” She smothers each of them with kisses before allowing them to go to Chaz, who is standing back and waiting for his chance to hug them.

“Do you think they’ll notice if we take off for a few days?” Cece asks, joining me on the porch.

“Probably not,” I mumble, wrapping my arm around her waist and resting my head on her shoulder. “How do you feel about Jamaica?”

“Sun, sand, cold drinks... what’s not to like? But since I’m broke, you should book the tickets,” she mumbles back, and we both laugh.

“What are you two laughing about?” Mom asks, coming up the steps with Chaz and the girls following close on her heels.

“Nothing,” we both say at the same time, cutting off our laughter.

She eyes both of us skeptically then sighs. “All right then, let’s get the girls a snack and figure out what we should do for dinner.”

“I have work tonight, Mom, so you’ll have to work with Mia on dinner plans,” Cece says as we walk into the house and head toward the kitchen.

“I thought you were going to see about getting the night off?” Mom pouts.

“I tried, but a few girls are out with a bug that’s been going around. I should have the entire weekend off though, so maybe we can go do something—”

“Can we go to Gatlinburg?” Kate asks, cutting off Cece with a hopeful smile.

“That would be fun.” Mom beams. “I’ll look for a cabin tonight. A weekend in the mountains sounds like a great idea.”

Cece looks through her girls before saying quietly, “I’ll have to talk to your dad about that, since Saturdays are his.” Damn, I didn’t even think about that and I know looking at Cece’s expression that she didn’t think about it either until that moment.

“But—” Mom starts.

“We’ll find something to do,” Chaz inserts, using a tone I haven’t heard before as his gaze locks with Mom’s.

“Right.” She lets out a breath. “We’ll find something fun to do.” She walks to the girls. “Now, what do you think we should eat for dinner? I’m thinking ice cream or cake.”

“Cake,” Lola and Kate say in unison.

“Ice cream.” Ruby laughs.

“You’re not feeding the girls cake or ice cream for dinner, when I never had that when I was their age.” I roll my eyes. “How about pizza?”

“You’re no fun.” Mom sighs dramatically, making the girls laugh, and the tension in the room disappears like it was never there.

“Too bad.” I walk across the kitchen, pull out the menus from the drawer near the fridge, and hand them over to my mom so she and the girls can look at them. When I turn around, I watch Chaz wrap his arm around Cece’s shoulders and kiss the side of her head. Seeing the look on my sister’s face, tears spring to my eyes, but I fight them back as I walk to Chaz, who holds out his arm toward me. I fall into his embrace and soak in his strength.

I don’t even want to imagine what my childhood would have been like if he and Mom didn’t get together. Unlike Cece, who I know is capable of being alone, our mom needed someone, and thankfully he was okay with falling in love with a woman who had two kids by a man who was absent, and he didn’t mind filling that void. We didn’t take it easy on him, but he never gave up or quit trying to prove to us that he was different and that he wasn’t going anywhere.

“So when do I get to meet the guy you’re dating?” Chaz asks, cutting into my thoughts, and I look at Cece around his broad chest, narrowing my eyes when she laughs.

“Umm...” I glance between him and Mom. “We just started dating. I’m not sure I’m ready to start introducing him to family yet.”

“He’s met the girls, ate dinner with them, and took them out for ice cream,” Cece says, grinning at me, and then she adds, looking at Mom and Chaz, “He’s really nice, like *really* nice.”

“I want to meet him. What’s he doing tonight?” Mom demands.

“He’s working, and even if he wasn’t, I wouldn’t just spring meeting my parents on him. I need to give him a heads-up and prepare him for that introduction.”

“You brought Sheppard to dinner as soon as you started dating him,” Mom says, and my nose scrunches, because she’s right; I did. But I also

didn't really care about him. I mean, I liked him, but it was just superficial. I knew it would never be anything more than it was. I also had known him for years, and my parents had met him a few times before we started seeing each other, so I didn't think about it being a big deal.

"It's that serious?" Chaz asks, and since his arm is still around my shoulders, I have to tip my head back to meet his gaze. "Damn, it's that serious," he mutters as his eyes search mine.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I decide to be honest. "Cece's right. He's really nice, and I like him a lot. I want you guys to meet him. I just want to see where his head's at when it comes to that kind of thing."

"We'll wait until you're ready," Chaz says quietly, holding my gaze before touching his lips to my forehead.

"I hate that I have to leave, but I need to get ready for work," Cece mumbles before looking at the girls and stepping away from Chaz. "Get your homework done so you don't have to worry about it after dinner."

"Sure, Mom," Lola says, and Kate sighs.

"Grandma, will you help me study my vocabulary words?" Ruby asks.

"Of course I will." She kisses the top of her head. "Get your stuff, and we'll sit in the living room.

"I'm going to unload the car." Chaz grabs his keys off the counter.

"After I get the girls settled and their lunch bags taken care of, I'll come out and help you," I tell him.

"I got it, honey." He says before he heads for the front door without a backward glance.

While he comes in and out carrying bags, I get Lola and Kate settled with their homework at the kitchen counter while Mom and Ruby sit on the couch in the living room. Between helping the girls when they need it, I unpack lunch bags and clean out containers for tomorrow, and then when it's time, I place an order for dinner. Cece comes down and says goodbye, and once she's gone, I send Talon a text to let him know I won't be able to see him tonight but will call him once the girls get to sleep. He texts back before I even set my cell down to let me know he understands.

Hours later, with the girls in bed and my parents downstairs watching a movie, I crawl into bed with my phone and dial Talon's number.

"Hey," he answers on the first ring, his voice rough with sleep.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" I ask, turning off the lamp before lying down.

“No, I’ve been dozing, but my bed isn’t as comfortable without you hogging it.”

Smiling, I inform him. “I don’t hog the bed.”

“You do,” he mutters then asks. “Your parents get in okay?”

“Yeah, they got here right before the girls got home, and they didn’t know about their visit, so they were excited to see them.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah,” I agree then clear my throat. “Umm, Mom and Chaz want to meet you. But,” I add quickly, “do not feel obligated. It’s totally okay if you aren’t ready for that.”

“I’m ready when you are, babe,” he says easily. “While we’re on the subject of family meetings, my mom’s having a thing for my dad Saturday, and she wants you to come. I told her I’d have to talk to you before I agreed to anything.”

“Oh. You told your parents about me?”

“Yeah, that and my uncles told their wives they met you so mom was gonna find out either way.” I hear the smile in his voice. “Are you freaking out?”

“A little,” I admit.

“Don’t. My family is cool, and my mom is the best. You’ll love her. But, baby, it’s okay if you’re not ready for that yet.”

“You say it’s okay, but I don’t know that it is. If your mom and dad know about me, and they know that I know what happened to your dad, I’m pretty sure they might think a little less of me if I don’t show up.”

“They won’t,” he says firmly, but I’m positive they will.

“What time Saturday?”

“I’m not really sure. Normally, people just show up when they can. There’s not really a set time. I was planning on heading to their place around four.”

“I work until three Saturday, so if you’re okay with it, maybe I can just come to your place to change then ride with you. Then Sunday, if the girls are with their dad, we can do lunch with my parents and get it all out of the way in one fell swoop.”

“Babe, it’s not that bad.” He laughs.

“It’s not bad; it’s just fast,” I say, and he goes quiet. “Talon?”

“My mom and dad met and moved in together within weeks of knowing each other. Same with my uncles and cousins who are married. It might feel

fast, babe, but if it feels right, who the fuck cares?”

“I know you asked me not to talk to you about my past relationships, but I’m going to anyway.”

“Mia—”

“Please,” I whisper, needing him to understand, and once more he grows quiet, but I still hear his steady breath through the phone. “I’ve dated a lot. Some relationships were more intense than others, but I’ve never felt like I do when it comes to you. I’m trying, really trying to just let things flow naturally, because this feels good. But that doesn’t mean I’m not scared out of my mind.” I drag in a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing. “Trust doesn’t come easy for me, but I’m learning I can trust you. I just need time, to trust myself.”

“Baby, your foot’s on the gas. As long as we’re moving forward, I’m good with whatever speed we’re going.”

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

“Shit, it fucking sucks you’re not here right now.”

“I know and if my parents weren’t downstairs, I’d sneak out to see you.” I giggle.

“Don’t make me hard when you aren’t here to help me out,” he growls, and my core tightens in response.

“Sorry, I just miss you,” I admit quietly.

“Not as much as I miss you. My bed is lonely without you in it, and I probably won’t sleep for shit tonight, which is going to suck tomorrow.”

“I’m working tomorrow if you need a test drive,” I say, and he laughs, which makes me smile.

“I’ll see you tomorrow. I need to come in and sign off on the Jeep.”

“So you’re buying it?”

“Babe, I made a down payment when you climbed your cute little ass into the passenger seat the first time. I just haven’t had a chance to get back there and sign the paperwork.”

“Trickster.”

“Call it what you want, baby. You’re still in my bed.”

“Whatever,” I mumble, the only response I have.

“Either way, I’ll see you for lunch tomorrow.”

Knowing I’ll soon get my fix of him, my body relaxes. “That sounds good to me. Send me a message so I can make sure I won’t be out with a client when you get to the dealership.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m leaving the house. The paperwork shouldn’t take long, so I’ll stop by to kiss you before then.”

“Okay,” I agree then yawn.

“Go to sleep, baby. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” I agree before whispering, “Good night.”

“Night, baby,” he whispers back, and I hang up then reach to place my cell on the nightstand before curling my arms around my pillow. And even though I’m exhausted, it takes forever for me to fall asleep without Talon wrapped around me.

## CHAPTER 12

### TALON

“YOU'RE RIGHT. THIS was delicious.” Mia sighs sounding happy as she leans back in her chair and rests her hand on her stomach.

“Told you so.”

“You did, but you have to admit the idea of a french toast sandwich stuffed with ham and cheese that you dip in raspberry preserves sounds weird.”

“A little.” I grin, taking her hand when she reaches out toward me across the table.

“The only bad thing about this lunch is now I’m stuffed and doubt I’ll be able to make it through the rest of the day without a nap.”

“You can sleep in the Jeep when I drive you back to work.” I run my thumb over her pulse. “You still not sleeping?”

“No.” She rolls her eyes. “You ruined me after two nights in your bed. Now it seems I can’t sleep without you.” She frowns when I smile. “That makes you happy?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not even surprised by that,” she says, then looks over my shoulder and waves as she stands with a smile on her face. “Hey, Harry.”

“Mia.” The man who asked her out before she agreed to go out with me wraps an arm around her waist and kisses her cheek. My jaw clenches as I stand to look down at him, and he smiles oddly as he looks between Mia and me. “I thought you said you don’t date customers.”

“Talon was very persistent.” She laughs, looking at me with a warm smile that helps ease some of the tension I’m feeling.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” he responds, grabbing her hand. “I’d love to stay and chat, but I have a meeting with a client.” He kisses her knuckles, and I somehow manage not to punch him in the face. “I’ll be in touch soon,” he tells her then shifts his attention to me. “Nice seeing you again.”

I lift my chin then watch him walk between tables to take a seat across from Roscoe Brute, one of the top real estate developers in the area and one of the biggest slime balls around. When Bax and I were buying the land for the house we're building, he attempted to outbid us, but the family who owned the property was only selling a piece of their land, and they didn't want the lot we purchased to be overdeveloped, so they turned him down. "Are you ready to go?" Mia asks, resting her palm on my chest and pulling me from my thoughts.

"Yeah, baby, let's go." I pull some cash out of my wallet and toss it on the table then place my hand in the middle of her back to lead her out of the restaurant. Once she's buckled in, I slam her door then get in behind the wheel and back out of my space, Roscoe and Harry's relationship bothering me to the point of irritation.

"What kind of work does Harry do?" I ask as I drive toward the dealership.

"I don't know for sure, but I think something in real estate. Why?"

"Just curious."

She reaches over to place her hand on my thigh. "You don't like him."

"He wants in your pants."

"He's not getting in my pants."

I glance over and catch her smile. "I'd kill him if he tried, Mia. I can hardly keep from putting hands on him when he touches you," I admit then look at her when I stop at a red light. "But it's more than the fact that he wants you that has me on edge when it comes to him."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. I can't put my finger on it, but something about him is off."

"I'll keep my guard up when I'm around him," she assures, giving my thigh a squeeze, and I cover her hand with mine. Thankfully, she isn't shutting down my concern and thinking I'm being a jealous, possessive boyfriend.

"Thanks, baby."

"I got your back," she says as I turn into the dealership and park in one of the empty spaces then turn toward her after I put the engine in park. Unlatching her seatbelt, she crawls over the console between us and takes my face in her hands. "Two more days."

“Two days.” I smile, because Friday can’t come soon enough. “If I didn’t have so much work to keep me busy, I’m not sure this would work for me,” I say, smoothing her hair away from her face.

“I know.” She drops her forehead to my chin. “But with my parents being here now, I might be able to get away a little more often.”

“Hey.” I tuck my fingers under her chin to raise her gaze to mine. “We’ll make this work. I know you need to be there for your sister and your nieces. I knew that when we started this, and I’m okay with it. We’ll find our time.” I brush my mouth against hers then sigh when I see the time on the dash. “You need to get to work, and so do I.”

“I don’t want to.” She pouts, and I laugh, wrapping my arms around her as her arms circle my back and her head rests against my chest under my chin. “We’ll have the whole weekend.”

“Except I have to work Saturday,” she groans.

“Right, so we’ll have most of the weekend.”

She leans back, and the moment her eyes meet mine, I see she’s as invested in this relationship as I am. That even though she might be afraid of getting hurt, she’s let her walls down. I lean forward and cover her mouth with mine, hoping like fuck she feels how appreciative I am that she’s willing to put her heart on the line.

---

AS MIA PULLS into the driveway, I walk out the front door to meet her. Even with seeing her for lunch almost every day and the amount of work I’ve had to keep me busy, the week has dragged. When I reach the end of the walkway, I brace as she runs toward me and step back on one foot when she jumps into my arms.

“I missed you.” Her hands capture my face as her mouth lands on mine, and I grin as she peppers my face with kisses.

“Missed you too.” I turn to carry her to the house then stop when I see Retro and Mercury heading to the front door. “You brought the girls.”

“Is it okay? I thought since we’ll be here all night it’d be a good time to find out how they are with Soma.”

“Did you bring their leashes?” I ask, and she wiggles to get down, and I reluctantly let her go.

“Their stuff is still in the car. I got excited when I saw you.” She laughs, heading back to the driveway. “I really do think they should be okay. They never seem to pay much mind to any of the animals out and about when we’re on walks.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but sometime between last night and this morning, the kittens learned to scale the gate, so they’ve been out exploring the house.”

“Oh.” She turns to face me when she reaches the trunk of her car, suddenly looking unsure. “Maybe I should take them home.”

“How about we see what happens?” I suggest.

After we have both girls leashed, we open the door and let them into the house, and Soma greets us, looking uncertain about the new guests. “Come here, Mama.” Mia picks her up when she jumps onto the stand near the door then rubs her head.

Both Retro and Mercury for their part ignore her completely after Mia bends down to allow them a chance to sniff her, the two of them more interested in exploring the house.

“They’ve already grown so much since the last time I was here.” Mia laughs when we reach the kitchen, and the kittens scatter in different directions. I watch her drop to her knees, still holding Soma, who I can hear purring from across the room as she bends at the waist in an attempt to lure one of the white kittens from under the edge of the couch in the sunroom.

“My cousin called today to let me know I need to get some soft food for them next week, since Soma only eats the dry stuff.”

“Does that mean it’s going to be time to find them homes soon?” she asks, sounding devastated as she hugs Soma to her chest like I might rip her away from her.

“Not soon. They’re only a little over three weeks, and they have to be at least twelve before that happens. You still have time with them.”

When my response doesn’t seem to erase the look from her face, I know I’m fucked. “Why do I have a feeling I’m going to be the owner of five cats?”

“Because you’re a big softie,” she says as Soma wiggles out of her hold.

“Yeah.” I sigh, watching her smile and her expression soften right before her eyes widen with panic.

“Retro, no!” she shouts, and I look down at my feet where both dogs are sitting and find Retro licking one of the gray kittens, who’s obviously

braver than the rest. Retro, adhering to the command, stops what she's doing before groaning and falling to her belly.

"Baby, relax. If either Retro or Mercury was even a little bit interested in hurting Soma or the kittens, they would have made that clear when we walked through the door. They're good."

"I know you're right, but the kittens are still so small." She grabs the white kitten when it tries to run past her and holds him like she was holding Soma.

"They're also fast, and your dogs are lazy. They'd give up after two minutes of trying to catch them." I bend to pet both pups before unhooking them from their leashes. Like I suspected they would, they don't use the freedom to run wild. Instead, they sprawl out on the floor where a single ray of sun shines into the room. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes." She stands up from where she was kneeling and comes with me into the kitchen. "Do you want to order something?"

"I got the stuff to make burgers and a bag of fries we can throw in the oven."

"Yum." She leans up in a silent demand for a kiss, and I bend to give her what she wants. "What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing. Get a drink and relax."

"Never mind." She rolls her eyes. "I'll figure it out while you start the grill." She releases the kitten she was still holding then goes to the sink to wash her hands. I leave her to it and go out to start the grill. After I come in to turn on the oven, I season the hamburger while she cuts up an onion and tomato. We work in sync while talking about the week and then head out to the deck, taking the girls with us when we go.

"Let me get this straight." I turn to meet Mia's gaze as I start to take our burgers off the grill. "Mike wouldn't let your sister and her parents take the girls away for the weekend, but he's still not going to see them until late Saturday evening?"

"Yep," she agrees, rolling her eyes. "And Cece is nicer than I am, because I would have told him to shove it. It's not like he sees them all week, when he could if he wanted to."

"He doesn't see his girls at all during the week?" I carry the burgers I just took off the grill to the table.

"Nope, he works Monday through Friday, then Saturday afternoon he plays softball with his friends, so he picks them up after that and then drops

them back at the house Sunday after they have dinner.”

“Babe, you gotta know that’s fucked up, right? I get that he needs to work to provide for his girls, but he also needs to spend more than twenty-four hours a week with them.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you.” She loads up her burger while I do the same with mine. “It’s just how it is, and now that he’s dating someone, I doubt that’s going to change. I just hope it doesn’t get worse.”

“Worse than it is?”

She sets down the fry she’s holding and wipes her fingers on the napkin in her lap before taking a sip of her tea and clearing her throat. “My dad did the same thing when him and Mom got divorced. He married the woman he had been having an affair with, and then he stopped showing up to see me and Cece. Then eventually he forgot about us all together.”

Witnessing her pain, it takes everything in me not to pick up the table between us and toss it over the deck.

“Thankfully—” She lets out a breath. “—we got Chaz, who was willing to put in the work and earn our trust.” She smiles a sad smile. “I don’t know what my mom or my sister and I would have done without his strength during that time.”

“You don’t have any contact with your dad?” I question, already knowing the answer.

“None, and I don’t know my siblings either.”

“He had more kids?” My jaw clenches. I know it happens, but growing up like I did, seeing the love between my parents and other members of my family, divorce and secondary families are a foreign concept to me.

“Two boys. He always wanted boys, so I’m sure he’s happy.”

“It’s his loss, baby. You gotta know that. He’s missing out on knowing you, your sister, his grandkids.”

“I’m not sad.” She reaches out, grasping my hand. “I’ve had a lot of time to get over the anger I felt when it comes to him, and you’re right; it’s his loss, my gain. When he left, my mom became a better mom, and when she got with Chaz, Cece and I got a dad who wanted to be a father. It might have taken me some time to realize that, but I know that now, and I don’t take him for granted.”

“You love him.” It’s not a question. Her devotion to him is written all over her face.

“More than anything.” She picks up a fry and dips it in some ketchup on her plate before meeting my gaze once more. “I know you might disagree, but I’m praying my sister finds a Chaz for her and the girls.”

“I get why you want that for them, baby,” I tell her quietly, and I do, given her history and Mike’s lack of involvement in his kids’ lives. It’s understandable why she wants that for her sister and her nieces. It’s not about having a man around; it’s about having someone willing to step up to be what each of them needs. “Your sister will find someone, but I hope Mike pulls his head out of his ass and becomes the dad his girls need right now.”

“Me too,” she agrees then shakes her head. “Enough about that. Tell me about the house.”

“I’ll take you over there Sunday before we have lunch with your parents.” I grin when the look crosses her face that states she is clearly still nervous about that introduction. “We’ve had a full crew in there all week, so if things keep moving like they are now, we’ll be back where we were before the break-in in a couple weeks ago and should be on track to finish the build by our deadline.”

“I’m sure you and Bax are both relieved about that.”

“We are, but until we have a buyer, I don’t think we’ll relax. But I am thankful things are flowing in a direction that will lead us to putting a For Sale sign on the front lawn.”

“Well, I can’t wait to see it.” She smiles, dunking one of her fries into some ketchup before tossing it into her mouth, and I follow suit.

Once we finish eating, we clean up then take the girls for a short walk before putting in a movie. I wake up halfway through it, having passed out at some point, and find Mia asleep on my chest. Not wanting to wake her and comfortable where I am, I drag the blanket off the back of the couch, tossing it over us before flipping off the TV and falling back to sleep.

---

“I CAN’T BE late to work,” Mia whispers against my mouth as I walk her backward from the bathroom toward the bed.

“You won’t be late,” I assure her, helping her out of my shirt she put on this morning before we ate breakfast.

“This has to be fast.”

“It will be fast.” I start to trail my mouth down her neck to her breast then smile as she turns so she can push me back onto the bed and climb up to straddle my hips. When her wet heat rubs against the head of my cock, I fight back a curse and wrap my hands around her waist. “We need a condom.”

“Right,” she agrees in a daze as I reach for the drawer where I dumped about eight dozen condoms last week. “I need—” Her teeth nip my neck then shoulder. “—to make an appointment to get on birth control.”

“Fuck.” My cock throbs at the idea of being in her without anything between us, but knowing that isn’t going to happen now, I focus on the task at hand and rip open the condom I’m holding and somehow manage to put it on. “Jesus, baby,” I hiss, capturing both her breasts in my hands as she slides down my length and begins to ride me, her head tilted forward, her eyes on mine.

“You feel so good. I missed this,” she rasps, riding me harder as her hips swirl in tight circles.

I want to take over. I want to fuck her until she screams. But seeing her like she is, I don’t. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than her working herself to release on my cock.

“I’m so close.” Her hips roll, and I drop my hands to her hips and tighten them in response, urging her on and holding her steady, building the release I know will come. I watch in fascination as her head falls back to her shoulders then groan when she falls forward to cover my mouth with hers. I take over the kiss, thrusting my tongue into her mouth, then roll her to her back and sink into her as my thumb finds her clit, swirling twice. I bite back a curse when she comes, her walls tightening, sending me over the edge. With three more thrusts, I plant myself deep inside her as her arms and legs wrap around me, holding me tight. I close my eyes then take the last bit of strength I have to roll to my back, bringing her with me.

“Call out of work and spend the day with me,” I say as my heartbeat begins to slow and my breathing begins to return to normal.

“I wish I could.” She tips her head back to meet my gaze. “If I didn’t have a scheduled meeting with Ken and Harry this afternoon, I would.”

“You have a meeting with Harry?”

She kisses my chest as I tuck some hair behind her ear. “He’s buying twelve trucks for his company, and Ken wants me there, because it’s going

to be his biggest sale since opening the dealership.”

“That’s big for you, baby.”

“It is, but it isn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not like I had to talk him into buying the trucks he’s purchasing. He knew what he needed and wanted. I just happened to be the one to work the deal. I’m just happy the commission will allow me to help Cece out if she decides to keep the house or if she needs some money to find somewhere else for her and the girls.”

“Your sister is lucky to have you.”

“We’re lucky to have each other.” She rests her chin on my chest then sighs. “If I’m going to take my pups home, I need to shower and get ready for work.”

“How about you leave them with me?” I suggest, resting my hand on her cheek while smoothing my thumb along the edge of her bottom lip. “I’m going to be here most of the day, and they can go with me when I run errands this afternoon.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind looking after them?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it if I did, and it might liven them up if they spend time outside in the wild.”

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up, because that’s not likely to happen. Even with the kittens ganging up on them last night, they didn’t bother exerting the energy needed to show them who’s boss.” She smirks, and I know something smart is going to come out of her pretty little mouth. “Not that I’m surprised, since pussy always wins.”

“Is that so,” I growl, listening to her laugh as I roll her to her back, settling my hips back between her legs. I capture her breasts in my hands and duck my head, taking one of her nipples into my mouth and sucking hard before nipping the tip, making her moan. I move a hand to between her legs and circle her clit before thrusting two fingers inside her. “What were you saying about pussy?”

“I don’t know.” She wraps her legs around my hips as my fingers move slowly in and out of her, and her head arches back into the pillow. “Please don’t stop.”

“Come for me,” I urge, using my thumb to circle her clit then pull her breast into my mouth and bite the tip of her nipple lightly, sending her over the edge. She comes, her pussy rippling around my fingers, panting for

breath as she grabs my hair and drags my mouth to hers. I lick into her mouth then groan as she sucks on my tongue.

“Now I really need a shower,” she whispers when her head falls back to the pillow and her lashes flutter open.

Somehow, I manage to get us both into the bathroom, then before the water has even heated up, she drags me under the spray and drops to her knees. With my palms on the shower wall, I lose myself down her throat, groaning “Fuck” as I come. I pull her into my arms and kiss her until we’re both breathless then rest my forehead against hers. “Marry me.”

Laughing, she rests her palms against my chest, and I know she thinks I’m joking, but I’d marry her tomorrow if she said yes.

## CHAPTER 13

MIA

SITTING IN THE conference room at the dealership with Ken at my side and Harry and Judy across from us, I watch Judy place a stack of papers Harry just signed into a plain folder. After just twenty minutes, Harry is officially the owner of a fleet of trucks for his business, and I've made enough commission to help out Cece and find an apartment for myself when the time comes.

I should be on cloud nine, but Talon's words about Harry have been nagging me, and it's not because I think he's being ridiculously jealous. It's because the few times Harry has come into the dealership, he's asked about Talon, and even though at the time I didn't think much of it at the time, now it seems odd, like he might have been searching for information and not just curious.

"Why don't we go out to lunch to celebrate?" Harry suggests, leaning forward in his chair, his eyes focused on me. Unlike Talon, who wears a uniform of boots jeans and T-shirts with a vibe that clearly states he'd be down to have a beer and shoot the shit, I've never seen Harry in anything but suits that make him look like a high-powered lawyer instead of someone who works in construction. As a woman, I can admit he's a good-looking man, but the air of arrogance that surrounds him has always put me off.

"I—"

"I'd love to, but unfortunately I can't," Ken cuts me off before I can come up with an excuse as to why I can't go. "But I insist you and Mia go have a drink on me to celebrate." He turns toward me looking ecstatic. "As a matter of fact, you should take the rest of the day off. I think you earned it."

*Shit, shit, shit.*

"What do you say, Mia?" Harry smiles as he stands, and knowing I can't really get out of this without possibly offending my boss, I wonder if I can

use the time to find out a little more about Harry.

“Sounds great,” I lie, standing when Ken does.

He looks surprised by my agreement then grins. “Do you like Mexican?”

“I love it. I’ve been wanting to try out that place behind the coffee shop on Main.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go,” he says as he moves toward the door.

“Great, I’ll meet you there in thirty minutes,” I tell him, not wanting him to think we’re riding together. I don’t wait to make sure that works for him before I turn toward Ken, who I want to kick and hug at the same time. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“See you Monday.” He takes hold of my shoulder before I can walk away. “I should also say congratulations. Even before Harry’s deal, you made the number one spot this month.”

“Really?” My jaw drops.

“Really.” He chuckles, stepping back and touching his knuckles to my chin. “Go enjoy lunch and the rest of the weekend.”

“Thanks, Ken.” I don’t care if it’s acceptable; I wrap my arms around him in a quick hug before stepping back. “You’re the best.”

His face softens, and he shakes his head before waving his hands toward the door. “Go on before you make me look like a softie.”

“You are a softie.” I laugh as I head for my desk then grab my purse and walk out to the parking lot, waving goodbye to a few people as I go. When I get in my car, I find my cell phone and dial Talon, listening to it ring and praying he answers.

“Hey, babe.”

“I need you to meet me somewhere,” I blurt, shoving the keys in the ignition and starting the engine.

“What?” I hear the frown in his voice and can picture his brows dragged together, which always makes the dimple in his chin that I love so much seem more pronounced.

“Remember that Mexican place I said I wanted to go to sometime? I need you to meet me there within the next hour.”

“Babe—”

“You should also bring your brother,” I cut him off, thinking on my toes. “I’m having lunch with Harry.” I continue quickly, wanting to reassure him, “I don’t want to have lunch with him, but I got to thinking that maybe this

is the perfect opportunity for you to figure out what it is about him that has you on edge.”

“What the fuck, Mia?” he growls, the confusion in his voice replaced with anger or annoyance, but I can’t tell, since I can’t see his face.

“Please just meet me there,” I beg. “And when you get there, pretend like you didn’t know I would be there with him.”

“Pretty sure that won’t be hard to do, since I can’t fucking believe you’re going out to lunch with him, baby.”

“So you’ll meet me?”

“What do you think?” He sighs.

I press my lips together to keep from smiling. “I’ll see you soon.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do to punish you for this, but I guarantee you I’ll spend the next forty minutes coming up with something,” he mutters. “Be good.”

Rolling my eyes at his clipped tone, I hang up and put on my seatbelt before backing out of my parking space. Then, thinking it’s probably smart to kill some time, I drive to the gas station, fill up my tank, and wander the aisles inside, coming out with a bag of Hot Cheetos and a couple candy bars for later tonight.

I arrive at the restaurant about fifteen minutes later than I said I would, and when I finally walk through the doors, I notice the place is packed for lunch. I spot Harry seated at a booth in the back of the room, facing away from the door and distracted by the phone he’s holding to his ear. He’s obviously waiting anxiously for me to arrive.

“Are you eating alone?” a cute elderly man with a Spanish accent asks, making me jump.

“No, sorry.” I point toward the booth Harry’s sitting in. “I’m meeting someone.”

“Enjoy your lunch.” He smiles, and I grin back before heading across the room.

When I reach the table Harry is at, I slide into the booth across from him, sighing dramatically. “Sorry I’m late. I didn’t know my tank was on empty until I was halfway here,” I lie. “Then I had to drive five minutes out of the way to the gas station.” I take my bag off my shoulder and place it next to me before resting my hands on the table. “Then my credit card wouldn’t work in the machine at the pump, so I had to go inside to pay.”

“You’re here now.” He gives me a placating smile, patting my hand.

“I’m here now,” I agree, picking up one of the two menus from the middle of the table and quickly looking over what kind of alcohol is available, because I don’t think I’ll be able to make it through this lunch without a little bit of liquid courage.

“Are you two ready to order?” a soft, sweet voice asks, and I look up at a very petite, elderly woman with long gray hair and know instantly that the man who greeted me when I arrive must be her husband, and if he’s not, he should be.

“I think so.” I glance at Harry and get his nod. I point at a picture of a margarita that comes in a cute little sand bucket and let her know I’ll have that along with an order of shrimp fajitas.

“You’ve got good taste.” She smiles at me then looks at Harry, who rattles off his order, something I can’t even pronounce, with a beer and a shot of some kind of whiskey. We both hand over our IDs when she asks to see them.

“Thank you.” I accept my ID and hand her the menus, and she smiles before she walks away.

“So.” I turn my attention back to Harry as I rest my elbows on the table, something I’d never normally do. “How does it feel to be the proud new owner of twelve trucks?”

“It doesn’t feel any different than being the part of a multimillion-dollar business.” He shrugs, loosening his tie, his comment about money rubbing me the wrong way.

“Hmm,” I mutter, and then my eyes widen when a very large bucket of ice and what smells like a whole lot of tequila is placed in front of me. “Umm.” I look up at our waitress and ask her quietly, “What’s your name?”

“You can call me Tita.”

“That’s sweet.” My chest warms, because I know that’s similar to “aunt.” “Tita, is this really the drink from the picture?”

“It is.” She beams.

“Well, okay then,” I mutter, and she laughs before letting us know she will be back shortly with our food.

“So where’s your boyfriend today?” Harry asks. “You’re still dating him, aren’t you?”

“Talon, yeah, we’re still seeing each other. He’s working today.” I wave him off, taking a sip from the straw while praying Talon gets here soon. “So tell me about yourself, Harry.”

“There’s not much to tell.” He picks up his beer, taking a drink from it, so I take another sip from my straw, the alcohol burning my throat. “I grew up here in town, went away to college, and moved back when I was given the opportunity.”

“What do you do exactly?” I ask, leaning in and hoping I look interested.

“I own part of a land developmental firm. We buy land to build subdivisions on.”

“That’s impressive.”

“I don’t know about impressive, but I’ve done well for myself.”

“Have you always wanted to do what you’re doing?” I take a long sip from my bucket.

He seems to think about my question for a minute before answering. “I always wanted to be successful. I was just lucky enough to find a job that made that possible.”

“That is lucky,” I agree then jump when a hand comes down hard enough on the table to make my drink shake.

“Mia!” Bax booms, looking between Harry and me, and I look up over his shoulder at Talon, fighting back a shiver when I see the look on his face. “Told you it was her. What are you doing here?” he asks as he takes a seat next to Harry, forcing him deeper into the booth.

“We’re having lunch to celebrate Harry’s new purchase. What are you guys doing here?” I scoot over, making room for Talon to sit, then grab his thigh when he rests his arm around my shoulders. “I thought you were working.”

“We were, but everyone needs lunch, right?” Bax drags my bucket of tequila across the table toward him and takes a sip from the straw. “Shit, babe, that’s strong,” he hisses, and I laugh. I can’t help it; there is something about Bax that is endearing and adorable even if he is a little rough around the edges.

When Talon’s arm around my shoulders tightens, I remember this isn’t just a normal lunch. “Sorry.” I clear my throat. “Harry, you know Talon, but this is his brother Bax. Bax, this is Harry.”

“Nice to meet you, man,” Bax mutters before taking another sip of my drink, something I doubt will affect him like it is currently affecting me right now, because he’s about four times my size. Even after just a few sips, I feel warm. Then again, I probably just took two maybe even three shots of tequila without even knowing it.

“You too,” Harry says, not looking even a little happy.

“You look familiar, man. Do we know each other?” Bax asks, and Harry seems to tense at the question before composing himself.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Talon agrees.

“I don’t think so. Then again, this town is small. We’ve probably passed each other a time or two at the grocery store.”

“You’re probably right,” Bax mutters, grabbing the laminated menu from the holder in the middle of the table. “I hope you guys don’t mind if we join you for lunch. I don’t want to ruin your date.”

“It’s not a date, just a celebratory lunch,” I repeat, not to make a point to Harry, but because, although I’m sure Talon talked to Bax about what is going on, I don’t want him to think I’d go out with another man when I’m seeing his brother.

“What did you order, baby?” Talon asks, and I look at him while he tips his chin down, a move that brings our mouths close together.

“I got the fajitas.”

“I’ll share with you.”

“Okay,” I agree, really wishing he’d kiss me to let me know we’re good.

“I’m gonna get the nachos,” Bax states, then asks. “So what is it that we’re celebrating?”

“Mia sold me a few trucks.”

“Oh yeah?” Bax asks, looking at me.

“Yeah.”

“How many?” he asks.

“Twelve.”

“Well shit, that *is* cause for celebration. Good job.”

“Thanks.” I laugh as he pushes the bucket back toward me, and like an idiot, I take another drink as he focuses his attention on Harry, asking him something about what kind of work he does.

“So,” I say quietly, turning toward Talon, and he dips his chin down to meet my gaze once more. “Ken told me today that I made the number one spot in sales this month, even before Harry’s purchase.”

“That’s big, baby. I’m proud of you.”

Seeing the look in his eyes, my chest warms. “Thank you.” I lean up to touch my mouth to his, and he meets me halfway, and then he makes it even better when he brushes his tongue against the inside edge of my bottom lip.

“How much alcohol is in that drink?” He nods to the bucket.

“I don’t know. A whole bottle of tequila?”

“That’s what it tastes like,” he mutters, and I snort then cover my mouth and glance around the table, finding Bax with a smirk on his face and Harry looking like he’d rather be anywhere other than here.

“Sorry,” Harry says when his phone rings pulling it out of his pocket, checking the screen before looking around at us. “I’ve got to take this. You mind letting me out?” he asks Bax, who stands, and once he’s out of the booth, he puts his phone to his ear as he walks away.

“Is that guy always so pompous?” Bax mutters when Harry is out of earshot.

“I don’t know him well, but I’m starting to think so,” I reply as I wave my hand in front of my face in an attempt to cool myself down. “Is it hot in here?”

“It’s not hot.” Bax pushes a cup of ice water across the table toward me, and Talon picks it up, placing the straw near my mouth. “You’re just drunk.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Babe, you’re totally drunk. You got the flush.” Bax points at my face.

“What do you mean?” I dig into my bag until I find my phone then turn on the camera. When I see the redness on the tip of my nose that has traveled across my cheeks, I groan. “I can’t be drunk. I’m meeting your parents today.”

“Don’t laugh at me,” I hiss at him, which only seems to make him laugh harder, and then I turn my attention to Talon. “I can’t be drunk and meet your parents.”

“Baby.” His eyes soften as he tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “It’s fine. You’ll sober up by the time we go see them.”

“Oh God.” I lean forward, resting my head in my hands. “Why am I such a lightweight? I really should have taken Cece’s advice and built up my alcohol tolerance,” I whimper, listening to Bax laugh again then feeling Talon tense at my side.

“Sorry,” Harry says as he clears his throat, and somehow I manage to lift my head that feels like it weights fifty pounds out of my hands to look at him. “I have to head out. Something came up. I’ve already taken care of the bill, so enjoy your lunch.”

“Oh.” I try to think of something else to say, but nothing is coming to mind, because I’m still having a mental breakdown about the fact that I’m

supposed to meet Talon's mom and dad in just a few hours, and I don't know if I will be sober by then.

"Have a good lunch." He looks between us before he pulls his ringing phone out of his pocket and walks away.

"Please tell me that you learned something and that I'm not drunk for no reason," I plead, looking between Bax and Talon.

"You mean besides the fact that he's a douche?" Bax asks.

"Yes, besides that," I groan while I cover my face with my hands.

"He works for his dad," Talon says, resting his hand on my back. "And if I'm right, his dad is Roscoe Brute."

"His last name is Charmers," I tell them, knowing that information from his ID that I've seen and the paperwork he filled out on the paperwork today.

"Harry Charmers." Bax chuckles, and I glare at him, having a feeling that his brother gives him the same look I do, judging by his fading expression.

"What?" He looks between Talon and me. "You have to admit that shit's funny."

Ignoring Bax, I focus on Talon. "Who's Roscoe?"

"He's one of the biggest developers in the area. When we had lunch the other day, that's who he was meeting."

"Being a developer is bad?" I ask, not understanding.

"When you use money and fear tactics to push people off their land and out of their homes, it is," Bax says, sounding suddenly somber.

"I don't know how it is in Montana, baby—" Talon gains my attention by touching my cheek. "—but here, land is being eaten up by big corporations, and when that happens, generations of families lose the thing that has kept them and maybe hundreds of others fed for years."

"Isn't it their choice if they want to sell or not?" I ask before gulping down some more water.

"It is, but it isn't. When a farmer's land is suddenly surrounded by housing developments, it makes it difficult for them not to give in when someone offers them thousands if not millions of dollars for their land," Talon explains.

"Or when they're asked if they are willing to sell and say no then are harassed until they have no choice but to give in to the pressure," Bax says angrily.

“That happens?” I ask, because that seems like something that only takes place in movies.

“Not often, but it does go down on occasion,” Talon tells me gently.

“Even if it only occurs on occasion, it sucks,” I murmur, and he leans in to kiss my forehead.

When he pulls away, I hear the sizzle of fajitas and find Tita standing at the side of the table with a cast-iron pan in her hand that she places in front of me. She turns and helps a young man place the rest of our food on the table, including Bax’s nachos, which he must have ordered at some point when I was preoccupied.

“This smells delicious,” I tell her, and she gives me a wide smile.

“Do you need anything else?”

I look at both men, and when they shake their heads, I turn back to Tita. “I think we’re good for now. Thank you.”

“Then please enjoy.” She does a half bow as she backs away with a smile on her face. I dig in with abandon, hoping that putting something in my stomach will help dilute the alcohol, and every bite is so delicious that I almost smack Talon’s hand when he reaches into my plate but refrain, because I did tell him I’d share.

When we finish eating, Talon pulls out his wallet and drops a twenty-dollar bill on the table before helping me out of the booth.

“Let me get your keys, baby,” Talon says when we reach the parking lot, and I hand them over to him, and he tosses them to Bax. “We’ll meet you at the house.”

With a lift of his chin, Bax heads for my car while Talon walks me to his Jeep and opens the door for me to get in.

“Are Mercury and Retro at your house?” I ask as he starts the engine.

“There at my parents’. Mom needed some help getting the tables and chairs set up, so that’s where Bax and I were when you called.”

“I’m sorry I pulled you away from that.”

“We were pretty much done, and my sisters all showed up, so Mom has help.” He covers my hand with his.

“Well, thank you for coming to meet me.”

“I still don’t know what the hell you were thinking, agreeing to have lunch with him.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I was thinking either. He put me on the spot, and Ken insisted I go. Then I thought maybe I could use that time with

him to my advantage and find out a little about him. Not that it worked,” I groan, dropping my head back to the headrest.

“How about we both agree that there will be no more *Colombo* fishing expeditions.”

“Agreed.” I laugh then turn my head toward him to watch as he lifts my hand to kiss my fingers. “Do you want us to go to your parents’ to help out and get my pups?”

“I was thinking I’d drop you at home. You can take a nap while I run Bax to my parents’, since his truck is still there. I’ll see if Mom needs anymore help and pick up the girls.”

“Are you going to be pissed at me if I agree to that plan, even though you’re the one who suggested it?”

“I’m not your dad or any of the assholes you dated, Mia. I don’t say shit I don’t mean, and I’ve never played any kind of fucked-up mind games with you,” he says quietly, but still the statement is roared in my head and guilt fills the pit of my stomach, because he’s right. He’s never once said anything he didn’t mean, and from the beginning, he’s been honest and has always tried to protect me. Which I know he’s doing now by allowing me time to sober up, so I won’t feel more stressed than I already will be when I meet his family.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” I say through the tightness in my throat, and he brings my hand to his lips, kissing it before giving it a squeeze. As he rests our hands on his thigh, I know we’re good. I also know I need to figure out how to deal with my personal issues. As scary as it is, I’m falling in love with him, and it’s not fair for me to keep painting him with the same brush I’ve used to define every other man in my life who’s let me down and disappointed me, when he is nothing like any of them.

## CHAPTER 14

### TALON

“IF YOU’RE GOOD, I’m gonna grab the girls and head home to shower then come back with Mia,” I say, stopping in the doorway to the kitchen where my mom and sisters are working on getting food ready before everyone starts showing up.

“The pups are fine. Just leave them. That way you don’t have to haul them back and forth.” Mom stops what she’s doing and wipes her hands on a dishrag while glancing over at Mercury and Retro, who are sprawled out on the floor in the dining room. “People have been in and out all day, and they have pretty much been doing exactly what they are doing right now. Even Willow has checked on them twice to make sure they’re still alive, because it’s so strange.” I laugh as she comes to give me a hug. “Just go home, shower, get Mia, and come back. If they suddenly start to act like normal dogs, I’ll call you so you can rush back here and witness that miracle.”

“All right,” I give in, leaning down to kiss her cheek. “I’ll be back with Mia.”

“You better watch out.” Willow smirks at me from across the kitchen, and I raise a brow. “I think Bax has a little bit of a crush on your girl.”

“Yeah, he keeps talking about how funny she is,” Nalia adds while Harmony laughs.

“Bax just likes beautiful women.” I grin when Mom attempts to smack me with the dishtowel she’s holding.

“She must be nice. You know your brother doesn’t like many people.”

“She is. You’re all going to love her,” I say, and Mom’s face softens. I know that even if she’s not saying she’s nervous about the impending meeting, she still is. Like Mia, my mom didn’t have the easiest childhood, and growing up like she did, it’s always been difficult for her to trust people. I still have no doubt she will see in Mia what I do and will want to take her under her wing and protect her.

“Go. We’ll see you when you get back here.”

I lift my chin then go to the backyard, where my dad and Harlen are enjoying the sun, and let them know I’ll be back. When I get home, I find Mia asleep in my bed surrounded by Soma and her kittens, but instead of letting her rest while I shower, I drag her into the bathroom with me and finish sobering her up with an orgasm.

---

“I THINK IT’S safe to say your girl fits in,” Dad says from my side, resting a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I somehow manage to drag my eyes off Mia, who is surrounded by my mom, sisters, cousins, and aunts, all of them gathered together in a circle and talking amongst themselves. “She’s sweet.”

“She is,” I agree, picking up my beer from the table and admitting quietly, “I’m in love with her.”

“Does she know that?”

“I haven’t told her, and I don’t think she’d believe me if I did. She’s not there yet. It’s been a struggle to get us where we are right now.”

“Even if she doesn’t believe, you need to tell her, and then you need to keep telling her over and over until it sinks in.” He pats my shoulder.

“You two talking about Mia?” Uncle Asher takes a seat next to my dad, setting his beer on the table.

“How did you guess?” Dad grins, and I sigh, because I know my father and my uncles tend to give advice that is not necessarily wanted or needed, and they also gossip more than the women in our family, which is saying something.

“The look on your boy’s face, and the fact that he can’t keep his eyes off his girl.”

“You remember how it is in the beginning,” Dad says.

“Yeah.” Uncle Asher laughs. “Good luck, kid, and just so you know, it doesn’t get any easier. It just changes with time.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Dad agrees, lifting his glass of water to tap it against his brother’s beer.

“Just take your time.”

“Like you two did?” I look between them, and they both smirk before my dad’s brows drag together.

“Something happened.” I follow his gaze across the patio to Mia, who has her phone to her ear and her eyes wide with worry. I stand and start toward her as she and my mom get up.

“I’ll be there soon,” I listen to her say when I meet her in the middle of the yard.

“What’s going on?” I ask, dragging her into my arms when tears spring to her eyes.

“Cece and my parents went out to dinner and when they got home they went inside and found the house destroyed.”

“Are the girls with their dad?” I question, rubbing her back trying to keep calm for her knowing that if I lose my shit it’s only going to make things harder for her.

“Yeah,” she whispers.

“Good,” I murmur, kissing the top of her head before looking at my mom and sisters, who all look worried. “Do you mind getting her in the Jeep while I get the dogs?”

“I’m okay.” She turns in my arms, and I feel her tense when she sees everyone has gathered around to find out what’s going on. “It—” She clears her throat. “It was really nice meeting you all.”

I hear a giggle come from someone and fight back a smile of my own, because only Mia would want to make sure my family doesn’t think she’s rude, even after getting the phone call she just got. “Come on, honey,” my mom says, taking her hand.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I assure her when she locks on to me like she doesn’t want to let go.

“Okay,” she nods and lets go of my hand.

I don’t wait to watch my mom and the girls walk her across the yard to the side gate that leads to the driveway where my Jeep is parked. Instead, I head toward the house.

“Do you think the break-in at her place and our property are connected?” I ask, looking around at the men who followed me inside as I stop in the dining room, where the dogs are asleep under the table.

“I don’t think you’ll know the answer to that until we find out who’s responsible for the break-in on your property and if they have a suspect for

what happened at her place,” Jax says after talking with Cobi and doing some investigating of his own.

“I’m gonna just say two break-ins only weeks apart is too much of a coincidence for me,” Bax chimes in, running his fingers through his hair before pointing at me. “I told you.”

“Here we fucking go,” Sage mutters, crossing his arms over his chest. “Keep your conspiracy theories to yourself, man. They aren’t helping anyone right now.”

“Jesus, it’s like you all forget the minute the drama is over what went down with the women you’ve fallen in love with.” Bax shakes his head. “All I’m saying is it’s connected, so either someone has it out for Mia or you.” He points at me. “So you both need to do some soul searching and figure out who the fuck you pissed off.”

Not having time to get into it with him right now, I bend down and call both dogs until they lift their heads, and then I stand and pat my thigh. It takes a minute for them to wiggle out from under the table, and when they do, I look at my dad, who rests his hand on my bicep. “Call. Let us know what’s going on or if you need us.”

“I will.” I give him a hug then lift my chin to everyone else before I leave the room.

When I get into the Jeep, my mom, who is standing in the open passenger door, gives me a concerned look. “I love you.”

“Love you too, Mom. I’ll call you.”

She nods then reaches out to touch Mia’s cheek. “Call me if you need anything, honey.”

“Thank you,” Mia says quietly, then adds once again, “it was nice meeting you all.” And my mom, sisters, cousins, and aunts all tell her goodnight.

Mom slams the door, and I back out of the driveway then rest my hand on Mia’s thigh.

“I’m sorry we had to leave,” she cuts through the silence when we’re halfway to her sister’s place, and I give her leg a squeeze. “Cece just sounded so freaked out I…”

“Her house was broken into. I think anyone would sound freaked out about that kinda thing. I’m just glad the girls are with Mike tonight.”

“Me too,” she agrees as she rests her hand over mine before turning to look out the window.

Ten minutes later, when we get to the house, two police cruisers are parked out front, and all the lights in the house are on with an officer standing in the open front door. “Wait until I come around to let you out,” I tell her as I park on the street, and her hand tightens around mine almost painfully.

“It will be okay,” I assure her, rolling down both front windows a few inches before shutting down the engine, getting out, and jogging around the front of the Jeep to open her door. I let her out, leaving the dogs in the car, and then take her hand, leading her to the front door, where the officer is still standing on the porch. “She’s the owner’s sister,” I tell him, and he lifts his chin, stepping out of the way for us to enter. The minute we walk inside, it feels like *déjà vu*. Someone has taken what had to be a sledgehammer to the walls, mirror, pictures, and furniture in the entryway, demolishing everything in sight.

“Cece!” Mia yells for her sister, who comes barreling around the corner before running into her arms. I step behind Mia as they collide to hold them up then look toward the end of the hall, where I know the kitchen is, finding a man and woman holding on to each other. “Are you okay?” Mia asks.

“Yes. No,” Cece whimpers through her tears. “I don’t know why someone would do this.”

“Come on, you two.” The woman I’m guessing is their mom wraps her arms around both girls, leading them toward the living room off the kitchen. As I watch them walk away, my hands ball into fists, because I know Bax was right. What happened at our build and what happened here are connected. There is no way they can’t be, which means someone is trying to get back at me. There is no other explanation, considering Mia just moved to town a few months ago.

“You must be Talon.”

I focus on the man suddenly standing in front of me and attempt to pull myself together, when all I really want to do is shove my hand through the fucking wall.

“Chaz, right?” I ask, anger making my voice gruff. He holds out his hand, and I clasp his tightly. “Hate meeting you like this.”

“Me too, but I’m glad my girl was with you and not here when whoever did this came through.” He lets go of my hand to wave his around.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I tell him then look over my shoulder when I hear someone enter the house and lock eyes with my cousin Cobi.

“Your mom mentioned this afternoon that you were working tonight.” I give him a one-armed hug as we clasp hands, and then I step back and motion between him and Chaz. “This is my girl’s dad. Chaz, this is my cousin, Cobi Mayson.”

“We already met,” Chaz says, then asks, “Did any of the neighbors hear or see anything?”

“The ones who answered their doors didn’t, but someone will be back around tomorrow evening around dinner to talk to her neighbors and canvas the area for any kind of cameras that might have caught anything.”

“Someone had to have heard something,” Chaz tells him, turning to walk toward the kitchen with us following him. When I see the cabinets smashed, dishes broken, and appliances destroyed, the anger I felt when I walked into our build is amplified tenfold. “They weren’t quiet, and they weren’t looking for things to steal. This is pure anger.”

“I agree, and I wish I could give you peace of mind by telling you we know who did this, but we don’t,” Cobi says quietly while looking between Chaz and me. “All I can say right now is I wouldn’t suggest anyone staying here tonight or until there’s a security system put in place.”

“They’ll stay with me,” I tell him, not even bothering to look at Chaz for his approval.

“That’d be smart,” Cobi replies, sounding relieved. “My guys and I will do a sweep every few hours just to make sure it’s quiet tonight.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate that.”

“Anytime,” he mutters, resting his hand on the counter that I notice is chipped along the edge, like someone didn’t have the strength to smash it like they wanted to. “I promise we will do everything within our power to find out who did this.”

“Thank you,” Chaz tells him quietly.

“No problem. Get some rest, and we’ll be in touch.” He lifts his chin before heading out of sight.

I look to the living room, where I can see Mia, Cece, and their mom huddled together over the back of the couch. “I know all this is fresh, but I think it’d be smart to get everyone out of the house,” I say, turning toward Chaz.

“Right.” He sighs. “I’ll find a hotel to book us.”

“That’s not happening.” I clench my teeth as he pulls his phone out. “Mia isn’t going to want to be away from her sister tonight, but I don’t want her

out of sight. I'll understand if you and your wife don't feel comfortable staying at my house, but neither of the girls will be staying with you, so you'll only need one room."

Studying me for a minute, he sighs again. "Do you have space for all of us? Because like you, I'm not about to be away from my girls, especially tonight."

"I have the space," I tell him. "You'll just have to help me make some beds."

"I can do that," he murmurs then lifts his chin to the living room. "I would say we should pack for them, but I doubt that would go over well."

"I'm gonna guess you're right about that," I agree.

"All right." He pats my shoulder. "I'll break up their huddle and get them moving."

"While you do that, I'm gonna do a walk-through to make sure everything is locked up." When he nods, we go our separate ways. I go through the house, checking all the windows and the doors, and as I see the extent of the damage, I try to figure out who I could have angered enough to do this to a home where a family obviously lives and how this is connected to what went down with me.

## CHAPTER 15

MIA

KEEPING MY EYES closed, I don't attempt to move away from Talon, who has me locked against him, with my leg trapped between his and my wrist held firmly in his grasp. I listen to his steady heartbeat while his chest rises and falls, knowing I would be happy for the rest of my life if I woke up every day in this exact position.

My throat gets tight when last night's events invade my warm, safe bubble, but I remind myself that my parents are asleep in the guestroom upstairs, my sister is asleep down the hall, and my nieces are with their dad, having no idea what happened yesterday. I don't even want to imagine what they would have thought if they had come home to find their home destroyed. And I'm not looking forward to the next few days while we try to figure out how to navigate the conversations that will have to happen.

There is no way Cece or the girls will be able to stay at the house, and it's going to take weeks if not months to get the house to a point where they can live there again.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes, tipping my head back to look at Talon in sleep, then carefully dislodge my wrist and move my leg, hoping I don't wake him. I'm sure he has to be exhausted after yesterday, not from just helping his family but from dealing with mine. I don't even know what time he came to bed last night; I just know it was some time after I fell asleep at around one. When I finally make it out of bed, I quietly grab a pair of shorts from my bag and pad to the bathroom, going through my morning routine before leaving him to sleep.

When I get to the kitchen, I find a pot of coffee has already been started and spot my mom out on the deck with my dogs through the glass doors, sitting in a chair with a mug in her hand. After preparing myself a cup, I head out to join her, and she turns to smile at me when the door opens.

"Hey." I walk to her, bending down to kiss her cheek. "I thought I'd be the first one up this morning."

“You know me. I can’t sleep in, even when I know I should.”

“Yeah.” I drag a chair across the deck and take a seat next to her, lifting my feet to the rail.

“It’s pretty out here, and if the trees were pine, I’d think I was in Montana,” she says quietly before taking a sip of coffee.

“I thought the same thing the first time I was here,” I tell her then point past the railing. “You can’t see it from here, but there’s a path behind the house that leads to a pond the size of a lake with one of those paddle boats on it. I’ll have to take you and Chaz down there; he’d get a kick out of it.”

“So I’m guessing you don’t plan on coming back to Montana, even after Cece and the girls are settled?” She turns her head my direction, and the sadness I see in her eyes makes me hate what I’m about to admit.

“I love it here. It took a little for me to settle in, but I’ve fallen in love with Tennessee.”

“You’ve fallen in love with Tennessee, or you’ve fallen in love with the man who owns this house?”

Licking my lips, I turn my gaze back to the trees in front of us then tell her the truth. “It’s him.” I shrug one shoulder. “I keep trying to remind myself it’s too soon to fall in love with him, but it doesn’t change how I feel about him.”

“When I met Chaz—” She touches my cheek, smiling. “—my first thought was ‘I’m going to marry him.’ It freaked me out to the point of denying him at every turn, but thankfully he never gave up on me.” She pulls her eyes off mine, but I still catch her somber expression before she can hide it. “I know I messed you girls up, and I hate that I negatively influenced your outlook on relationships and love. I wish I could go back in time and do things differently.”

“Mom, it’s—”

“Don’t tell me it’s okay, Mia,” she cuts me off before I can tell her that I understand why she did what she did, now that I’m an adult. “I was weak. I knew what I should have done every single time your dad cheated, but I never did it. Then worse, I dragged you and your sister into our issues, because I needed someone, anyone, to tell me that what I was feeling and how I was reacting was okay. And because you girls didn’t know any better, you fed me what I wanted to hear.” She wipes under her eyes quickly. “I hate that I put you and Cece in that position. You never should have had to deal with that when you were kids.”

“You’re right, but, Mom, it also made us stronger.”

“It didn’t.” She locks her eyes on mine. “Cece went looking for a man to fill the role her father couldn’t, ending up with a man just like him. And you’ve avoided love at all cost, so afraid of getting hurt that you always end things at the first sign of it becoming serious.” She grabs my hand, linking our fingers together. “You deserve love; your sister deserves love. I never want either of you to settle for contentment, not when there is so much more out there for you both if you just open yourselves up to it.” She gives my hand a squeeze. “Promise me that you’ll open yourself up to it.”

“I promise,” I say, and she kisses the back of my hand before letting it go then leans her head back against the chair, closing her eyes. Thinking our conversation is over and needing a few minutes to myself, I start to get up to go back into the house, but her next words make me pause. “If you’re curious, I like him a lot, and so does Chaz. He’s good for you, and it doesn’t hurt that he’s not hard to look at.”

“Good to know.” I push out of my seat and start for the backdoor with Mercury and Retro at my heels, probably knowing it’s time for breakfast. Before I have a chance to reach for the handle on the door, it’s opened, and a sleepy-looking Chaz steps out on the deck wearing a T-shirt and sleep pants. “Morning.” I smile at his expression, positive he’s not happy about being up right now.

“Morning.” He leans in to kiss my forehead, and then I turn to watch him walk to Mom and lean over to kiss her before he falls into the chair next to hers, stealing the cup of coffee from her hands.

I close the door behind me and set my mostly full mug on the counter before I go to the pantry for my girls’ food. I put half a can of wet food into each of their bowls before making my way down the hall to the bedroom, where Talon is still sleeping. The moment my knee hits the bed, his eyes open, landing on mine, and he lifts his arm in a silent demand for me to come to him. I don’t hesitate to fall into his embrace or kiss him when he dips his chin down to look at me.

“You taste like coffee. How long have you been up?” he asks gruffly, sleep still evident in his voice as he tosses the blankets back over us.

“Not long, but my mom was up and outside, so I spent a few minutes with her.” I close my eyes as I snuggle against him.

“Is she okay? I know you mentioned before she’s allergic to cats. I didn’t even think about that shit last night.”

Only he would remember a small detail like that. “She didn’t say anything, so I’m guessing she’s okay.” I rest my hand over his waist and my leg over his hip.

“Did you sleep all right?” He rolls us, placing us face-to-face, then drags his finger along my cheek to my ear.

“I did,” I admit, leaning up to kiss his chin before resting my palm on his cheek. “Thank you for last night, and for letting my family stay here.”

“They’re welcome here as long as they want to stay.” He rests his forehead against mine.

“I want to call you a liar, but I have a feeling you’d be okay with my entire family staying in your house for the foreseeable future.”

“Maybe not that long.” He grins, moving his hand to my ass and squeezing.

“You know what I mean.” I roll my eyes as I laugh.

“I do.” He captures my attention by resting his hand around the side of my neck, his thumb smoothing along the edge of my jaw. “I talked to my family last night. They’re all going to meet me at your sister’s this afternoon for clean-up, and this next week, we’ll move the crew from the build to her place to get things back to normal for her and the girls.”

“Wh... What?” I choke out, moving my hand to his bicep and digging my nails into his skin. “You can’t do that,” I tell him, knowing that he and Bax are behind on their deadline because of what happened at their project, and it’s something he’s been worried about.

“Don’t worry about me.”

“So I should just ignore how upset and anxious you’ve been since the house you’re building was broken into and destroyed and let you move your only chance of completing it on time to my sister’s house?”

“It’s already done.” He holds me tighter when I attempt to roll away. “I love that you’re worried about me, baby, but at the end of the day, my build doesn’t mean shit in the long run. We know that, even without a huge showing and a magazine spread, someone will buy our house. What matters right now is Ruby, Lola, and Kate feeling secure, especially with how much their lives have already changed. They don’t need to deal with any more than they already have.”

Fighting back tears, I shake my head. “How can I be mad at you but still want to go down on you to show my gratitude?”

“I’m not sure I’m down with having your mouth around my junk when you’re mad, baby.” He grins as his fingers drift along my cheek.

Laughing, I close my eyes and tuck my forehead under his chin while wrapping my arm around his waist. “Then I guess I’ll just settle on saying thank you for right now. I will add that I don’t know how I got so lucky.” I kiss the center of his chest with the words *I love you* on the tip of my tongue. I swallow them back down, wishing I wasn’t so afraid of what his response might be, because it’s one thing to admit to myself and my mom how I feel about him, but it’s another for him to know, and to find out he doesn’t feel the same.

“I—” He starts to say something, but a knock on the bedroom door cuts him off.

“Hold on,” I call out then roll out of bed and go to the door. When I open it, Cece is standing on the other side. “Hey, is everything okay?”

“Do you care if I make something to eat?”

“I’ll cook breakfast,” Talon says, and I turn to watch him get out of bed wearing his boxers and nothing else, and then his eyes lock with mine. “While I get dressed, you wanna fill her in on what’s gonna happen today?”

“Yeah, honey,” I say, and his eyes soften right before he turns and walks toward the bathroom, and because he’s a sight to see, I don’t pull my eyes off his back and ass until the door closes.

“I hate you,” Cece mutters.

“What?” I turn to look at her, frowning.

“I hate you. Not only is he the nicest guy ever, but you get to sleep with him, and he looks like *that* in the morning.”

I smile and shrug. “If it makes you feel any better, I’d hate me too if I were you.”

“It doesn’t, thank you,” she grumbles then turns away. “I need coffee, so you can talk to me while I make it.”

I look at the bathroom door where Talon just disappeared and sigh as I step out of the room and close the door to follow my sister to the kitchen. While she pours herself a cup of coffee, I grab my mug off the counter and take it to the microwave to warm it up, since it’s gone cold.

“So today,” I tell Cece as I press the buttons on the microwave, “Talon is meeting his family at your house to start cleaning up, and next week, the crew that has been working on the house that he and his brother are building are going to move to your place to get everything repaired.” I turn

to face her, finding her standing in the middle of the kitchen, holding her mug in her hands, and staring at me unblinking. “Did you hear me?” I ask when she doesn’t move.

“I heard you.” She walks two steps to the side and leans against the counter. “I just... I just don’t know what to say.” Tears fill her eyes. “He can’t do that, Mia.”

“Well, good luck telling him that,” I say, and she laughs as the backdoor opens and quickly wipes at her cheeks.

“Why are you crying?” Mom frowns, looking at her, then turns her head my way, narrowing her eyes like it’s my fault.

“Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t make her cry. Talon did.”

“What did I do?” Talon asks, coming into the kitchen and stopping at my side.

“You made Cece cry.” I tip my head back to look at him, and his brows draw together before he looks at Cece.

“You can’t have your family clean up my house or your crew fix it,” she states firmly. “Mia mentioned you’ve been trying to finish your build, so I know you need to focus on that. And besides, I can’t afford to do anything right now, not until I get the insurance money—”

“This isn’t up for discussion,” he tells her, gently but firmly cutting her off before she can say more. “Money isn’t an issue. My family wants to help, and like I told Mia, the house I’m building will be built and will sell, but right now, something more important has come up, so we’re going to transfer our energy to it.”

“Why...?” She shakes her head. “Why would you do that? We don’t even really know each other.”

“Because I love your sister,” he tells her easily while grabbing my hand like he’s afraid I might run off. “Family takes care of family.”

Tears fill her eyes once more and spill down her cheeks faster than she can wipe them away. “Now you really did make me cry.” She sniffles as she walks toward him, and I release his hand and stand back as they embrace, still too stunned to move or say anything after he just dropped that bomb. “Thank you. I’ll pay you back when I get the insurance money.”

“No, you’ll put that money up until you need it,” he tells her softly, which makes her cry harder.

His gaze meets mine, and tears burn the back of my throat. I thought I loved him before this moment, but now I know that was only the half of it,

or maybe that's love, finding something new every day that reminds you why you chose the person you gave your heart to.

The moment is shattered when the doorbell rings, then rings again, and again. I look at Talon, wondering if he's expecting anyone, and he shakes his head muttering, "I'll be back," before stopping to kiss my forehead.

When he leaves the kitchen, Cece goes to my mom and Chaz, who both wrap their arms around her as she continues to sob.

Not sure what to do with myself, I grab my cup of coffee from the microwave and start to take a sip, but I stop when I hear someone shout, "Let me in to see her!" and Talon growl back, "Fuck no, you need to leave."

"What now?" Chaz asks, looking at me

"I don't know." I set down my cup and leave them in the kitchen then gasp when the front door comes into view and I see Talon shove Winston's chest, pushing him back off the porch.

"Oh no." Cece rushes around us to stand between Winston and Talon with her arms out to keep them apart.

"Who's that?" Mom asks me.

"Umm... Cece's boss?"

"Jesus, what the hell have you girls been up to?" Chaz asks, storming toward the front door, but I rush ahead of him when Talon steps outside.

"Why are you here, Winston?" Cece asks, sounding distraught.

"I heard your house was broken into." He rips a hand through his hair before continuing, "I went to check on you, but you weren't there, so I made a few calls and found out you came here last night."

"Where's your wife?" Talon asks him, his voice vibrating with anger as I wrap my arm around his waist, and he rests his over my shoulders.

"I don't know." Winston glares at him. "Probably her house."

"Winston," Cece calls quietly, and his jaw tics as he focuses on her. "As you can see, I'm okay. Just go home."

"Why didn't you call me?" The hurt in his tone makes my chest ache.

"You know why," she whispers, her shoulders sagging. "I told you I can't do this."

"So what? I'm just supposed to let you go?" he questions, sounding devastated.

"You made your choice, and even though I wish things were different, I can't live a lie alongside you."

"I love you, Cece."

“I know.” Her head drops forward, and he starts to move toward her, but she steps back out of reach. “Please just go.”

“This isn’t over,” he whispers before turning and walking away.

“Come on,” I tell Cece as he goes to his SUV, and I wrap my arm around her waist then turn her back toward the house. Once we’re inside, I lead her to the couch in the sunroom and take a seat next to her, grabbing her hand while Chaz and Talon head out the back door.

“What the hell was that?” Mom asks, sitting down on the other side of her.

“Mom.” I shake my head, telling her without words to be quiet.

“What? I want to know who that man was and what that was all about.”

“He’s no one.” Cece leans forward, resting her face in her hands. “Can we just have breakfast and forget what just happened?”

“No, we can’t,” Mom snaps. “For months, you kept your separation from Mike to yourself, thinking you could handle it all on your own, and look what happened. Now is not the time to hide things.”

“Mom, please stop. You’re not helping things right now. Why don’t you take a moment to go get dressed?”

“Fine.” She stands up and starts to storm out of the room, but pauses to add, “But this conversation is not over, not by a long shot.”

Shaking my head at her dramatics, I rub Cece’s back, then ask quietly, “Are you okay?”

“I’m in love with a married man.” She pulls her hands from her face. “I’m not okay. I’m an idiot. I don’t even know how it happened, but it did, and... and *God*, I’m so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, and he obviously feels the same about you,” I tell her, hoping to make her feel better, but I know it sounds ridiculous, considering that he is married. And he’s obviously not about to change that, which I really do not get, seeing as he admitted he’s in love with Cece. “He said he’s been separated from his wife for years. Why won’t he just divorce her if they aren’t together?”

“They have a prenup. If he cheats or is the one to ask for the divorce, she gets everything, his money, his business, everything. I guess after ten years, it becomes null and void, but I’m not going to live a life where we’re together only behind closed doors for the next three years, and the rest of the time I have to pretend like he doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Wow, that’s... that’s...”

“Fucked up. I already know, and there is no way I’m going to subject my girls to that kind of drama, not when I would be either lying to them or asking them to lie so the truth didn’t get out.”

“I can’t believe he’d ask you to do that.”

“He didn’t ask me, but I’m not an idiot. I know that’s exactly what would happen, and his wife is crazy, like *really* crazy. She shows up wherever he is and is always making a point to start drama at the restaurant. I don’t even want to imagine what she would do if she found out about us.” She shakes her head. “I’m just done. It’s time for me to stop thinking with my heart and to start using my head.”

“I’m sorry. I wish you weren’t dealing with this on top of everything else,” I tell her, not having a clue how to make her feel better right now.

“I’ll be okay. As long as my girls are happy, nothing else really matters.”

“Still, you know I’m always here if you need to talk, and I’ll always have your back.”

“I know.” She leans forward to hug me. “I don’t know what I or the girls would do without you.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She lets me go then stands. “I’m going to go wash my face and get dressed.”

“Sure.” I watch her walk off then go to the kitchen to start breakfast, since Talon and Chaz are still outside, with Mom probably hiding in the room, waiting for someone to check on her.

With pancakes on the stove and bacon cooking in the oven, I look to the backdoor when it’s opened and meet Talon’s gaze. “I was just coming in to start breakfast.” He walks toward me, and I shrug.

“I needed something to do, and I didn’t know how long you’d be out with Chaz, since he doesn’t have his shop to hide in. I figured he might keep you occupied awhile.

“His shop?” He fits himself against my back, wrapping his arms around my middle.

“He makes birdhouses when he’s working through whatever he’s feeling. At his and Mom’s house, there are thousands of birdhouses all over the yard.” I smile when he chuckles, then ask, “Is he okay though?”

“Yeah, just worried about your sister. He knows she’s dealing with a lot, and now with the break-in and Winston showing up, he doesn’t know what to think.” He sighs. “How’s your sister?”

“She’s upset, but she’ll be okay.” I turn in his arms so that we’re standing front-to-front. “Thank you for looking after her. I know I said that already, but I want you to understand how much that means to not only her but to me.” I lean up on my tiptoes and press my mouth to his then fall back to flat-footed. “Do you mind taking over here so I can get dressed?”

“Yeah, baby, go on.”

“Thanks,” I say when he takes the spatula out of my hand and starts to place the pancakes I flipped a minute ago on a plate. As I head for his room, I stop at the edge of the hall, knowing it’s now or never. “And Talon?”

“Yeah, baby?” He looks at me over his shoulder.

“I love you too,” I admit, watching his eyes warm and his features soften.

“You better get your ass back here and kiss me,” he growls, and I laugh as I run to him and jump into his embrace. With his hands under my ass and my arms around his neck, I kiss him until we’re both breathless.

## CHAPTER 16

MIA

“CECE, ARE YOU ready to go?” I shout as I tie my shoes, something that isn’t easy to do with four curious kittens attacking the strings.

“Yep.” She comes around the corner with her overnight bag over her shoulder. “Do you think we should call mom and Chaz to make sure they found the rental okay?” she asks as I grab Talon’s Jeep keys off the table near the door.

“I think they’re completely capable of calling us if they need help.” We walk outside, making sure the kittens don’t escape before locking the door. During breakfast, Bax showed up and Talon decided to ride with him to Cece’s so they could get started on clean up. And since my parents told us they wanted to find a place to rent for the week, Talon insisted I stay behind to help them and to drive his jeep over when I was ready.

“How long do you think Mom is going to be upset for?” Cece asks as I pull out onto the main road.

“Until you’re honest,” I say quietly, then add, “You have to admit you’ve kept a lot to yourself and that hurts especially when all we want to do is help.”

I glance over at her when she doesn’t respond and notice her gazing out the window. Not wanting to upset her, I drive the rest of the way to her place in silence, then park on the street because the driveway is filled with three trucks and a large dumpster. After I shut down the engine, I step out and know she climbs out with me because I hear her door slam. As soon as I make it inside, I go in search of Talon and find him in the kitchen, working on removing the counters.

“Hey baby.” He stops what he’s doing to greet me with a kiss. “Did your parents find a place?”

“They did. They’re going over there now then to the store.” I look around. “You guys have gotten a lot done.” The front of the cabinets are

gone, the broken dishes and stuff is cleaned up, and the appliances, which had been dented, are no longer around.

“There’s still a lot to do, but we’ll get it done.” He gives my hip a squeeze as Cece comes around the corner followed by Sophie, November, April, Nalia, and Willow.

“Just who we we’re looking for.” Sophie grabs my hand, tugging me away from her son.

“Mom.” He shakes his head, sighing and I wonder what’s going on as she drags me out of the kitchen toward the back door, which November opens up.

“Don’t worry honey, we’ll take good care of her.”

“Right, like I believe that.” I hear him mutter as I’m pulled outside.

“Shouldn’t we be inside helping clean up?” Cece asks as Talon’s sister Willow pushes her down into a seat on the deck under a large umbrella that’s been opened up.

“No,” his cousin April states, as she pulls a bottle of expensive tequila from her purse.

“We’d just be in the way,” Sophie mutters, taking a seat next to me and patting my thigh.

“Exactly,” November agrees, “and how many times do you want to be told ‘don’t lift that,’ ‘be careful,’ ‘wait for me and my big, strong muscles to help you’?”

“Which is why—” His sister Nalia laughs, pulling out a stack of hot pink plastic shot glasses from her bag. “—rather than becoming annoyed with men who believe we are incapable of helping, we’re going to *drink* until we are incapable of helping.”

“I don’t know,” Cece says, looking at me seeming unsure, and I shrug because I have a feeling they aren’t wrong.

“Trust us.” November hands her a shot. “We’ve been dealing with these guys forever if you go back in there you’re just going to be standing around because they won’t let you do anything.”

“Okay!” She gives in.

“What are we drinking to?” Nalia asks, holding up her glass, and we all follow her lead, lifting ours.

“To badass women who have the ability to take care of everything but more importantly, take care of each other.” April shoots back her shot, and

everyone else does the same. Knowing this is going to burn, I squeeze my eyes closed and shoot back the shot, gasping for air after I swallow.

“So,” Sophie says, focusing on me as April starts to fill everyone’s glass again. “Where are your parents today?”

“They’ve found a temporary rental in town, so they’re going to the grocery store to pick up some stuff then take it over there and have a look around.” I leave out what happened this morning and that I’m also sure they need some time alone to talk about it and hopefully get over it.

“And your daughters?” November asks, looking at Cece before shooting back her latest shot.

“They’re with their dad. They’re staying the night with him tonight, and then we’ll stay with my parents until it’s okay for us to come back here.”

“It won’t be long. The guys are determined to get you and your babies back in your house as soon as possible. Really, I wouldn’t be surprised if they all decided to camp out here until it’s done,” November tells her then leans toward April. “Give me another one.”

I shoot back my shot, and then set the glass down on the edge of the firepit between us before she can give me another one. “I can’t drink anymore.” I cover the top with my hand when she tries to fill it once more.

“Aw, come on.” Willow nudges my foot. “One more drink won’t hurt.”

“Mia is a lightweight.” Cece grins at me. “She’d probably pass out until tomorrow night if she had another shot.”

“She’s not lying.” I shrug, and everyone laughs.

“Well, I’ll pay tribute for Mia.” Nalia holds out her glass, and I watch her take another shot, and everyone else follows her lead. With my body feeling relaxed, I place my feet up on the firepit as we talk.

“All the girls should get breakfast tomorrow,” November suggests, looking around the group. “If we go around eight, everyone should be able to make it even the babies.” She starts to pull out her phone, I’m guessing to send a text and ask them.

“I wish I could, but I’m picking my girls up in the morning from their dad’s and taking them to school,” Cece says, and I frown at her.

“Mike can’t take the girls to school tomorrow morning?” I ask, sitting up.

“He has work,” she tells me with a shrug.

“At like nine. He can drop them before he goes to his office, so you can go out to breakfast or sleep in for once.”

“I don’t mind taking them.”

“Of course you don’t. You never mind doing it all.” I roll my eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She narrows her gaze on mine.

“You let him off the hook for everything, Cece. He sees the girls one day a week. One.” I hold up a finger—or I’m pretty sure it’s one finger, because it kinda looks like two. “I get that he works, but you work too, and you’re going to school. It’s not fair that it all falls on you.”

“You’re right,” she agrees with me as she holds out her glass to April. “I just don’t want to rock the boat right now.”

“So when are you going to rock the boat?” I ask, not sure I’d have the courage if I weren’t half drunk—or mostly drunk.

“I don’t know,” she snaps, and my spine stiffens in response to her sharp tone. “Is that what you want me to say?”

“No,” I snap back. “I want my sister to grow a damn backbone and demand the man she had kids with to step up and take care of his responsibilities more than one day a fricking week.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” she hisses.

“No, Cece, you’re doing it fucking *all* and letting Mike do whatever the hell he wants, when he’s the one who should be tying himself in knots to make sure you and his girls are happy, regardless if you’re together or not.” I stand ready to storm off then remember Talon’s mom and family are watching. “Sorry.” I look around at them. “I’m going in to see if the guys need help.”

I don’t wait for them to respond. I head inside and find Talon upstairs with Bax in the master bathroom, cleaning up broken glass from the shower and the long mirror above the double sinks. The moment his eyes meet mine, I start to cry, and it takes me a few minutes to pull myself together enough to explain what happened.

Everything after that is a blur, but I do know he takes me back to his house and helps me into bed, insisting I will feel better after I sleep, and that Cece and I will talk and things will be okay. But as my eyes drift closed, I don’t know if he’s right. I’ve always tried to lay things out for Cece in a way that won’t hurt her feelings, but I didn’t do that this time. And even though I don’t regret it, I’m not sure speaking the truth was the right thing to do especially with everything that has happened.

I wake up feeling hot with Talon’s heavy weight holding me hostage, his arm curved around my waist, his thigh thrown over mine, and his chin in my neck as he breathes deep in sleep. Needing to get up and drink some

water before the slight headache I'm feeling because of dehydration becomes unbearable. I start to move but stop when I hear several mewls of disapproval coming from what must be Soma and her kittens, who have joined us in bed. With no choice but to disturb them, I carefully slip out of bed, and once I'm standing, I realize I'm wearing a T-shirt that must have been put on me when I was passed out. Vowing to seriously never drink again or at least stop when I know I should, I leave the bedroom and pad down the hall to the kitchen where I grab a glass and fill it from the tap.

"Can't sleep?" I don't scream at that question. Instead, I squeak and fumble with the full glass of water in my hand, barely catching it before it crashes to the floor, but I soak my tee in the process. "Sorry." Cece comes toward me, taking the glass from my hand and refilling it from the tap as I grab a rag to clean up my mess. "I didn't mean to scare you. I thought you saw me sitting here."

"I didn't." I take my glass back when she hands it to me and down it in just a few gulps. Once I empty it, I fill the glass again, asking, "Why are you here?"

"We need to talk," she says, the dim light coming from outside hiding her expression, so I don't know what to expect from her as I keep my mouth closed and wait. "You're right. I've let Mike off the hook for everything, and it's not fair to me to let him continue on like he has. But more importantly, it's not fair to our girls." I listen to her take a deep breath. "I know he should be more involved. I know I should demand more from him, but I'm afraid."

"Of what?" I ask when she doesn't say more.

"Of him stepping out of the picture completely, of him abandoning the girls like Dad abandoned us. I mean..." I see in the shadows as her head shakes back and forth. "I don't ever want them to experience that. I don't want them to ever feel like they are that easily forgotten."

"Do you miss Dad?" I ask, knowing the answer but still wanting her to admit it out loud.

"What?"

"Dad, our biological dad, do you miss him?"

"I never really think about him, to be honest," she says, and I close my eyes.

"Don't you see, Cece, that you can't miss something you never had? Either Mike wants to be a part of his girls' lives, or he doesn't. Either he

wants to make them a priority, or he doesn't. Sharing DNA with a child doesn't make you a parent. The bond built over time expressed through devotion and love does. I know you want what's best for Ruby, Kate, and Lola, but wanting him to step up and be the father he should be isn't going to make it happen." I step toward her shadow when I see her shoulders slump forward in defeat. "I know you want what's best for your babies, but letting Mike continue on like he has been isn't giving them what they need. The girls need time with their dad, and you need to demand that he gives them that."

"I'm going to talk to my lawyer about how he thinks I should bring things up to Mike."

"Do you know how ridiculous that sounds? Mike got an apartment without talking to you, introduced his girlfriend to the girls without talking to you, and now you're going to talk to your lawyer about how you should talk to the father of your kids about something that affects you all?" I'm unable to hide my disgust. "Honest to God, you and Mike need to learn how to communicate with each other, because the girls are getting older, and there's going to be things that come up with them that will require the two of you to be on the same page without using someone as a go-between."

"You think I don't know that?" she asks, sounding angry.

"I'm not saying you don't know it, Cece. I'm asking what you're going to do to change the way things are right now, because Mike isn't going to be the one to address the issues, since he doesn't have any issues to address. For him, everything is perfect. He's living life like he always did, while everything for you has changed completely."

"I wish things were as easy as you're making them seem they are."

"And I wish you'd understand that you're making this harder than it needs to be. The conversation you need to have with him doesn't have to be ugly or confrontational. It just has to be honest. Mike might not know what he's doing is hurting the girls and making things more difficult for you, because you've never said anything to him. He might not think it's a big deal that he only sees the girls one day a week, because he talks to them every night and is available if they call. You won't know how he will react until you talk to him, and after that, if he doesn't say he's willing to work on things, then you talk to your lawyer. But I have a feeling you might be surprised by his reaction. Both of you love the girls, and both of you want

what's best for them. The two of you just need to learn how to talk to each other about stuff before it boils over."

"I'll talk to him," she agrees quietly. "I'll see if he can meet me tomorrow evening when he gets off work."

"I think that would be good," I say, relief evident in my voice.

"Are we okay?"

"Almost." I let out a breath. "I'm sorry for bringing things up in front of Talon's family. It was rude, and I should have had better control," I say, not sure when I will be ready to face Talon's mom or the rest of his family after my outburst and behavior.

"It's fine, and they all agreed with you and wanted to go after you to make sure you were okay, but we knew you would be with Talon and he'd take care of you."

"They had my back?"

"Oh yeah... well, I mean, Sophie and November gathered around me to make sure I was okay, even though I could tell they didn't agree with me at all, but April, Nalia, and Willow were just as outraged as you were and nicely let me have it." I listen to her take a deep breath. "I know it's not my place, but I have to tell you that you better not mess up what you and Talon have, because I promise you will regret it. It's not just that he's such a good guy, and there aren't very many out there anymore; it's also that he has the family he does."

"I'm not going to mess up what he and I have, and I know exactly how lucky I am that he decided to pursue me." I smile. "I'm just glad he was as determined as he was."

"I'm happy for you." She reaches for my hand then pulls me into a hug. "I love you."

"I love you too, and you should know that no matter what happens, I will always be here for you and the girls."

"I know." She gives me a squeeze then lets me go. "Now that we've talked, I'm going to bed, since I need to get up early."

"What time do you have to get up?"

"I'm setting my alarm for 6:30. That way I can shower before I need to leave the house."

"Just think, if Mike were dropping them off, you wouldn't have to get up so early, and we could go out to breakfast, which we haven't done in forever."

“I know, I know, and like I said, I’ll talk to him tomorrow.” I can’t see her roll her eyes, but I can hear her sigh.

“Night.” I laugh.

“Yeah, night.”

I listen to her pad off down the hall then fill up my glass once more and head for the bedroom. Not wanting to make any noise, I open the door slowly so it doesn’t squeak like it sometimes does, finding my endeavor pointless, because Talon is up in bed with light coming in from the bathroom. “Honey, you really need to get some bedside tables and lamps. And not to overwhelm you, but maybe you could even add a few pictures to make it feel more like a bedroom and less like a prison cell.”

“A prison cell?” He chuckles, and I grin at him, noticing the kittens and Soma are gone, so he probably woke when they wanted out, which means he probably heard me talking to Cece. I set my glass on the only surface in the room, which is the dresser, before going to the bed when he wiggles his fingers at me. “We can go shopping for shit when you move in here with me.”

“When I move in with you?” I pause with one knee on the bed.

“Yeah, when you move in.” He reaches for me then hauls me across the mattress to him before rolling me to my back. Once he’s pinned me with his leg between mine, his warm palm moves up my bare thigh.

“Talon,” I whisper.

“I know it’s not going to be tomorrow, baby, but when it happens, you’re free to change whatever you want to make this our home.” My throat burns as I look into his eyes. I’ve never been a crier, but I swear since I met this man, I’ve shed more tears than I have in my whole life. The only difference is they are always tears of happiness. To hide the sudden rush of emotions I’m feeling, I lift my neck and nip his bottom lip. “My shirt’s wet. Help me get it off.” I feel him smile against my lips then moan when he moves his hand between my legs, cupping my sex through the thin material of my panties.

“Funny, this is the only place that feels wet to me.”

“That’s strange,” I whimper as he slides my panties to the side and his middle finger rolls over my clit, causing my back to arch off the bed.

“Talon.” I bite my lip and latch onto his bicep, digging my nails into his skin as he sinks two fingers inside me.

“What, baby?”

I don't answer him. Honestly, I couldn't answer him even if I wanted to, not with his thumb moving in tight, quick circles over my clit while he taps against my G-spot with two fingers, drawing me closer and closer to an orgasm that is building at a blinding speed. My breath catches, and I come, seeing stars as I clamp my thighs around his arm, holding it hostage before going limp.

"You okay?" he asks, nipping my bottom lip.

"No." I slip my hand down the front of his boxers and wrap my hand around him, sliding up then down once and listening to him groan. He moves my hand away, and I lick my lips as he takes off his boxers. I wiggle out of my panties before sitting up on my knees and taking off my shirt.

He kneels before me, and I rest my palms against his warm skin, wondering how it's possible something so hard can still be so soft. I moan as his hands wrap around my thighs then whimper as I fall back to the bed and his thighs settle between mine. I wrap my legs around his hips as he kisses me and move my hands up and down the smooth skin of his back as his cock nudges my entrance.

"Hold on," he groans as I lift my hips, trying to get him where I need him most.

"I can't." I use every ounce of strength I have and manage to roll him to his back, and I rest my palms against his chest, watching his pupils flare as I sink down onto his length, feeling the stretch and burn as he fills me. "God." I sit up and cup my breasts. "There is nothing better than being filled with you."

"Jesus Christ, Mia." He takes hold of my hips, and his eyes darken as they skim down my body. I watch his jaw twitch as I lift my hips and fall, then do it again and again and again, getting lost in the feel of him. "Fuck."

"Yeah." I bite my bottom lip, and my head falls back to my shoulders.

"Kiss me." His fingers sink into the hair at the back of my head as he sits up. I meet his gaze, my skin tingling when I see the hungry look in his eyes. I circle my legs around him and lean forward as his arm wraps around my waist, holding us together. My inner walls spasm as he rocks us, and his mouth takes mine in a kiss so deep that it has my toes curling. I cling to him, having never felt more connected to anyone in my life as the slow waves of my orgasm begin to wash over me. I hold him tighter and bury my face in his neck.

“Talon,” I whisper as he moves us to lay me back on the bed, and his hand slides between us. “I can’t.” I shake my head when his thumb finds my oversensitive clit.

“You can.” He pulls out of me slowly, only to sink back in, his deep thrust hitting just the right spot. I dig my nails into his back and the heels of my feet into his ass as he manipulates each of my breasts with his tongue and teeth. On the edge once more, I press my fingertips into his scalp, and he pulls back to look at me. I catch the warm look in his eyes right before he drops his head down to kiss me while his thrusts become faster and faster. Until he plants himself deep inside me, groaning his orgasm down my throat and sending me over the edge with him.

Breathing erratically, I relish in the feel of his heavy weight as he falls against me and hold him as tight as I can, not ready for our connection to end. “I love you,” I whisper, and he kisses the side of my neck before pulling back to search my face.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to hearing you say that.” He smooths my hair back away from my damp forehead. “I didn’t think you were there yet.”

“I wanted to tell you before you told me, but I was afraid you didn’t feel the same,” I admit.

“Chicken.”

“Yes.” I laugh, and he rubs his nose against mine.

“You never have to be afraid with me, baby.”

“I’ve been learning that.” I skim my fingers along his jaw then down his neck and rest them over his heart that is still beating hard. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“I know I didn’t make things easy for you, but I’m glad you were willing to show up, even when I was pushing you away. And even though it’s going to sound cheesy, I think part of me was so scared, because I knew I wanted this but was afraid you’d end up being just like every guy I’ve known before. I didn’t want to tarnish the image of who I thought you were, if that happened to be true.”

“I’m not perfect, baby, not by a long shot. But I love you and will always fight for us, because what I found in you is more than I ever thought possible. I thought I had an idea of what having your love might feel like, but it didn’t even come close to the real thing.”

“You’re going to make me cry,” I whisper as my nose starts to sting.

“No crying. Just tell me you love me, and then we need to clean up and get to bed, because my mom said to make sure you’re at breakfast tomorrow morning, which means you are only gonna have a few hours before you gotta get up.”

“Is your mom mad at me about yesterday?”

“Hell no, she gets it. And baby, once you’re a part of the family fold, that’s it. There is no going back. Everyone has accepted you, which means all of them are gonna be up in our business whether we like it or not. But the good thing is that means you have a whole lot of people who now have your back.”

“That’s a little scary.”

“That’s family—or that’s my family, anyway.” He grins.

“Right.” I let out a deep breath then lean up and kiss him quickly. “I should go shower.”

“Yeah, but first you need to tell me you love me.”

My face softens and I touch his cheek. “I love you, Talon Mayson, even if you are bossy and slightly crazy,” I whisper.

“All I care about is that you love me,” he whispers back, and I know in that moment that as long as I have him, I can handle anything life throws at me.

## CHAPTER 17

MIA

“SO HOW DID it go?” I ask Cece about her meeting with Mike as I take a seat on the couch in a windowed room next to the kitchen with the phone to my ear. The kittens immediately start fighting at my feet, making me smile.

“It went all right,” she says, sounding tired.

“Just all right?”

“Well, he was defensive when I brought up the amount of time he spends with the girls, and he threw it in my face that he has to work to pay all the bills.”

“Seriously?” I don’t even attempt to hide my annoyance.

“Are you really surprised by that?” She sighs. “I told him that I have to work too and that if it weren’t for you being here, I don’t know what I would do.”

“You would have made it work,” I tell her gently, and I know she would have. It might not have been easy, but she would have found a way to do it all. That, or she would have been forced to talk to Mike.

“I wouldn’t have, Mia, and you and I both know I was drowning, and he didn’t even notice.”

I hear tears in her voice, and my throat gets tight. “Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not going to cry. The girls and I are in a good spot, and with me getting a new job and the house going on the market soon, we will be even better off.”

“New job?” I frown. I knew a realtor came to check out the house yesterday and start the paperwork, and knew he told her that the break-in might have been a blessing, because fresh paint and updates always help with a quick sale. But I didn’t know about a new job.

“This afternoon, I applied at a café in town, and they offered me a job. The pay is a little less than I was making at Winston’s, but with tips, it should even out. And it’s days, so I’ll be home with the girls in the

evenings, and I can just move my online classes to nights and do my schoolwork while they're in bed."

"Cece, you don't have to—"

"Mia, I love you, and I'm so thankful for you. But honestly, I can't expect you to help me until I finish school. I know you're not moving with us into the apartment, so it wouldn't be fair of me to expect you to take care of my girls when they have two parents that are capable of looking after them." I listen to her take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You were right about Mike. He needs to start doing his part, and I'm going to start holding him accountable, because the girls and I both deserve that from him."

"Still, I want you to know I'm here no matter what, even if I'm not living with you." The reminder makes me realize I'm going to have to do some soul searching. I know I want to live with Talon; I just don't know if it's too soon. Then again, it would be stupid to get into a lease somewhere and buy furniture and stuff just to leave it to sit because I'm staying here all the time.

"I know that." Her statement brings me out of my thoughts. "But I want... no, I *need* to do this. I need to know I can take care of my girls. I want them to see their parents, even if they aren't together, putting their differences aside to make sure they're happy."

"I want that for you all too."

"I know you do, and even if the conversation started off on a bad note, Mike did end up agreeing that he would try to be around more. So now, all I can do is wait to see what happens with him."

"Does Winston know you're quitting?" I ask, hoping Mike does step up like he needs to.

"Yeah, and he understands, even if he doesn't like it. And honestly, I couldn't work there and see him every day. There's just too much that's happened between us."

"I get that, Cece, and I really think it's healthier for you that you don't work there anymore."

"I know," she says as I hear the front door open, which means Talon is home. And even though I just saw him a couple hours ago when I stopped by Cece's to take him and the guys dinner, I've missed him since I left his presence. "I'm just going to miss seeing him."

My eyes slide closed and my heart hurts for her, because I understand that feeling, even if my emotions aren't clouded with pain. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Me too," she whispers back. "What's your plan for tomorrow evening? Mom was asking about getting together for dinner with you and Talon."

"Umm." I open my eyes when I hear Talon enter the kitchen, and I smile as he stops to give Retro and Mercury some love. Of course, my easygoing girls have settled in at his place without any issues, and they even seem to enjoy the company of Soma and the kittens. "Talon just got home. Let me ask him."

He walks toward me, somehow looking seriously hot in a dirty tee, jeans, and boots. My tongue gets stuck to the roof of my mouth, and all thoughts but him leave my mind as he stoops down to kiss me quickly, still managing to touch his tongue to my bottom lip. "What's up?" Clearing my throat, I blink as he takes off his shirt. "Babe."

"Right." I lick my lips. "My parents are wondering if we can all get together for dinner tomorrow evening."

"Sure." His fingers move to his belt, distracting me as he unbuckles it, drawing attention to the thin strip of hair that I know leads to heaven. "Mia."

"Hmm?" I lose focus as he starts to unbutton his jeans.

"Never mind." He reaches for the phone in my hand, taking it from my grasp and putting it to his ear. "Cece, yeah, dinner tomorrow works. How about you and your parents meet us here around five, and I'll throw something on the grill?" He pulls me up off the couch before I can ask him what he's doing, and then he starts leading me toward the bedroom with his hand wrapped tightly around mine. "Cool. See you then. Yeah. All right, have a good night, and sure, I'll tell Mia you said that." He hangs up and tosses my phone on the counter in the kitchen before spinning around and picking me up. "Your sister said goodnight."

"Okay." I breathe as I wrap my legs around his hips and drop my mouth down to his. When we get to the bathroom, even though I showered when I got home, I have no problem at all when he drags me under the spray of water with him. And I for sure don't complain about the two orgasms he gives me as he fucks me against the tile.

---

MY PARENTS, SISTER, nieces, Talon, and I sit around the table on his back deck, with dishes littering the tabletop and nothing but scraps left from the salmon, baked potatoes, and corn on the cob I cooked. Talon ended up getting stuck at Cece's house, so I got everything ready for dinner before he got home. I pick up my iced tea and take a sip.

"Mia was telling Chaz and me about the house you're building. We'd love to see it this week if you have time," my mom says, picking up her wine glass.

"Just let me know when." Talon rests his arm on the back of my chair and smooths his thumb up and down my shoulder as I rest my hand on his thigh.

"Do you know what you're planning on pricing it at?" she asks him, and my spine stiffens.

"Mom."

"What?" She frowns at me. "Chaz and I have been talking, and we're thinking about moving here."

"What?" I ask, sure I heard her wrong. She's lived in Montana her whole life, and so has Chaz, so it's hard for me to believe they would move. And not only that, but Chaz has a well-established law practice there, and I don't see him retiring anytime soon, even though he's almost seventy.

"Chaz is planning on retiring in the next couple of years, and we've fallen in love with this area and are talking about finding a place here."

"Really?" I look at Chaz.

"We want to be closer to all our girls," he says, his face soft as he looks between me, Cece, Ruby, Lola, and Kate.

"I wouldn't be upset about that," I tell him.

"Me neither," Cece agrees, then asks the girls, "How happy would you guys be if Grandma and Grandpa moved here?"

"So happy." Lola grins.

"So, so happy," Kate says, always wanting to one-up her sister however she can.

"Can I go play with the kittens?" Ruby asks, bouncing in her seat and making us all laugh.

"Yeah, go on. Just be gentle with them," Cece tells her, and her sisters follow her inside. When the door closes behind them, Cece looks at Talon and points. "Just so you know, I will kill you if you offer my girls one of those kittens."

“Oh, that’s a good idea. You can have two, and that way they will still be able to play with each other,” I say happily, and my sister glares at me. “You have to admit they’re cute, and you haven’t had any kind of allergic reaction to them.”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“You can’t stop me from giving them a gift.” I shrug, smiling when Talon laughs and kisses the side of my head.

“See? This is what we don’t want to miss,” Mom says, and I look at her. “And just think, honey, if we get a place here, I’ll be around a lot more and will be able to help you plan your wedding.”

“Mom,” I groan, covering my face.

“What?”

“Talon and I—”

“Your daughter has to agree to marry me before you two start planning a wedding,” Talon cuts me off, and I turn to glare at him.

“Don’t encourage her.”

“Why? I did ask you.”

“No, you didn’t,” I deny, then my eyes widen when I remember him asking me after I gave him a blowjob, and he grins like he’s reading my mind. “That didn’t count,” I tell him, hearing Cece laugh as I shake my head. “Anyway, we just got together. It’s gonna be awhile before any of that happens.”

“So you’re not going to move in here when Cece gets her apartment?” Chaz asks me.

“Well...” I look around, feeling put on the spot.

“We’re going to take it one day at a time,” Talon says, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “Mia knows I want her here with me, but I’m not going to pressure her if she’s not ready.”

“Is Bax single?” Mom blurts, looking at Talon like he’s solely responsible for ending world hunger.

“Mom,” Cece snaps, knowing where she’s going with that question.

“What?” Mom snaps back. “He’s very handsome, is obviously a hard worker, and he’s Talon’s brother, so they’re probably a lot alike.”

“Just stop, Mom.” Cece pushes away from the table to stand and starts for the door, saying over her shoulder, “I’m gonna go check on my girls.”

“I was just asking.” Mom sighs when Chaz shakes his head at her.

“Cece has enough guy problems right now, don’t you think?” he asks her.

“I just want her to be happy,” Mom says quietly, and he covers her hand on the table with his.

“I think you more than anyone knows she’s not gonna find that in a man. She needs to find it in herself,” he says gently, and my fingers wrap around Talon’s thigh and dig in.

“You’re right.” Mom drops her head toward him, and he kisses her forehead.

Watching them in that moment, I know exactly why my mom fell in love with him, and I have to admit I love him even more than I already did, which was a whole hell of a lot. It takes a special kind of man to understand they can add to your life but they can’t *be* your life. One thing I’ve been learning with the help of the man at my side is that you have to find happiness and contentment within yourself before you are ever able to make anyone else happy, but if you’re lucky, you’ll find someone who is willing to wait for you while you figure things out.

## CHAPTER 18

### TALON

WITH MY HAND in Mia's hair and her kneeling between my legs, I watch as she wraps her lips around my cock, sucking the tip and flicking the head before taking me fully into her mouth. Between her hunger and skill, every time she puts her mouth on me, I fight the urge to come immediately. "Goddamn, Mia," I hiss, my head falling back, unable to hold it up as she twists her hand in sync with every upward stroke of her mouth. I right my head when her hand on my thigh moves, and groan as she slides it between her legs. Knowing how sweet she tastes and wanting her on my tongue, I pull her off my cock, ignoring her protest, and drag her up over my mouth.

"I was doing something," she complains, with her hips jerking as I run a finger through her folds and circle her clit. I place my hands on her inner thighs, spreading her open and licking up her center. "Oh God."

"What were you saying, baby?" I ask, and her eyes meet mine and narrow.

"Don't stop," she pants, and I lick her again and focus on her clit, flicking it with my tongue while looking up her body. Her head is back, and her hands are covering her tits, tugging her nipples.

"Talon!" she shouts, dropping her head forward, and I hold her gaze as I bury my tongue inside her. Then I groan when she comes, her hips jerking and thighs shaking. Kissing her inner thigh, I expect it to take a minute for her to recover as I start to move her, but before I have a chance to change our position, she straddles my hips, wraps her hand around my cock, and sinks down on my length.

"Fuck, Mia." My body jerks as her tight, wet heat strangles my cock, and I wrap my hands around her hips to hold her steady before she can move. When her eyes meet mine, the wild look she gives me proves she's half out of her mind with lust. "We keep fucking bare, Mia, and I'm gonna get you pregnant."

My cock twitches at the idea of her carrying my child, and her walls spasm in response. Without responding to my statement, she falls forward, her mouth covering mine as she lifts her hips and falls back down my length in slow, steady movements that are driving me half out my mind.

Needing more, I flip her to her back, get up on my knees, then spin her to her belly, placing her legs on either side of mine and lifting her up by her hips. As soon as I'm in position, I sink into her in one harsh thrust then skim my hand up her back to her shoulder and pull her up. "I'm guessing, since you didn't make me get a condom, that you're good with having my baby," I say harshly, fucking into her hard, and she moans, reaching her hands behind me to grab my ass. Nipping her neck, I wrap my arms around her, one moving to her breast and tugging her nipple, the other taking hold of her jaw and turning her head my way until her gaze meets mine. "I'm not fucking around anymore, Mia. If you're willing to give me that, you can move in with me, wear my ring, and be my wife." I kiss her, thrusting my tongue between her lips before she can reply. Releasing her jaw, I slide my hand down over her stomach to between her legs, finding her clit with my middle finger.

"Talon." She covers my hand with hers, and I curse as her fingers cover mine as I sink into her. She turns her head my way. "I love you."

"I know, baby." I kiss her as she leans up for my mouth, and like it happens almost every time with her, she comes, and I jump over the edge with her, always willing to follow her. My hips jerk, and I hold her tighter as her cries fill the air. Sweaty, sated, with my heart pounding hard and my breaths coming in harsh pants, I collapse forward onto the bed, taking her with me, unwilling to lose our connection.

"No," she whispers when I try to move, sure my weight is too much for her. "Just give me a minute." She grabs my hand and links our fingers, pulling it up against her chest. I don't fight her; instead, I kiss the lobe of her ear and relax against her, listening to her breathing slow to normal. "Are you sure about me moving in?" she asks, cutting through the silence, and my eyes slide closed.

"You know I'm sure, baby."

"Okay," she says quietly, then her breath evens out and it takes me a minute to realize she's fallen asleep. Not wanting to wake her, I carefully dislodge myself from her hold and get up, tossing the blanket over her before going to the bathroom. After I grab a washrag and clean her up, I

shut off the bathroom light and climb into bed, pulling her against me. She nuzzles into my side and curves her arm around my waist, giving it a squeeze. "I'm moving in, so we need to go shopping," she says, sounding half asleep, and I smile at the ceiling.

"God, I hate that sound," Mia, who's pinned under me, moans, dragging the pillow over her head as I reach behind me for my cell to turn off my alarm. "How is it already morning?"

Laughing, I pull the pillow from her grasp and cup her cheek as her eyes blink open to meet mine. "Do you wanna shower?"

"Since I can't go back to sleep, I might as well get an orgasm for having to wake up." She touches her finger to the dimple in my chin then runs it along my bottom lip. "You've been running on less sleep than I've been. How are you not tired?"

"I'm running on adrenalin. It's always been that way with me. When there's work to do, I'm focused on getting it done, because I know there will be downtime when I can do nothing but relax."

"Except you won't be able to relax after you finish with Cece's house, because you still have to finish your build." She rests her forehead under my chin. "When you have some time off, I think we should go on a vacation."

"Where do you wanna go?"

"I don't care, as long as it's just you and me."

"I'll make that happen." I kiss the top of her hair then tell her quietly, "I'm gonna start the shower."

"I'll meet you in there," she says, and I get out of bed, expecting her to fall back to sleep, but she joins me a few minutes later. And I make the most of that time, giving her an orgasm before getting one of my own.

"Talon, get down here now!" Uncle Asher shouts, and I meet Bax's eye around the edge of the mirror we're attempting to hang in Cece's master bath.

"Yeah, give me a minute!" I shout back, shaking my head. "How many times do you think I need to tell them we're not upgrading shit before they listen?" I ask as we place the mirror on the wall so we can finish screwing it into place. For the last week, we've been at Cece's house every day, and every day, I've had to explain to my uncles that she is putting this house on the market, so the things being repaired do not need to be updated or upgraded.

“Since they keep asking, I’m gonna say until we finish,” he grumbles, taking most of the weight of the mirror as I grab the drill.

“Yeah, well, it’d be different if Cece wasn’t going to sell, but with everything that’s happened, she’s more determined to put this place on the market and find a place to rent.”

“I don’t blame her.”

“Me neither.” I step back and look around the master bath. I didn’t see the room before we started working on it, but with a new mirror, new glass in the shower, and fresh paint, I’m guessing it looks better than it did before the break-in, which will help when it goes on the market, much the same as the rest of the house.

“Talon!” Uncle Asher yells once more.

“Damn, what the fuck did you do?”

I don’t answer Bax. I gather the drop cloths off the floor and leave the room, passing under the scaffolding in the stairway that the painters set up. When I get to the bottom of the steps, I see my family gathered in the kitchen and my cousin Cobi with his eyes on me, his body seeming wired.

Worry starts to niggle the back of my mind, and my heart starts to pound. I’ve let my guard down this past week, having Mia in my bed when I wake up every morning and at my place every evening when she gets off work, with her parents, sister, and nieces safe in their rental. “What’s going on?”

“We gotta talk,” Cobi states, stepping around the island toward me.

“About what?” Bax asks, putting himself between me and everyone else in the room.

“Where’s Mia?” I demand with Bax pressing closer to my side.

“Mia is okay.” Cobi tries to reassure me, but the fear rushing through me is making it difficult to believe him. “Do you know Harrison Charmers, better known as Harry nowadays?” he asks, and I freeze at the mention of the man who has had my teeth on edge for weeks. I start for the door, needing to see for myself that Mia is okay, but he wraps his hand around my bicep, stopping me. “You have my promise that she’s okay. Right now, she’s on a test drive with one of my guys, and they are explaining to her exactly what I’m about to explain to you.”

“What the fuck is going on?” I shrug him off, ready to take him and everyone else out in order to get to Mia if needed.

“Corina Schmidt put out a hit on her husband, his lover, and her family a few days ago.”

“Who the fuck is Corina Schmidt?” Bax asks the question on the tip of my tongue.

“Corina Schmidt is Winston’s wife,” Uncle Asher says, and Cobi runs a hand through his hair and sighs before meeting my gaze once more.

“As Uncle Asher said, she’s Winston’s wife, and a few days ago, Winston asked her for a divorce after finding proof she’d been having a long-term affair with Harry Charmers. An affair that made their prenup null and void. The prenup being the only thing keeping him and Corina together for all these years.” His head jerks from side to side like he can’t believe what he’s about to say. “After Winston confronted her about Harry, Corina started looking for a hitman.”

“So Mia and her family are in danger?” I growl, cutting him off, my rage coming back tenfold thinking about not only my woman but her nieces, sister, and parents being in danger. I start for the door, but everyone surrounds me, making it impossible to leave. My chest heaves as I focus on my cousin as another officer enters the house, this one in full uniform.

“Let me explain,” Cobi says, holding up his hands.

“Then stop taking us on a fucking journey down fucked-up history lane and get to the point,” Bax demands with anger and frustration coloring his tone.

Glaring at Bax, Cobi then turns his attention back to me. “The girls, Cece, Mia, and their parents are all going to be locked down at their rental this evening, and tomorrow morning, after the hit is supposed to take place, our officer—who Corina believes is her hitman—will call her to let her know the job is done.”

“Jesus.” I scrub my hands down my face, not believing this shit is real. “Tell me that everyone will be safe.”

“They’ll all be safe. We have a plan in place to get the evidence we need. I just need to know you’ll be able to keep your cool while we work our case, so Harry and Corina will get the sentences they deserve.”

“You want me to be cool about the idea of my woman having a hit put out on her?” I ask in disbelief.

“I’m not saying it’s gonna be easy, but when you leave this house, you need to act like it’s business as usual, you don’t know about what’s gonna go down, and you don’t know shit is about to hit the fan. All you have to remember is that tomorrow night, when you go to bed, your girl will be lying next to you and this shit will be over. Can you do that?”

“They’re watching me?”

“From what our undercover officer was able to get out of Corina while talking to her about the hit, she explained that her lover, Harry, was supposed to win Mia over and get information out of her about the affair that Winston and Cece were having. Which would’ve given her the opportunity to divorce him and get everything. When you came into the picture, the plan went to shit, and your relationship with Mia prevented him from getting close to her. And with the pressure from Corina, he took his anger out by first destroying your build and then this place.”

“Jesus,” Bax mutters,

“Love makes you do crazy things,” Cobi says and I close my eyes. He’s right; I know love makes you do things you wouldn’t normally even think about doing, but to be a part of hurting people and killing an entire family is just insanity. “I’m just happy Corina and Harry were too stupid to actually look into the person they hired for the hit, because shit could be going sideways, and we’d be having a totally different conversation.”

I open my eyes to meet his, feeling nauseated. “I need to be with Mia and her family tonight.”

“I can’t let that happen,” Cobi says, resting his hand on my bicep. “If they get spooked, it might blow the whole case against them.”

“Mia’s been staying with me this week.”

“Yeah, but as far as they know, she doesn’t live with you, so it’s not gonna seem odd that she’s staying with her family tonight,” he says then steps close until we’re face-to-face. “I promise, once this is over, it’s over. You won’t have to worry about being away from her again. I just need you to trust me and know that I’ll do right by you and her, and by the weekend, this will be over, and you’ll be able to start your life together without worrying.”

With my jaw clenching I pull out my phone and dial Mia’s number as I walk towards the back door.

“Hey, honey,” she says quietly, the fear in her voice making me want to shove my fist through the wall.

“You doing all right?”

“No.” She takes a deep breath. “I’m worried about Cece. She’s not taking any of this very well.”

I’m sure she’s not, which is understandable. “Cobi assured me that she and the girls are good, baby.”

“I know, but this is a lot... on top of a lot. She’s flipping out, because she’s going to have to explain things to Mike, and she knows that is not going to go down well.”

“How are your parents dealing?”

“Mom was opening a bottle of vodka for her and Chaz, since he doesn’t have his shop here to disappear into.”

I smile at that. “Where are you?”

“Driving back to the dealership. Um... Officer Jameson has been driving me around while I talk on the phone. He said I can’t make it look suspicious when I get back to the dealership by leaving right away.”

“This will be over soon.”

“I love you,” she whispers, and my head drops forward as my eyes close.

“I’ll meet you at your parents’ rental tonight.”

“Talon,” Cobi barks, but I ignore him.

“They said we can’t make anything look out of the ordinary, so I’ll just stay for dinner. I just need to see you,” I tell her, and Cobi groans.

“Thank you.”

“Love you, baby. Call me when you’re leaving work as soon as you get to your car.”

“I will.” She hangs up, and I shove my phone into my back pocket.

“Don’t fuck my case, Talon.”

“If this shit was going down with Hadley, no one would be able to keep you away from her,” I say, and his jaw twitches, because he knows I’m right. “I won’t stay all night. I’ll go for dinner. It would be stranger for me *not* to see Mia.”

“Fine.” He shakes his head. “I’m gonna head out. I’ll be in touch tomorrow morning when Corina and Harry are behind bars.”

When he leaves, I turn to face everyone. “I’m gonna head out.”

“Do you wanna talk?” Uncle Cash asks, the concerned look in his eyes reflected in everyone else’s in the room.

“No, I need some time to get my head right.”

“You know Mia will be safe, along with the girls.”

“Yeah,” I agree, but still that doesn’t change the fucked-up feeling sitting in the pit of my stomach. “I’ll have my cell if you need me.” I leave the house and go home to check on the pups and take them out. When Mia calls to let me know she’s at her parents’, I load up the pups in the car and head her way and don’t leave until close to midnight. I don’t sit in my car outside

like I want to. I head to my parents' place and sit with my dad until four in the morning, when Cobi calls to tell that Harry and Corina have been arrested. After that, I drive straight to Mia, pick her up, and take her home with me.

## COBI

STANDING WITH MY arms crossed over my chest with Winston at my side, we watch Corina Schmidt through the one-way mirror sit up as the door opens. She fidgets nervously as Detective Jameson and Detective Clarkston enter the room.

"Ma'am," Clarkston dips his chin before taking a seat across from her, while Jameson stands near the door.

"Will someone just please tell me why I'm here?" Corina pleads, wrapping her sweater around her middle, hugging herself. "I've been here for hours and no one has been in to tell me anything."

"I'm sorry about that, it's been a busy night," Jameson tells her, moving his chair to the edge of the table then sitting with his elbows to his knees, bringing his body closer to her, making the situation seem more intimate. "This kind of thing is never easy."

"What happened?" she whispers, looking between both men.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you that your husband was shot at his home a few hours ago."

"What?" she whispers, her body slumping as her eyes start to water. "Is he okay?"

I gotta give it to her, she's a good actress and if I didn't know the truth, I might have been convinced that she actually cared.

"He's dead," Jameson says, and she covers her face with her hands and starts to sob.

"No, no, no!." She falls to her knees, resting her forehead on the floor while she screams and Clarkston looks at the mirror rolling his eyes.

"Ma'am." Jameson touches her shoulder. "I know this isn't easy but I have some questions for you."

"I don't know anything." She frantically shakes her head as he helps her back into her seat, hands her a box of Kleenex and waits for her to stop crying.

“Do you know a Cece Willimson?”

“Yes, she worked with Winston, why?”

“We’re trying to figure out the connection to your husband’s murder and hers,” he says, then continues.

“From what we were able to gather, your husband and you are no longer together. Can I ask what led to your separation?”

“Winston cheated.” She sniffles. “We were trying to work things out, but it’s not always easy to get over an affair.”

“Is his affair what led to your relationship with Harry Charmers?” Clarkston asks. Her face pales as she registers what the officer said. “You two have been together for a few years now, right?”

“I... we....” She shifts her attention back and forth between both men. “Harry and I are just friends.”

“That’s strange because Harry is in the room across the hall, and he’s admitted your affair to us,” Clarkston states, taking on the role of bad cop as he looks down his nose at her.

The tears in her eyes seem to instantly dry up, and her lips press into a tight line. “He’s lying!”

“Was he also lying when he said it was your idea to find a hitman to murder your husband, the woman he’s been seeing, and her entire family?”

“That never happened,” she spits as the door opens again and Ace, one of our undercover officers, is escorted into the room in cuffs with his head down.

“Do you know this man?” Clarkston asks her, and I can see as panic fills her eyes.

“It wasn’t my idea!” she blurts, looking around like she’s searching for a way to escape. “Harry wanted to marry me, Winston wouldn’t divorce me no matter how much I begged him to.”

“I can’t believe this bitch,” Winston mutters from my side, running his fingers through his hair. “Not fucking once has she even asked where our son is, when he was with me last night.”

“You wanna go confront her?” Captain asks, and I see Winston lift his chin before he’s led out of the room.

“And you were okay with nine people dying so you could get married?” Clarkston asks Corina as I turn my attention back to the glass. She starts to shake her head, looking completely panicked.

“I didn’t... I didn’t do anything,” she whimpers, then the door opens once more to let Winston walk into the room. The moment she sees him, the color drains from her face and she looks ready to puke. “You....”

“Yeah, I’m alive.” He glares at her as she tries to stand up and walk to him. “I wish I could say I’m surprised by your latest selfish act of desperation, but I’m not. I should also let you know, not that you give a fuck, that our son is okay.” He turns for the door then stops when she screams his name.

“Winston, stop please I’m sorry!”

“Tell it to the judge, and I’ll get the divorce papers to your lawyer.” He leaves the room and as soon as the door shuts behind him, she breaks down.

“You guys did good.” Captain pats my shoulder as he flips the switch, turning the glass in front of me black. “With Ace’s video evidence, Harry admitting to his part, and the bank records where Corina withdrew enough money to pay for the hit, the case against both of them is solid.”

“Yeah,” I agree, running a hand through my hair, glad that the latest family drama is done, and after I deal with a shit load of paperwork I get to head home to my girls, who’ll remind me that there’s more good in this world than bad.

# EPILOGUE

## TALON

*Three months later*

*“TALON AND BAX Mayson’s unique architectural design, style, eye for detail, and use of smart technology in their builds has brought something new to the Tennessee housing market. If you’re looking for a house that is not only energy efficient but stylish and welcoming, you’re going to want to place them at the top of your builders list. They, along with Mayson Construction, have set a new precedence in the world of construction, and in my opinion, they’ve done it with a boom. Stan Miller, Home Design Critic for Tennessee Million Dollar Home Magazine,”* Mia finishes reading then squeals while shoving her phone up to my face. And since I’m driving, I barely have a chance to glance at the image—not that I need to see it. I know the photo chosen for the six-page magazine spread, the one of Bax and me standing in front of the log house we built, smiling wide. “I’m so proud of you, honey.”

“Thanks, baby.” I place my hand on her thigh.

“And even without this article, you guys already sold the house.”

“We did,” I agree, though her mom and Chaz didn’t buy it. A couple moving from California outbid Mia’s parents, and thankfully they we’re okay with Bax and me taking the offer for more money. We also might have told them we’d build for them, if that’s what they decide to do.

“Did Ruby give you this?” Mia asks, dragging me from my thoughts and fingering the thick pink ribbon that’s been tied around my wrist for four days. I smile, lacing my fingers through hers.

“Nope.” I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss the back of it. “You’ll see what it’s for when we get to Fire Fox Mountain.”

“Oh, a mystery.” She laughs as she turns to check on the airstream we’re pulling. “You know, when you first told me that we should go camping

rather than to a beach somewhere, I thought you lost your mind, but I don't think I've ever had a better vacation in my life."

"I'm glad, baby."

"And it doesn't hurt that my own personal Tennessee tour guide is seriously hot and really good at giving orgasms," she adds. Laughing, I exit the highway. "I just can't believe we're going to have to go home soon. I'm not ready to go back to real life."

"I know, baby, but we still have a few days before we gotta leave," I say as I park the Jeep and camper in a double space then get out, putting my vest on over my hoodie as I walk around to the passenger side and open Mia's door.

"Burr, it's a lot colder here than in Chattanooga." She rubs her hands together as she hops down then leans up to steal a kiss before I open the backdoor to grab her jacket, helping her put it on.

"We're close to the east, so that probably has something to do with the temp drop. Well, that and it's October," I say, taking her hand as I lead her into the park, having already paid for our entry online. When we get inside, we follow the signs to the Ye Old Wishing Well, and she knows as soon as the area near the well comes into view, because she gasps and her hand spasms in mine.

"Do you think someone's getting married?" She points at the bridge that is decorated with white flowers and tulle, making it look like something out of a fairy tale. "Maybe we should turn around."

"I don't see anyone getting married, and we're just passing through. It's okay," I tell her as we step onto the bridge, and she tips her head back to look at the ceiling, where thousands of multicolored ribbons are hanging. "They say—" I let go of her hand and untie the ribbon from around my wrist and find an empty spot to place it. "—that if you make a wish on a ribbon, tie it to the ceiling in here, and ring the bell—" I pull the tattered cord, causing a bell to ring. "—the gnomes will grant your wish." I face her and see a small, somewhat confused smile on her beautiful face, and then her eyes widen as I pull a pink ribbon with a diamond ring attached to it from the pocket of my jeans and hold it up, going down on one knee. "So, baby, will you help them make my wish come true?"

"Are you serious?" she asks with tears filling her eyes, right before she crashes into me, knocking me back on my ass. "Yes, I'll marry you. Yes, yes, yes!" She laughs, peppering my face with kisses. I sit up, adjust her on

my lap, and take her hand, placing the ring on her finger. Once it's in place, she rests her forehead against mine. "I love you, Talon Mayson, and I'm so lucky I get to call you mine."

Swiping the tears from under her eyes, I shake my head. "I'm the lucky one, Mia." I kiss her as I stand with her in my arms and at that moment, our families come out of hiding and start to cheer.

"You didn't," she laughs against my mouth.

"They insisted on coming." I smile and she shakes her head before rushing to hug everyone. I stand back and watch her, wondering how long it will be until I get used to her being mine. Then I glance around at my family and those who have found what I now have, and I realize I never will.

## MIA

### *Six month later*

WAITING IN FRONT of the back doors at Talon's parents' house, I fidget. I'm not even a little nervous about what's about to happen. I'm anxious to finally marry the man who's waiting for me on the other side of the doors.

After Talon proposed, my mom and his aunt November stepped up to plan the event, and I kind of let them lead the way, even though I would have been happy to get married at the courthouse. Our wedding was planned for six months from now, but two months ago, Talon told them they needed to speed things up, because we found out I'm pregnant with twins, and he refused to have me start showing without having his last name.

"If you're getting cold feet, you should know I already promised Talon that I'd pick you up and carry you down the aisle to him," Chaz says, and I laugh as I tip my head back to look up at him.

"I'm not getting cold feet," I promise, finding his hand and squeezing it.

"I didn't think so."

"But I am a little disappointed you'd choose Talon's side if I did try to run away."

"Sorry, sweetheart." He grins. "I'm not apologizing for knowing what's best for you." He kisses the side of my head as I smile.

“You have one minute until the doors open,” November says, looking like a professional wedding planner with her folder in her arms and a mic attached to her ear. Honestly, I don’t know what I would have done without her, or without any of Talon’s family. Not only have they been here for me while planning the wedding and getting ready for two babies, but they have been a godsend to my sister and her girls after my parents went back to Montana to put their house on the market. Something that wasn’t part of their plan until they found out I was pregnant.

“Are you ready?” Aunt November asks.

“Yes.”

“What about you, Dad? You doing okay?” She looks at Chaz, and I watch him swallow hard.

“I’m ready.”

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road.” She looks at the group of kids playing off to the side of where we’re standing. Obviously, I couldn’t do the normal flower girl gig, not with all the kids saying they wanted to be a part of the ceremony, so November came up with an idea that was just too cute not to go with. “Come on, you guys,” she calls over to all the kids, handing them each a bubble gun.

“You guys know what to do. Just please do not shoot each other or anyone else with bubbles,” she begs, and I start to laugh, because yesterday during our rehearsal, that is exactly what happened. Once the kids are standing in front of me, the doors open, and they start down the aisle with their plastic guns in the air, blowing bubbles that become bits of magic with the light from the white fairy lights glowing around the backyard.

I follow them, holding onto Chaz tightly, wanting to avoid tripping in my heels on the white runner and falling on my face. When we make it to the end of the aisle, Talon steps down from the stage he and his brother built and takes my hand from Chaz, who turns to kiss my forehead before he goes to find his seat next to my mom. With my legs shaking, I’m not sure I can make it any farther, but with Talon’s help, I make it up two steps and stand facing him in front of our family and friends, my nose stinging as I look into his eyes.

I don’t want to cry and mess up my makeup, but tears still fill my eyes as his family’s pastor starts to speak about family, love, and devotion, everything I have found in the man holding my hands. As we say our vows,

I can no longer hold back the tears and start to cry, which means when we say “I do” and the pastor says you can kiss the bride, I’m sobbing.

## TALON

*Two years later*

I BLOCK SOMA and her kids from trying to escape as I step out onto the back porch of the house I designed and built for my family and spot Mia in a peach-colored sundress, her belly growing with the little boy who will be here in a few months, lying in the grass on a blanket. Our son Tobias and our daughter Eleanor waddle around her as Mercury and Retro stand guard, both pups always finding energy to look after the kids whenever they’re outside.

I walk down the steps to the backyard, and the minute I reach the grass, the kids run toward me screaming “Daddy!” while Mia sits up and rubs her belly. I pick the two of them up and walk toward her, dropping to my knees at her side.

“Hey, Daddy.” Mia smiles, reaching out to me and touching the dimple in my chin like she’s always done before running a finger along my bottom lip. “We missed you today.”

“I missed you.” I lean forward to kiss her as the kids use me as a jungle gym, climbing over my back and under my chest.

“You know,” she whispers, holding my jaw as I pull away, “until you, I never would have believed this would be my life, but every day, I’m thankful for your determination to make me see that I could trust you to give me a beautiful life.”

“Baby.” I lean back, looking at her, my children, and my baby still growing in her belly. “You’ve given me more than I could have wished for, and every single day, I’m grateful for you.” I touch my mouth to hers, knowing she will never really understand what I would go through to make sure she’s happy. But then again, that’s love, proving every day that you are worthy of the person you’re with.

The End

If you're all caught up on the Until series but want a little more BOOM  
make sure you check out *The Happily Ever Alpha World* at  
<https://boomfactorypublishing.com/happily-ever-alpha-world/>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I have to give thanks to God, because without him none of this would be possible. Second, I want to thank my husband. I love you now and always—thank you for believing in me even when I don't always believe in myself. To my beautiful son, you bringing such joy into my life, and I'm so honored to be your mom.

To my beautiful, friends that bring so much laughter, support and peace to my life I love you all. To every blog and reader, thank you for taking the time to read and share my books. There would never be enough ink in the world to acknowledge you all, but I will forever be grateful to each and every one of you.

I started this writing journey after I fell in love with reading, like thousands of authors before me. I wanted to give people a place to escape where the stories were funny, sweet, and hot and left you feeling good. I have loved sharing my stories with you all, loved that I have helped people escape the real world, even for a moment.

I started writing for me and will continue writing for you. XOXO Aurora

# BOOKS BY AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

The Until Series

Until November

Until Trevor

Until Lilly.

Until Nico

Second Chance Holiday.

Until Her Series

Until July.

Until June

Until Ashlyn

Until Harmony.

Until December

Until Him Series

Until Jax

**Until Sage**

**Until Cobi**

**Until Talon**

**Shooting Stars Series**

**Fighting to Breathe**

**Wide-Open Spaces**

**One Last Wish**

**Underground Kings Series**

**Assumption**

**Obligation**

**Distraction**

**Infatuation**

**Fluke My Life Series**

**Running into Love**

**Stumbling into Love**

**Tossed into Love**

**Drawn Into Love**

**How to Catch an Alpha Series**

**Catching Him**

**Baiting Him**

**Hooking Him**

**Standalone Novels**

**Falling Fast**

**Love At The Bluebird**

**The Wrong/Right Man**

**Alpha Law (written under CA ROSE)**

**Justified (written under CA ROSE)**

**Liability (written under CA ROSE)**

**Finders Keepers (written under CA ROSE)**

**To Have To Hold To Keep**

**Trapping Her**

**Taking Her (Coming Soon)**

**Stalking Her (Coming Soon)**

**HAPPILY EVER ALPHA WORLD**

Do you love Aurora's Until series? Check out her Happily Ever Alpha World, published by Boom Factory Publishing.

The Happily Ever Alpha authors have been hand selected by Aurora to write stories connected to her Until/Until Her/Until Him series.

**[Click on the Boom Factory Publishing logo to see the books in the Happily Ever Alpha World.](#)**



## ABOUT AURORA ROSE REYNOLDS

Aurora Rose Reynolds is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author whose wildly popular series include the Until, Until Him, Until Her, Fluke My Life, Underground Kings, How to Catch an Alpha, and Shooting Stars series.

Her writing career started in an attempt to get the outrageously alpha men who resided in her head to leave her alone and has blossomed into an opportunity to share her stories with readers all over the world.

Sign up now for Aurora's Alpha-Mailing list where you can keep up to date with what's going on. <http://eepurl.com/by57rz>

And don't forget to stop by her website to find out about new releases.  
<http://AuroraRoseReynolds.com>