

THE SUBSTITUTION



MORGAN ELIZABETH

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SPRINGBROOK HILLS SERIES, BOOK THREE

MORGAN ELIZABETH

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CONTENTS

[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](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Epilogue](#)

ONE

-jordan-

SO, maybe this wasn't my best plan, I think as Hunter, my not-so-long lost half brother gets down on bended knee in front of a beautiful woman with long, wavy dark hair. Her hands go to her mouth, eyes filling with tears visible from where I stand in the way back of the crowded bar.

My brother is proposing, and I'm here to drop some serious shit on him.

Fuck.

Did I mention my brother has never met me? Doesn't know I exist?

Yeah. Not my best plan.

Classic Jordan.

When I asked at the front desk of the only hotel in this tiny town, the sweet woman gave the address of my brother's house freely, as well as a tip. She told me he probably wouldn't be there tonight. There was a concert at the only bar in town—a fundraiser.

"It might be sold out," the front desk lady told me, and I deflated, thinking my chance was gone. "But I think Janie's kiddo got sick tonight, and she can't go to the concert. Let me call her; maybe she still has the ticket."

Small town life is weird, I couldn't help but think. If I asked where someone lived in any of the cities I've been to over the past seven years, I'd probably get the cops called on me for stalking. But here, I get an address, info on where he'll be tonight, and even a possible ticket there. Normally it would freak me the fuck out knowing this, but the woman's openness saved me a *ton* of time.

It also led me to watching my brother propose because Janie's son Evan was, in fact, sick tonight, meaning Janie *couldn't* go to the Hometown Heroes concert at Full Moon Cafe tonight. Evan is in fourth grade, a sweet kid, always says thank you, and was in the town's musical last spring, according to Front Desk Lady, who I learned is named Edith.

So, end of the story, I got to go in Janie's stead.

Now I'm standing outside, the crisp spring weather chilling me to the bone as I stand in a tiny denim skirt, a tank top, and sneakers from some designer adorning my feet. Jax picked it all out. Since we were ending the tour in the south, I hadn't had any warmer clothes with me when I fled, grabbing what I could stuff into my suitcase.

I need some warmer clothes.

I also need a job to pay for those clothes.

But first, I need to meet my brother.

The group is standing together, huddling and talking about bachelor parties, engagement parties, and saying goodbye to a short woman built like me with long auburn hair. It's not the same reddish tinge as my own, but it suits her well. She's holding the hand of a little girl with strawberry blonde hair and fair skin like me.

If I didn't know better, I'd think the little girl was me as a kid. This must be my sister, Autumn, and her daughter. It looks like mom's genes are pretty strong, skipping Autumn and going right to her daughter.

And me, of course.

Well. Two birds, one stone, I guess. I can meet them both. Taking a deep breath, I panic, trying to figure out how to break in and introduce myself.

A woman with light blonde hair brushing her shoulders meets my eye and makes my dilemma easier.

"Can I help you?" she asks, her voice tinkling and genuine.

"Uhm..." I start, nerves flowing through me. *You made it this far, Dani. You can't turn back.* My eyes flit to my brother. Hunter. God, how many times did Mom tell me about him? About how wonderful and intelligent he is, how I'll never...

He must take after his father, with dark hair and a darker beard framing a huge white smile, even as he looks at me for the first time. I don't see our mom in him. "Uh, are you... Hunter? Hunter Hutchins?" I know the answer, of course. I feel stupid asking it.

He looks at me confused, trying to figure me out. Like he's seen me before but can't put his finger on where. *Nope, just an older version of me.*

"Yeah, that's me. Can I help you?" So formal. His voice has gone from friendly and outgoing to business-like, how you'd speak to a stranger. The grin morphs into a polite smile.

"And you... you're Autumn?" I turn to her, the gorgeous woman Mom bragged about when she showed me printed photos and clippings from newspapers.

"And look at her, Jordan. Your sister, Autumn. She graduated top of her class this year. Look how she holds herself, girl. Straighten your back, stand taller."

In those photos, she looked kind and open. Caring. Exactly how I thought a big sister should look at her little sister. Now, her eyes are shuttered as she stares at me. Does she know? Can she figure it out? She was older when Mom left her. *Nine*, I think. I've done the math enough times. She's ten years older than I am. She might notice the similarities.

"What do you need?" a man says, pulling the little girl and another, taller, older one closer. My... nieces. He must be Autumn's husband.

"I... I'm sorry, this is so weird." I'm stuttering, flustered and stressed, and so, so nervous. God, this was a terrible idea. But where else was I going to go? Everywhere else, he'd know, know where I was. "But... I think I'm your sister. Well. Your half-sister."

They all stare at me, wordless. I continue to ramble like an idiot.

"We have the same mom. Regina? She's my mom. Uhm. And your mom? But I mean, we have different dads." Oh my *God*, why am I like this? "Obviously." I stand there silent, looking at Hunter, at Autumn, chewing my lip between my teeth, the nervous tic Jax hated. They're staring at me in shock, confusion radiating off of them. But being me, I cannot handle awkward silence. My eyes travel to the woman who just got engaged.

"Hannah, right? Congratulations. Sorry to dump this on you tonight. I didn't... well, I didn't expect... uhm... this. I would have postponed, but I'm kinda... well I couldn't." I smile at her awkwardly. I expect her to be mad, frustrated I'm taking her night away. But instead, she stares at me for just a moment before she smiles back. And then she *laughs*,

"Oh my God! This is amazing! You have another sister, babe!" Her elbow hits Hunter, knocking him out of his daze. "A half-sister! How cool

is that?! Oh my God, you look JUST like them. And like Rosie! Holy crap, I bet your baby pictures are basically just Rosie.”

I wouldn’t know. I’m not sure my mom kept any of me.

Out of his daze, Hunter stares at his fiancé with the most fantastic look on his face. Like he’s so in love with her, and he just finds her antics adorable.

“Yeah, I’m Hannah! These are my friends, Sadie and Luna - she owns the bar.” She’s going around, pointing at the different people hanging outside. “That’s Tanner, a friend of Hunter’s, and Tony, Luna’s boyfriend. I think Zoe and Zander are around her somewhere....” She looks around but doesn’t see who she’s searching for. “They’re probably inside still. And you already know Autumn - Aut! A sister! How freaking cool!” Her voice is an excited squeal when she meets Autumn’s eyes. “And this is her husband, Steve. And theese,” she says, a hand waving to two little girls, “are your NIECES!” The girls smile, popping out from behind their dad. “Sara and Rosie.” Rosie, the one who has my hair, steps out to stand beside Hannah.

“You look like me.” Her little hands are on her hips. “You’re my aunt?” I stare at her, not sure how to respond.

“Rosie, why don’t you, Sara, and Daddy go to the car?” Autumn interrupts, her voice stern.

“Mommy! I wa-”

“Enough, Rosie. Car, now.” Autumn looks at her husband, and he nods. Hannah’s face is confused and a little frustrated, staring at Autumn then at the girls before looking back at Hunter. He shakes his head, a gentle order not to push it.

I guess introductions are over. My sister turns to me. “Look. I have no clue what’s going on. I’ve never heard of you, never met you.”

“I have proof; I’m not trying to con you, promise I just-”

“I don’t need proof. You’re the spitting image of *her*, and you’re basically a grown-up version of Rosie. It’s clear we’re related. But to be honest, I don’t have much energy left to deal with this, and it’s been a big night for Hunt and Hannah. Which you’re aware of, so I’m not sure why you chose now to show up.”

“I-”

“Will you be here long? Or are you going to disappear just like our mother?”

“I-” I try to speak, in shock, but she cuts me off again.

“Yeah, so I’m not really looking to invest energy into another person who is just going to disappear.”

“Autumn, that’s enough.” Hunter’s voice rings clear through the night, slicing through and stopping Autumn. Her eyes meet his, and some kind of silent sibling communication happens. Seeing it, live in person with two people who are technically *my* siblings, cuts me deep in an utterly unexpected way.

I should have that.

But I have no one.

No one on my side.

“Fine.” Autumn’s voice is cold and frustrated.

“Can you meet tomorrow, Jordan? This is all... a lot. And it’s late.”

“And no offense, totally great meeting you and all, but I just got engaged. So I really want to get home.” Hannah’s face lights up with a smile that’s a little tipsy and totally happy. I wonder if she’s this outgoing and hilarious or if she’s high on life.

“Yeah, I’m free tomorrow. Got nothing else going on, just here to, uh... meet you guys.” God, this feels so awkward. “I’m over at the motel down the road.” Sadie’s nose crinkles.

“That place is old and smells like it.” It is. It’s gross, especially after touring the country in relative luxury with a country star for seven years. But it’s what they had and, even more, what I could afford.

“It’s fine.”

“Do you have a number we can call tomorrow? To set something up?” Hunter asks, taking a sleek phone out of his pocket. My stomach drops.

“Uh, actually, no. I... totally smashed mine on the way here. Total klutz, dropped it facedown, and it shattered, should have had a case, ya know?” I’m rambling like an idiot, trying to balance the truth and stories. Fuck. I look around at the small crowd and see Luna nodding like she relates while her boyfriend smiles down at her. Sadie is watching the bar door like she’s waiting for something or someone to pop out. The guy, Tanner, though. He’s staring at me like he knows I’m full of shit.

I look back to my brother. “You can just... just give me yours? And I’ll call from the motel in the morning?” A group of confused eyes land on me, all trying to muddle through my story and make sense of it. I can’t blame them, of course - who doesn’t have a phone these days, much less a woman traveling alone?

“Uhm, sure,” Hunter says, and I dig into my oversized tote bag and manage to find a scrap of paper and a pen. He writes down his cell number, and Hannah steals the paper, scribbling hers and Sadie’s numbers as well,

“Just in case,” she says with a wink when she hands it back. I already like this woman.

“We need to set something up. I own the coffee shop in town, come down tomorrow and grab something on the house. Any sister of Hunter is a sister of Hannah. Any sister of Hannah’s is a sister of mine.”

“Okay.” I take the pen and paperback, grateful for these kind people even if it seems like Autumn might take some work. “Okay, I’ll let you guys go. I know this was weird and awkward and shit timing, but I really am glad I finally, finally met you. My mom’s been talking about you guys my whole life.”

“Well, we’ve never heard about you,” Autumn says, her eyes still ice cold.

“Enough, Autumn. Let’s go.” The voice is her husband Steve this time, and he’s grabbing her arm to pull her towards their car.

“I’m just saying,” she says under her breath as he tugs her to their car.

“Nice meeting you, Jordan. We’ll see you soon,” Steve says over his shoulder, giving me a polite wave.

“Bye, Auntie Jordan!” The adorable little girl shouts and fuck, if I don’t melt on the spot. *Auntie Jordan*. “Bye, Auntie Hannah!”

“Bye, baby, I’ll see you tomorrow!” Hannah shouts back.

“Okay, Jordan, we’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay? It was... good to meet you. Sorry about Autumn. Mom is a sore topic for her. But we’re all thrilled you’re here.” Hunter says, and it seems genuine if a bit stiff. He puts his hand out to me, and I shake it. It all feels so... strange. Nice, but strange.

Years ago, when I was a little girl and Mom would tell me about Hunter and Autumn, I’d envision some grand meeting where Hunter came and saved me from her. In my imagination, he took me back to his dad’s, and then Autumn hugged me and cried, so happy to have a sister. Then, she would teach me to do makeup, and we’d giggle late at night about boys and actors we thought were cute.

Some small part of me held onto my dream, whether or not I realized it. It’s obviously not going to be happening.

Before leaving, Hannah, clearly a people person, comes in for a hug. A huge one. *This is what I envisioned. This feeling, this welcome.*

“This is going to be so great, Jordan. *So* glad you’re here. Don’t worry about Autumn.” She pulls back to look at me, still hugging me. “Eeek! Another sister!” The idea excites her.

“Nice to meet you too, Hannah,” I say, and then they walk away. And I can’t help but wonder what I’ve gotten myself into.

TWO

-jordan-

“WELL, look who it is, the long-lost half-sister!” Sadie calls from the barista bar as I walk into Rise and Grind the following day. It turns out to be an adorable coffee bar and coworking space, trendy and welcoming and calming all in one. It’s all weathered wood and mismatched chairs, comfy loungers, and six working cubicles. I love it here instantly.

“Hey, Sadie. Hope you meant it when you told me to come down this morning.”

“Of course! What can I get ya?” I give Sadie my standard order, a caramel latte, and she turns her back to me, starting my drink.”So you really like to make an impression, huh?”

“Well, no. But I guess I did, didn’t I?” I was up nearly half the night overthinking every moment of last night. What I could have done differently, if I should have done this at all... “I feel pretty bad, taking the spotlight off Hannah. It truly wasn’t my plan in the least.”

“You get to know Hannah, and you’ll see there’s no need to worry. Hannah is all about helping people, family, and friends. She already called me this morning, hungover as she was, to make sure if you came in, you got her info again.”

“Wow, she seems... awesome.”

“You’ll see. Hannah is the best of the best. She’s been my best friend since we were kids. Basically sisters. And I guess you guys are almost like sisters, too now.” She turns to me, a weird look on her face. “That is so totally insane. I can’t believe Hunter and Autumn have a *sister*.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I say, but my whole life, I’ve known about my brother and sister. My mom talked about them, showed me proof of their accomplishments. She compared me to them, always raising the invisible bar to achievable standards. They created a benchmark I will never reach in a contest they didn’t even know existed.

My mom ran away, and I was supposed to be the substitution for the two kids she left behind. Instead, I was a disappointment at every turn. I never lived up to the standard my unknown siblings created for me.

“So, I gotta ask. You’ve known about this your whole life?”

“Yup. I guess our mom got pregnant with me not long after she left their dad. We always had old pictures around the house of them. Kept an eye on them and whatnot.”

“But she never came to see them? It’s so weird. Where were you guys?”

“Right outside Vegas. She grew up there, and when she went back, we never left. I’m... I don’t know the whole story. Why she left, why she never came back. I just always grew up knowing I had a sister and a brother somewhere.”

“This is wild. You know that, right?” She sets the latte in front of me in a gorgeous pale pink mug with a pretty heart in the foam.

“Yeah, it’s, uh, pretty crazy.” I take a sip, and my eyes widen at the coffee. It’s so good. It could easily rival any of the best shops on the Strip. I use it as a catalyst to change the subject. “Damn, this is amazing!” I say, looking at Sadie. She blushes, and it’s cute, especially for such a personable extrovert.

“Oh, thanks. It’s not much, just a latte.”

“Seriously, it’s good, though,” I say. “I’ve been to a lot of places. I grew up in Vegas, went on tour with a country band-”

“I’m sorry, what?” *God, why did I let that out so soon?*

“Uh, yeah. I spent, God, seven years touring with Jax Jackson and his crew. Do you know them?”

“Shut the fuck up. I did too!” she says, and I blanch.

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, no, not with him. But I toured with a band after high school. Spent about six months on tour. My ex was the guitarist, and he asked me to come, so... I did.”

“No shit? That’s crazy.”

“Yeah, it was a blast,” she says, then her eyes glaze over and unfocus with an expression I know well. “Until... it wasn’t.” Now *that* I can relate to.

“Until it wasn’t,” I say quieter. Sadie looks at me, our eyes meeting, and it’s there. The understanding we have something more profound in common. I smile, and she returns the look before we sit in comfortable silence for a few moments.

“So, uh, do you, by any chance, have Hunter’s number? Or Autumn’s? I’m not sure how I’m supposed to get in touch with them. I’m a dumbass and left the paper with Hunter’s number on it in the motel.”

“I’ll do you one better - I’ll call Han.” Sadie pulls her phone out and starts tapping on the screen. “She might already be at Autumn’s, and I doubt today Hunter is very far from her.” The phone goes to her ear.

“Hey, babe. Yup, she’s here... Totally, I can send her your way... I’m not sure, let me ask.” She pulls the phone from her mouth and looks at me. “Jor, how did you get here?”

“Oh, I, uh, I walked.”

“No, here, Springbrook Hills.”

“Uhm, a bus and a cab?” I say it like I’m asking her to confirm.

“Jesus.” The phone goes back to her mouth. “Yeah, she doesn’t have a car. Want me to call Lune, see if she’s close by?... Oh, okay, that works. I’ll keep her here until then... Love you, bye!” Sadie swipes the screen and puts the cell on the wooden counter.

“Okay, Hannah and Hunter are gonna drop by, get coffee and treats for everyone at the Sutter household, pick you up, and bring you over to Aut’s.”

“They don’t have to do that. I can just get a cab if they get the address to me.” God, I hate having people do shit for me.

“Babe, gonna tell you now. Hannah loves people. Loves helping people. The woman quite literally lives to do it. If you refuse her help, she will be offended, no questions asked. Accept the help. When you can, repay it.” Sadie’s eyes meet mine, and it’s clear the words are true. I nod then go back to sipping my coffee.

Hannah and Hunter enter ten minutes later, and Sadie jumps from behind the bar with a squeal.

“Let me see it!” she says, holding her hand out and grabbing Hannah’s to stare at her beautiful, massive engagement ring. It’s a thin band, probably platinum, with a big, princess cut rock in the middle. It’s simple, nothing flashy, but something tells me it’s perfect for her.

“Sade, you saw it last night. And you helped him pick it out,” she says, a happy, carefree giggle in her voice. Looking at her, it’s clear how delighted she is - I don’t know the girl, but she is *glowing*.

“It’s not the same! Last night it was dark, and I was tipsy. This is the first time I get to see this gorgeous rock in the daylight and *on your finger*.” Rotating Hannah’s hand, she inspects it from all directions. Seeing the beautiful ring up close, I can’t help but think back just a week ago, standing on stage...

“Hey, Jordan. How are you?”

Hunter looks like the rugged version of a Christian Grey-type businessman. He has a thick layer of dark scruff lining his face, and his hair is just a bit overlong on top. In the recent photos I’ve seen of him, he was clean shaved with perfectly coiffed hair and a classic tailored suit. This version, clad in flannel to combat the early morning spring chill, cargos, and boots, looks completely different. But his eyes look happier, like he’s overcome something blocking his joy from shining in those other pictures.

Looking at his fiancé, it’s clear what made it happen.

“Hunter, hey. I’m uh, I’m good. Sorry you had to come here. I told Sadie I could take a cab over, no big.” I start to ramble again, nervous as can be.

“Oh, hush! No way, you’re family! Plus, we were heading here anyway. I wanted an Americano and lemon loaf,” Hannah says before winking at me and holding a bag of goodies and an iced coffee I didn’t even notice Sadie making.

You’re family. God, no one has ever said that to me. At least, not pleasantly or positively.

“Are you ready, baby?” Hunter asks Hannah. She looks at me.

“You good?”

“Yeah, let me just pay-”

“Nope, on the house,” Sadie says and then hands me over a to-go cup with her logo printed on the front. “For the road.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Just let it go, trust me. You can pay her back another time, but she’ll never back down,” Hannah says with an eye roll before gently pressing my back and pushing me towards the exit. “Let’s go to Autumn’s.”

An hour later, I’m sitting at my half-sister’s kitchen table. I’ve met everyone again, formally, and spent a good 15 minutes chatting with Rosie about hair, dolls, and anything her little brain could think up. She is too cute for words. Talking with everyone and getting to know them on the most basic, ‘nice to meet you’ level has been so lovely.

Except, now I’m staring at Autumn, who has an annoyed face as she glares at me.

It seems like at least one person isn’t happy to see me.

“So, Jordan, where, uh... where have you been?” Hunter asks, a hand scratching his dark scruff. His new fiancé is off watching the kids - I learned today she’s their nanny. It’s how she met Hunter.

“Well, I grew up in Vegas with my... I mean, I guess our mom. Stayed there my whole life. Then for the past seven years, I’ve been traveling with Jax Jackson. He’s my... well, he’s my ex. But I was with him before he was signed, and I came along when he started to hit it big. And... now I’m here.”

“That’s an interesting life you’ve led so far,” Hunter says, not in a sarcastic way but a true one.

“Yeah, it was an experience for sure.”

“How old are you?”

“27. I’ll be 28 in the fall. September.”

“Autumn’s birthday is in September.”

“Yeah, I know, Mom-”

“Yeah, great, sounds like fun. Can we talk about the important stuff? Why are you here? How do you know about us, but we don’t know about you? What are you looking for from us?”

“Autumn-” Hunter starts.

“No, it’s all fair. I expected that. I’m not sure why she never told you about me. I think... I think she wanted to stay gone for you? Once she left, I

think maybe she figured it would be easier for you guys. To have her... gone. I don't know. You'd have to ask her, but she has pictures of you both, told me stories. Knew everything about you guys. So... that's how I know you."

"And why are you here?" Autumn's voice is angry. I want to be understanding, but it's starting to irritate me. Mom betrayed her, but *I* didn't make it happen.

"Look, I get this isn't what you signed up for, and you had no idea I existed. I get it's super weird, but know I'm a victim of her shit too," I say, equally annoyed.

"We get that, Jordan. We appreciate you understanding how much of a shock this is to us," Hunter says to me but glares at Autumn while he speaks. "But I have to admit. I'm also interested in why. Or, why now? Why are you here? Not that I'm not pleased to meet my... sister."

I laugh at his awkwardness but secretly try to think of how to explain this all. "I've... I've hit a weird time in my life. I always planned on trying to find you both at some point, so I figured now was the right time."

"What does 'a weird time' mean?" Autumn asks. Looking at her, she's leaned back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest. God, she hates me already. I sigh.

"If you search me, because of who I was dating, you'll find a lot of shit. Some of it's true, don't get me wrong, but a lot - and I mean, *a lot* of it is twisted up."

"What kind of stuff?"

"My relationship was incredibly public. It just ended for reasons I'm not ready to talk about, and I'm not *able* to talk about. But the media and PR will twist things. I need somewhere to stay. Somewhere to lie low while I figure my life out and the next steps. I wouldn't be here if there were another option for me. Trust that. This is not the meeting I've envisioned for years. But here we are."

"So you're telling me some long-lost sister comes here, tells us we're related, and then she *wants* something from us?" The incredulous look on Autumn's face says everything I was terrified I'd find here.

"Autumn.."

"No, Hunter. Stop. This is insanity. We know nothing about this girl. Obviously, we're related - she's identical to Mom, and Rosie is her mini. But, isn't it strange this woman comes out of nowhere asking for help?"

“Autumn, she’s our sister. She needs help.” This conversation feels like something I shouldn’t be here for.

“Why should I care? Fine, mom kept her a secret for 18 years. But she’s not 18 anymore. She had, what? Nine years to find us? So instead of looking for us, she goes on tour with some musician and lives the good life. But, when that goes bad, it’s our job to clean it up?”

“Autumn, stop it. You’re being a bitch because you’re mad at our mother. What she did is not Jordan’s fault. And the way you’re acting? Maybe she was afraid this is exactly how it would end, and you’re just proving her point.”

They’re having a conversation as if I’m not right here, and it’s uncomfortable.

“Look, you guys, I’m sorry, this was a-”

“All three of you stop,” a voice calls from the foyer. Hannah walks in, frustration on her face and a hand on her hip. Hunter’s mouth quirks up almost unnoticeably, and the look alone tells me everything I need to know about their relationship. “Jordan needs us. Period. Autumn, you need to get over it. We have no idea of her relationship with your mother or what she’s been through. We all know history can leave wounds which go deep, visible or not.” She looks at me with warm eyes. “Jordan, you need a place to stay. Behind the house there’s a cottage - I used to live there. It’s fully furnished and super cute. We’ll help you find some work, and once you’re settled, you can pay Autumn \$500 a month for it.” Autumn opens her mouth, but Hannah turns to her.

“Pretend you’re still paying my room and board for the meantime. You know as well as I do if someone is in the cottage, it’s easy to avoid the main house if needed.” Autumn stares at Hannah, annoyed, contemplating what to say.

“She’s right, Autumn. We can help *our sister* get on her feet and learn more about her. It’s the right thing to do.”

“Why can’t she stay with you guys?”

“Autumn, Dad is there. While he wouldn’t give two shits, seeing a girl who needs help, it would be awkward. I’m sure you’ve done the same math I have and figured out she wasn’t born long after she left him.”

Once again, Autumn stares at her brother, then her soon-to-be sister-in-law, before sighing.

“I have to talk to Steve about it, but fine. There will be rules, though. I have kids, so I don’t want any parties, no drama. They’re impressionable, and I don’t want your... whatever affecting them.” I bristle internally a bit at her assumption of me but nod. The offer is more than I had hoped for.

“Of course. I’m going into town as soon as possible to find help wanted signs to find something. I’ll start paying you this month.” It could be a little optimistic, but I don’t want to push it with how Autumn is acting.

“Fine,” she says, but before any of us say another word, she pushes her chair back and walks upstairs, leaving us all staring awkwardly at each other.

THREE

-tanner-

“LATER, GUYS,” I shout across the lot as my men drive off. Driving off to homes with hot meals and women to warm their beds. Meanwhile, I am walking into the on-site trailer that has become my home over the past few years.

This place is a pit. The ‘kitchen’ table is layered with paperwork, envelopes, bills, and wrappers. Clothes are strewn about, most just from the last two days or so. The breakfast dishes are still in the sink where I left them when I rushed out the door to meet the men this morning.

Unfortunately, chaos is my life right now. Rushing to catch up, to get to a place where I can finally relax. When I inherited this business three years ago, my vision differed from what I received. Finally, after three years of sacrifice, constant work, and exhaustion, I’m almost there. Almost to the safe, comfortable place I need to be.

But for now, this works for me.

I reach for my laundry basket before tossing dirty clothes into it haphazardly, not worried about darks and lights, just trying to make a cleanish spot on the couch to collapse into. I’ve been up since 4:30, out on the site since five, to work alongside my men, filling in wherever we’re short-handed or falling behind for the day. It’s 6:30 p.m. now, and although I’m starving, I just want to sleep. It seems these days are a constant battle of tired versus hungry. *Which will win out this time?*

Just as my ass hits the small couch, thinking today might be exhaustion, my cell rings in my hand. My head falls back to the small window as I

groan before looking at it and seeing Hunter's name. He's a friend, but he's also the owner of the site we're working on now, so as much as I want to pretend I don't see it, I answer.

"Yo."

"Fuck, man, you okay?" Hunter says, a laugh in his voice.

"Fuck off, I just spent 13 hours working your site. I'm beat. What do you need?"

"Ah, so I guess you're not up for a beer tonight?" I don't reply, contemplating my options and thinking if we hit the pub outside of town, at least I could get a meal. But that would also require my body to work and more energy to get expelled. "I'll buy you dinner," he adds in.

I'm never one to give up a free meal.

"Is there a problem?" I ask to grasp the purpose of the meeting.

"Do you remember I now have a long-lost sister we all met last night?" he says with a laugh.

There's no way I could forget. His sister showed up the night Hunter and Hannah finally got engaged, throwing everyone for a loop. But the real shock was looking at her - the woman was gorgeous. Tiny, all curves, gorgeous strawberry blonde hair hanging to her waist.

"How's that going?"

"Meet me at Hannigan's and I'll tell you all about it."

"Fine. I'll be there in 15," I say. The pub is only about five minutes from the site, but I desperately need a shower first.

"See ya then, bro," he says before the click of the receiver comes down the line.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting down next to Hunter at the bar and handing the menu back to the bartender, already knowing what I want. "Burger, medium, everything on it. Extra fries and a side of wings." Hunter laughs.

"Hungry or something? Or are you just trying to make it worth your time?"

"Both." He laughs before he looks at the waitress.

"I'll have the same."

“So, where’s your fiancé?” I ask after taking a sip of my beer, the foam tickling my nose but the taste instantly relaxing me, some kind of pavlovian response.

“God, I fuckin’ love that sound.”

“You’re so whipped.”

“You should try it,” he says with a laugh. But, I have to admit, the man looks so incredibly happy. He came home for the first time in about ten years last summer, and when we met for dinner then, he was stern, stressed, and uptight. Nothing like the kid I knew from high school. But Hannah changed all of that. “She’s hanging with Sadie and Luna, apparently pouring over wedding magazines.”

“Ahh, you’re smart to escape.”

“Exactly,” he says, but the smile on his face tells me even if he had to sit there with those women and listen to them rant about dresses and table settings, he’d be smiling all the same. “How’s the site going?”

“Good, but you were there yesterday, so you know what. What’s goin’ on?”

He sighs, running a hand over his beard before taking a deep swallow of his beer. “This sister shit.”

“Ahh, I was wondering when we’d get to that.”

“It’s jacked as can be. She knew about us her whole life. Apparently, my mother talked about us, had news articles and photos. We had no clue, man. No clue this kid existed.”

“That’s nuts. How old is she?”

“Twenty-seven.” My eyes widen, already knowing the math. “Yeah, so chances are she left pregnant. She grew up outside of Vegas, so it sounds like my mom went right back to where she was raised and never left again. It also sounds like Jordan didn’t have it so good with her, ran off with some singer as soon as she could, and never looked back.” A rock settles in my stomach, knowing the story all too well.

“A singer?”

“Yeah, get this - you know Jax Jackson, the country singer?” I nod. “She was dating him for seven years. Just left him and hasn’t looked back. But she has no one, nothing, and, from what I can tell, no money.” I let out a puff of air.

“No shit. Did she say why she left?”

“No, but I searched her. Press is saying she left him. He proposed on stage last week, and she ran off, completely disappeared.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. They’re spinning it as she cheated on him, and he’s left behind. But... I don’t know, man.” His eyes drift out of focus, a million thoughts racing through them.

“You’re not buying it?”

“Look, I don’t know the girl. Just met her. But she seems... desperate. Scared. News articles make it seem like he adored her, they were the perfect couple. She had everything she could need. Who leaves that life and cuts all ties if there’s not more to the story?” I sit on the thought, thinking of my history with women who leave when life seems perfect, not sure how to phrase it without being a dick.

“You never know, Hunter.” He looks at me, probably remembering the drunken night months ago where I confessed everything that happened since we’d last spent time together in high school.

“I built my business by reading people, Tan. I’m not reading it that way.”

“Then I trust you. Just stay smart.”

“You sound like Autumn.”

“Autumn not on the same page as you?” I ask, intrigued. Autumn is sweet and spunky, but I’ve never known her to be unkind.

“She’s... she’s been blindsided by it all. I think she’s angry at our mom and transferring the anger to Jordan. There’s some resentment there. We never got closure with our mother, and this girl... this... sister had her this whole time.” Hunter sighs. “Autumn had to grow up, go through all the ins and outs of being a woman with two men and no guidance. Being a mom to girls now, I think it’s hitting her even harder, Sara getting to the same age she was when our mom left.”

“That makes sense.” The bartender comes over and delivers a massive pile of food for the two of us. Once she moves on and we start eating, I ask him my next question.

“So, where’s she staying?”

“Autumn’s,” Hunter says with a smug smile before shoving a fry into his mouth.

“But I thought she wasn’t a fan?”

“Oh, she’s not. Jordan’s going to be staying in Hannah’s old cottage, so she won’t run into her much if she chooses not to.” I nod, knowing the property well enough.

“Autumn cool with that?”

“Nope. But Hannah laid down the law, and Autumn is going with it for now. I think Han’s taking her under her wing. The shit mother thing? Hannah can relate.”

“Well, that should be interesting.”

“No shit. Oh, and Autumn wanted me to ask if you can come by her place sometime. I guess you were talking about quoting her for a pool?” I nod, remembering the conversation we had the night he got engaged. She’s looking to put an in-ground pool in her backyard, and while it’s not necessarily what we do full time, I can’t say no to a quick, straightforward job.

“Yeah, tell her I’ll call her tomorrow morning, set something up.”

“Will do, thanks, man. So how’s the business going? Saw the camp is coming along now that everything has thawed. So how’s everything else?”

“Awesome. We’re getting into our groove, and things are smoothing out. We’re booked with big projects through the fall, with some smaller ones built in too. Finally, looking up. Thanks again for looking over the business and giving me some pointers.”

A few months ago, I confessed to Hunter how stressful it’s been since taking over the family business. But, with his genius business mind, he was able to look over everything and give me some things to put into action immediately.

When my older brother Ben decided the family business wasn’t for him, my dad reluctantly handed over the company to me, the second son. It didn’t take long to see it was a mess. I spent weeks digging through files, some just tiny slips of papers with numbers or names scribbled on them. Finally, it became clear the family business we’d been told was thriving and profitable was held together with scotch tape and bubblegum. The books were in disarray, the client list dwindling, and the equipment was purchased overpriced and financed or needing expensive repairs or replacement. So I’ve spent the last three years running myself into the ground to build it back up, stabilize the business that’s been in my family for three generations, and ensure it can last for more to come.

“Only problem I’m facing now is I’m a jack of all trades and fuckin’ beat. Running the company, organizing the books, making the schedules, *and* working the sites? It’s a lot.”

“Did you ever fill the office manager position?” he asks, mentioning the position he told me I need to add to keep myself afloat. I see the value, but things were still so rocky a few months ago, adding another person to payroll was too much of a risk.

“Not yet, but I think I’m going to look into it this week. It’s just too much for me, and I feel like we’re in a place where I can handle the cost.”

“What would you be looking for exactly?”

“Ah, you know, just someone to monitor the books, make orders, keep the clients up to date. Handle the schedules. That kind of thing.”

“What about experience?”

“I do everything myself right now, and my system is a wreck. Basic organizing skills would be nice, but I can teach them whatever I need to, and they can create their own systems. Honestly, less experience is probably better since the pay won’t be amazing yet.” I use a fork to push around coleslaw, too full to eat more.

“Look, I don’t want to be that guy, and feel free to say fuck no, no hard feelings,” Hunter says, and I brace. “But Jordan needs a job. She’s gonna go door to door downtown, but you know Springbrook Hills. She’s an outsider and will be bottom of the list in terms of callbacks. So until she’s rooted here or moves on, she needs something solid.” I sit back and take a sip of my beer, contemplating the gorgeous redhead from last night. I know nothing about her. From what I’m hearing, it could be a disaster. But the look in Hunter’s eyes, the pleading...

“Man, I don’t know. I know nothing about her, what she’s done in the past, I-”

“She was a personal assistant slash tour manager for seven years. Helped her ex with the day-to-day of rockstar-dom or whatever. She also has her associate’s in business management. So she’s qualified, just doesn’t have the formal experience.”

“And you think she’ll be happy being an office manager for a construction company?” I highly doubt this. Not after living seven years of excitement.

“I think she’s looking for a change. Looking for normalcy. And honestly, Tanner, I don’t think she realizes it, but she came here, to Autumn

and me because she's looking for roots... I think she's looking for family. I've left Springbrook Hills. I've come back. I know there is no better place to dig your roots, to build a community that will support and protect you than here."

This chick has already pulled Hunter to her side. It's a surprise since Hunter isn't the type to get bought over easily. I'm not sure, but Hunter has always been a good judge of people, even when we were in high school.

"Fine. Okay. Send her over on Monday; I'll interview her. But it's just gonna be a trial basis. No promises. If it works, if we have no real issues, we can talk more permanency if it's what she's looking for."

"Seriously? Fuck, I didn't think you'd go for it," he says with a laugh, slapping me on the back.

"Yeah, well, you caught me at a good time. I'm exhausted, you fed me, and got me a beer."

"I'll keep that in mind."

We finish our meal and agree to meet next week to go over details for the next stage of the build. As I'm walking out to my truck parked next to Hunter's old Bronco, the beat-up truck which used to be his father's, he turns to me.

"Look, man. I know your dad left you a mess, but you're doing fuckin' amazing with the business, regardless. You need to be easier on yourself. Give yourself some breathing room. All work and no play isn't the way to live your life."

"You'd know, right?" I say with a laugh, remembering him pre-Hannah-induced breakthrough.

"I would." His words are firm, lacking the humor mine are. "Life is a lot more than just working. Especially when you're working to fix someone else's mistakes." That one hits home.

"Thanks, man, but no need to worry about me." *Lies.*

"It's not just me who sees it. The girls are all worried about you. Heard Hannah, Sadie, and Luna all gossiping a week ago. You've charmed them somehow, so now you're on their radar."

"Great," I say in a grumble under my breath. I've lived in Springbrook Hills my entire life, and most of it, those four, when you add in Zoe, have been tight-knit and constantly looking to fix people. So being on their list is sweet but also a nightmare.

Hunter laughs. “Yeah, well, maybe act like you are enjoying your life instead of just working yourself into the ground, and you can avoid the intervention.”

“Yeah, I’ll get right on that.” I roll my eyes before I flick my hand in his direction in goodbye as I hop into my truck and drive off.

FOUR

-tanner-

WALKING through the gate into Autumn Sutter's back yard, my mind keeps drifting to the ridiculous agreement I made with Hunter. To hire his *half-sister*. Some woman with zero experience, zero ties to this town. Someone who could up and leave at any moment.

Some woman I have never talked to *in my life*.

But even more, I'm still shocked Hunter has another sister.

We were close in high school. We'd hang out together nearly every day, explore our small town and go hiking. Some days, I'd chat his ear off while he brooded. Other times we both opened up about life and the world around us. He was the person every teen needs to feel comfortable dumping their thoughts and emotions on while growing into adulthood.

His mom left when we were in kindergarten. I don't remember it specifically, but once, I overheard my parents talking about it in hushed tones.

"Did you hear Regina Hutchins left?"

"Yeah, saw Ron on the site today, asking to come in part-time. Poor man's got those two kids all to himself now."

"Gosh, what makes a woman do that? Up and leave her children like that?"

I never fully understood what happened, but it was a sore subject for all three of the Hutchins. Autumn went through an interesting goth phase in high school, and I remember everyone deciding it was because her mother had left.

“No woman to hold her hand through growing up,” is what they said around town.

With the most recent info, chances are their mother left because she was pregnant with Jordan. Did she go to be with Jordan’s father? Is her father from around here? Why go back to Vegas, where Regina was born and raised? It seems so crazy when you try and look at it with an analytical lens. Why leave everything and start a-new, but also diligently keep tabs on the kids you left behind? If the interest in them is so strong, why completely disappear from their life?

Pondering the thought, I close the gate behind me, making sure to drop the latch in place. There is a small play structure in the corner in the well-maintained yard and a couple of pink little girls’ bikes lying across the grass, both covered in pollen fallen from the trees surrounding the property. I’ve been here before for parties hosted by Steve and Autumn, so I know where to walk to find the spot they’d like a pool.

But I’m stopped dead in my tracks when I see a long stretch of tan skin.

The tan skin of a woman, face down in a lounge chair with no ties to be seen keeping a top on her flawless skin.

“Oh, shit.” The words fall out of my mouth, shock suffusing my mind as my body freezes in place and, fuck me, but the woman sits up in shock.

I was right - there’s no top.

“Oh my God!” she shouts, using a hand to cover her bare breasts as she feels around for a towel.

It’s Jordan. Hunter’s long-lost half-sister and the woman I’ve promised to hire. Completely topless in front of me as I stare at her, frozen in place.

Fuck. Me.

And, fuck me even more, because I’m standing like a creepy statue, staring right at her full tits peeking through her fluttering hands with perfectly pink nipples pointed right in my direction.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” The panic in her voice pops me back into reality, and finally, *finally*, I’m back in control of my body.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” I say, turning my back to her and covering my eyes, anything to block the vision. But it’s still burned into my mind - perfectly handfuls with tiny, pert nipples, both peaked with the slight breeze. When my eyes are closed, the image is plastered to the back of my eyelids.

“This is private property! How did you find me?” The shout is both annoyed and horrified as I hear the metal limbed chair scraping on the concrete. *Private property?*

“You need to go, or I’m calling the cops. This is ridiculous!”

“What are you-“

“I’m serious! This is such an invasion of privacy. I’m grabbing my phone now, gonna call the police. Get the fuck out of here!” Hoping she’s added something to cover herself up, I turn to see her wrapped in a towel, a cordless landline phone in hand, and face red with anger. “Can’t you people leave me the fuck alone?!”

“Look, I think-“ the phone starts beeping in her hand with the input of numbers. Fuck, I need to handle this before she calls the station. I can only imagine what Tony or Zander would say about this, catching our friend’s little sister topless. But, then again, I bet Tony would be able to sympathize... *shit, get it together, Coleman.*

“Jordan!” I shout her name, hoping to quiet her panic and pause her furiously moving thumb. No good. “Jordan, I’m a friend of Hunter and Autumn’s.” She stops moving and looks at me, an eyebrow quirked. “Name’s Tanner.” The hand with the phone drops, the other still holding the towel up, but a look of recognition washes over her face.

“I... Were you there? At Full Moon?”

“Yeah. Hannah did the introduction.” She pauses like she’s taking it in, the possibility I could be telling the truth and not... who? Who did she think I was?

She seems to relax, accepting my excuse for barging in on her and shaking the stress out of her shoulders. It brings my eyes back up there, to the expanse of skin that’s tinted just a bit darker than Hunter and Autumn’s, a beautiful contrast to the gleaming strawberry blond curls falling down her back, having escaped the twist on top of her head.

“Oh. Well... what are you doing here? Everyone is gone for the day,” she says, looking around the yard.

“I’m here to measure for a pool. Autumn and Steve are looking to put one in. Own a construction company, told Hunt I’d give her a quote.” I point to the area they’re looking to put in the pool.

“Makes sense.” Relaxed now, she plops into a chair, a kittenish smile on her lips. “So you’re a friend of Hunter’s?” The towel she’s using to cover herself starts to dip, the edge just barely covering her nipple but still revealing the swells of her breasts.

“Can you put a top on?” She stares at me, contemplating my request.

“I mean, I could, but I won’t,”

“Why not?”

Her coy lips tip up into a devious grin, the look going straight to my cock. A place it has absolutely no business being. “Because your cheeks are so damn red right now, and it’s kind of totally adorable.” The burn intensifies on my face, and I can’t decide if I should be annoyed at this woman or intrigued by how outright she is.

“Who did you think I was?” I ask, changing the subject.

“What?”

“When I came, you didn’t seem surprised someone would be here, but you weren’t happy about it.” An icy shield comes down on her face, her smile disappearing. For some strange reason, I find myself missing it.

“No one.”

“No one? You mentioned private property. That sounds like something more than nothing.” Her nose crinkles, realizing she let more slip than intended. My eyes stay locked to hers, letting her know my curiosity is not going anywhere. It’ll be easier just to give me an answer.

Thoughts flit over her face as she holds my gaze, as she weighs whether if she should tell the truth or not before rolling her eyes with a huff.

“Jesus, I thought you were paparazzi, okay?” I remember what Hunter told me about her boyfriend or whoever the fuck.

“Paparazzi, huh? Hunter told me your man is some famous star.” Something about that grates, revealing raw nerves from past cuts, and I hate I still react. I try and distract myself by measuring the yard. Digging through my work bag that’s beaten and worn, a thin layer of grime covering each nook and cranny, I pull out a tape measure and walk to the edge of the patio.

“Ex.” The words are harsh, unexpected from her. With her hair and those big eyes and, yes, that *body*, she gives off a bubblegum-happy,

constantly-full-of-sunshine vibe. Anger or frustration seems so foreign on her.

“What?”

“He’s not my... man. He’s my ex.” My eyes move from where I’m starting to measure back to her at her tone. It’s a mix of sadness and exhaustion and... fear.

It’s even more unexpected.

I stare at her, trying to read her body language, stiff and closed off. She won’t look at me, and something tells me not to dig more. So instead, I nod and continue to measure, taking notes on my phone.

“So, do you often pop in on women when they’re topless sunbathing?” When she breaks the silence between us, she’s back to snarky and frustrating, the protective wall back up. She’s like an ice princess, hiding behind the calm exterior. I stop and look up at her. She’s lounging on the chair once again, one long bare leg crossed over the other, and the towel is thankfully covering her breasts.

“Do you often lay topless in the yards of near-strangers?” That seems to shut her up.

I go back to working in silence, my back to her for a few minutes, taking measurements and noting where zoning restrictions require a fence and the like. Then, when I turn back to face her direction, I’m hit once again with the sight of bare breasts as she lounges with sunglasses perched on her nose and her arms out beside her.

“Jesus, woman, cover up,” I say, grabbing another towel off the patio and tossing it at her.

“Do I make you uncomfortable, Tanner?”

“Of course not.” But, *of course*, she does. It’s not just that she’s sitting here, shamelessly tanning with her perfectly round tits hanging out. It’s the whole package. Long strawberry blond hair hangs in soft ringlets over her shoulders, tan skin taking in the sun.

On top of all that alluring and distracting woman, she has the personality I’ve avoided for years.

The kind I’ve learned my lesson from.

A wanderer. Probably just like her mother, who left Hunter and Autumn when he was five, never showing her face again. Leaving Mr. Hutchins heartbroken, completely a wreck for years after.

Going for a more exciting life in Vegas? Was her previous, safe and comfortable life not enough? So much so, she created an entirely new one, an easy substitution to fill in the blanks.

And then you have Jordan - Jordan, who grew up in the city of lights and chaos, who spent seven years touring the world with her famous boyfriend - ex or not. Looking at her, it's clear she's the type of woman to who a man could get addicted to. Get in so deep he can't see the surface. And Springbrook Hills is not the kind of town a woman who has seen as much as she has, wants to get stuck in.

I'm a hometown guy - born and raised here. I'll die in Springbrook Hills, happily. I've never found a reason to leave.

She is the kind of woman a man like me has to avoid.

"Then you won't mind me tanning out here while you work," she says, dropping a pair of oversized sunglasses onto her nose and leaning back, arms at her sides. The towel I tossed at her lays in the grass, forgotten, piled on top of the first one, her body glistening in the sun.

"You know tanning is terrible for you, right?" I pull out a pad of paper to take notes with. "Skin cancer, aging, that kind of thing." She leans over to grab something, which gives me a great view of her, thankfully clothed, round ass.

"Sprayed this on before you came over. Unless, of course, you want to help me reapply another coat?" She shakes a spray bottle of sunscreen at me, her smile teasing and tantalizing, both questioning me and waiting for a reaction.

I don't give it to her. Instead, turning so my back is to her, I ask, "Why tan if you're wearing sunscreen?" She's quiet for a bit, and I can't help but look over my shoulder to make sure she's okay. Or... something. Her eyes are guarded behind her shades, her face tilted to the sun, and fuck, that *body*. I turn back around quickly before she catches me looking.

"Love the feel of the sun on my skin. Grew up in Vegas. This is the first warm day I've felt in months."

"Where were you before this?"

"Midwest. After that, we were in NYC. That's where I was when I... left." I remember reading that. It seems her ex picked the biggest venue when he popped the question, choosing to do so at Madison Square Garden.

“Midwest has to be cold in early spring.”

“Absolutely frigid. It’s not much warmer here, though. Didn’t realize the East Coast was so dang cold.”

“Don’t worry, come July, you’ll feel right at home.”

“Yeah,” she says, but her voice is softer now, more contemplative.

“You gonna be around in summer?”

She sighs. “I’m not sure. Got nowhere else to go. And I like it here so far. The town is nice. Hunter’s fiancé and her friends are awesome. Rosie and Sara are the cutest. Hunter seems cool. Autumn... I’d like to get to know her. To know my big sister.”

“You got any other siblings?”

“None I know of,” she says with a laugh. “But with mom’s track record? Anything is possible.” At least she has a good sense of humor about the situation. “Nope, just me, my mom, and a revolving door of men.”

“No dad?”

“Negative. He split when my mom got pregnant. She had a few good boyfriends in there. One was great. He stuck around for three or four years when I was young. Was nice to me. I was sad to see that one go.” Her voice shows it, her sorrow with the idea.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“We all have our stories,” she says, flippant like it’s no big deal. The way she says it makes me wonder if that’s the worst of her stories or if there’s more weighing her down.

“Yeah,” I say, moving further as I continue to measure. Because she’s right, we all have our stories, stories that tug at frayed edges, stories we keep tight.

Even hometown guys like me who haven’t seen much past the town lines.

The afternoon goes this way, her taunting and teasing me, me measuring and taking notes. Eventually, she turns to her stomach, and while that should, in theory, be better, the risk of me catching a view of her gone, the expanse of naked back and round ass are just as tempting.

Finally, I’m done, putting final touches on my notes and shooting Autumn a text saying I’ll send her a quote tomorrow. I pack my bag back up, putting markers and measuring tape and string back in before I zip it and stand.

“Later, Jordan,” I say, waving to the tempting and mysterious woman as I head for the gate.

“Later, Tanner. You ever want to hang and tan with me again, you let me know. You were good company,” she says as she uses a finger to push the sunglasses down her nose and wink at me.

I walk out shaking my head, but as I drive off, I can’t seem to get rid of the smile stuck on my face.

FIVE

-tanner-

REHEATED LEFTOVERS MIGHT BE my least favorite meal of all time, but after measuring Autumn's yard and enduring the precocious Miss... whatever her last name is, I'm too wired to head to the store or grab takeout.

Hunter's new little sister is... something else. There's only been one woman I've met who taunted me, who teased and engaged me the way she did today, and that alone makes me want to avoid her. But, on the other hand, I can't help but wonder if acts this way with all the men she meets or if...

The microwave beeps, and I grab my dinner, the heated ceramic plate burning my fingers as I slam it to the cheap table. The entire trailer shakes a bit with the movement before I sit and slide my laptop closer.

Before I even take a bite of my food, my fingers are flying across the keyboard, logging in, and opening a new search tab. I can't help myself. I need to know more about this woman. Typing in the little I know - her first name, where she grew up, and her ex's name - brings up 1,242,000 search results.

Jesus.

Scrolling over to the 'News' tab, I click it, and a stream of articles pop up.

JAX JACKSON POPS THE QUESTION... AND LEFT ON STAGE!!

JORDAN DANIELS IN HIDING AFTER EMBARRASSING JAX JACKSON

JAXDAN - DONE FOR GOOD??

COLD-HEARTED JORDAN DANIELS LEAVES JAX JACKSON BROKEN-HEARTED, A CLOSE SOURCE REVEALS.

At a concert in New York last week, Jax called Jordan on stage and asked her to marry him. She hesitated before turning Jax down and running off stage. The paparazzi have not seen her since. There have been ‘sightings’ all around the country and even some in Europe.

And all this time, she’s been on the east coast, ending in little Springbrook Hills.

I guess that makes her nerves about being found by the press more understandable. From what I can see, there is a Jordan Daniels tip line for the more prominent tabloids, searching for where they can find the would-be queen for the country star’s reign. So, it’s no wonder she’s nervous about being seen and flooded by the press.

It isn’t long before I fall down a rabbit hole of current and past articles. It seems she lived a perfect life as a trophy girlfriend. Constantly dressed perfectly, lunching with celebrities, shopping, hitting spas, and exclusive nightclubs. She had everything, and where she isn’t smiling and waving at paparazzi doing day-to-day tasks, she’s glowing, dressed to the nines at award shows on Jackson’s arm. It’s hard to believe any woman would turn down someone like him, turn down that life. But to do so, so incredibly publicly after having dated for seven years? It just doesn’t make sense. Something doesn’t add up.

I pull my dinner closer as I pick at it, completely caught up in finding out more about this woman. Born and raised in Vegas, I already knew. She’s an only child to Regina Daniels (ha), who raised her daughter as a single mom and put her through dance lessons by working long nights on the strip. *What does that mean?*

Jordan met Jax at a club when she was 20, and according to Jax, it was love at first sight. They’ve been inseparable since. He calls her his ‘muse.’ I try to suppress a gag at that one. According to her Wikipedia page, she helps manage the tour and acts as his PA, but there’s no commentary from her on the relationship, an interesting fact.

Fuck, the woman has a goddamn Wikipedia page.

Looking at the press photos of the two, which are infinite, I pick them apart with a fine-tooth comb. Because I’m insane and need to do this to... what? Get her out of my system? Appease some kind of sick curiosity? Regardless, a few things stand out and make me... uneasy.

In photos at events, she's never alone. She's always on the arm of Jax or sitting with his bandmates, his manager, or his publicist.

In photos the press catches candidly, she's *always* alone. At the beach, at a park, shopping, eating dinner. She's nearly *always* alone. In the hundreds of images of her 'out in the wild,' maybe two percent have Jax. And I'm no expert, but that two percent looks pretty damn staged.

What could it mean, though? He's a busy man, I'm sure. It's probably normal.

But why does it scream "red flag" to me? And why the fuck do I even care? This woman is infuriating. She clearly likes to stir the pot, loves attention, and she's my best friend's newfound sister.

Even as I ask myself these questions, I know what it is about her. The voice in the back of my mind knows which aspect of the little I know of her story intrigues me. Why a woman who could have had it all with some star but turned it down interests me.

Courtney.

Courtney, who, even though she accepted my ring and planned a life with me, ran off with a band to live wild.

Leaving me behind.

I don't talk about it or dwell on it, but I thought she would be it back then. She would be forever. God, everyone did. Everyone thought we'd be the story the town would talk about, the couple that met in high school, stayed here, raised their family, grew old here. But... that wasn't what she wanted.

Suddenly, I reach out and slam the top of my laptop closed, no longer liking the memories this is dragging up. Memories I meticulously filed away years ago... None of it changes the fact Jordan will probably be signing on soon as my part-time office assistant. With that in mind, I pick up my phone to call Hunter.

"Hey man, how'd surveying Autumn's go?" Hunter asks when he answers his cell.

"Fine, I already sent over a quote to them. So it shouldn't be too difficult once they get the okay from the town."

"Good, thanks for doing that, man. So it all went well?"

"Yeah, I mean, I uh, I bumped into Jordan," I say, a hand going behind my neck to scratch at the skin there.

"Oh yeah? Did you ask her about the job?"

“No, I uh, I didn’t get the chance.”

“Why not?” He’s confused, and rightfully so. I pause, unsure of how to proceed. She *is* his sister. As is my way, I go with the truth.

“Okay, so, I walk in, right? And she’s laying there tanning fuckin’ topless. I didn’t expect to see anyone there, and she has no shame in her body.” Not that the woman should be by any stretch of the imagination. “But I spent the entire time I was there avoiding eye contact with her tits, and she spent the whole time testing me and trying to make me even more uncomfortable. So I got out of there as soon as I could.”

Once I tell my tale, Hunter is silent for a moment. Anxiety rumbles in me as I get up and walk to my fridge to grab a beer, popping the top all through his silence.

And then he busts out laughing.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he asks when he catches his breath. “Oh, my God, this is priceless.”

“Bro, it wasn’t funny. It was so uncomfortable. I was there to do a job. And now, all I can think about is if she takes the job, I’ll have seen my office assistant’s tits.” And fuck if they weren’t pretty ones. My mind fights with my body, trying to remember this woman needs this job, and I need her to work it. Remind me the last thing I need is another wild woman throwing a wrench in my plans.

“Oh, it’s hilarious. God, I can totally picture it.”

“She’s your sister, you sick fuck.”

“Fuck off. I’m not picturing her boobs, you creep.” I am—perfectly round, with small, rosy nipples. The perfect size to just fill my hands with their weight. Every move she made had them swaying gently as I talked to her and - fuck. I reach down to try and adjust myself as I take a long pull from my beer, once again trying to remember she *may be my employee*.

This attraction probably wouldn’t be an issue if I’d actually seen a pair of tits in the last year. But I’ve been so fucking focused on getting this business back on stable ground, I’ve done nothing but work. Occasionally, Hunter convinces me to go out with him and Hannah, but even those nights are far and few between. I just don’t have time or energy for a woman right now, even when my body is dying for a warm body in my bed.

A bed in a shit trailer at a construction site.

Reason number two I can’t go around picking up women.

“Either way, don’t tell Autumn about what happened, will you?” It’s then I realize Hunter was still talking while I’ve been thinking about Jordan and how fucking badly I need to get laid.

“What? Why?”

“Like I just said, she’s not too happy with the idea of Jordan being here, much less in her backyard. I’ll talk with Jordan, but if Autumn finds out she’s tanning topless in her yard, she’ll lose it. Hannah worked her magic to get Aut to agree, but it only goes so far. She’s already told me if Jordan does anything which could be a ‘bad influence’ to the girls, she’s out.”

That makes sense. It’s a bit harsh, considering the girls were definitely at school while she was out back and not a soul was home, but it is her home, and she makes the rules.

Still, before I can think twice about it, I’m defending her. “Honestly, it wasn’t her fault. She didn’t think anyone was home, definitely didn’t think I’d be coming in. The gate was locked. I scared the shit out of her when I came in; she thought I was paparazzi trying to get a shot. Threatened to call the cops.”

“Tony would have loved that call,” Hunter says, his mind exactly where I was. “Interesting you’re defending the woman you say was making fun of you all afternoon.”

“Not defending her,” I say, trying to save face. What *was* I doing, though? “Just feel bad for the girl, don’t want her to get kicked out. Either way, I won’t talk to Autumn or Steve about it.”

“Oh, I’m totally telling Steve. He doesn’t give a shit, thinks Aut is being a bit extreme, and he’ll find this damn hilarious.” Even though no one is here to see it, I can feel the burn on my face at the knowledge yet another person is going to know about this mishap.

“Fuck you, Hunter.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll go call Jordan now - give her the description you sent to me and see if she thinks it would work.”

“Great. Can you shoot me a text, either way? Let me know what to expect? If she’s ready to start tomorrow, I’ll be at the site all day. She can come at 8:30, we can figure out the sign-on paperwork, and I’ll start showing her the ropes.”

“Will do. Thanks again, man. I appreciate you helping.”

“In the perfect world, we’ll all benefit from this. No need to thank me.” I hang up and finish my cold dinner.

An hour later, I get a text from an unknown number.

Unknown: See you at 8:30 sharp tomorrow, boss man. I'll make sure to wear a shirt this time. -J

I am so fucked.

SIX

-jordan-

“KNOCK, KNOCK!” The doorknob to the tiny cottage I’m staying in jiggles but doesn’t open since it’s locked. “It’s locked. Why is it locked?”

“Normal people in the rest of the world lock doors.”

“Do you think she’s home?” A familiar voice asks.

“Sade, she has no car, and the lights are on. Where else would she be?”

“Some people like exploring and having fun, Hannah. Unlike you.”

“I like to have fun!” A voice I now realize as Hannah’s says, clearly offended.

“Whatever, sure you do.” I make my way over from reading on the couch to the front door and open it. The cottage is adorable, painted serene light green with a super girly bedroom complete with a canopy bed, a flowery wallpapered accent wall, and light pink paint. The house is perfect for one person, but the impeccable gardening, already apparent though it’s just barely spring, is the real show stopper. Spring bulbs line the entryway, while the back showcases a small oasis that has been created around a gorgeous fire pit.

I absolutely love this place.

“Hey guys,” I say as I open the door to see Hannah and Sadie’s smiling faces. Sadie towers over Hannah in high heels, dark jeans, and a loose, sparkly tank, while Hannah looks cute and relaxed in booties and a knee-length, long sleeve sweater dress. Even though the olive green material covers nearly every inch of her body, she looks fantastic.

“Jordan!” Sadie yells, arms going into the air and pulling me in for a hug. I stagger back with her weight, and my eyes go wide looking at Hannah. Then, awkwardly, I put my arms around her to repay the hug.

“Uh, hey, Sadie.” She lets go before stepping back, her hands holding mine and looking over my outfit, a comfy, matching pink tie-dye sweatsuit.

“Go get dressed. We’re going out. Introduce Springbrook Hills to you.”

“Sadie, babe, you’re scaring her,” Hannah says, putting a hand on Sadie’s shoulder and pulling her back. “Hey, Jordan, nice to see you again. We’re here to see if you want to go to Full Moon with us. Low key, nothing crazy.”

“Uh, I, uh,” I stutter, unsure of what to say.

“No choice. You’re coming,” Sadie says, heels clicking as she walks into the bedroom. “I’ll pick out your clothes; you go brush your hair.”

“Sorry, she’s... she’s like this. She means well. And we really do want you to come out with us! There’s no band at Full Moon, so it’ll be super chill, and Luna - she’s another friend, owns Full Moon Cafe - is dying to meet you. You’ll love her.” My eyes are still wide, trying to process the information.

For seven years, my ‘friends’ have come in the form of hangers-on, tour groupies, makeup and hair artists, and roadies. The only time I was invited to something was when it could benefit them. If they could get closer to a band, get their names on something. I was either Jax’s girl or a step to further their career to the people around me. Or both.

Having these women I met days ago welcome me with open arms starts to overwhelm me with an unfamiliar feeling. Before it can come to fruition, I stamp it down quickly.

There’s only one thing to do.

“Okay,” I say before I follow Hannah into the bedroom, where Sadie is already digging through my exploded suitcase on the ground.

“So you’re the long-lost sister, huh?” Luna asks as she places a Jack and Coke in front of me. *God, when was the last time I had something like this?* I bring the small cocktail straw to my lips and take a long, satisfying sip. She laughs, watching me. But if you’ve had every meal, every drink, every workout planned for you for years, drinking a non-diet version of what *you* ordered is... everything. “Good?”

“Yeah. I needed this, thank you. And yes, that’s me. The long-lost sister.” I’m still unclear if it’s a good title to have, but regardless, it’s mine now.

“How has that been going?” Luna has the vibe mirrored in many bartenders I’ve met over the years at venues all across the country. She leans onto the weathered wood bar top with her forearms, giving the impression she’s all mine, ready to listen to whatever I’m willing to reveal.

I like her immediately.

Unlike two-thirds of the bartenders I’ve met, Luna has an air of utter happiness about her, like she is entirely content with her life and where she is in it. Part is probably because she actually *owns* this bar instead of just working it. But the other reason is definitely the man on the other side who keeps staring at her ass. She’s stopped over there a few times to chat, and the smile that’s graced her gorgeous face was stunning each time.

“It’s uh, well, it’s going,” I say, trying to be honest but also not give it all away. After years of living with a mask on, I know to guard what I say and reveal at all costs. As I answer, both Sadie and Hannah slide into stools on either side of me.

“What’s going?” Sadie asks, and I’m coming to find she is the nosy one of the bunch. It’s not in an annoying way, just in a ‘says what everyone else is thinking’ way.

“Jordan’s introduction to the Hutchins family. Being the long-lost baby sister.”

“Ahh,” Hannah says, a motherly, knowing look in her eyes.

“It’s not going well?” Sadie asks.

“It’s not going... bad?” Sadie throws her head back in a laugh I can’t help but smile at. “It hasn’t been long, and I dropped all of this in their laps. I didn’t know what to expect, coming here like this, but a place to stay and open arms are more than I could have hoped for.”

“Autumn... she isn’t sure,” Hannah says with a sigh, confirming my suspicions.

“What? What’s not to be sure about? She’s Rosie in 20 years,” Luna says, looking me over.

“She’s sure of who Jordan is. She just isn’t sure about the whole situation. Autumn’s a tough cookie; you know that. She loves everyone, but if she thinks it could have any chance of impacting her family? She’s a mama bear. Remember when she and Steve almost kicked out Hunter

because he broke my heart?" Sadie and Luna nod while I sit there with shocked wide eyes.

"Long story, we'll tell you another time," Hannah says, taking in my expression.

"Yeah, and we'll tell you about the time a stalker kidnaped Luna." Sadie says with a smile.

"I'm sorry, what?" I say in shock, looking over at Luna.

"Stop, you're scaring the poor girl," she says, throwing a cherry at her friend. It hits her in the forehead and bounces to the bar top, where she picks it up and eats it with a shrug, winking at Luna.

"Ew, Sadie. You're so gross," Hannah shouts at her friend. God, these women are too much. I'm jealous of the apparent bond they have.

"So, what does Hunter think of this all?" Sadie asks, ignoring her friend's reaction. It's strange how they're talking like I'm not here, but I won't be complaining. Not when I'm just as intrigued by the answer as Luna and Sadie.

"I think if you had caught Hunter one year ago, pre-me," Hannah starts with a sassy fluff to her hair, "He'd have a different response. If he had one at all, to be honest. But now? I think he just sees it as another way to build his family. Of course, it helps bribed him into seeing the good in it." The girls all laugh, all of us able to deduce what a bribe from Hannah would look like.

"Look," Sadie starts, looking at me. "Autumn can be tough, but she's fair. She's trying to protect herself and her family. And to be honest, she probably has some hurt feelings over your mom. I mean, she left them when they were young, and then you got her your whole life."

"It's not like she was the mom of the year," I mumble, a reel of shitty childhood moments flowing through my mind.

"Doesn't matter. I had a shit mom, but I'm pretty sure if I didn't, if I were saved from that, I would still always wonder what if. What would have happened, what could have happened." She stops talking and eyes me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I don't know you, don't know your story. I'm sorry you had a shit mom. But, trust me, one day, we can get drunk and commiserate over our crappy birth-givers. I'm just trying to explain where Autumn might be coming from, you know?"

I did, of course, because I was living both sides of it in a way. A shit mom who held me to some invisible standard and was never truly there, and

a father who ran as soon as the test came back positive. “I get it.”

“Okay, enough of this negative stuff. What do you think of our little town so far, Jordan?” Sadie cuts the tension, and for that, I’m eternally grateful.

“So far, so good. You guys are awesome. The town is cute, lots of cool places to hang out,” I pause, wondering if I should open up. “What’s up with that guy Tanner?”

“Tanner? Like Tanner Coleman?” Luna asks, her interest piqued.

I didn’t get his full name. Darkish hair, ridiculously tall, hella built?” I tick off the attributes and mentally fight the flutter in my belly at the thought.

I can’t deny the man is gorgeous. And the way I so easily flustered him makes him all the more interesting to me after living in a world of men who deem nonchalance the utmost ‘alpha’ behavior.

“Yeah, that’s Tanner. What about him?” Luna asks, leaning in once again after serving a drink. Her immediate interest makes me wonder if there’s something between them.

“He caught me topless this morning,” I say without hesitation. Hannah leans back, shock on her face, and Luna’s eyes go wide. But it’s Sadie who throws her head back with a huge belly laugh, drawing attention to us.

“Oh my God, no way! Tanner?! What happened? How? What did he say?!” Her voice is a delighted shriek.

“Bring your damn voice down, and I’ll tell you. I don’t need the entire bar knowing about this,” I say, a light punch to her arm. I already feel a kinship with Sadie, considering she’s lived the life before, and she’s been so open-armed with her friendship.

“Okay, fine, tell us!” she says quieter this time, leaning in. Luna and Hannah, now recovered from their shock, lean in too.

“It wasn’t a big deal. I was out back, tanning, since I had nothing to do. No one was home, so I figured I was fine. I was on my stomach, not like, flaunting it. He comes in and scares me. So I sat up and flashed him.”

“Shut up, what did he say!?”

“Well, I started shouting at him because I thought he might be trying to take photos to leak to a tabloid. Eventually, he explained, but he was kind of a jerk about it and uncomfortable with my being there, topless. So…”

“So what?!”

“So I tanned topless and flirted shamelessly for the next hour while he was there taking measurements....” At the time, I was almost proud of that, finding myself hilarious. Loving the slight blush on his cheeks, the effort he took to not look at me. I have this new freedom I’ve never known, the freedom to take control of what I do and with who.

I can’t deny I also enjoyed the fact I was enticing him, distracting him. I can’t tell you the last time I felt attractive to a man.

But now, telling the story to the girls, I feel embarrassed and ashamed. The poor guy was just trying to do his job, and I made it more complicated.

“Shut the fuck up,” Luna says, a mumble under her breath, eyes wide as can be.

“Hell yeah, girl!” Sadie whoops.

“Oh dear Lord,” Hannah says, her voice just louder than a whisper.

“It was a shitty thing to do, but he was so flustered and annoyed. But now...” I start, and I feel my face already beginning to flush at the idea.

“Now what?”

“Now I found out he might be my new boss.” My head clunks on the bar. The sound can be heard even over the crowd chatting. It’s what the girls called a ‘slow’ night at the bar, but there are still a ton of people laughing and drinking here. I wonder what a busy night is like. “He needs an office assistant, and Hunter talked to him about it. I go in tomorrow to see if it would work.” Hunter came by earlier this evening to spread the news. For a moment, I nearly told him no, but then I remembered how much I needed this job...

“Shut up.”

“Oh my God, Hunter mentioned something about that!” Hannah shouts, slapping my arms excitedly. “No way!”

“So your new boss saw your tits.” This one is from Sadie, and my head is forced to raise and glare at her.

“Oh my God, my new boss saw my tits,” I say, dropping my head once again, and everyone laughs—everyone but me. “And I’m totally into him. Have you seen his back?” The words are mumbled to the wood as I reminisce, watching his muscled back move under his shirt as he walked around the property measuring.

“Who wouldn’t be into him?” I hear from Sadie.

“Jordan, it’s going to be fine. I promise. Tanner’s a good guy. And from what Hunter tells me, he needs the help.” Hannah says, rubbing my back.

“Oh, so he’ll accept any employee, even if they show their boobs to them off the clock?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind showing Tanner my boobs if it means I could see some of his parts. He’s fiiiine,” Sadie says, waving a hand at her. “Not my type, though. Too much of a good boy. Town’s golden boy, ya know?”

“Golden boy?”

“Yeah, you know. Homecoming king, quarterback, dated the head cheerleader. He took over his dad’s business when it got to be too much. Volunteers for all of the things. Fuck, if it weren’t for Hunter, I’d try to hook him up with Hannah. They’d be a good pair.”

“He is pretty cute,” Hannah says. Sadie cocks an eyebrow at her, and Hannah blushes. “You tell Hunter that, I’ll let Rosie pick your bridesmaid’s dress.” Instead of responding, Sadie just laughs.

“Seriously, Jordan, I’m sure it will be fine.”

“I hope so,” I say before finishing my drink. Famous last words. `

SEVEN

-jordan-

SLAMMING the door to the cab I took to the worksite, I mentally calculate the tip and compare it against what's remaining in my wallet. The wallet which was pretty well depleted before I even got to Springbrook Hills.

When you date a star, you don't need a paying job. In fact, my 'job' was to sit on Jax's arm at events, smile prettily, and keep my mouth shut. He paid for everything. Even though I worked for him as his personal assistant and tour manager, I never received an official paycheck deposited in the bank. This was brought to shocking clarity when the black AmEx I was given for whatever I wanted declined at my first stop. The 'joint' bank account I tried to access when I left New York was closed. I've been afraid to try any other source of money I might have that's tied to him, since every time I've done so, hours later, the press magically is talking about an 'anonymous tip' and showing up where I was just an hour earlier.

He's looking for me. Jax and his team are looking for me. They need me to come back, to play my part the way I was trained. Everyone is wondering where I am, what I'm doing, what I'm thinking, ditching Jax on stage.

But they don't know the truth, the whole story.

And I can't defend myself.

Looking around the worksite, I try to figure out where I should go. There are men all around in hard hats and safety vests, all seeming to know exactly where *they're* going and doing. Machinery litters the area, some small, some bigger than three of me. A brand new building stands in the distance, clearly the project's focus. They wrapped a large sign in

cellophane, but I can faintly read “Camp Sunshine” in bright, sunny yellow letters.

A man walks by me, and I wave to grab his attention. “Hi, hey, excuse me?” He stops, looking at me before giving me a not-so-subtle head to toe. I’m dressed as well as I can, considering my wardrobe is a bit lacking. My extensive collection of designer clothes didn’t make it on this... adventure with me. My only jeans without rips are a pair of dark skinny jeans and I paired them with a loose white peasant tee with pretty silver thread woven throughout. I pinned my long red hair half up, half down to keep it from my face and brown booties are on my feet, adding two inches to my short frame. I made the conscious decision to cover my body as much as possible without looking like I was trying to do just that.

“Hey, sweetness, how can I help you?” the man says, and he’s kind of cute, Dark skin, a gorgeous white smile, lean build.

“I’m looking for Tanner? Uh, Mr. Coleman? I uh, I have an interview.” God, why am I like this?

“An interview, huh? You gonna help finish the project with us?” He’s flirting, but my stomach is churning already from nerves, knowing I need this job, knowing I may have already fucked it up beyond belief.

“Office Manager? I’m looking to help in the, uh, office.”

“Oh, well, let me walk you over-”

“Jacobs, get back to work. I’ll take it from here.” A deep, familiar voice interrupts the man, and he nods before walking off. It’s not a flustered or embarrassed retreat but one of a man who knows when to give in. I turn to see Tanner not far behind me, dressed in worn-in denim jeans, a tight, fitted white tee shirt, and a safety vest. A hard hat dangles from his fingers. Long, thick fingers that-

Jesus Christ, Dani. Get it the fuck together.

I have already fucked this up so bad. These thoughts are so far from where I should be. No matter how well he fills out a pair of jeans or how perfectly his chest stretches a plain tee shirt.

“Tanner, hey. I was, uh, just looking for you.” Oh God, I can feel the burn of a deep scarlet blush on my face.

“Follow me.” His voice is gruff and reserved, like I’m just another potential employee and not some woman who repeatedly flashed him yesterday. That’s good, right? I follow him, navigating the gravel lot in my

heeled booties and reminding myself if I get this job, a pair of flat boots is on my 'must buy' list.

We head to a large silver mobile office trailer with a plaque reading 'OFFICE' plastered across the top of the door. He opens it, holding the door for me, and I step up the two metal stairs and into the trailer.

And... it's a disaster.

Two tiny desks sit inside, covered in stacks of papers, files, receipts, and other business paraphernalia. My palms immediately itch to organize it all, find a place for each necessary piece, and trash the rest. The table must be used as a break area is stacked with donut boxes and one of those to-go boxes of coffee with the logo for Sadie's coffee shop stamped on the side.

While the rest of the space is clean in the sense it's not grimy and dirty, it's clear Tanner has fallen behind on all things administrative.

"So... this is the office," Tanner says, a hand scratching the back of his neck. "Obviously. It's just been me for about three years. Managing everything. We have a bookkeeper I meet with once a month, but everything regarding schedules, purchase orders, billing, and employees goes through me."

"You need help," I say, walking over to one of the piles and lifting a folder. The receipt on top is from four months ago, and the folder has a sticky note indicating these receipts have not been inputted or filed.

"No shit." He's annoyed. I turn to him, folder in my hands, and I actually *look* at him for the first time. The man is gorgeous - that much is irrefutable. But underneath the shock of that, he's damn tired. I don't know what his story is, what's up with this business other than what the girls filled me in on - but it's draining him. "I didn't mean it in a bad way. I mean, you need *my* help."

"Look, Jordan, I know you're Hunter's... sister. Or whatever. And I know you're in a jam. But I'm not sure about this. I can't train or babysit a new employee - I need someone who-"

"I can do it," I say, sure of myself. I can, too. This is where I thrive, the mess in the chaos of it all. I could happily lose myself for weeks getting this office together.

"I'm sure you could, but--"

"No, really. I basically managed the tour. Managed all of my ex's finances, which were astronomical since he had high expenses to pay for. Scheduled all of his appointments, checked in with the arenas before we

arrived, made sure everything went smoothly.” Of course, I did more than that, spent seven years as what I’m now seeing was an unpaid worker who fucked my boss rather than a girlfriend.

“That’s great, but-“

“Seriously, Tanner. I have my AA in business management. It’s not much, and it’s pretty old, but I have it. I can show you. *I’m not sure how since I’ve shut off any device can track me*, I think. “I can do this. Please. I need this job, Tanner. I know I fucked up messing with you yesterday. I was a bitch, but in my defense, I’ve been through a shit ton this last week or two, and you completely surprised me. But I can do this. Give me two weeks. Let me prove myself. If you don’t think it’s a good fit after, I’ll quit. You won’t even have to fire me. I’ll tell Hunter it was on me.”

My gut clenches as he stares at me, taking me in, reading what’s in my eyes. He’s trying to sift out the truth, but that’s all I have. That’s all I am anymore, no more facade left to hide behind.

When I left, I swore to myself I’d live by two new philosophies if nothing else. No more lies, and never let another person take advantage of me again.

The silence between us is heavy, so dense I feel like if I reach out, the oily feeling will coat my fingers. If I take a step forward, it will be like slogging through mud to get to the door.

“Look. I need this job. It’s embarrassing to admit, but I’ve got no car, nowhere to live. I’m forced to live with my sister who hates me for our mother’s sins. Forced to dump myself on a family who didn’t know I existed two weeks ago. I have *nothing*. I need this job, I-” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Fine. One month. There’s not much change you can make in two weeks, and I’m fair, I want to give you a fair shot. You plan on sticking around for a while, right? At least a month?” He’s the first person to ask me that. To ask not why I’m here but for how long. He’s the first person to put the ball in my court, to give me the chance to decide my life. Maybe for the first time in seven years.

I pause, trying to sift through my thoughts and emotions. Trying to make a decision. But it’s simple.

“Yeah. I’m staying. I’m starting over here.”

EIGHT

-tanner-

I'M STARTING OVER.

The words pound in my mind hours after the site shuts down for the night. Hours after Jordan has left. Hours after I showed her the computer system, helped her log in, got her set up with an employee file. Hours after I left her with a stack of filing folders, I came back to find the piles and piles of documents organized into neat boxes with hanging file folders.

I'm starting over.

Who would want to start over when they lived her life? The life of luxury, in the spotlight? Living a life of excitement and constant travel? Sure, that would be exhausting for some, but Jordan doesn't seem the type. Instead, she seems the type to thrive on chaos.

I'm starting over.

They're the exact words Courtney said to me when she left all those years ago. When I found her in our apartment, bags packed, waiting for me to get home from the site. When she told me she was leaving, following the man she'd been cheating on me with for six months, going to live a life of excitement, of travel, of adventure.

When she told me she couldn't stay in this small town, our home. It was suffocating her.

I was suffocating her.

I shake my head to knock those thoughts out, needing to get over it, moving to other more productive ones.

But instead, it shifts to thoughts about Jordan.

She stayed in the office all day, from 8 a.m. when she got here a half-hour early, until six-thirty when I told her she could head out. Then she asked if she could borrow my phone to call a cab. Of course, when I saw her getting dropped off, I didn't even think she didn't have a ride home.

"I'll take you home," I said, grabbing my keys off the now clear counter.

"Tanner, no, that's not necessary. It's late. You've been working all day." She wrung her hands like the whole situation was making her anxious. God, I hate to admit it, but she's damn cute. Fuck.

"Jordan. No arguing. Get in my truck. I'll take you to Autumn's."

"Seriously, it's not necessary."

"Truck. Now." We were at a stalemate, staring each other down, and I saw it click in her eyes. Going from anxious and nervous she'd rock the boat to determination flitting through them to stubborn resolve.

"I'm gonna get a cab home. Now, if you could let me borrow your cell, that would be a huge help."

"No."

"Fine, then move over, and I'll ask one of the men to borrow their phones before they leave." Her hands went to her hips in full-on attitude mode. God, if I didn't know she was her aunt, I would think she was Rosie's mom. The sass must come from her mom's side.

For some unhinged reason, the thought of her going out to ask one of my men, men who spent more time in the office trailer than they have in the entirety of this job today, checking out the new office manager? It made me feel things I should not be feeling. Not for an employee. Not for a woman who needs a wild adventure. Not for fuckin' Jordan Daniels.

But when I saw Jacobs flirting with her this morning, I damn near lost my mind. He's a player, always ready to flirt, always coming in with some story of ass he's tapped. I could have let him take her to me, could have waited for her. Fuck, I should have. But instead, I gave him a look that said everything I didn't want it to say- mostly, step the fuck back and stay away from her.

"If you don't get in my damn truck right now, I'm carrying you there."

"You're joking."

"Try me," I said, and honestly, the thought of carrying her tiny frame to my truck kicking and screaming was kind of appealing in a fucked up way.

She must have seen it because she screwed up her face like she smelled something sour and rolled her eyes before grabbing her bag, marching towards my truck.

The entire drive to Autumn's was silent until I parked in the small gravel lot which leads to the back of Autumn's house and the small cottage that used to be Hannah's.

"I'll be here tomorrow at eight."

"What?"

"Pickin' you up."

"Tanner, that's not necessary. I can take a cab."

"Be ready at eight."

"Tanner."

"Jordan, I've had a long fuckin' day. You're a good worker. Got more done than I have in five years. For the love of God, let me save you the \$15 and pick you up. I pass this way each morning to get coffee for the guys. Won't add anything to my day." It's a lie. I get the guys coffee and donuts from Sadie's place once a week to soften the blow of a Monday. But I guess for the time being until she can find a ride of her own, I'll be picking her up and getting coffee.

I'm not sure why the thought made me feel relief and a burst of warmth, but I'm determined not to overthink it. She stared at me.

"You really don't mind?" The words reveal hope in her voice.

I knew it. The cab fares each day would cut. It seems crazy, but it's clear Jordan has little to no money right now. Which is fucked considering her ex and how much work it sounds like she did for him. Unless she spent everything on fancy clothes and expensive spa days, which from photos seemed feasible...

"Wouldn't offer if I did,"

"Okay then. I'm kind of in a jam, so I'll take the offer. But I owe you."

"Organize my chaos, and we're even." With that, she smiled, the first full, genuine smile I've seen from her, and fuck, it lit up the entire truck.

"Okay, Tanner. I'll see you tomorrow," she said, her voice soft, before opening the door and running out to the little cottage. My eyes didn't leave her ass the whole time.

Now, I'm lying on my tiny bed in the too-small trailer I've lived in since I decided to cut my pay to fix the company's books. The decision left me with the option of running through my savings at lighting speed or living here and, eventually, continuing to save some. I chose the obvious answer.

Sacrifice for a few months, a year. Save for a house instead of a shit apartment downtown. Take a pay cut so my men wouldn't and have the ability to give myself time to figure out the backend of the business and how to make it profitable. Make it so I'm not up late at night trying to calculate how much is in the bank and how many outstanding bills there are. Unfortunately, it took longer than anticipated. Six months flew, and I took no paycheck for myself, living off savings. Then we were a bit more comfortable, and I started working for minimum wage. But nearly three years later, I'm still in this trailer.

While this business thrived for years, when the recession hit, it hit us hard. Unfortunately, Dad didn't take the time to scale back. Like me, he refused to lay off a single man, even if it meant he was paying them without any jobs to complete. Add on general maintenance and life span of equipment, insurance, and taxes, and when it was handed to me after my brother declined the offer, our family business was hanging by a thread. When I finally dug in, it was clear this business was way worse than I'd been aware of.

This was never my plan. This was always supposed to be my brother Ben's company. The company goes from father to the first son. It has been for three generations. When I realized as a kid this wouldn't be my responsibility, and I could work here and travel and live my life without stress, I was relieved.

Ben told Dad he wouldn't be taking on the family business, and it shook everyone. It was always supposed to be him. He was the golden son, the perfect heir. But my dad didn't watch or pay attention because when Ben hit high school, it was clear to everyone he met his passion was art. He'd scribble detailed images in the margins of notebooks. His teachers all said he was creative with his head in the clouds. When he discovered his passion for tattooing, that was it. I knew he'd pass on the business and break my father's heart.

And then it was begrudgingly left to me. I could either take on the company, save the family business or let the tradition die with me.

I couldn't do that to my dad. So I took it over when he was ready to retire, and since I took it over, it's been an endlessly stressful life, constantly jumping through hoops and praying I'll make it out alive.

With Jordan on board and finally organizing everything, my hope is I'll be able to find where to cut things, where we can grow, and how to once and for all dig us out of this hole.

But tonight, instead of thinking about bills and business plans like I do every night, all I see when I close my eyes is Jordan's ass swaying in those dark jeans as she walked to the cottage.

NINE

-jordan-

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm sitting out on the front step of the cottage with an eye on the gravel driveway, waiting for Tanner's truck to pull in. I feel like a kid waiting for the school bus to pick her up on the first day of school, and I'm probably just as nervous.

I'm nervous I'll fuck this up, or I won't be able to help Tanner. But everything I said to him about my experience is true. I haven't held a traditional job in over seven years, not since Jax told me to quit my job as a barista and come on tour with him. But I still worked, managing finances and creating his budgets.

He wasn't big then - playing small venues and clubs around Vegas, but he finally booked a tour as an opening act for a big star. He said he needed me to come with him or he couldn't do it. Deep in my gut, I knew this was it, his chance to be a star.

This is an excellent time to mention I'm a hopeless romantic at heart. I've read the books, seen the movies, and trust I deserve that kind of story deep in my soul. After seeing the exact opposite, I convinced myself I'd get my fairytale as a little girl. At 20, the idea my boyfriend found me to be his muse and said he couldn't follow his dream without me was intoxicating. So I said yes. And I traveled the country and then the world with him, visiting every state in the US at least once, seeing big cities and small towns.

Somewhere, buried in a closet under clothes I never wanted and shoes I didn't need, is a scrapbook I started the first year. It's packed with photos of

us standing in front of monuments and landmarks, exploring together, growing together. I meticulously chose and printed images, lovingly adding them to the book with cute little captions like, ‘Grand Canyon with the love of my life!’ At the time, I had some romantic idea of showing it off to our kids, the first year Mommy and Daddy traveled the world, the year our lives changed.

I never finished it, and it lays there only half-filled with photos of the two of us smiling.

I stopped filling it when he decided he was too big to do tourist things, too important to spend his day off exploring with his girlfriend. Instead, he’d rather drink or party, or, my favorite, ‘meet his fans.’

I wonder absentmindedly where that scrapbook is now. If Jax found it, if he threw it out. Maybe his team found it. Maybe they sold it to the highest bidder to show how happy we were once, how I threw it all away like a careless bitch. But to me, it has always been a testament to why I stayed. Things were good once.

Until they... weren’t.

As I sit contemplating my life, the choices and mistakes I’ve made along the way, gravel crunches under tires, and the front of Tanner’s truck comes into view as he makes it up the small hill. Walking over to the passenger’s side with my way-too-fancy bag on my shoulder, Tanner leans over, unlocking and pushing open the door of the old-as-dirt truck.

With an ease born from years of hopping into many vehicles in heels, dresses, and gowns, I plant one heeled bootie in the footwell and pull myself up with the handle. Looking at Tanner, he has a quirked eyebrow and a slight smile on his lips. He might even be impressed by me. I wink.

“I’ve had to lug myself into many vehicles over the years, sometimes in heels.” If he’s searched my name, he probably knows Jax is known for his ridiculous trucks, usually lifted with big tires, flags flapping in the wind. Anything to fit the country boy image he worked so hard to curate...

“I see that,” he says, and the smile has been replaced with a scowl. Fuck, how have I already done something wrong? Instead of trying to determine where I went awry, I busy myself with buckling and settling my bag at my feet.

“You get a cell yet?” he asks after we’ve been silent for a few minutes on our drive into town to hit Rise and Grind.

“No, I haven’t made it to a store yet. Also need to, uh, you know....” I feel awkward explaining this. After years of having money held over my head as a way to keep me in line, talking about it freely is uncomfortable at best.

“Have to what?”

“Get paid. I need to wait for my first check to show I have a real job.” I say the words quietly, embarrassment burning my cheeks. I tried to call a store last night using the landline in the cottage. I’m shocked it still works. But it turns out, when you haven’t had a job in seven years and have no real money to your name, they want to know if you can actually pay the phone bill when it comes. The sweet lady I spoke with was kind about it, but she told me I needed a paystub to get a phone plan. So I’ll need to wait.

Even then, once I have the money, I’m not sure if I’ll go the traditional route. That requires someone to input my information, a credit check. But, from what I’ve learned in the past two weeks, if you have money and the will, you can find absolutely anybody if they’re connected to a system.

“Didn’t you already have a phone plan? Just need a new one, right?” Shit. He is too attentive.

“Yeah, but it’s technically under my ex’s name. So I need to start my own.” Okay, simple answer, Don’t elaborate.

“Hmm,” he says, his face contemplative. Embarrassed, I look out the window at the passing scenery. It’s spring, and the numerous trees that seem to take up every square inch of town without a home are sprouting leaves and sweet, perfumed flowers. It’s a gorgeous sight.

This town is similar and unlike any of those I’ve traveled to over the years. It’s not what you’d expect when you hear ‘small town in New Jersey.’ There’s no hustle and bustle, no Tony Soprano. No crazy pollution or busy highways. Most of the roads outside of the downtown are long and windy, tree-lined with the occasional house dotting the landscape.

But the landscape is gorgeous, with tons of trees, small creeks, and a river that cuts through the town, spring flowers blooming everywhere. I’ve seen more wildlife in Autumn’s backyard than I ever saw in the desert, cute woodland creatures of the deer, bunny, and fox variety.

Tanner pulls into Rise and Grind’s parking lot at the center of town, and I give Sadie a good morning wave as we walk in. We chat while she makes the box of coffee and sorts out the baked goods. When we walked in, she

seemed shocked and confused to see Tanner, which I found... strange. He's here every morning.

She hands over the coffee and donuts as we leave, but not before she hands me a tall, warm cup.

"Latte for you," she says with a wink.

"Oh, I couldn't, let me pay at least," I say, reaching for my wallet, mentally calculating how much I have.

"Nope, Tanner already got it." The smile on her face cracks it nearly in half with its size and almost blinds me with the shine. This chick might be insane. I turn to Tanner, but he grabs my arm, pulling me out the door,

"Bye, Sadie, thanks!" I shout over my shoulder. "You didn't have to do that, Tanner."

"It's a coffee, not a diamond ring," he says, placing the treasures in the backseat while I slide into the passenger's side. It makes the car smell like sugar and yeast and cinnamon and coffee, the combination absolutely divine.

He slams the door and pulls off, driving towards the worksite, and I sip my coffee in silence. "After work today, I'll take you into town. Put you on the company's plan, get you a phone," he says definitively, and I look at him confused.

"What?"

"After work, you and I will go to the electronic store downtown. Get you set up with a phone."

"That's not necessary-"

"You need a cell. If there's an issue at the site, I need to be able to contact you. It'll be a company phone, but you can use it for normal shit. It won't be fancy."

"Do all of your employees get phones?" I ask, and fuck, I feel my sass coming out. I need to tamp it down because it's clear he's just doing something nice.

"Some do. Mostly supervisors. Never had an office manager, as you probably could have guessed. But I think one would get one. And after you get off, we're gonna go get you one." I sit on that for a moment, thinking of the pros and cons and if I should argue it.

"And it would be a company phone? In the company name?"

"Yup." That means it would give me a bit longer to hide where I am. Give me time to figure things out, time to try and build some roots. Make

friends and learn more about my family before the vultures prey on me.

“Okay,” I say, hesitant all the same. “But the fee is coming out of my pay. So is the cost of the cell. I might need to stretch it over a few paychecks, but-”

“Company phone. Part of the package,” he says, the heel of his palm meeting the top of his steering wheel as he turns into the gravel lot. He does that thing where he turns the wheel completely with one hand, the veins and tendons in his forearm standing out in harsh relief, and *holy shit*, is it hot.

Absolutely not, Jordan. No fucking way.

That’s a train that needs to be stopped before it even gets going.

“We’ll see,” I say, hopping out of the truck and slamming the door to avoid his response. Then, quickly looking over my shoulder as I walk toward the trailer, still in heeled boots which wobble dangerously over the gravel parking lot, I see him shaking his head at me, a slight smile on his lips.

Maybe he does like me after all.

The next week is more of the same, except now Tanner texts me when he’s leaving his apartment on the brand new, shiny phone he picked out for me. I tried to use a bit of my remaining cash to splurge for a case, but he said it was ‘to protect company property,’ so it was on him as well.

While I’m not sure how many of his employees get phones, I know none of them has a sparkly pink phone case. I would have noticed *that* for sure.

Each day we drive to Sadie’s in silence, and each day I’m stopped when I tried to buy my own latte, Tanner having bundled the price into the coffee and donuts. Yet, if Sadie looked confused when we walked in that first day, she seemed absolutely giddy each day since.

On the second week of my employment, I decide it’s time to ask him questions and get to know my new boss on the drive to the site. All of which were met with the least interesting, minimal answers.

“Do you have any siblings?”

“One brother.”

“You grew up in Springbrook Hills?”

“Yup.”

“Did you always want to work in construction?”

“Was born into it.” To be honest, I think that was the most interesting answer, but digging on it led to nowhere and a bit of sulking on his part. Both days when we got to the site, he helped me into the trailer, carrying the donuts and coffee. Then, I got back to work organizing and inputting the receipts, payroll, and expenses into the program he quickly showed me the first day.

It’s tedious work for sure, but something about the monotony, the noticeably shrinking piles, and the impeccable organization system I’m creating is satisfying. You’d think after living a life of adventure and travel, sitting still and staring at a screen would drive me nuts, but it’s the opposite. I’m able to zone out, focus on one thing and completely forget about the chaos in my life.

The men come in and out throughout the day, grabbing drinks and coffee. I discovered one of the fridges is stocked with water and Gatorade for them, and add a note to my mental list that when I get paid, I’m stocking it personally as a thank you. Some just say hi, some shoot the shit with me. Each has been kind and considerate, not bothering me much but still introducing themselves and being friendly.

Each day, Tanner drives me home in silence. It’s not a silence where he wants me to shut up, but more he’s exhausted, bone-deep tiredness permeating his mind and ability to interact with others. I know he says he passes Autumn’s house on the way to Sadie’s, but I have to wonder where his apartment is and how far out of his way the drive is.

On the third day, I dig in my heels with the questions.

“What did you want to be when you grew up?” I ask, staring at him as I hold my latte in my hands. The drink warms them blissfully - even though it’s late April, the East Coast is still chilly in the mornings, I’m finding.

“What?”

“When you were a kid. What did you want to be? I wanted to be a dancer. Growing up in Vegas, they’re everywhere. Thought it sounded glamorous.”

“Are you a good dancer?”

“Not in the least,” I say with a smile. “My mom dated a guy for a while who was nice. Bought me dance lessons for the three birthdays he was

around. So I danced for three years. The worst of the lot.” A small smile breaks through his stoic face.

“Sounds like a waste of money.”

“I guess. I still dance. I look like a whack job, but it makes me happy, so I do it.”

“Good way to live life,” he says, and I hum my agreement before we sit in contented silence once more. Eventually, I remember my original question.

“So? What did you want to be?”

“I’m not sure. My dad owned this company, and his dad owned it. All my uncles have worked for it at some point. It was supposed to be my brother’s. Goes to the oldest son. But I always figured this was my path. I never really thought I’d be doing anything else.” Something about it sits wrong in my gut. I want to dig more, learn more about this enigma of a man. But looking at his face, a mask of confusion and uncomfortable contemplation, I drop the questions for the day.

On Thursday, we have our first fight.

“I’m not wearing that,” I say, my arms crossing my chest covered in a red and black flannel over a black tank top. This job doesn’t require fancy clothes, which is good since I used up all of my cute stuff the first few days, and I desperately need to do laundry.

“Gotta wear it if you’re on-site,” Tanner says, placing a bright yellow hardhat on my head. It’s enormous, dipping forward and covering my eyes. “It’s an OSHA regulation. You don’t, and an inspector comes, I get fined.”

“Tanner, it doesn’t even fit,” I say, taking it off and handing it back. He doesn’t try to grab it.

“Gotta wear it, Jordan. Or stay in the trailer.”

“This can’t be any safer than going without. It wouldn’t protect me at all.”

“Gotta wear this too,” he says, lifting a florescent vest that’s seen better days. The reflective tape is worn and peeling, and it looks like it hasn’t been washed since the first poor soul had to wear it, much less the hundreds after.

“Absolutely not.” I can practically smell the sweat coming off it.

“Then you’re not coming out of that trailer until the end of the day.” He drops the vest on the ground

“Tanner, look at that thing. It’s disgusting.” My lip peels back in a sneer, and I stare at it like something might come out and bite me.

“I’m so sorry our equipment isn’t up to your high standards, Princess.”

“I’m not a princess because I prefer to wear a vest not covered in sweat stains and don’t want to wear a hardhat will cover my eyes at a worksite where I’m nearly always tripping already.”

“That’s the rule. You want to explore, want me to show you around, you have to wear it. Look around; everyone else is wearing it. Get over yourself, Jordan. It’s not a big deal. Just fuckin’ put on the hard hat and the vest. My site, my rules.” Something in those words snaps something in me, bringing me back to where I was just a few weeks ago, living by someone else’s rules with not a clue of who I was. Who I *am*.

“Fuck off, Tanner,” I say, throwing the hard hat to the ground and stomping back to the trailer, trying to keep my footing as steady as possible and slamming the flimsy door behind me. I lock myself in there for the rest of the afternoon, frustrated with Tanner, frustrated with the situation, and, admittedly, a little frustrated with myself.

While he definitely didn’t go about it the right way, he’s not wrong. A construction site is dangerous, and there are safety standards for a reason. Not to mention, he’s my *boss*. If I want this job, which I do, I need to learn to work with him, not against him.

Around five, I start planning what I will say to him on the drive home. Now that things have settled, it’s clear I overreacted and was absolutely unprofessional, marching off like a child. But in my admittedly weak defense, I was right - the hard hat didn’t fit, and the vest was grimy. Still, it’s clear some rules need to be obeyed on a potentially dangerous worksite, and I need to follow them. He genuinely could get into a lot of trouble if I didn’t follow them.

He sees me as some kind of privileged, over-reacting ex to a country star. He probably thinks I’m used to being showered with things and designer clothes, which isn’t necessarily far from the truth, I’ll admit.

But years of living that life taught me the most important thing to fight for is respect, and if something makes me feel uncomfortable, if I’m not okay with something, I need to open my damn mouth. Not sweep it under the rug for seven years.

The third time I mentally run through my apology, the trailer door swings open, and Tanner walks in, a plastic shopping bag in hand.

“Hey, Tanner, I need to-” I say, but he cuts me off.

“Here.” His hand reaches out, holding the bag out to me. Hesitantly, I grab it.

“What is it?”

“Open it up, Jordan.” His face is... hard to read. The ever-present exhaustion is there, but so is a flash of annoyance and a healthy dose of... is that remorse? Without overthinking it, I reach in to grab some kind of wrapped fabric, the plastic packaging crinkling loudly... Pulling it out, I see a bright yellow vest, brand new with the sticky tag reads “Women’s Small.”

“Tanner, you didn’t-“

“Yeah, I did. You were right. The vest was nasty. I’ve worked with men for years. Men tend to care less about that shit. But a woman wearing nice clothes shouldn’t wear that shit. That one’s yours. You need another, let me know, and we can add it to the next order.”

“Tanner-”

“The bag. There’s more.” He’s right. The bag in my hand is still weighed down with another object, the heavier of the two. Reaching in once more, I pull out a bright pink, shiny new hardhat. I stare at it for a moment, then at Tanner, who looks at me expectantly.

My eyes start to well unexpectedly, so I avert my gaze to his worn-in boots which are tucked under his light, equally worn jeans with the hem fraying in the back.

No one has done something like this for me. Ever. No one has gone out of their way to get me something they thought I needed. Especially not without strings attached, without some kind of deal I need to hold up.

“Hey, it’s not a big deal. You need appropriate safety equipment. You were right. I also got you on the account for a credit down at the work store in town. Need to get you set up with work boots. Your heels are cute, babe, but not safe for here.” My breath hitches as I try to keep my cool, overwhelmed by his generosity, his kindness. Giving me a job, driving me back and for, the phone, the hardhat... he might say it’s because I’m an employee, but I know. I know it down to my gut.

Tanner Coleman is just a good fucking man. And I don’t know what to do with this knowledge.

I hear his boots hit the floor until they're right in front of me, a warm, rough finger pressing under my chin to tip it up. He's close. If I just leaned in, went onto my toes...

"What's wrong?" His voice is soft and caring, velvety smooth, and the sound flows through me, warming me through.

"You didn't have to do this," I say. "Any of it."

"I know. But I did." And that's it. That's all he says.

He might be annoying. And he might be the least talkative person on the planet. But he's kind, and he's genuine. He cares about the people he works with. Everyone I meet in town tells me what a great guy he is, great employer, hard worker, loyal son.

And I can't deny he is unbearably attractive, with that rough voice and strong hands, his tall, powerful build. His bright green eyes are looking down at me, entirely focused on me, trying to read every cue I'm giving, trying to interpret me similarly to how I'm trying to decode him.

"Tanner," I start, my voice shaky as his thumb grazes the top of my cheekbone. A gentle whisper, barely even there, but not a touch an employer gives his employee.

It's becoming more and more apparent every moment I'm in this man's presence there is some kind of undeniable, unavoidable pull between us, an invisible string connecting us for better or worse.

I'm about to say more, to ask a question, to... I don't know. But his phone rings, the blare shocking me into stepping back and entering reality at full speed. *What the hell am I doing?*

He doesn't move, though. Instead, he keeps staring at me, his arm still raised as if I hadn't moved before he reaches into his back pocket to grab his cell.

Without a word, he turns around and walks out.

After a fitful night of tossing and turning, a night which included taking a trip downtown with Hannah to grab boots and dinner with Sadie, I feel the need to add a little more makeup to cover the deep bags under my eyes. So I'm standing out front when Tanner pulls up, and I hop in.

"You like?" I say with a smile, pulling on my knee to bring my foot up and wave it around. It's encased in a pair of dark leather lace-up boots, perfect for a worksite.

“Nice,” he says before pulling out. God, his one-word answers are so annoying. But also so Tanner.

“Thanks again. You didn’t have to do that. I was planning on going there when I get my first check.”

“No problem.”

“Excited it’s Friday?”

“Yup.” That’s all I get as we make our daily drive down to Rise and Grind to grab coffee and treats. *Once again*, I don’t get to pay for my drink, which reminds me to call Sadie and pay ahead for Monday. Since it’s Friday, though, I decide to dig up more on Tanner. He’s so intriguing to me, his quiet, broody way.

“So, you got anything fun planned for this weekend?” I ask, looking at him for his reaction.

“Nope.” Lord, he’s infuriating.

“No big parties? No plans?”

“Nope.”

“Is that... typical for you?”

“I guess,” he says, still not looking at me, eyes glued to the road.

“So no woman in your life? Or man?” I’m not sure what makes me say it, but the words come out before I can second guess myself. He splutters on the sip of coffee he was taking before he quickly corrects the truck’s steering to avoid oncoming traffic. An angry horn blares at us. “Jesus! Tanner, are you okay?”

“Sorry, fuck, yeah. Give me a napkin?” I hand him one of the white logoed napkins, and he dabs at his jeans, the same light, worn, boot cut style he wears daily. The only way I know they aren’t the same exact pants day in and day out is each is worn in just a bit differently. This pair has a tiny hole in the corner of the right pocket.

“Did my question rattle you, Mr. Coleman?” I say, a smile on my face and in my voice once my heart rate slows.

“What? No. I was just... caught off guard.”

“Why is that?”

“I’m not into men.”

“It was just a polite, politically correct addition,” I say.

“Think it’s clear I’m not into men, Jordan.” Now *I* choke, this time on air. What the fuck does *that* mean?

“How would it be clear?”

“You know, Jordan.” Did I? Did I know that? Was all of this.. all of the things I’ve been reading into, forcing myself *not* to read into... were they all real and true? “You’re a gorgeous woman, Jordan. No way of denying it.” I stare out the windshield in shock. “You’re a pain in the ass and talkback way too fuckin’ much for my liking. But you’re a knockout.” Before I can say anything, shock still suffusing my system, he puts the truck into park in the now familiar gravel lot and opens his door. But before he hops out to start the day, he turns to me.

“And no, Jordan. I don’t have a woman.”

What in the hell just happened?

TEN

-jordan-

HOURS LATER, Tanner pops his head into the office, sweat, and dirt lining his face.

“You mind taking orders for lunch? You call it into the deli downtown, and they’ll bring it out here,” he says. He’s wearing his bright yellow hardhat and has a streak of dirt across his nose which makes my hands itch with the need to wipe it off. Instead, I stay in my seat and nod, resisting the urge to sit on my hands.

“No problem. What do you want?”

“Italian on a sub roll, everything on it. Janine will know.” I nod again, writing down his order on the notepad next to the clunky old desktop computer. He returns the gesture, knocking twice on the measly door frame and walking away.

Gathering my things and stuffing my cell into my back pocket, I place my pink hardhat on my head and don the ugly but clean yellow vest before heading out to take orders. I’m about halfway through the men when I get to Chris Jacobs, the Coleman and Sons Construction employee I met on my first day.

“Hey, Chris!” I call with a wave, and he stops while I catch up. His white smile is huge and directed at me. I’ve come to learn most of the names of the men and quickly determined which of them are friendly, which are quiet, and which are flirts. Most are flirts, something they flaunt often considering I am the only woman on site, but Jacobs is by far the biggest.

“Hey, sweetheart, what can I do for you?”

“Takin’ lunch orders, whatcha want from the deli?” I look down at my notepad that’s already half-filled with my loopy handwriting, stars and hearts doodled on the sides.

“How about I take you out? You place the order for everyone, and we take our break together. I’ll grab you somethin’ to eat?”

“Chris, you know that’s not how this works,” I scold with a smile. Every time I see him, he tries to convince me to go out with him. For drinks after work, for dinner, for breakfast. Each time I turn him down. I need this job, and dating employees would be a horrible idea.

“Aww, come on, Jordan. Just one little date,” he says, a teasing smile on his face. God, he’s good. Not my type, though - I learned my lesson with dating players and smooth talkers. But he is damn good. So it’s easy to see why my rejection keeps him coming.

Before I can answer, a hand is around my upper arm.

A strong, rough hand on my bare skin grabbing me, maybe just a tiny bit too hard, and tugging me away from Chris and towards the trailer. I look up to see Tanner, his face full of thunder and frustration.

“Tanner, what-” I start, but he just keeps walking before he cuts me off.

“Get in the goddamn trailer,” he says, guiding me up the steps.

“Tanner, this is crazy, I-” But before any other words can come out of my mouth, I’m in the office, my back pressed to the door, and Tanner’s body is flush with mine. My head tips back to look at him and ask what he’s doing. But before I can, his mouth comes crashing down onto mine.

A moment, maybe two passes and my body is frozen, my brain trying to rush and catch up, to process what is happening before his scent hits me.

It’s musky with hard work in the warm spring sun, a hint of manly body wash, and the familiar leather of the seats in his truck. His body is warm against mine, pressed to me as his lips follow suit. Somehow, they’re both harsh and soft in their assault.

It only takes me those two moments to figure it out before I respond, my hand going to the nape of his neck and pulling on it, bringing him closer to me. My silent consent draws a groan from his chest, a groan that rattles through my own body, sending bolts of pleasure to my core. His mouth opens, his tongue tapping at my lips, demanding entrance, and I obey. Immediately our tongues tangle, the taste of him, of black coffee and

cinnamon donuts and something so undeniably Tanner flooding my mouth and pulling a soft, breathy moan from me now.

His lips continue to ravage me, one hand on the door beside my head, the other on my hip and moving down. His hand grabs my ass, another groan leaving his throat before it trails lower. He uses his hand to leverage me up, lifting me and urging me to wrap my legs around him. I do, and now with my legs around him, still pressed to the door, his hard cock hitting me right in my center, I can't help it.

As we kiss, I start to rock on him, a clashing of tongues and teeth, pants and groans flowing from us.

I can't stop. A thrust follows each rock of my hips, so we're moving in tandem, kissing and slowly raising the temperature of the trailer, of my body, a fraction with each movement. My body is climbing, no hands needed, and something tells me if I let this happen, if I let him continue, I would come, just like this, fully clothed, pinned to the door of a mobile office, kissing my boss.

And I'm totally okay with that.

"Fuuuuck, Dani," he says into my mouth, and that's what finally causes my body to freeze, ice suffusing my system. Only one other person on the planet has called me that name, the endearment holding a sweet memory to it. A memory of the only man who treated me like a person rather than a burden or a possession. And now Tanner Coleman, my half-brother's best friend, my boss, the guy who I'm pretty sure holds an equal level of attraction and contempt for me is groaning it into my mouth while he dry humps me.

I pull my head back, trying to get air, trying to get space, trying to get away.

"Tanner, let me down," I say, and the sound is frantic even to my ears. I know he hears it, too, because immediately, he drops my legs and lets me go. What I don't register is how gently he does it, instantly giving in to my request even though I know he was as gone as I was. Instead, I'm completely lost in my panic.

He doesn't back up, though, still caging me into place with his hand.

"Back up, back up, back up!" The words are a panicked shout, no longer in control of my breathing or my emotions.

"Fuck, Jordan, I'm sorry. I'm not...." He steps back instantly, giving me the space I crave, the space I need. I take a deep breath, drawing air into my

lungs, reason, and reality filling my veins with the effort.

Without the panic clouding my vision, I see I overreacted. I let past traumas get to me. Let his reaction to some non-existent flirting, his large body caging in my small one, the use of an old, forgotten nickname completely frazzle me.

“What was that?” If I could step back, I would, but my back is still plastered to the wall. My notepad and pen are scattered to the ground at my feet next to my pretty pink hardhat Tanner threw off when he pinned me to the door.

“Fuck, I don’t know, Jordan. I looked over, and you were talkin’ to Jacobs, fuckin’ flirting with him-”

“I wasn’t flirting,” I say, and my voice is meek, panic now heightened as different memories flood me, old wounds which never healed opening—memories of similar arguments. “I was just getting his order. He was flirting with me.” He stares at me.

“Princess, you flirt with every man you cross paths with. Whether you mean to or not doesn’t change that fact.”

“I wasn’t flirting with him, Tanner,” I say, the words so soft I can barely hear myself past the rushing of blood in my ears. My eyes are at the floor, on his shoes, flitting to the pink pen, then the notepad, then the hardhat. I can’t breathe. I need air. I need, I need...

“You were. None of my business what you do, but you won’t be doin’ it with my men.”

“Tanner, I’m friendly. I always have been. I was taking his order, nothing more.”

“Not gonna argue with you.” I look around the room, looking for an exit as I try to avoid his eyes but catch them, anyway. They look... hurt. And frustrated. Angry. The hand that was just grabbing my ass moments ago runs over his hair. “I’m sorry I... attacked you. You got the lunch order?” He bends down to grab it before I can answer, scanning my swirly, girly handwriting before nodding. “I’ll get the rest.” I move over to the wall near my desk so he can leave, giving him a wide berth as I do.

As soon as the door clicks behind him, I slide down into my desk chair, hand flitting for my cell. Sending Sadie a text, I ask if she wants to meet up tonight and if she can pick me up from the worksite.

She agrees, and I don’t see Tanner again until Monday.

ELEVEN

-tanner-

MY HAND KNOCKS on the bright blue door of Hannah's old cottage on Monday, a strange churn in my gut. I have no idea how Jordan will be this morning.

That kiss was fucking everything I've been missing for years and simultaneously everything I absolutely cannot afford to have.

Another wild woman.

Even more, a woman who is so damn friendly to everyone she meets, my crazy ass can't decode if she's flirting or just getting a damn lunch order.

Fuck. I can't go there.

On Friday, I walked to the office trailer at five on the dot, ready to apologize and grovel if needed because by then, I'd replayed the scenario in my mind so many fucking times, and it's clear I was the asshole.

She wasn't fucking flirting. Jacobs will flirt with anything with a pulse, much less a sexy woman on a worksite when she's the only woman for miles. And then I dragged her off, pinned her to a wall, and... well. I kissed her.

But then I scared her.

I don't know what changed, what made her go from soft and willing in my arms, on the verge of coming just by rubbing on me to meek and terrified, but I have my assumptions. And I'm going to get to the fucking bottom of that, too.

But on Friday at five, the trailer lights were off, and she was gone.

When I looked around, about to reach for my cell to call her, I saw one of those ridiculous pink notes she sticks everywhere.

TANNER-

SADIE PICKED ME UP.

-J

That was it.

I didn't hear from her all weekend. I tried calling her once on Friday, left a message saying we should talk, but I figured I'd leave it be until Monday.

And now it's Monday.

Instead of sending a text to say I'm on my way, I show up 15 minutes earlier than usual, park in the small gravel drive, and walk up to the door I'm now waiting at.

"Hey, Tanner," she says when the door swings open. Her pretty red hair is braided back, away from her face, and she's wearing one of her sweet, low-cut tees and a pair of jeans with those dark work boots she was so excited to show me last week.

But it's her face I'm stuck on.

Pale.

Unsure.

But most of all, nervous.

"Hey, Jordan. Sorry I didn't text. You, uh, you ready to go?" I ask, knowing I should ask a million other questions but settling on that.

She looks at me for a long moment, thoughts and excuses flitting through her mind, and I see it. I can see she's about to say no, to quit, to... I don't know.

But I can't let her.

"Fuck, Jordan, I'm sorry. I fucked up... I'm a dick. I promise I'll keep my cool, stay the fuck away from you. But I really need you. You're a great worker. You're already organizing things better than I could in three years. One more chance. Please." I'm not blowing smoke, either. She's fantastic at the job. I went through her notes over the weekend, and seeing everything

neat and organized, easy to access, and assess, made my life a million times better.

I *need* this woman. I just need to remind my body I need her in a *business* sense.

She takes in my words, scanning my face for sincerity and fuck, I hope she can read it, hope she can see how much I need her, I hope she doesn't-

"Okay," she says, but the words are quiet and unsure. "Let me grab my bag." She turns from me, closing the door in my face.

And that's how the entire week goes.

Two weeks go by, and Jordan still isn't talking to me more than the absolute bare minimum, and I *fucking hate it*.

As much as her constant needling and questions drove me insane, her silence is worse. And to exasperate the problem, I keep replaying our kiss in my mind.

That fucking kiss.

Our kiss completely blew my mind. Never have I been that out of control, completely out of my mind for a woman. After years of working myself to the bone to bring this company to it, fix it, and build it, I finally felt something more than exhaustion and disappointment. Jordan does it. She brings light to every room she enters, a smile to everyone she meets. Her non-stop picking on me, flirting with me, giggling, and smiling brought a dash of bright sunshine to each day.

And that's the problem, isn't it? I accused her of something she didn't do. Of flirting with one of my men, my employees. Not only is that none of my business, but after a week of watching her, I'm one hundred percent sure wasn't true. She's like that with everyone - sweet and kind and open.

Except with me now.

The first week was different. That week I had her before I fucked it up. It was like she was trying so hard to pull out a smile or embarrass me. Trying to learn about me and get to know me with her silly question games each morning. She entertains the guys' advances, of course. She laughs it off, tells them no when they try. And fuck, do they try. I'm pretty sure I've seen each one try to woo her at this point. She's made friends with each man on my staff, and something about it brings a lightness to the worksite.

But she never shifts her body subtly to hear them better. She never leans in, just a tiny bit to get closer. She never smiles with her eyes and never throws her head back with a laugh. This week without it, I realized she did with me.

For some reason, when I gave Jordan a chance, she gave me her trust, and I broke that.

Even more, she's damn good at the job.

She spent the first week organizing everything. Slowly the stacks of paper strewn everywhere were filed, scanned, stored, and inputted into any number of spreadsheets. She set up a cloud-based system to check numbers from my phone or home.

Her second week was when she made herself invaluable.

The first thing she did was create a system for tracking purchase orders, inventory of supplies, and creating a rate sheet that she updates daily to track the pricing of materials. According to Jordan, this should help me plan bulk-purchasing better. No idea if that's true, but it sounds fuckin' smart.

Then she researched average prices of materials of what we were currently purchasing. If the number was over the average, she called our supplier and other local suppliers to get the best price. As a result, she's already knocked at least 15% off our overall material costs.

The men love her because she dug into the personnel time once she did all of *that*. So, now we have a rotating list for overtime allowance, meaning no one will be overworked *or* hurting for overtime.

All of this shit is the stuff I've been trying to figure out myself, to do myself, but between actually working the damn jobs and trying to find new clients and attempting to keep my own head above water, it's fallen to the wayside.

Jordan is doing it all and more without even trying, it seems. She keeps her head down and works damn hard. And for some crazy fucking reason, I miss how she was before I fucked it all up.

When I realized she was gone on Friday, picked up by Sadie with no hope of an apology until Monday, I wanted to call her up and force her back to the site. Every cell in my body told me to argue, to tell her no, she needed to stay and talk to me, but that was fucked. It was Friday at five - she was free to go.

Monday, I picked her up, and she spoke not a word other than good morning. When we drove to Rise and Grind, a new habit I can't seem to

kick, Sadie told me Jordan had paid for her own coffee for the entire week. No need to add hers to my bill.

The ride to the site was just as silent, and when she left the truck, she gave a quiet, “Thanks for the ride,” and walked to the office.

I knew I’d fucked up big time when this continued through to this week.

And really, it shouldn’t bother me at all. She’s an employee. But it does. It bothers me more than I care to admit or explain.

This is what I’m thinking on Thursday as I’m looking over the PO Jordan left for me to approve, neatly clipped onto my clipboard with a girly pink note reading, “Please approve. -J”

Now, boots crunch on gravel behind me. I turn and there she is, her long red hair braided and laying over her shoulder. Every time I see that pink hat, I think of another time I was a dick to her, yelling at her for not wearing a grimy ass vest and calling her a privileged princess.

Fuck, why does this woman do this to me?

“Hey, Jordan,” I say, nodding at her. It’s clear she’s headed in my direction since no one else is nearby.

“Hey, Tanner.” She stops in front of me, and I see small white teeth pop out as she chews her bottom lip. *She’s damn cute.* Those are the words that pop into my mind, and fuck, fuck, *fuck* that cannot be on my mind. Period.

“What can I do for you?” I lean into the stack of fresh lumber delivered this morning, trying to give her the space she made clear she needed. She’s eyeing me like a scared kitten, unsure of how I’ll react. *Goddamn it.*

“Can I, uh, shit. Can we have a meeting today? Before, uh, before the weekend.” Her hand goes up to play with the end of her braid.

“Are you quitting?”

“What? No!” She says the words quickly, scared again and steps back.

“Thank God,” I mumble. “Was gonna talk to you soon. I think we’re good to say your trial period is over. You’ve done more around here in three weeks than I have in three years.” Relief washes over her, but her eyes are still wary, still unsure.

“Oh, uhm, well... thanks. That’s... good news.” Her eyes drift around as sweet, pink blush blooms on her cheeks. “No, I found something to go over with you, if you don’t mind.” Once again, she does everything in her power not to look at me. I glance at her, then at the watch on my wrist.

“Sure thing. How about at four? The boys are all getting out early today, closing everything down now with the storm rolling in.” Her big hazel eyes

look to the sky and take in the ominous clouds.

“Yeah, that works,” she says and takes a step back, ready to bolt.

“You goin’ out with Sadie again tonight?” I ask, and I don’t know why. Why the fuck do I care. “Or am I taking you back to Autumns?”

“If you don’t mind giving me a ride, that would be helpful. Or I can take a cab. It’s no big deal.”

“Nope, happy to take you home.” She’s already turning back, heading back to the office, and trying to get away from me. *Goddamn it*. What the fuck happened that made her so nervous around me? Sure, we kissed, and yeah, I was frustrated, but it’s not like I’ve held it over her head or tried to make this awkward. Right?

“Okay, see you at four?” She takes another step back and glances over her shoulder at the trailer like it’s a safety zone she needs to get to. To be away from me. Safe from me.

What in the actual *fuck*.

Instead of going after her, which I *really* want to do, to shake some sense into her and figure out what is going on right now, I take a step back from her, giving her space and nod. With the move, her body relaxes, and her face softens, the look a mix of relief, comfort, and guilt.

“Yeah, Princess. See you at four.” I’m not sure why I call her that, especially since the first time wasn’t my shining moment, but something about it fits. And with the words, quickly, so quick I almost miss it, her eyes flare with something pleasant before she turns and runs away from me.

An hour later, I knock on the office door and poke my head in. She’s sitting at the little desk in the trailer, cute black-rimmed glasses she wears when she’s at the computer perched on her nose.

“Can I come in?”

“It’s your office,” she says, standing.

“No, it’s your office. Your space, Jordan.” I’m saying this for more reasons than just to let her know she’s welcome here. But also to let her know if she needs a reprieve, a break, this is her space. She doesn’t respond, just stares at me, a bit confused. This is where I miss the sassy version of

Jordan, where she would have given me shit, would have made fun of me, or had some response. Instead, she nods and sweeps her arm in front of her.

“You wanna sit down? I can make you a coffee?” She turns to gesture towards the small break area we have set up for the guys, a microwave, and a coffee pot alongside the refrigerator full of water and drinks.

“Nah, I’m good. What did you need to talk to me about?” I sit unceremoniously in the visitor’s chair in front of her desk, kicking my legs out in front of me and leaning back. I’m fuckin’ beat.

She looks around like she forgot I was here because *she* asked to meet with *me* and blinks a few times. God, it’s cute. Cuter than it should be, considering I officially scare the shit out of her, and she officially works for me full time.

No way I’m holding her to a trial period. I’ll beg the woman to say if I have to. The pressure she’s already taken off my shoulders is enormous.

“Oh, yeah,” she says before shuffling some papers around. Her little glasses slide down on her nose, and a pink-painted nail pushes them back up.

“You need those to see?” I tip my chin towards her.

“What?” Her nose scrunches in confusion. This woman is adorable. I need to get out of this damn trailer before I say or do something really fuckin’ stupid.

“Glasses, Princess. You need them?”

“Oh, uh yeah. For reading and stuff.” Her head tips back down to her papers before she holds one up triumphantly. “Here!” *God, with the fucking* cute. “Okay, so, I’ve been digging through your books, you know. Trying to organize them. Because they are a total mess. I have no idea how you manage to keep it together with them like that, Tanner.”

“Got it. My books are a mess. Not my specialty.” She smiles a sweet, familiar smile, and I think between having a specific topic to talk about and the desk between us, the Jordan I know is seeping back in. The confident one who enjoys messing with me. Thank God.

“A *total* mess. Anyway, so I spent like, two weeks putting in your receipts, checking payroll, cross-checking things, you know the works. It was so much stuff, but look.” She waves an arm around like she’s Vanna White. “It’s so much neater around here, and you can actually find stuff.”

“Jordan...” I say, raising an eyebrow and trying to keep her on task.

“Oh, right. Well, anyway, I found a couple of things you should know about.” Instead of saying anything, she just stares at me.

“Jesus, Jordan, tell me.”

“God, hold on to your panties, Tanner. A conversation is give and take. Not just me blabbing.” She grabs the first paper on the pile. “This is a list of three different projects you’ve done in the past year that still have a balance. It looks like their accounts were marked as fulfilled. The outstanding total equals almost fifty thousand.” My heart skips a beat. “Next week, I’m going to dig into the previous year’s records to make sure it’s just these three falling through and nothing strange.” She hands me the paper, and all three are projects I remember. One was smaller, and it looks like it’s only been half paid.

“Holy shit, this is a big find, Jordan.” Staring at them, I realize this alone could bring us into a really comfortable spot. Enough I can finally fuckin’ relax,

“Do you have any particular relationship with these clients? I’ve written up an email for each requesting the final payment in full. I can send you the email, and you just touch it and send.” I look at her, gratitude pouring off me in waves. I hate this kind of thing. I’d much rather just design the builds and work on the projects. But being the owner has forced my hand more.

“That would be awesome. If you could get those to me today, I’ll send them out tonight.” Her fingers tap the keys of the computer, and she hits a button with a flourish.

“Done. It’s in your inbox.” My phone vibrates with a new email, and I smile.

“What else you got?”

“Next, I completed the new pricing with the three suppliers I spoke with last week. You need to sign the contracts locking in the pricing here.” She passes me a set of stapled contracts with little sticky tabs where I should sign. I take them and set them aside.

“Great, I’ll sign those and have them to you by Monday.”

“Perfect. Okay and, finally.” She digs one more time to find the paper she needs, her confidence soaring at this point. It’s a relief to see the nervous, anxious version gone for now. “I made a formal acceptance letter of my position. Since, you know, I’m not in a trial period anymore.” The smile on her face lights up the trailer, and I grab the paper, smiling back at her with a small laugh. She’s doing this to prove a point because she is who

she is. But I'm more than happy to hire her on, to have her full time if this is what she's willing to do. Unlike with the contracts, I don't even read it over before signing right above the sticky notes which say 'sign here' and handing it back.

"Welcome to the team, Jordan," I say, and my voice is quieter than before. It's not intentional, but it fits the moment.

"Thanks, Tanner." She takes the paper and goes about scanning it into her computer before filing it away in her new fancy organizing system.

"Okay, shut it down, grab your stuff and let's go," I say, standing and holding out a hand to help her up. She takes it hesitantly, and I tug until she's standing, the desk still between us.

"Let's go?"

"I'm taking you out to dinner in town. As a welcome to the team, and thanks for all you've already done."

"Oh, Tanner, I-"

"Nope, you already told me you don't have plans. You're coming."

"You don't have to-"

"Jesus, Jordan, grab your bag and let's go," I say, and my voice does not leave it open for discussion or argument, but I still take care to make sure any anger or frustration is not there. She sighs but grabs her bag and walks out the door to my truck.

TWELVE

-tanner-

AN HOUR LATER, we're seated at On the Edge, the closest thing Springbrook Hills has to a fancy restaurant. It's a classy joint you can still go to after work in boots without feeling too underdressed. Thankfully, I stopped in my trailer before heading to Jordan to change out of my dirty work clothes, but her tight dark jeans and loose white blouse fit in perfectly. Even those adorable work boots look classy on her. I remember how excited she was to show them to me when she first got them.

I want to know more about this woman. Who she is, why she's here. Why she's so good at what she does, how she learned it. She has her associates, but it sat unused for seven years. I want to know why the most stubborn woman I've ever met was willing arm candy for so long. I want to know why she's being painted as a spoiled rich girlfriend who fled for no reason.

Because I don't know much about Jordan Daniels, but I'm pretty sure running isn't her typical M.O. Jordan is a fighter.

But most of all, I want to know why the fuck I'm so attracted to her. And why she freaked out last week.

"So, how did you get so good at this bookkeeping and office manager stuff?" I ask, grabbing a roll from the basket the server left and buttering it. The best part about this place is the fresh, warm bread and butter. They make it in-house, and it's lightly flavored with garlic and herbs.

"My mom was a stripper," she says, not looking up as she follows suit with buttering a roll. I splutter, choking on the bread. "Shit, Tanner, are you

okay?" She goes to stand and help, but I wave her off as I clear my throat and take a spit of water. Coughing a few more times, my eyes stop watering enough to see she's staring at me with a shocked, scared look, and I can't help but laugh.

"I'm sorry, what?" My laugh explodes from me, a mix of shock and hilarity, as well as general lightness. After this week, with all the work Jordan has done, the stress is finally lightening. I feel like I can actually laugh at things now.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. But did you say at Hunter's mom was a *stripper*?" She looks at me with a small smile on her lips, catching onto why I found that part funny.

"Okay, when you put it like that, it *is* funny. But yeah. My mom, Hunter's mom, Autumn's mom.. whoever's mom. She was a stripper in Vegas most of my life. Sometimes she'd have a guy to support us, but most of the time, it was us and hustling. She's shit with money and can't manage to save her life. So when I was around ten, I started taking her tips and organizing them, using the money to pay our bills, set aside for savings, then give her the rest. Learned a lot about money management from that. I liked it, went to school for it. Found I was pretty good at it." She takes a bite of her buttered bread, and her eyes roll back in her head as a soft, breathy moan falls from her lips.

Holy fuck.

I can not get hard right now, sitting at dinner across from my employee. No fuckin' way. But the way the light is glinting off her exposed neck, the sounds she's making, just from eating fuckin' bread? God *damn*, it's impossible not to wonder what she would be like if I...

"Anyway, I didn't need it when I was... on tour. But I held on to the skill and started using it to help Jax. He was shit with his money, too. Most stars are. Most are fucking broke because they spend it all on shit. Jax did too, but now he's also got a bunch of investments and savings accounts to offset his stupidity." Each time she talks about her ex, something feels off. It's nothing explicitly in what she says, just an underlying annoyance or frustration or... anxiousness. It makes me remember how she freaked out when I pinned her to the door.

"So you wanted to be a business manager? Or a bookkeeper?"

“It sounds weird, I know. I could never tell anyone on tour since they’d give me such a weird look. Who would want to live in spreadsheets when you could do something fun, like being a country star’s girlfriend, right?” She looks down at her plate, picking at the half-eaten bread. “But I like the surety. I like the black and white of numbers and analyzing. My childhood was full of chaos, and my relationship was... well, it was more chaos. Living wild is fun, but living safe and settled is what I daydreamed of.”

A small stone gets added to the scales, slowly weighing her in my mind, and it tips in a dangerous direction. Few women can live a life of excitement and adventure and still yearn for quiet comfort.

“That’s weird, right? I know. I just...” I cut her off

“No, it makes sense. I grew up in a small town. Spent a few years doing the party life, going crazy. Had to settle down when I was handed Coleman and Sons. But it never felt right. I always knew I’d live and die here. I’m okay with that. Happy with it, even. Not everyone is built for adventure and uncertainty.”

Her eyes meet mine, and they warm a bit, the last of the ice remaining after our kiss melting to reveal trust and relief. She pauses, thinking before speaking.

“Okay, I have a question, but if it’s... too much or not my business, just let me know. You won’t offend me,” she says with a small smile and a hint of a blush on her cheeks.

“Hit me.” She reaches for the wine she ordered and takes a big gulp, making me smile.

“I’ve been doing the payroll stuff. And I see the financials and the cost of things and... whatnot. So, I see how much everything costs and uh, you know....” This woman is adorable in her nervous energy and the way she flips from this to confidently messing with me and back again.

“Okay...”

“So... why do you make the least of everyone?” The words come out quick like she’s not sure how to say it. “Because it’s not like you work less or not as hard. You’re there as long as everyone else. You work just as hard. And, I mean. You pay the bills, deal with the stress, so...” She fades off. I sigh, unsure how to answer this or if I even should. She is my employee, after all. But I decide to go for it and talk to someone besides Hunter for the first time.

“A few years ago, my dad gave me the business. It wasn’t supposed to be mine, it was supposed to be my brother’s, but he didn’t want it. That’s a long story. It goes to the oldest son, but... I was the substitution.” Her nose crinkles, and she looks like she’s about to say something, but I keep on. “This wasn’t my plan. I wanted to work on the projects, not the company. My brother to be the one who ran the business. I’d bring the ideas and the designs. Later down the road, I planned to go to school, but he decided... I don’t know. He decided it wasn’t for him. So my dad gave me the company. Except, as you can see, it was a mess. Five years ago, it was worse - equipment wasn’t maintained, some of it was about to be repossessed because it wasn’t being paid for. We had too much of some materials and none of others, but no capital to buy it. Payroll was out of control. Employees taking advantage of the situation, unpaid work. It was just ridiculous. Honestly, I should have just closed it up and called it a day. But... it’s my family’s business. Three generations. And in some ways, the town relies on it. We employ a lot of the men in town, and I couldn’t... I just couldn’t do that.” Her face softens, but I ignore her.

“So I spent about two weeks combing through everything, trying to figure it out. Find missing paperwork, organize what was fucked up. Send out invoices. Some never came back, and I chalked those up as a loss. But some did. I think doing all of that paperwork and organizing is why it’s a mess now. I tapped out early.” She giggles, and it’s a sweet sound.

“I realized to make it work, I’d need to lay some men off, which I did - the ones who weren’t pulling their weight or weren’t doing what was needed. I’d worked with them all for years, so I knew them. It wasn’t easy. But even then, I couldn’t make payroll. So I took the hit. Moved out of my apartment to save on rent and into one of the trailers. I stay on-site in the trailer. It’s not ideal, but I’ve got enough saved for a down payment on a house now, so that’s cool. For six months, I lived off my savings and worked for free. Then I started paying myself minimum wage. I’ve been increasing it once a year, and now I’m comfortable. The company is just about thriving now. Especially now with you on board.” Another blush creeps over her cheeks, and I reach over the table to grab her hand. “I seriously can’t thank you enough for everything. You do not know how much stress you’ve taken off my shoulders these last three weeks.”

We’re interrupted when a curvy server places our meals in front of us, spending just a moment too long grazing my hand when she puts down my

plate. We eat in silence before Jordan talks again, and I brace. I laid a lot out on her, and I've been watching the gears go in her mind.

"So, you've been lying this whole time?" My fork drops to my plate, and I look at her, confused.

"What?"

"You've been taking me back to Autumns for three weeks. Picking me up every morning. You said it was on your way." The accusation on her face is irresistible.

"Yeah, well. Okay. I lied. It's nowhere near on my way," I say, a smile on my lips. "If I confess something else, will you throw that steak knife at me?" I ask, tipping my chin to the knife in her hand. She looks at it and blushes once more before dropping it and putting her hand in her lap.

"I won't stab you," she says. "Probably." She's making me want to laugh, and the feel of it is like tiny bubbles in my chest, creeping up.

"I don't get the guys donuts and coffee every day." Her eyebrows furrow in confusion, and I continue. "I do it on Mondays. Not every day. But I knew you'd be weird about letting me come get you every morning. I didn't want you paying for a cab until you had a ride of your own. So... I made it up."

"You're kidding."

"Nope, not even a little. The men are all grateful, I'm sure. But it's usually a Monday thing."

"Is that why every day Sadie laughs?!" she yells, and *god fuckin' dammit, the woman is too fuckin' cute.*

"Yup. I figured she'd have told you by now."

"No! I'm gonna kick her ass," she says, reaching down to grab her bag, which presumably has her phone. I laugh and reach over to grab her wrist.

"Yell at her later, okay, Princess?" I say as my thumb strokes the warm, soft skin under her wrist. Her body freezes, but I keep rubbing, eyes locked to hers.

"Why do you call me that?" Her voice is soft and breathy and goes straight to my dick.

"Princess?" She nods. "Because you look like one, you act like one. Fuck, if you started singing to forest animals on-site, I wouldn't be surprised. You look like you're waiting for some white knight to come to rescue you."

"Maybe I am," she says, so soft I almost don't hear her.

But I do.

“What do you need to be rescued from, Jordan?” I ask, the words falling from my lips without thought. Because she does, I know it. Some deep part of me knows she needs rescuing from *something*. Or maybe someone.

She stares at me, a shaky silence between us, and each moment it becomes clearer she’s hiding from something and isn’t sure if she should share. I need to know. Some kind of unexplainable force is drawing me to this woman, to protect her, keep her safe.

I know Jordan isn’t in Springbrook Hills because she wanted to meet her brother and sister. This was probably her last resort. But why? What happened with her ex, who made her run from her cushy, exciting life? Her eyes seem to calculate the pros and cons of speaking, a scale of her own tipping back and forth before she lands on something, and her full, soft lips part.

“How’s it going over here?” The same nosey waitress from before asks, breaking the moment. Jordan pulls her hand from mine almost instantly, and I sit back, frustrated as fuck. Something in my gut knows what she was about to tell me. Looking at the waitress, I growl at her.

“The check. We’re leaving.” She blinks at me a few times. “And two boxes.” I look at Jordan, who is gently folding the napkin from her lap and placing it next to her plate, not even arguing with the fact we’re leaving. Instead, she grabs her half-full wine glass and empties it in one gulp.

I can’t help but laugh as she smirks at me.

It feels like hours later when I sign the bill and stand, reaching over to Jordan to take her hand and pull her up. In one hand, I have a plastic bag with two nearly full containers of dinner and two slices of their famous chocolate cake with a dozen thin layers of cake and decadent frosting. It isn’t until I hear my name I realize I’m walking faster than she can keep up, nearly pulling her behind me. When I slow my stride and look over at her, I see a small, giddy smile, and *fuck*, I want to kiss her.

No, I need to kiss this woman.

Pushing the double doors open and pulling her through, we hit unseasonably warm air for spring on the east coast, and I make my decision.

I gently pull her into an alley and press her into the brick wall, lining my body against hers.

“If you don’t want me to kiss you, you better say the words right now,” I say, my breath fanning her lips. Hers comes out in shallow pants, eyes wide in the darkening light, but I can still see it there - excitement. Intrigue.

I wait a moment for her to answer, ready to back off the first moment she tells me to, but she shocks me instead by rolling to the tips of her toes in those adorable fucking boots and planting her soft lips on mine, the hand I’m not holding between us snaking up to grab the back of my neck and pull herself closer.

And then, I lose it. I kiss her back, mouth instantly opening to taste fruity wine and the same sweet taste that lingered on my tongue for days after I kissed her last time, the like which has haunted my dreams. Immediately, I groan into her mouth when her tongue carefully and tentatively touches mine, losing every shred of dignity and grabbing her ass with my free hand. The other hand lets the bag with our food crash to the ground before I plant it next to her head, letting me get close to her without crushing her. I pull her hips to mine, warmth hitting me right on my already hard dick. The sweetest whimper leaves her lips as she grinds against me in return, the sounds vibrating down my spine in a bloom of heat. Her legs immediately wrap around my hips when I lift her, her chest pressing against mine before I grab the end of the braid, which has been taunting me since I saw it, giving it a little tug. Another moan escapes our joined mouths, and I can’t help but smile against her lips, already thinking about the fun I can have.

“Fuck, Princess, you’re so fuckin’ hot,” I groan against her lips as she starts rocking against me. Just as I contemplate how the fuck I can take this further, being that we’re in an alley of a restaurant downtown, we hear the doors to the restaurant open and a clatter of people walking out. The laughing and talking bring us both to reality.

Fuck, we’re in the *fucking alley of a restaurant*. What am I thinking?

But I know the answer.

I’m not thinking at all when this woman is in my presence.

She completely annihilates any sense of control or composure until I’m running purely on instinct. And right now, my animal instinct is telling me to take her.

Thankfully, a minuscule sliver of sanity remains.

“We gotta take this somewhere else,” I say. Not a word leaves her mouth as she looks into my eyes, still panting, and nods before unwrapping her legs from my hips. Gently, I help her down and hold her until she’s steady. Nerves are rushing through me, unsure of how she’ll react next.

The last time I attacked her, pressed her into something, and kissed her senseless, she clammed up and ignored me for a week. Will we go back to that?

But all of my fears are assuaged when her little hand reaches out and grabs mine, a small but content smile reaching her eyes.

“My place?”

THIRTEEN

-tanner-

MY TRUCK BOUNCES on the gravel driveway behind the Sutter's house where Jordan is staying. The tiny cottage sits with its bright blue door and spring flowers popping up around the walkway.

"Are you, uhm? Are you coming in?" she asks as we sit in the truck, both staring straight ahead. A smile cracks through my face.

"You think after what just happened in the alley, I'm gonna let you walk in there alone?" I look at her in time to see the stress melt off her face, a small smile making its way onto her lips.

"I guess not," she says and reaches for the door handle. But my mom raised me better than to let a lady leave your car after a date without a hand.

This is a date, right?

"Stay there," I order, hopping out and jogging around the front of the truck to open her door. She's smiling big now, her sweet face filled with a mix of awe and amusement. I put a hand out for her to grab, and she places hers there before getting out. Leaning into the truck, I grab our food. Walking to the door, her hand is still in mine, warm and small. I don't let go as she digs into her purse, awkwardly pulling out a set of keys. She juggles them one-handed before slipping a blue cloud one into the lock, turning it, and opening the door.

"You can leave it on the table," she says, pointing to a small dark coffee table that seems to double as a kitchen table. I carefully place the bag with our dinner and cake on the table, though I'm unsure why. It was already jostled when I dropped it on the ground of an alley not 20 minutes ago.

“Want a tour?” Her hands are fidgeting with the strap of her bag before she looks at it and self-consciously places it on the couch. It’s a comfy-looking light grey piece with a towering pile of throw pillows, some on the sofa, some having tumbled to the floor.

I’ll never understand those - women seem to love them, get them for all occasions and holidays, but they’re not comfortable or functional at all. Still, something about seeing them, the chaos of them being all over, is purely Jordan, even though the space isn’t entirely hers.

The living area and kitchen are painted a clean, calm sage green, and it takes a second to remember before she got with Hunter, Hannah lived here for years. The area is one big room with a small kitchen and a few cabinets on one side, just enough to make a meal for two. It kind of reminds me of my cramped quarters in my trailer. Yet, something about it is comforting, knowing she’s okay staying in a place like this, somewhere small and efficient rather than the luxury she’s used to.

Now, why would that be Tanner? I shake my head to break the thought.

“No?” Jordan asks, her forehead creased in confusion. Looking at her, I force myself to remember what she was saying. Oh, shit, a tour.

“No, sorry. Yes.” I fumble my words, trying to accept the tour, but her sweet, nervous face has my mind in another universe.

“Yes? Or... no?” she asks, her furrow in her brow that forms when she’s confused or thinks so adorable, I want to kiss it. So tiny. It’s small, like everything about her. She can’t be more than five-two, five-three, and when I’m standing at over six feet in my work boots, she’s absolutely tiny.

“Yes, I’d love a tour, Jordan.” Instead of letting her go, I pull her closer until her front is flush with mine, her warmth seeping into my skin.

“Oh,” she says under her breath, the sound soft as the air whooshes from her lungs. The little noise and the look of awe in her big round eyes are enough to remind me of why I lost myself in the alleyway.

“On second thought, how do you feel about showing me your bedroom first?” I say, bending low and gently pressing my lips to hers, barely a touch, before standing straight.

“Okay,” she breathes before turning to head toward her room.

FOURTEEN

-jordan-

“SO... THIS IS IT,” I say with a grand sweep of my hand before pulling my lip between my teeth and gnawing at it. Another nervous habit I thought I had broken after years in the limelight, but it seems Tanner drags a lot out of me.

But still, this room is adorable. It’s a little girl’s dream with light pink walls and one accent wall laid with the cutest vintage floral wallpaper, a lacey canopy over the bed. It’s not exactly what I would have designed for myself, but knowing Hannah now, it’s *precisely* what I would expect from her.

Seeing Tanner, big, manly Tanner with his rough, work-honed hands and dirty work boots, standing in the middle of the tiny room is almost laughable.

“It’s very... pink,” he says with a smile, taking in the room.

Hannah’s decorated when she lived here. I’m told I can do whatever I want to it, but I don’t want to rock the boat with Autumn just yet,” I say with hesitation.

“Not your style,” he says, taking a step closer to me.

“No?”

“Not at all.”

“What’s my style, Tanner Coleman?” I ask, fighting the urge to tug at the hem of my shirt or play with my hair or do *anything* to show him how nervous he makes me.

“Your style is strong and sexy,” he says, another step closer. “It’s girly, sure, but not in a soft and lacey way. It’s a wild way, a way that makes a man want to put his hands on you and hold you down, keep you from drifting when the wind changes.”

“Are you gonna hold me down, Tanner?” I ask, my eyes locked on his. I’ve had a man try to hold me down before, to cage me and force me to live a life against my will. But something tells me if Tanner Coleman wanted to hold me down, it would be a gentle hold. A safe hold. The kind of hold a girl daydreams about before reality comes in.

“I think I’m gonna try,” he says, his voice low and quiet, so close now that his lips are a whisper of skin on my own. Before I can respond to agree, beg him to try or warn him not to, his hand is on the back of my head, pushing me until our lips meet. It’s warm and soft, not the same fire and urgency as in the alleyway or the trailer, but something about that makes it even more beautiful. Even more meaningful.

My hands travel up, locking around his neck as he holds me close, pulling me in with a thick arm around my waist. Our lips move together in a dance that feels like we’ve known each other our whole lives. As if this moment is just one of many we’ve lived for years.

When I was a little girl, we had an elderly neighbor that lived across the hall. So when I was too young to be left home alone, and my mom didn’t want to bring me into the club while she worked, I’d get dumped at Edna’s house. She was sweet, a lovely old lady with photos all over her home and more cats than my little mind could count.

Each time I was there, she’d tell me about her beloved husband, who she lost in the war. But he passed before they could have children together. He was it for her. Forever. She lived each day without her other half, never trying or wanting to move on, to fill that void. Just... existing.

Once, she told me that when they met, it was like their souls knew each other, saw their other half, and drew their human counterparts together. She didn’t even like him. She thought he was a jerk at first, but there was no staying away. She told me one day I’d find the mate to my soul, and it, it would be like I’ve known them my whole life.

And something about kissing Tanner Coleman makes me feel like this is where I should have been all along.

The thought should scare me.

It should terrify me to the core.

But all I feel is warmth. All I feel is home.

So when his tongue brushes my lower lip, begging for entrance into my mouth, I greedily open and let him in, tangling mine with his and letting the somehow already familiar taste of him fill my senses.

I press my body closer to his, my already hard nipples brushing my bra as it grazes his chest and drawing a soft moan from my lips. That's all it takes to snap him.

Tanner gently bends his knees before grabbing my ass with both hands and lifting, his hands shifting to my knees to force them around his hips. He takes two steps until I'm pinned to a wall; his knee moves between my legs, his muscular thighs sitting in the perfect spot, so when I squirm, wanting him, *needing* him, my clit rubs against my jeans and pulls a low moan from me.

His hand dips under my shirt, calluses scratching my soft skin as he glides up my back. They stop my bra clasp as his head moves back to look in my eyes, a nearly indiscernible move. He's asking a silent question, and the action forces me to fall for him in a small, unavoidable way. I nod, and the bra loosens. Rough skin slides against mine, dipping to cup a breast in his hand. He groans, the sound alone having me grinding on him again, and a jolt of pleasure runs through me.

"Fuckin' knew it, a perfect fit," he says, a conversation with himself as he holds my breast in his hand, a rough thumb brushing my nipple and pulling a whimper from me. His lips return to mine, pressing hard, almost bruising, before his tongue is back in my mouth, dancing with my own, nipping my lip.

My hips continue to rock on his hard thigh between my legs as we kiss, as he continues to play with my tit, pulling my nipple. Soon I'm full-out grinding on his leg and getting close.

Holy shit, I'm getting close.

My movements get more frantic with my realization, eager to come with a man helping me, the feeling building and building until he groans in my ear, his hands going to my waist.

"Fuck, Dani, bed, now," he says, taking me and tossing me to the bed like I weigh nothing. I bounce with a giggle, my body feeling like it's made of fresh air and sunshine, my entire soul feeling lighter than it ever has. "Clothes off," he says, and a shiver rolls down my spine at the words. I oblige, arms crossing to remove my tee before wiggling out of my jeans.

His eyes stay locked on my body, taking in every inch of unveiled skin like I'm some highly anticipated sculpture, and the artist is slowly removing the black sheet. His hands are leisurely working the clasp of his belt as he watches, almost absentmindedly, though the bulge right beneath his worn jeans tells me there's no way he's absent-minded right now.

And *man* is it a bulge.

"Fucking beautiful," he says under his breath once I'm devoid of all clothes, the words coming out reverently like he didn't mean to tell them.

"Your turn," I say, tipping my chin at him in a challenge. He smiles at me, shaking his head as he slips the belt out of the loops, tossing it to the ground. Next, strong arms cross over each other behind his head, the plain black tee he's wearing coming off in one smooth move. Beneath the fabric is a muscular chest, perfectly dusted with hair, strong abs that aren't perfectly boxed but show he has a job that requires physical labor. As his hands work on the bottom of his jeans, my eyes travel to his hip bones, skin disappearing into a pair of dark blue boxer briefs. The jeans come down, the bulge growing as it's released from its denim prison, and then the boxers...

Holy fuck, this man.

Jax was built in the way most men in Hollywood are. Men who take care of themselves, who have personal trainers and special diet plans. Men created by marketing specialists to appeal to the masses.

Tanner blows them all out of the water.

His body isn't carefully crafted by meticulously counting macros and long days in the gym. No, his body is a woman's fantasy come to life. It was created by hard work and reality.

And right now, he's standing over me, stroking a thick cock as he looks over my body with a downright hungry look in his eyes.

"Holy shit," I whisper, eyes wide as I lock my eyes to his pumping fist, the sight making wet drip from me. In response, a hand starts to slip down my belly to my hips and... But just as I hit my swollen clit, which is absolutely *dying* for attention, he growls. *Growls* in the sexiest animalistic way that has me moaning in some kind of primal response.

"That's mine. You got it?" His voice is stern as he gets onto the bed, kneeling in front of me and smacking my hand away. His thumb takes over, strumming my clit and pulling a deep moan from my gut at the feeling of electricity that starts back up, the warmth flooding my lower spine. How is this man doing this to me? I've never been able to...

“We’ll do foreplay next time. I gotta get inside this fucking cunt right now,” Tanner says, looking at me, once again looking for my permission.

“Yes, honey, *yes*, ” I moan, my hips lifting, trying to get... more.

“Fuuuuck, Princess, hold on,” he says, leaning over the bed to his jeans. I’m confused until he comes up with a condom, putting the foil between white teeth as he tears it, pulling out the small latex disk.

“What a Boy Scout, always prepared,” I tease as my eyes fixate on his hand, rolling the condom down his thick cock.

“I’ll show you prepared,” he says, and without warning, thrusts into me in one quick movement, having me screaming his name as he fills me to the hilt, the feeling of fullness complete overpowering me. This feels *so fucking right*.

“Oh my fucking God, Tanner!” I shout over the sound of our bodies slamming together, his balls slapping against me, my wetness loud between us. “So good, shit!”

“Fuck yeah, it is,” he says, his hand leaving my hip and smacking my ass. The feeling shoots through me as I clamp down on him. I guess we can add that to ‘things I definitely never thought I’d like but really, really want to happen again.’

Each thrust feels like he goes deeper, each entrance and retreat brushing sensitive tissues and bringing me closer, closer in a way I’ve never...

It’s building with each thrust of his hips, each brush of his pelvis to my clit, but I need more, I need...

And just like every sexual encounter I’ve had in eight years, through the rushing of blood in my ears, I hear a deep, sexy, relieved groan in my hair as Tanner pushes his hips deep into mine, his body pulsing as he reaches his orgasm.

Immediately, all tension leaves my body as disappointment floods in. I can’t help but wonder if maybe all those women and romance novels lied to me all along. Perhaps there’s no such thing as a woman coming during sex.

Maybe I’m forever doomed to do it myself. Because, if this sweet, attentive, fucking *gorgeous* man can’t make it happen, who will?

These are the thoughts I have as Tanner lies on top of me, catching his breath. As I’m waiting for him to roll off and go clean up, I contemplate life as I stare at the ceiling. It’s meticulously clean and perfectly white, not a single defect to be found.

My mind stays there until I feel his lips moving on my neck, his hands that were buried in the bedding beside us, grazing the sensitive skin on my hip as he slides out. My over-sensitized body, still secretly begging for release, cries out at the touch, but I bury it. His mouth trails down, down my neck, between my breasts, pulling one still peaked nipple into it. My back bows just a fraction without my permission, trying to get more.

“Tanner, what are you-” I ask, his mouth moving downward, licking the sensitive skin around my belly button. Finally, he stops, looking up at me with a boyish smile.

“You didn’t think I’d leave you hanging, did you?”

FIFTEEN

-tanner-

IT'S BEEN A LONG FUCKING time since I've had a woman in my bed. Last I estimated, I was running on almost two years. With the business and the general lack of time, a woman has just not been on my priority list, and a one-night stand in a small town where everyone knows everyone is just not a good idea.

That being said, the second I slid into Jordan's tight, wet pussy for the first time, I fucking *knew* I'd be finishing her off with my mouth.

Especially when she clamped down on my cock when I smacked her round ass that's been taunting me for three weeks. It seems Jordan might be a perfect fit for me, down to liking it a bit rough.

No way in hell could I last.

Not that I mind - eating pussy might be something other men cringe about, but having a woman rub herself on my face, getting close enough to see every tremble, feel every muscle quake as she screams my name and comes on my tongue?

Fucking nirvana.

So as I kiss down her body, down the soft skin between her breasts, and over her smooth, flat belly, I am *ready*. I am ready to hear how this woman sounds when she comes and feels when she explodes because of me.

When I pumped into her one last time, her resignation was apparent, but it didn't seem like she was surprised, which angered me more than it should.

When I get to her hips, licking each with deserved reverence and tasting Jordan and salty sweat, her little hand goes to my shoulder, trying to push me away.

“Tanner, honey, you don’t have to-” I stop her there.

“Don’t have to, but I sure as fuck am going to make you come on my face, Princess.” A shiver runs through her, fire blazing in her eyes, and I smile at her one last time before sliding down the last inch until I’m face to face with paradise.

“Seriously, Tanner, I know guys don’t... it’s-”

Before she can say another word of this bullshit, which already has given me an idea of how men before me treated her in bed, I shut her up. “I want nothing more in the world right now than to eat this pussy.” Her eyes widen before she gives me a tiny nod, giving me the permission I need, then averting my eyes back on her wetness.

“Jesus, Dani, so fucking wet for me,” I murmur, using a thumb on each side to open her and stare before I run a flattened tongue from top to bottom, groaning at the musky, sweet taste of her. Her body jerks at the move, and I can’t help but smile against her cunt as I slip my tongue inside her, lapping at all she’ll give me.

“Fuck, Tanner!” Her voice is hoarse, and her hand goes to my hair, tugging just a bit and pulling me closer. For someone who said I didn’t have to just moments ago, she seems to be enjoying this.

Moving my lips to her clit, I circle it with my mouth and create a strong, quick suction that has her back bowing and her hand shoving me closer into her pussy. *Fuck, this is hot.* I use my tongue to move her hood and flutter over her clit as I sink one finger into her, pressing against her g-spot as she writhes, moaning incoherently.

When her thighs start to close in on my head, I move my head back, using my hands to press them open, leaving her wide and exposed for me.

“Be a good girl and keep these open for me, okay, Princess?” I say with a smile, looking at her hooded eyes, which can barely focus on me. Her hips lift, looking for me to go back to what I was doing. “Okay, Dani?” I ask, looking for an answer.

“God, Tanner, yes, please!” She strings words together, and the thought that she can’t even make a complete sentence almost has me hardening again as I dive back into her wetness, devouring her. I’ve got two fingers fucking her deep, my mouth latched on her clit, and I can tell she’s close.

Her legs start to close again on my head, but I want her open for this, completely wide for me when she screams my name.

My head comes up for just a moment, the fingers of one hand continuing to fuck her while my other hand slaps her inner thigh, the sound ringing loud. Her body tenses, and for a split second, I worry if I went too far, if maybe it was a bit much. But then her cunt tightens in a vice grip on my fingers; a deep moan falls from her lips, and I know she's there.

My mouth dives back to her clit, sucking as she writhes and comes around my fingers. She's so tight now, I can't even move inside her, just pressing on her g-spot as she pulses around me, and I groan on her clit.

What feels like years later, her voice quiets until she's just barely whimpering, her hips slightly jerking, and her pussy finally relaxing so I can pull my fingers out. I lift my head to look at her and stare at her beautiful face, flushed and sweaty with red strands that came loose from her braid sticking to her head.

"Holy shit," she says with her eyes still closed, and all I can do is laugh.

SIXTEEN

-jordan-

“I WANT to say I’m surprised Hannah has breakfast-in-bed trays, but I’m not,” Tanner says as he reaches over to my tray for one of my fries still in the styrofoam container. I smack his hand to stop him, but somehow the sneak succeeds.

“I’m cool about almost everything, but learn now - fries are not shared,” I say with a glare, watching him toss the cold fry into his mouth with a smile.

“Princess, you want more fries, I’ll call delivery. Just say the word.” He ends the sentence with a wink, and it takes everything in me not to melt. Some would say it as a line, but something tells me to Tanner, it’s not a line. That’s just how he is.

I know deep in my soul if I looked at him and said, ‘yup, I want fries,’ he’d be scrolling his phone to find someone to bring them to me. Something about it warms me deeply, the walls of my ice castle dripping slowly, thinning my defenses. So, instead of answering, I glare at him.

He leans in and kisses me on my nose, and the move makes my eyes burn. To change the subject, I reach over and grab the container with the chocolate cake that’s been taunting me. It’s got at least ten layers of cake and frosting and is the darkest, most decadent chocolate color. Opening it, I stick a finger into the frosting and suck it off my finger.

“Jesus fuck,” Tanner says, mumbling under his breath, and I look up at him smiling.

“What?” I say with a tease in my voice. God, this man. What is he doing to me? I am not this woman, this shameless flirt.

“You’re too fuckin’ much. Stop that now, or I’m gonna make you eat that later and start with round two. And this time, you’ll be comin’ on my cock, not on my face.” Heat rushes through me, focusing at my center with those words, at the memory of Tanner eating me until I come *after he came*.

That was the single most erotic moment of my life.

After *years* of solo orgasms and selfish sex, the fact a man would do.. *that* is beyond me. But, I can also feel the burn of embarrassment hit my cheeks with the memory.

“What?” Tanner says, pushing a hair behind my ear and keeping my face pointed at his when I try to turn it away.

“Nothing,” I say, looking down at the cake and reaching for my fork. Instead of grabbing it and starting in on the decadence, Tanner takes the tray from my lap and places it gently on the floor, followed by his. We found them hidden behind the plates in Hannah’s old kitchen and decided it was the best way to eat in bed. At the time, I thought it was a barrier, an added layer of protection between us after our intimacies. Without that buffer, I feel exposed.

His hand is back on my neck, pulling my gaze to his while his other arm wraps around my waist and pulls me closer. Fingers play in my long, red hair I took out of my braid. I’m sure it looks chaotic.

“What is it?” My head shakes, refusing to answer his question, and I look between us at the pink duvet. “Jordan, look at me.” The words are an order, and I can’t deny him of the request for some reason. My eyes meet his, green and vibrant, and I’m hooked. Unable to look away but unable to speak all the same.

“What happened earlier is hands down the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced.” A shiver runs down my spine. “No fuckin’ way was I gonna let you give me that, the best orgasm of my damn life, and then let it fall short for you. No fucking way.”

“Yeah, but guys...”

“Guys, what?”

“Guys don’t... want that.”

“Want *what*, Jordan? Because let me tell you right now, I am not the kind of man who does shit I don’t want to do. I very fuckin’ much wanted

to eat your sweet pussy and make you come on my face.” Another shiver runs down my spine, leaving tingles to spark at the bottom.

“You don’t have to-”

“Did your man make you come?” The words are abrupt and cause heat to flush on my face. It radiates with the mere thought of answering the question.

“What?”

“Did your ex make you come?”

“What? Tanner, that’s-”

“I don’t need your answer. I already know it. The way you were beggin’ for it, telling me not to stop. The way you tensed up when I came. You looking fuckin’ resigned, Jordan, thinkin’ that would be it. And let me tell you, Princess. That shit will *never* happen with me.”

“Tanner, you’re being-”

“No, Jordan. No man does that. No man leaves a woman hanging, getting himself off and letting her go. A real man loves making his woman come. Fuck, I got more enjoyment out of watching you scream than I did from coming.”

“Am I your woman?”

“You sure as fuck are. And not because of what just happened. It’s because you’re a sweet-as-can-be woman who I like a fuckuva lot. And I want to get to know you better. But the way you rode my cock? The way you screamed my name when you came? So yeah, I’m definitely keeping you.”

I blush both from the discomfort of talking about what we just did and pleasure at the thought of him ‘*keeping me.*’ I bury my head in his neck to avoid looking at him. The arm around my waist rubs my bare back, reminding me we never got dressed before eating our cold dinner. “We’ll work on that, too”

“What?” I sit up a bit, pulling back.

“If we’re going to be doing this.” He gestures between us, his hand in my hair, tugging a bit. “And trust me, if that was even a glimpse of what it would be like when you finally get out of your head, *we will be doing this.*” The hand on my waist comes up, and a thumb brushes my nipple over the thin sheet covering it, making the traitorous body part rise to attention. “Then we’ll have lots of conversations about this. About what you like, what you don’t.”

Oh my God. I don't think I could handle that. I would burst into embarrassed flames.

My mom was a stripper, sure. And I was primarily raised in a strip club. *And* I grew up in the City of Sin. But that does not mean I've ever been comfortable with sex, with my body, with my... pleasure. So just the thought of talking about sex with this god of a man makes me a bit lightheaded.

He must see the look of panic on my face because his sweet lips tip up once again.

"Don't worry, Princess. Not right now. So, you gonna tell me about this fuckwad ex who didn't give a shit about you?" The hand on my breast returns to my back, grazing it gently as we settle back, his back to the pillows and my head on his chest. The rumble of his voice is a comfort.

"How much do you know?" I ask because that's the question, isn't it? I know Hunter and Autumn know... enough. No one knows everything, of course. But how much does...

"I know a bit. Know he is some country star. You told me you went on tour with him." He pauses, his hand in my hair stopping as if he's not sure if he should go on. "I know he proposed, and you left." I sigh because it's basically what I had expected.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, fingers drifting up to play on his chest where there's a light dusting of hair. His entire body is toned and broad, a clear result of his profession, and fuck if it isn't the sexiest thing ever.

"Whatever you're willing to tell me. Got my own demons behind closed doors. Know it's not as easy as reading it from cover to cover. You will when you're ready. Until then, give me what you're willing, Princess." His words hit me somewhere deep. Not only does this man want to know more about me, but he wants me to do it in *my time*. He wants me to open up to him, but he's willing to wait. Something about that makes me open up for the first time.

"I met Jax when I was working at a coffeehouse, right after I got my associates. I was saving up to go back to school, be an accountant, or something with business. I don't know. But we met and we... I guess we fell in love. He was playing at clubs at the time, small stuff, but he got picked up by a big-time act as an opener, and that was it. He asked me to go on tour with him, and I did it." I watch my fingers run circles over his abs, remembering our conversation. I see it for what it is now. See how

manipulative he was, how he made me feel small to make himself bigger, told me I'd never actually pass college, and said I was his muse.

He told me he needed me.

And it was intoxicating, distracting even, feeling needed finally.

Tanner stays quiet, and I appreciate that. He gives me time to think, to decide what to say next.

"It was eight years together. Seven years of being by his side on tour and in the limelight. When he made it big, I became... I became kind of an accessory for his image. Something for him to parade around. His cute down-home girl to cinch the facade in place, convince people of who he was, and sell records and tickets. But he... he wasn't that." I take a deep breath, and Tanner's arm keeps rubbing my back in small, soothing circles. I focus on it as I carry on.

"He was wild and rude. He loved to party, loved the attention. Loved the women fame brought." I pause, wondering if I should go on, but something tells me to. "I knew he was cheating me the second year. So I called him out on it and threatened to leave." My mind goes back to that night.

I sat on the huge, white hotel room bed. It was three a.m., and I hadn't slept yet. Jax was out. He told me to stay in, to get some sleep. Said I looked tired. I remember searching for an hour online after he left, figuring out how to hide the look of exhaustion, trying to always look my best for him. But at midnight, it became clear he didn't want me to stay home because I looked tired.

A roadie was out, a girl I was friendly with, and she sent me a photo. Two blurry figures were there, and for a split second, I wondered if she had sent it by accident. However, it took only a moment for the image to clear in my mind. There they were - in a VIP section of some kind, a pretty blonde thing on my boyfriend's lap, grinding with her lips on Jax's neck.

Everything in me shattered.

"I'm so sorry" was all the text read.

He walked in drunk, eyes glazed, and, fuck, right there on his collar was red lipstick.

I lost it. I told Jax I was leaving, I deserved better, to find some other idiot, some other girl he could fool. Some other woman he could use as a cover to keep his sweet, good country boy image.

I should have left then. I should have run for my life.

Instead, I let him apologize. I listened to his lies, listened to the twisted story he told me. I listened to him tell me it wasn't his fault I hadn't been there; he got confused. And then he brought his management team in to calm me down. Together, they promised me it was a mistake and it would never happen again. Convinced me I needed to stay.

But even then, even that day, they mentioned it. The agreement I signed. They reminded me I had left everything, had nothing back home. No family, no home, no friends, no money. What were my choices?

Days later, when I asked where Stacy, the roadie who sent me the text was, I was informed she had abruptly left the tour. And no one on tour ever tried to be friends with me again. It was the start of the most painfully lonely years of my life. But I don't tell Tanner those parts, those dirty, painful memories. Instead, I glaze over it.

"He apologized. I was an idiot, accepted it. After that... after that, he was sneakier. But I'm not dumb. Not like he thinks, at least. He kept cheating on me, kept disappearing." Tanner's body goes stiff around mine with my words and I curse at how dumb I'm being. "God, I've... I've been tested. And we hadn't... you know... in a year. Probably longer. I'm clean, I promise," I say, scrambling to get the words out. It sounds so bad when I put it that way. That my boyfriend was cheating on me, I knew, I let it happen. That we haven't been intimate for a year or more. It probably sounds like he was justified like I wasn't putting out, like-

"Fuck Jordan, I don't give a shit about that." He pauses, thinking about what he said. "Well, I do, glad to know it's all good on that end, but not in that sense. I trust you. I'm angry he would cheat on you, in your face. Use you for what you could offer him in his career and give you nothing in return. Play you when you are the most beautiful person I've met, inside and out."

"Yeah, well, Jax didn't think that."

"He's a fuckin' moron." I don't reply, instead choosing to stay quiet. It's strange hearing someone frustrated for me. Angry, even. My mind goes back, wondering if I can remember anyone ever doing it. Not my mom, of course. Maybe one of her boyfriends? A teacher? A friend?

Nothing sticks out.

After some time, he speaks, breaking the contemplative silence I've fallen into. "Why'd you stay?" I sigh, knowing this was coming. It's going to come more and more if I decide to open up about my past, about my

relationship. I'm at a crossroads now. Because there are so many reasons I stayed. Some I touched on. Others...

Do I tell him everything? Can I trust him? Legally, can I even do it? So I go in half ways, choosing my words carefully.

"I... I can't talk about it all right now. Not today. But I'll tell you it wasn't that easy. They had me trapped. I had no money of my own. No car, no way to get out. Nowhere to go. I have no family, not really. No friends. The few I had before Jax drifted when I ran off with him. I was... I was just stuck." I feel Tanner's mouth press a kiss into the wild hair at the top of my head. The warmth of his gentle touch radiates from my head and through my body, capturing all of the fear and anxiety I have and gently removing it. "I can't say much more than that."

"That's more than enough, Jordan. I'm sorry you went through that. But you're safe here. With me."

Safe. How did he know what I needed to hear?

"Yeah," is all I can say, and the words come out as the softest whisper. Once again, the silence takes over.

"So what about you? Anything juicy in your past?" I say, attempting to move the subject off of me. I fix the blanket so it covers me when it starts to dip, but his eyes glance down at just the right moment and catch a glimpse of skin, making them go lazy. He sighs, the sound heavy with history, a sigh I recognize because I made the same sound not long ago.

"I had a girl. I dated her in high school. We were the town's power couple. Quarterback and cheerleader. Homecoming king and queen. I proposed to her not long after we were out of school. I thought she'd be it, and we'd tell our kids about how we were both born and raised here, met here, fell in love here. But... it didn't work out."

"What happened?"

"Just didn't work. I wanted to stay here, had the family business. She wanted to go, spread her wings. Leave this small town. I didn't." I don't know who would want to leave this charming town with its open arms and kind people. But I'm even more confused by any woman who would willingly let this man go.

"She's an idiot," I say. He doesn't reply with words. Instead, he answers with a hand on my jaw, brushing a lock of hair, pushing it behind my ear.

"I don't want to talk about her right now." His voice has dropped an octave, and he looks into my eyes, the comfortable warmth in them slowing

turning into a burning heat.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” I push a hand up his chest, hooking it behind his neck. We’re so close now our breaths mingle in the small space between us until we’re breathing our brand of air, filled with attraction and lust and something more.

“What do you want to talk about then?”

“I think it’s time to make up for my shortcomings.” The hand on my neck trails down my arm, over my ribs, stopping at the curve of my hip. The action sends shivers down my spine. Shivers he can feel if the tilt of his lips means anything.

“You have nothing-” He cuts my words short by pressing soft lips to mine. Simultaneously, he pulls my hips to his, making his intention clear and his eagerness even more apparent.

“Nothing I’d rather do right now than prove to you how a man treats his woman and to feel you come around my cock.”

SEVENTEEN

-tanner-

JORDAN'S FACE goes stark with a mix of surprise and arousal, her eyes wide and mouth softly parting. If I wasn't already so fucking turned on, I'd laugh, but my cock has awoken from his short nap, reminding me how I was already getting hard when I ate her out before.

I put a hand to her neck, then up into her hair, pulling her face to mine until her still open mouth is on mine, pulling her full pink lip between my teeth and nipping gently. Again, a soft moan leaves her mouth, and this time I smile before sucking that lip into my mouth. Her hips move on me, naked skin on naked skin as she tries to find purchase on me, tries to find some kind of friction.

Instead of letting her find it, I roll on top, caging her with my arms and tangling us in the sheet. Our lips continue to meld, to learn each other, tongues rivaling in a sweet, sweet dance that seems all at once new and comfortable like we've done it a million times. My lips trail from hers to her neck, nipping and sucking, learning the taste of her as I lick her skin, taste the salt of sweat, and smell the strawberry shampoo she uses that drives me wild. I keep going until I hit her pink nipple, and without warning, the entire thing is in my mouth as I suck hard. Her back arches, her hands go to my hair to hold me in place, and a growl rips from my throat at the move. I lave her, pulling the flesh until it's tight, but as she continues to thrash with pleasure, her hips lift, looking for friction once more, and that's when I'm done messing around.

When her wet pussy hits my belly, drenching my skin, I need her.

Rolling to my back, I take her with me and force her to sit up, her legs straddling my waist, her pussy stretched across my flesh and leaving a trail of wetness.

“Jesus baby, look how fucking pretty you are,” I murmur, looking at her and running a thumb over her clit. Her hips jerk and I can’t help but smile at her.

“Tease.” She’s pouting, but behind that is fire. I smile wider before grabbing her hips again, moving her until she’s across my legs as I roll to grab a new condom from the string she unearthed earlier.

She watches me as I roll the condom on, reminding me we need to have another conversation, the one about condoms and protection. Because at this moment, I want nothing but to push my cock into her wetness with nothing between us.

But it’s the look she’s giving me that has me pausing.

Her eyes are fixated on my hand as I roll the latex down, a dazed, hooded look in them with her mouth hanging slightly open. When I hit the base, I see her hand is moving, slowly running a finger up and down her slit, stopping at the top to circle her clit and make her hips buck before going back down. Her finger glistens with wetness, wetness I can see dripping from her swollen slit.

“Fuck that,” I say, and before she knows what’s happening, I grab her waist, lifting her tiny body up and up until that wet pussy is over my mouth, and I latch on, sucking deep and lapping at her.

“Oh, my God, Tanner!” The sound is shrill and surprised as her hands grip the headboard before looking down and locking eyes with me. There is pleasure, burning pleasure, and raw sexuality, but right beneath it, lingering quietly, is insecurity, embarrassment. “Tanner, I don’t-“ I cut her off before she can finish her words, unlatching for just a moment to answer before I go back.

“Ride my face, baby. Do what feels good. You’re so fucking sexy.” Then I’m back at her, tongue invading her cunt and lips rubbing on her clit. A low moan leaks from her, and as I continue to feast, she slowly starts to move. All of her weight is still on her knees, nervous about putting pressure on my face. So I’ll give her that for now. But soon, I’ll expect her to be comfortable enough to absolutely smother me.

On one tentative movement, her clit hits my upper lip harshly, and she moans, deeper this time before doing it again, grinding harder this time.

Fuck yeah. I moan at the sexy move, the vibration running through my mouth and straight to her cunt, pulling another groan from her.

Her knees are moving, unsure of how far to go, but I want this woman to fucking suffocate me, to ride my face like her life depends on it. My hands go to the dip between her generous hips and pull her deep into my mouth, and the accompanying shout that comes from her, some kind of unknown gibberish, tells me I'm on the right path. Even more when her hand reaches down to my hair, tugging as I continue to eat her.

Moments later, her muscles tense, the grinding getting more frantic, and I know. She's close.

The hands on her hips lift her and move her back, placing her right past my cock.

"Tanner, what-"

"Told you, you're gonna come on my cock, Princess." My words make her eyes glaze over, and she rises to her knees, straddling me on either side of my hips before slowly, so fucking slowly it's almost torture, she sinks on me. I watch as my cock disappears into her, inch by delicious inch, until with a deep moan from both of us, she's sitting on me, not moving.

"Oh, my god, Tanner. I'm so fucking full like this." I look up to see her eyes have drifted closed, her gorgeous body on me, her head tipped back, and a look of pure bliss on her face.

"Ride me, Dani," I say. I can hear the desperation in my voice. But thank fucking God, she starts to move, first up an inch, then back down. Two inches, then down. The torture of watching my dick disappear into her then reappear is too much.

My hands go to her hips, urging her into a rhythm I know will get her there.

Because she *needs to get there*.

Up and down, up and down, I slam her onto me, lifting my hips to bring her deeper, to fill her more. The clenching of the muscles in her cunt tells me she loves this, but I knew already from the sounds coming from her.

The animalistic moans.

"Need to feel you, Dani. Need to feel your cunt clamp on me," I say, loving when she looks down at me, her eyes flaring at my words. She looks like a fucking queen riding me.

Deciding any longer and I'll be eating her until she comes again, I put my hands on her hips and guide her back and forth on me when I'm deep in

her, grinding her clit on me.

That's all it takes.

Her head snaps back, her pussy clenching so hard I have no choice but to stay still, planted in her, and come with her name on my lips.

EIGHTEEN

-tanner-

SOFT FINGERS GRAZE the hair that's fallen across my temple as my eyes slowly open, the bright light in the unfamiliar room nearly blinding me and forcing me to shut them once again.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Jordan's sweet voice says, and it all comes back to me - dinner, clearing up things with Jordan, coming back here... everything that came after that. I see pink walls behind Jordan when I open my eyes, which are just a fraction more adjusted than they were a moment earlier. Her long red hair is pulled back into a neat ponytail, and she's got one of her sweet t-shirts on, the ones that scoop down at the front to show the very top of her full tits, hugging her tiny waist and flaring at her hips.

I swear the woman is a goddamn wet dream, and I'd be a fuckin' idiot if I let her get away.

It's clear she's got some walls up, and some of them I can figure out myself. She had a douche of an ex, and I know from Hunter that her mother is a piece of work. However, my gut tells me that although they were left without a mom, Autumn and Hunter still got the better end of the deal.

"Hey, Dani," the name comes out of my mouth without even hitting a filter, knowing the last time I called her that she freaked out on me, but the name fits her. She's a Dani.

Scratch that. She's *my* Dani.

Instead of freezing up, her eyes soften and warm, and her hand runs through my hair again, brushing it back. It's dark now, the winter just

ending, but after a summer of working in the sun on-site, I know it will bleach, just like it does every year.

“It’s gettin’ late. You probably need to get to the site early today, get changed, and whatnot.”

“You showered.” I state the obvious, smelling her clean skin and the smell of body wash.

“Uh, yeah. You looked peaceful. I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I never sleep in.” My mind is jumping from topic to topic, trying to grasp straws and make sense of what has happened in the last 24 hours.

How did we go from this woman hating me, rightly so, to me waking up in her bed? To her waking me up gently with a sweet smile on her lips?

“Well, you did,” she says, that smile growing to a grin. “And it’s about 30 minutes from when you usually come to get me. You should probably roll out of bed, so you have time to change and get cleaned up.”

“Next time you wake me up. We shower together.” Her cheeks redden, and her eyes move to the side, avoiding mine.

“Next time?”

“Oh yeah, Princess. Next time,” I say, wrapping a hand around the back of her neck and pulling her to me. With a squeal, she falls onto me, only the thin sheet separating her from my bare body. After last night, we both passed out naked.

Even more reason for her to wake me up.

“There’s going to be a next time?”

“If you think after yesterday I’m letting you get away, you’re out of your mind.”

“I am?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re mine now,” I say before pressing her to me so I can give her a proper good morning kiss before we move on with our day. I can’t help but think I’d be okay with waking up like this every day.

NINETEEN

-jordan-

“SO, WHAT IS THIS?” The words blurt out of my mouth without permission as I stare at Tanner, who is leaning back on his surprisingly comfy couch, grease-stained pizza plate on the small coffee table in front of him. His eyes leave the TV and turn to me, an eyebrow raised in question.

“This?” he asks. My own eyes look down as I pick at the circle of pepperoni on the slice on my plate. All those memes about NY-style pizza being superior didn’t lie. This pizza is fantastic, but I can’t focus on eating while having a mini-mental breakdown. I regret saying anything, but Tanner will never let me drop it.

“Yeah. This. You... and... me? This?” A hand reaches out to grab my own greasy plate and moves it to the table before his strong arm reaches over and pulls me to him.

“Are you asking me about what we’re doing right now, eating dinner? Or are you asking me about you and me sittin’ in my trailer after work eatin’ pizza and me thinkin’ about eating your pussy?” Immediately, I feel the flush hit my face.

”Tanner!” My hand smacks his arms as his smile grows, and a laugh erupts from him.

“Not one to sugarcoat things, Princess.” Funny how a name he said to be a dick has turned into my favorite word in a single day.

“The... the second one. Minus the last part,” I say as I bury my face in his neck. His hands grab my shoulders and push me back so he can look into my eyes.

“Jordan, look at me.” I do. “I’m not one to play games. Not to say that I haven’t enjoyed my fair share of women in my bed, but I’m 32, and that’s not what I’m looking for. I told you yesterday you’re my woman.”

“What does... what does that mean? Are you like, my... boyfriend?”

“I’m not anyone’s boyfriend.” My stomach dips, disappointment overtaking me at the thought that Tanner’s the same as every other man I’ve met. Wants the perks of being together but doesn’t want the ties. “But I am your man. And I mean that in any sense you need that to mean. But for me, that means taking you out, takin’ you for drinks at Full Moon. Means if any guy gives me a fuckin’ whiff of wanting what’s mine, I’m gonna talk with him.” My eyes widen on his, the ice in my gut melting to a warm puddle, the feeling dripping over my body like warm spring rain. “Won’t kiss you on-site, not in front of the men. You still work for me, technically. But other than that, it’s us. You and me.” Today, that was clear when we worked alongside each other without much more than sly glances and warm smiles. I’m good with that. In fact, I’m good with *everything* he said.

“Okay.” It’s all I can say as my world shifts just a tiny bit.

TWENTY

-jordan-

“STOP FIDGETING,” Tanner says as once more, I tug on my t-shirt to unwrinkle it. I really need to get more clothes, or at least get better at not just shoving an outfit in a bag for sleepovers. My hands go under my butt, trying to stop the inevitable. “Why are you so nervous?”

The question doesn’t need an answer, I’m sure. He knows why. We are on our way to my first ‘family function’ since arriving in Springbrook Hills.

It’s been a week since Tanner and I became an ‘us’ and five weeks since I arrived in this tiny town, and, for the most part, I’ve felt nothing but welcome. Except for my half-sister, who is a bit skeptical of me, rightfully so, I think.

And I get it. I do. If my mother left me when I was nine to run off and start a new life with new kids for lack of better understanding, I’d be mad. And hurt. And have a tough time letting in the result of that, regardless of her being my sister.

Hunter and Tanner seem to be getting a bit tired of her less than warm welcome, but I’m a pro at smiling past people who don’t care for me.

Now we’re heading to Hunter and Hannah’s place, which is the home my brother and sister grew up in, the house my mom raised them for some time in. Hannah is throwing a Memorial Day barbeque, and we’re invited - alongside Autumn and her family and Ron, my mother’s... ex-husband.

Who she left when she became pregnant with me.

Because she cheated on him.

“Ron’s going to love you. Nicest guy I’ve ever met,” Tanner says when I don’t answer. I’m sure that’s true, but... “Seriously, Dani. He won’t say anything to you about that.” He’s probably right, but... “And Autumn... give her time. Give her space. Plenty of people will be there.” Once again, he’s right. But what if... “And as soon as you want, we’re out of there, okay?”

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?” he asks.

“Read my mind. Know what I’m going to say.”

“Written on your face. You don’t hide a thing.” After years of hiding every thought, every emotion, sweeping it under the rug, that’s a shock to my system. I spent years being someone else, hiding me. His hand reaches over and grabs mine. “It’s going to be fine, Dani.”

Two hours later, a drink in my hand and laughing with Sadie with Rosie in my lap, it’s clear Tanner was right. Everything is fine. Ron smiled politely, introduced himself to me, and told me I looked just like my mother. Then he told me to relax, straight out telling me that nothing is my fault.

“Autumn always wanted a little sister. Don’t think she wanted one all grown up, but she got her wish. She might be bein’ a bitch right now, but give her time. She’ll get over herself. If not, you tell me, and I’ll talk with her, yeah?” he asked, tipping his head to his daughter, who was talking with a pretty older brunette woman. She turned out to be Ron’s date, a nurse he met at the hospital last year. Autumn tried to act like she wasn’t watching, but every few moments, her eyes would flick to us, ready to pounce if she thought I was distressing her father.

“I’ll give her some time, Mr. Hutchins. Thank you.”

“You call me Mr. Hutchins again, and I’ll let Aut have her way with you. It’s Ron, sweetheart.” The words were soft, reminding me of Vinnie, the sweet boyfriend my mom once had, and it’s instantly clear why he lasted so long. Whether it was intentional or by mistake, my mother found a man just like Ron and kept him until her toxic ways pushed him out too.

“Got it, Ron.”

And since then, my anxiety melted, allowing me to enjoy a sunny day with family, an experience I honestly never thought I'd have.

"Auntie Jordan, are you staying here forever and ever?" Rosie asks, little strawberry blond pigtails trailing behind her as her head tips up to look at me. Since we got here, she's been attached to my hip, asking me questions about myself, from my favorite color to my favorite food. Now I know how Tanner feels when I'm chatting his ear off in the mornings. I start to answer, but a strong arm around my shoulder makes me pause.

"If I can keep her here, then yeah, Rosie girl." Tanner's body is behind me, towering over me as I sit in the patio chair.

"Are you now, Tanner?" Sadie asks, an elbow to my side. I ignore her.

"Is he what?" Hunter asks as he walks over, a beer in his hand. He looks so different from the photos I grew up staring at, rough and casual, at ease. So relaxed. Something tells me it has a lot to do with the woman on the other side of the yard, giggling with Sara, a shiny ring glinting in the sun.

"Tanner's going to force Jordan to stay in town." God, Sadie has a big mouth. The blush on my cheeks has me wondering if the sunscreen I put on was expired and I'm burnt to a crisp.

"Good. We like having you around, sis," Hunter says, and *shit shit shit*. I fight back tears because the emotions I have overflowing right now are too much. This is so much more than I ever expected when I ran off and wound up here five weeks ago. A place to stay? Maybe. New friends? Cool. But open arms, and... family? A family that wants me to stay? Shit. That's more than my wildest dreams.

"Uncle Tanner, you better work really, really hard, okay? Because Auntie Jordan is going to be my new best friend ever." Sadie laughs at Rosie's answer, but I look up at Tanner and smile, even though the sun is blinding my eyes. He sees it, though, all of my thoughts and emotions, the gratitude and shock. Then, just like he told me he could, he reads my face and pulls me in closer.

I don't think he'd have to work too hard to keep me. He'll have to work to get rid of me, instead.

TWENTY-ONE

-jordan-

HOURS LATER, I'm laying on top of Tanner like we often do, body exhausted from the sun and outpouring of emotions hitting me all day. We spent the whole day at Hunter and Hannah's, drinking and eating, playing games, and chasing little girls, and it just felt so right. The rubble of my fortress, now a small, melting pile of ice cubes, couldn't keep me from feeling all of the things, from attaching myself to beautiful people.

Tanner's hand is running up my side, under my shirt, and tickling my ribs in the most alluring way when my phone rings. The hand pauses, his lips freezing on mine.

"Ignore it," I murmur on his lips, pulling his neck closer to mine to get his lips on me again. He listens, his tongue slipping into my mouth and tangling with mine, the low moan slipping from my chest drowning out the ringing. Our day of family and fun was fantastic, even the stressful parts, but it was also the first day we had together without work. Right now, we're in the delicious phase where I seriously want him all damn day long, and being so close was the ultimate tease. I'm dying for... more.

When it rings a second time, Tanner pauses, this time his fingers *finally* sneaking under the soft, thin fabric of the bralette I have on. *No, no, no!*

"Might be important, babe," he says, his voice full of the same regret I'm feeling.

"But it's probably not. No one knows this number." I refuse to let go of this man, not now. Instead, my hand wraps more firmly around him.

“Your girls? Hunter? Autumn?” I try not to cringe at my sister’s name, but Tanner being Tanner sees it. “Stop. She’ll come around.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let me see my phone.” His eyes still on mine, he reaches to the small table in front of us, grabbing it and handing it over to me without even glancing at it—another perfect example of the trust he already has in me.

The number isn’t saved in my phone, but I know the area code. It’s burned into my brain.

I feel the blood drain from my face... How? How would they...

“Jordan?”

I stare at my phone, willing it to stop ringing. Tanner’s hand reaches under my chin, tipping it, so my eyes move from the small device to his face, eyes full of concern. Not concerned like he thinks the call might be from another man, or I’m sneaking around on him like Jax used to think. But of concern there might be something wrong, something unsettling me.

“I don’t know this number,” I say as the phone blissfully stops blaring. I sigh in relief once more. Tanner’s gaze on me intensifies.

“Who are you afraid is calling you?” he asks.

“No one-“ I start, but the fucking phone. It starts up again with the same number. Same area code. Instead of waiting for my response, my excuse I haven’t even made up yet, Tanner gently moves me off him before standing, holding my cell as he swipes to accept the call and puts it to his ear.

“Yeah?” He answers, and my body explodes in a mix of heated panic and icy shock. No, no, no. He can’t do this. How did they find this number?! “This is her boss. What can I do for you?... What’s Jordan gotta do with that fuckwad’s PR team?... Yeah, well, if she wanted him to reach him, don’t you think she would have made it easy?... No, look, I don’t think *you’re* understanding. She is not interested in talking to Mr. Jackson. If, and only if, she wishes to do so, she will personally reach out to Mr. Jackson. Until then, if this continues, I’ll be assisting Ms. Daniels in pressing charges.” Oh my fucking God. What in the- “No, that is all we have to say to each other. You have a great day, sir.” He swipes to end the call, tossing it to the couch and running a hand through his hair. In a weirdly detached way, I can’t help but think if he lived in Hollywood, if he were a rockstar or an actor or an artist, he’d grace the “Most Handsome” lists each year.

But then he's looking at me, confusion and worry and frustration in his eyes, and it hits me he took complete control of the conversation. I don't have to face it. Face their call.

This has never happened to me.

No one has ever stuck up for me, not since Vinnie way back when, and even then, it was only for a few years and to whatever degree he could get past Mom. No one has ever taken my back, taken my side. Defended me without even knowing the full story.

"Princess, what is going on?" Tanner says this as he kneels between my legs, grabbing my hands in his big rough ones. I'm not sure when he got there, but there he is, the same look in his bright green eyes.

And then I cry.

I straight up *lose it*.

Giant, ugly sobs I know will leave my face blotchy and swollen.

Years of pent-up frustration and fear and anger are released because this man did the *bare fucking minimum*, and I'm blown away by it.

When this happens, once again, he becomes the first and scoops me up, settling me into his lap as I cry into his shirt until it's soaked through. One hand rubs my back as the other runs through my hair, now free of a ponytail holder, rocking me gently on his lap.

"Shhh, Jordan, it's okay. It's going to be okay. We'll handle this together. Nothing is going to happen. Ever." His words make the tidal wave inside me grow and crash harder, each word weakening apart the flimsy wall no one ever bothered to test, never bothered to even try to break down.

And when I'm clean of my barricade, when I no longer have a wall to hide behind, all I have is the truth.

"We met when I was 19. I was young and stupid and wanted to be in love. Wanted someone to take care of me. I fell for him, and he took it and ran with it. He wrote songs for me, wooed me. And then he was discovered, and I came with him. Told me I was his muse." The laugh that comes from my lips sounds as tired as I feel.

Tired physically and emotionally.

"Somehow, I became part of his image. He's a huge country star now, but he blew up by singing about me, about falling for me. Or maybe it was someone else. Who the fuck knows. But the public ate it up, and the PR team decided that was it. That was the image. 'Man completely in love with his college sweetheart.' Of course, he dropped out after a semester, and I

just had my associates. But I went to every interview and was on his arm at award shows and every concert. He pulled me on stage and kissed me in front of the crowd, and they all coo-ed and wished they were me.” The next part is the hardest.

“Once I was off the stage, out of the spotlight, I was put back into my little box. He would go off and fuck groupies, or whatever. They’d all sign NDA’s before he even met with them, so it would never get out. He’d go party and drink, and I’d be stuck in the tour bus or our big ass fancy condo. I’d do his books, and I’d read, and I’d watch TV.” My laugh is venomous, angry. “You’d think I’d miss him, but once he got famous, he started getting mean. Talking about my weight, about my mind. Comparing me to other women or just ignoring me completely. That part I didn’t mind as much.” Another deep breath raises my shoulders, but Tanner just sits there listening, rubbing my back. His steady presence urges me on.

“A few times, I tried to leave, but I had nothing. I tried to talk to Jax to get him to see my side. Do you know what he told me?” He shakes his head. “Told me I wasn’t even his first choice for this ‘role.’ He’d planned it, needed a cute down-home girl. His first choice didn’t work, and I was a substitution. A fun way to pass the time. A placeholder. But, lucky me, I was in the right place at the right time, with him when he got famous and boom. I was stuck.”

Tanner’s eyes burn, my story of being second best seeming to light something in him, But I’ve always been second best. Since I was born, I have always been a substitution for the desired outcome, a participation trophy.

“Inside, I was dying. I was on diets and exercise routines because I needed to fit the mold they made of me. I was told if I gained weight, there would be pregnancy rumors. Once, they decided things were slow and forced me to gain weight. Set it up to look like I was pregnant, so the tabloids had us front and center. That was my job. His team planned my days, so the paparazzi would catch me doing dumb shit - shopping, going out to lunch with other famous girlfriends. Picking up his damn laundry. Whatever it took to show I was devoted and in love with Jax.”

“Were you?”

“Was I what?”

“Devoted to him.”

“In the beginning. But eventually, it was a role. I know he was cheating on me. The songs aren’t even-“ I stop and gnaw my lip, stomach-churning. I can’t...

“What?” My head pulls back to look at him. “Jordan, what?” Another sigh breaks from my chest.

“There are things I want to tell you. Things you... you need to know before we go forward. Things you need to know to understand me. To know why... Why I left. But...”

“Jordan, I’ll be as patient with you as you need, but you need to let me know what I need to know.” He’s moved me, so I’m straddling him, his hands holding my jaws on either side.

“I signed an NDA when he signed his first deal. I have a copy. I need to find someone to go over it. But from what I understand, it’s... it’s tight. I can’t... I can’t say a lot.” His eyes burn with fury, and I think he gets it.

“How bad was it, Jordan?”

“Tanner, don’t ask me that.”

“Bad enough to leave a cushy life with nothing to your name?”

“I hated that life.”

“Bad enough to get scared when I backed you in a corner and told you to stay away from other men?”

He knows.

“Tanner, if they brought you on a stand....”

“Jesus fuck, I wanna wring this fucker’s neck.”

“Tanner, please.” He has to hear the panic in my voice. `

“Not gonna ask you more, baby. Not today. But tomorrow after work, we’re going to Hunter to ask about a lawyer. Someone needs to look at the document. We need to find out how deep this shit is and how to get you free.”

“Free?”

“Free baby. Free of him, of these assholes hounding you. It’s why you came here, right? Why you ditched your phone? Why you have no car?”

“Tanner, I can’t-“

“You don’t have to. I can figure it out. But when you can, you’re telling me it all. The whole damn story.” I stare at him, confused and amazed that he’s not running for the hills. That he doesn’t think I’m full of shit.

“Why are they calling you?”

“Who?”

“That fuckwad’s team.” I feel like Jax has a new nickname for Tanner.
“Why are they calling you? Why not him?”

“Honestly, he probably barely even knows I’m gone. His PR team kept the facade strong. We live separate lives. They set it all up.”

“What up?”

“The proposal. Jax knew I was planning to find a way out. He didn’t care. Never did. He knew his team would figure it out. But before the show, they pulled me aside. Told me to wear some sparkly white dress and to act surprised. He was going to ask me to marry him. Can you believe they told me it was the ‘next step in my career’? Like this had become my passion... To be an interesting detail in someone else’s career. From there, I was pulled into hair and makeup. Gotta look perfect for the cameras, you know?” The laugh sounds bitter. “My mind kept reeling. I knew... I knew I couldn’t do it. If I said yes, I’d be locked in. They’d probably make me sign the marriage contract when I left the stage or, God, make me get married right away.” I stop and look into his eyes. “I couldn’t do it, Tanner.” My voice sounds fragile, so breakable.

“What’d you do, baby?” His voice matches mine but with an undertone of caring or protection.

“I ran. They pushed me on stage, and he sang ‘my’ song. The first song he wrote ‘for me.’” My fingers make air quotes on the words to tell him what bullshit it is. “I shook my head and *ran* off the stage. Got to the trailer and packed what I could. Anything that meant anything to me. Got a cab. I got as much cash from ATMs as I could before they shut my cards off. I knew they would. And they did.”

“Jesus.”

“I had nothing, but I had taken some stuff of his to sell. Got enough to hop around for a week before I came here. I had a bank account I set up in secret, but they figured it out. I realized halfway here, paparazzi would be on me in an hour any time I used it. I couldn’t get free. Same with my cell. He bought it, but he must have had a tracker on it too. Every time I turn it on, they find me not long after.”

“That’s why you had no cell. It’s not broken, is it?” I shake my head and stare off behind his head, doing everything I can to avoid looking at him. To avoid his eyes and what might be in them. Pity? Frustration? Disappointment?

His rough hand comes up and tips my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes once and In them is... empathy. And a warmth I can't name. It's a warmth I don't think I've ever seen in someone's eyes, not directed at me.

"That day, in the trailer. Last week." He doesn't have to explain more. I know what he's going to ask. "The day I pinned you to the door. Did he ever threaten you?" *God, god! I can't do this.*

"Don't ask that."

"Don't ask what, Jordan?"

"Don't ask what you're about to ask."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't answer that." The look in his eyes is clear - frustration.

"Can't, or won't?" It's a good question.

"Can't, Tanner. If I could, I would. If I could open myself up, lay out all of my secrets at your feet and start clean, I would. I'd *love* to do that. But I can't, Tanner. Not right now. You need to know, though, if I could, I would. I *would*, honey." I hope he can hear in my voice, see in my eyes the sincerity.

"Why not?"

"I.. Fuck, Tanner. It's not simple." He says nothing. He lets me work through it without pushing. "The world I was in. It was normal. Or I thought it was. I was told it was kind of like a prenup. It protects Jax and his assets. I don't... I don't know if they knew then or if they do it with everyone. But..." I sigh, remembering how fucking stupid I was. Why did I do it? Why did it take so many damn red flags to catch my attention?

"I signed an NDA. If I speak, if I talk to *anyone* about... what happened, any of it, behind the scenes... they can take everything from me. I've already said way, way too much." I sigh, closing my eyes. "I don't have much. But just the thought of starting over with that hanging over my head? I can't."

"You signed an NDA specifically about your relationship with him?" I nod in confirmation. "They knew. They knew even then. And instead of protecting a vulnerable girl, they protected him." I don't meet his eyes, don't nod, don't acknowledge the truth, but he knows.

"I can't talk about it, Tanner."

"Jesus, Jordan."

"I answered one of the first calls they made. They made it clear that if I talked, I was ruined. He has fans, too, crazy ones. It wasn't explicit, they

know how to cover their ass, but his manager told me they could leak where I was. I'm scared, Tanner. I'm stuck. With the contract signed, I'm still just a puppet." His hand runs through my hair, tucking it behind my ear and something about it comforts me. "I've been tracking it—the tabloids. I'm sure... I'm sure you Google'd me. They're setting me up to be the bad guy. Leaking just enough truth with lies so I look crazy. I look like I led him on. I was on meds, and I stopped taking them." The lump in my throat feels like it's wrapped in barbed wire. "So if I do break the contract, no one will believe me." Finally, to my horror, my eyes well, and a tear falls, chased by another.

"I don't care about the perception from the public. But... God. I don't want to be her. That woman. And this town is growing on me, but they don't know me here. I don't want it to spread, for them to see me like that. And, God, Autumn already hates me. I don't blame her. But if she knows... if she thinks...."

"We're calling Tony," he says, reaching for his cell.

"Tony?"

"Tony, a good friend. A detective on the SHPD."

"Luna's boyfriend?"

"Yeah." He scrolls through numbers looking for a name.

"No, no, Tanner." In a panic, I slap his phone out of his hand. He looks at me, then the phone on the floor and back to me. But something in my eyes must tell him what he needs to know, his voice dropping to a comforting tone, how you'd speak to a spooked animal to calm it.

"Jordan, he's stalking you. We need to get the police involved."

"He isn't. He has no idea where I am." *Not yet, at least.*

"For how long? They know your number. Where you work. You can't hide away forever. You need to report this."

"No, Tanner. Seriously. Not yet."

"When?" he asks, looking me in the eyes.

"When?"

"When will we talk to someone? Find out your options? A lawyer, the station, someone."

"Give me a week. Two. I just... God, Tanner. I haven't been me in seven years. I don't know who that is. Everyone here sees me at Hunter and Autumn's long-lost sister. Not... not some celebrity hanger-on. I just want

time... to be me. Okay?" He looks at me for long, long moments as I hold my breath, hoping he'll agree.

What feels like hours later, he answers. "Okay, Dani." And with that, the only nickname I've ever been given falling from this man's lips, I take it as my sign from some higher being everything is going to be okay.

TWENTY-TWO

-tanner-

THE FOLLOWING week moves on in a dreamy daze of work, secret smiles, fantastic sex, and long nights together. If you would have told me just a month ago I'd be panting after a woman, after an *employee*, and spending nearly every waking moment with her, I'd call you insane.

But somehow, it's happened. Even though Jordan drives me up a wall with her sass and smart mouth, she's fun. She works hard as fuck. She's kind, and I love just being around her.

Example A: just two weeks after finally admitting we had something, Jordan is laying on top of me, hands under her chin and staring at me with a smile, slowly going from guarded and torn to comfortable and confident. Finally, the icy fortress constantly in front of her is melting and crumbling, and she's letting me in—letting me see the bright, beautiful, slightly goofy woman behind it.

Over the past week, things have been different in the best way. Every morning we've woken together. Sometimes we wake with the sun in the less comfortable bed in the trailer; sometimes, it's in the vast, fluffy bed in the cottage. But since the first morning, it's been together. We get ready together before trekking down to Rise and Grind, a habit I've kept up even though I no longer need to use it as an excuse to pick up Jordan.

I drive to the site with coffee and treats in hand while she badgers me with silly questions, some completely out there, others making me think. For each she asks me, I make sure I get her answer in return, so on these 10 minute daily drives, I learn more about her than I have of any woman I've

ever dated. I know her favorite color (mint, whatever the fuck that means) and her favorite food. (French fries, with cupcakes coming in second. “It’s how I keep my ass,” she said with a smile.) The first PG-13 movie she saw in theaters (Ever After. “You remember that Drew Barrymore movie?” No, Princess, I don’t, but I’ll nod anyway.) and the first concert she went to (an Elvis Tribute band, fitting with her Vegas roots.) In return, I told her about my brother in Wildwood, and chocolate chip cookies are my weakness.

Once at the site, I walk her to the office trailer, usually pinning her against the door and kissing her like the first time, except now she’s comfortable with me, no longer scared when I back her into walls—something *I find myself doing often*.

Now with the weather nice, most days, she sits outside with the men and me when we take lunch, chatting and being a goof. Each time I make sure she sits next to me, close enough to keep a hand on her, to touch her, brush her hair over her shoulder.

To make sure everyone knows, Jordan Daniels is *mine*.

It’s another unexpected trait I’m learning I have - this jealous, possessive streak seems to be brought out by her. Whenever I see a man’s eyes on her, I have to fight the urge to lock her in the trailer until everyone leaves.

After the day ends, we make dinner, either in my tiny trailer or her little cottage, and start the whole routine over.

It’s comfortable and easy, like she easily slotted herself into my life without a hiccup.

Like it was meant to be this way. And that’s how we are now, late on Friday night with Jordan laying on top of my chest, her tiny chin resting on her hand, explaining how she got so good at business management and chose it as a career of sorts.

“So, long story short, I was good with money and numbers, and it was the only thing I could think of to make decent money at. I did well in high school and got a grant to get my associates for free. I had good enough grades from the community college to go for my bachelor’s on a full ride, but then... well, you know the rest.” I do. The rest is she worked part-time at a coffeehouse, and The Asshole, as I exclusively call him, convinced my girl to quit and tour the world with him instead.

It’s just another layer to the story of her, a story we’ve each been slowly telling each other through her silly question games or by sharing tiny

chapters at the end of the day. She's told me about growing up with her mom, living in Vegas. Having strippers as babysitters and the elderly neighbor who would occasionally watch her. She told me about how she got her stunning red hair from her mom, which I vaguely remember when she lived in Springbrook Hills. I told her about growing up here, about the time Hunter and I jumped into the river naked, about how I got the scar on my knee by taking off my training wheels before I was ready. I tell her about playing football and how much I loved it.

"Why didn't you ever go back? Take online classes or something?" I ask, tucking the same strand of red hair which always comes undone behind her ear, and she smiles at the action.

"That drives you crazy, doesn't it?"

"Hmm?"

"The hair. It's popped out my whole life. Every time you tuck it back."

"Never noticed. Just like seein' your face," I say, and her eyes warm.

"You're sweet." Her voice is low and warm.

"Yeah, yeah. So why didn't you go back to school?" She sighs and tries to roll off me, but my arm holds her in place.

"I asked Jax a few times. I was bored. My life wasn't for me. I thought it could be something I did for myself. Thought he'd be okay with it since it would benefit him."

"He said no?"

"He said no."

"Fuckin' hate that guy."

"Hating him won't help. Hating people who fucked you over changes nothing. The only thing we can do is roll with the punches." I stare at her, shocked by this strong woman. I don't know her whole story. I know her mom was a piece of shit who left her with an elderly woman and held her to an unknown standard from birth. I know her father abandoned her before birth. I know a piece of shit controlled her for years, and she smiled through it. This would scar anyone, make them angry or bitter, but this woman shines from the inside out every day, attracting everyone in her stratosphere.

It's beautiful.

"Wish I could do that. It took me years to accept things with my ex. Accept we were young and stupid, and it wasn't totally her fault she destroyed me the way she did." She looks at me, hazel eyes I've seen in

Autumn's face burning through me, reading every emotion flickering through me. I can't avoid this question. Not this time, at least.

"Tell me about it," she says, her voice soft and hesitant, and I know I need to open about it, but things are so good between us right now. I cringe at bringing this ghost into our lives.

But she's been nothing but open and transparent with me, and I owe her the same.

And if we're going to be something, she needs to know the whole story if we're going to be together. And she needs to hear it from me, not from town gossip.

"I met Courtney when we were kids. She moved here in second grade. The school is even smaller than the town. Everyone knows each other. She was the talk of second grade. The pretty little girl who moved here. She sat next to me, and that was it. My dumb ass fell for her. We were together from middle school on. In high school, she was the cheerleader, and I was the quarterback. Homecoming court, prom king, and queen. We were like... God, it sounds dumb, but at that school, we were like royalty." I blush, and Jordan laughs. Relief, she's not taking this poorly rushes through me.

"I always knew I'd be here forever. I love this town. I don't... I don't like change," I say, and Jordan snorts.

"No shit."

"Shut up, or I won't finish my story," I say, tickling her side and listening to her sweet laugh.

"Okay, okay! I'll stop! Proceed, sir,"

"You're a smart ass, you know that?" I smile at her, pushing a lock of beautiful red hair from her eyes and behind her ear. "Anyway, I knew I never wanted to leave here. I knew - or thought I knew, at least - I wouldn't have to run the family business, but I planned to work it forever., Get a house, marry her, have kids. Do it all, you know? But..." I pause, unsure of where I should go from here. "I should have known. After graduation, she went to the community college in Bridgeville, one town over, and made new friends. She always wanted to go out. We had an apartment together, and I was working full weeks plus overtime at Coleman's. I was trying to balance it all, make money, pay rent and our bills, save up for a ring. She'd get mad when I was too tired to go out. Annoyed when I wanted to go to the same old places, see the same friends. She wanted... I don't know. More.

She wanted wild after a life of safety.” Jordan’s eyes flash, and I’m unsure if she’s thinking of her mom or her own wildlife.

“You know Luna, right? Well, her younger brother is in a band from here. They got big. Hometown Heroes. One day I came home to our apartment after a long day of overtime, and she was sitting on the couch, bags all around her. She told me she’s been cheating on me with the bassist for six months, was running off with the band. Going on tour. She was going to live the big life. Was going to be the girlfriend of a star.” She flinches, reminding me why I needed to tell her this story, why she needs to understand.

“It broke me for a while. I planned my life around this girl. Had no other plans, just living here and being with her. But I was rooted. *She* was rooted. Or I thought so. My hopes and dreams weren’t enough when she wanted to see the world.”

I look away, knowing the parallels in my story and her life, not wanting to see the pity in her eyes. But her small, warm hand comes to my jaw as she continues to lie on top of me, forcing my eyes to her.

“Tanner, to the right woman, it would have been enough. You would have been enough.” And with those words, I can’t help but ask myself if she’s trying to tell me something. To tell me to her, it would be enough.

To her, I would be enough.

TWENTY-THREE

-jordan-

I'M LIVING IN A ROM-COM.

It's the only excuse I can think of.

Or maybe I'm asleep, and this is all some kind of elaborate dream my mind spun up. And when I wake, I'll be on a tour bus, unhappy and friendless.

But when I pinch myself, I'm still in a dressing room on Saturday afternoon, trying on clothes to go out to a bar tonight with my new... friends. And my brother. And my... boyfriend? I don't have too long to sit on how weird *that* sounds because Sadie is knocking on the door.

"You still in there, Jord?" I glance at the mirror and see the loose white tank I have tucked into a tight, short, fake leather mini skirt.

I look... cute. Edgy but approachable. Different, but in a good way.

It's a far cry from the country girl style the team always dressed me in to fit the 'image' so carefully crafted for me. Cowboy boots, denim skirts, sundresses. This is fun and hip. For the first time in, I don't know how long I look in the mirror and see... me.

"Jordan! You okay?"

"Sade, you know she's in there. Chill." That's Zoe, the only one of the crew I hadn't met yet. She's cute, with shoulder-length dark hair and golden skin. She's quieter, more laid back than the other girls, and I immediately love her.

Giving them all a break, I open the door and peek my head out, nervous to show them the outfit.

“Come on, let’s see it,” Hannah says, crooking a finger and then twirling it, telling me to spin. I step out, and all three of them stop and look at me. No one says a word.

Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe this isn’t-

“That’s it,” Sadie says.

“Totally,” Hannah agrees.

“Get the top in the other colors too,” Zoe adds, standing and handing me over a stack of hangers. “Now try these.”

“You think it’s cute?” All three heads bob in confirmation. “It’s so... different. Than what I’m used to, I mean.” My mind flits over years of red carpet dresses and designer outfits I had no hand in choosing. I try to think about what I wore before, what I chose for myself, but... I just can’t. I can’t picture it.

“You mean when you were a country princess? Uh, no. That’s not you. You’re edgier, tomboy biker chick.” Sadie looks me up and down like she’s already planning an entire wardrobe based on one successful outfit. But I like her description. I like boots and jeans and comfy clothes, but I also like looking hot. It sounds like a decent balance.

“Now shoo, go try on more,” Zoe says, pushing me back into the fitting room.

“I don’t think I need....”

“Stop. If I see that white peasant tee one more time, I’m gonna barf,” Sadie says, rolling her eyes. Okay, so maybe I have six shirts I’ve been rotating, and one is my white peasant tee. My non-existent wardrobe can use a bit of help, especially now I’m trying to figure out who I am. But right now, I’m on a bit of a budget trying to reinvent myself and start over, not to mention I need to look into hiring a lawyer...

”Sadie! Rude!” Hannah says. She looks me over, eyes meeting mine, and somehow, in a way only Hannah can do, reads my thoughts before nodding. “Budget. Got it. Look, Hunter gave me money. He told me to take you shopping. I think he meant it more like, here’s an excuse to buy myself a bunch of stuff he’ll like since I hate spending his money. But either way, your brother is footing the bill. So you need to go shopping, so I don’t have to buy more things.”

“Trust me, she has more than any woman needs,” Sadie says, and, once again, the other two nod in agreement. I stare at them, two with stern eyes

and one with understanding ones, all three kind, as I try to decide what to do.

“I don’t think I could-“

“You don’t, then we’ll come back and buy it all when you’re not here and cut the tags off when we deliver it.” Sadie looks me in the eye, eyebrow raised as she delivers that blow, challenge on her face. I sigh, realizing I’m stuck and I’ll have to just internally promise to pay Hunter back, somehow.

But also, tonight I’m going on my first proper date with Tanner, going out with everyone for a night at Full Moon Cafe, the bar Luna owns. When Tanner asked me last night after work, I realized I had the issue every woman has encountered at least once in her life: I had nothing to wear.

A call to Sadie meant she showed up with Hannah and Zoe in tow to make our way to the mall in Bridgeville.

And here we are.

And here *I* am, experiencing a rom-com worthy wardrobe ambush with friends - real, genuine girlfriends who, my entire life, I daydreamed about having. Staring at them, knowing Sadie’s threat is real, I nod before speaking.

“Fine,” I say, and the girls cheer before pushing me into the fitting room to change.

After four hours, an embarrassing amount of bags, and a full makeup tutorial from Zoe, I’m waiting for Tanner to come and pick me up for a night out.

And I’m *nervous*.

I haven’t been nervous in years. After perfecting my facade and crafting the ability to turn off most of my emotions, I’ve learned to just coast, turn off my brain, and hope for the best.

Except, now my wall has been torn down by Tanner, and I have butterflies in my belly, can’t keep my hands still, and I’m checking the time every three seconds and looking out the window endlessly.

At six on the dot, the sound of tires crunching gravel hits my ears, and I start full-on hyperventilating. *Who am I?!* Also, why am I so nervous about Tanner, who I’ve been spending nearly every waking moment with for over two weeks?

Uh, maybe because he's your hot as fuck boss, you just left an abusive relationship, and you've never been on a proper date?

I'm wearing the first outfit I tried on with a pair of heeled booties I already had, my hair huge and curled thanks to Sadie, my makeup smokey and sexy thanks to Zoe. Looking in the mirror one last time, I don't see a trace of the sad, lonely girl I've been for years. The smoothed hair and flirty but conservative dresses are gone—no pretty, feminine makeup. Instead, funky jewelry borrowed from Luna replaces the dainty pieces famous jewelers lent me.

Most importantly, gone is the vacant look in my eyes of a woman living a shell of a life, the life of a puppet on strings.

The thought hits me and has me leaning in closer to the full-length mirror to find herl in me, to see if she's really gone or just hiding. Tanner's loud knock interrupts my self-inspection.

"Come in!" I shout as I exit the bedroom, boots clicking on the floor as I walk in the door's direction. I've never been in a position where I don't lock my door, where I'm not constantly worried about sleazy neighbors or crazed fans. It's another revelation making me fall for Springbrook Hills a bit more.

And then the rest of the reason I'm falling for this sleepy little town walks in, wearing a pair of worn-in khaki jeans and a dark blue button-down that looks so unbearably sexy on him. His ever-present work boots are on his feet, but this time it's a clean pair, newer in his rotation.

"Hey," I say with a smile. "You ready? I just gotta grab my bag. Do you think I'll need a jacket? It's been pretty warm today, but I never know at night...." My voice fades off as I watch him, his eyes on me, glazing with a familiar look. "Tanner..."

"Look good, Princess," he says, his voice low and husky as he takes a few steps towards me.

"Tanner, no. We have places to be."

"Trust me, no one in that crew would blame me for being late."

"The girls would!"

"The girls would least of all, Jordan." This is *probably* true. Sadie asked me at least a dozen questions just *this* side of appropriate. It wasn't in a nosy way, but a fun, 'girlfriend who wants to know you're getting the good stuff' way.

"Tanner, my hair. My make-up!"

“Won’t touch either of them,” he says, and a bolt of heat runs through me as his warm hands meet my hips, and he backs me up into the kitchen. He does that a lot, backs me into things.

“Tanner, that’s impossible.”

“Just wanna taste, baby. Won’t even take me long, knowin’ you.”

“A taste?” I ask, and even I can hear the delighted quiver in my voice, excitement at the prospect of Tanner getting *a taste*. The hands-on my hips dip down to the edge of my pleather skirt and wiggle it up until it’s hiked to my waist, leaving me in a tiny black thong.

“Fuck, Dani. Gonna need more than a taste of that.” His eyes lock to the revealed flesh, and instantly I’m ready for whatever he wants, wetness seeping from me.

“Honey…” The protest is both half-assed and futile. If there’s anything I know about this force of a man, it’s he does whatever the fuck he wants. Especially in the pursuit of my pleasure. His hands yank the thin fabric down my thighs, the material getting stuck on one foot where it hangs as he lifts me, placing my now bare ass on the kitchen counter.

The cold stone is a shock to my heated body, but I immediately forget about it when he drags one thick finger through my wet with one hand while the other pushes my knees apart as far as they can go comfortably. The finger now drenched in *me* comes to my lips.

“Taste you. Fucking divine,” he says, and even though some past version of me would have grimaced by the thought of that, all I want to do is make him proud. Tentatively, I open my mouth and take his finger into my mouth, tasting myself and him at once. The combination has me moaning around the digit.

“Fuck, Princess. So fuckin’ hot.” My eyes are already hooded when they meet his, and even though we’re supposed to be at the bar in ten minutes, the world could be on fire, and I still wouldn’t leave this spot. His hands leave me, going to my jaw and pulling my face to his for a deep, beautiful kiss I can feel in every inch of my being.

Somehow, in five short weeks, Tanner Coleman has become a part of me I don’t think I’ll ever shake. But, even after he’s long gone, moved onto better, more beautiful things, a better fit than my temporary substitution, a part of me will always be his.

Breaking the kiss, he looks into my eyes, and for a moment, I worry he sees it there, sees the truth of how far gone I am. He stares at me for long

moments, digging through the rubble of the wall I used to have to keep everyone out before he kisses me once more, soft and sweet, before getting to his knees in front of me.

My body is on high alert, anticipating his every move, but before he dives in with the passion I'm used to, he takes my hands in his and presses each to my inner thigh, forcing me to hold them open. I'm spread for him, wide for his enjoyment, and though I could feel self-conscious about it, I don't. Never with him.

"Be a good girl and keep these open for me, Princess," he says, and his words send a shiver through me even more so when the warm breath from his words hits my wet center. "Yeah?" he asks when I don't answer.

"Yes, Tanner," I say, and the words come out breathy and uneven. But with my words, his head dips forward, running from top to bottom with his hot tongue, and immediately my back arches, my head going back to hit the kitchen cabinet. A low, satisfied moan rips from my chest.

"So fucking sweet," his mouth says against my pussy. When it latches to my clit, giving a few hard sucks followed by a lashing of his tongue, I scream, the feeling of electricity flowing from my center, down my thighs, up my spine, completely consuming me. The chuckle he emits as I buck my hips to get myself closer to his mouth reverberates right on my clit better than any vibrator I've ever used.

"Holy shit, Tanner, holy shit," I say, nails digging into the delicate skin of my inner thighs and adding another layer to the soup of feelings and emotions running through my body. When he slips two fingers into my wet pussy, crooking them in the way that tells me he already knows my body perfectly, one hand of my hands leaves my thigh. It shoots into his hair to try to keep him there.

But then he pauses.

Shit. My hand goes back to my thigh, keeping me open and splayed for him and his head comes up to meet my eyes while his fingers go back to moving in me.

"Such a good girl, Princess. Should I reward you? Should I make you come on my face or make you wait until we get back here and suffer together?" I whimper, half because this man is so fucking sexy, bringing parts of me to the surface I didn't even know existed, and half because I am so close to the edge already. I will cry if he stops.

“No, honey, please,” I beg, another thing I would never, ever do in another life.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll take care of you.” The words are soothing as his fingers continue, taking me closer to the edge as I start to move my hips to ride his fingers. *But I need more...* “You ready to come on my face?” I know he wants an answer.

“Yes, yes, please.”

“Okay, Dani.” Each time he says that in his sweet voice, so contrary to the rough and stoic man he is, a part of me leaves forever, becoming his, never to be mine again. I can’t sit on that for long, though, because his mouth is back where I need it, sucking hard on my clit, and that’s it. It’s all I need.

Electric waves shoot through me, my toes and fingers tingling as I unconsciously pull my legs even further apart and *scream* his name. So loud, I wouldn’t be surprised if they could hear it eat the big house and call the police about an attacker.

It seems to go on forever, my body experiencing shock waves for long moments after, his tongue continuing to lick up my wet with gentle reverence, his fingers slowing moving in me to prolong my pleasure.

Eventually, my body loses all tension, my head smacks on the cabinets once again. He stands between my still-spread legs, arms wrapping around my back to keep me safe.

“Oh my fucking God, what was that?” I ask, half-dazed as I look in his eyes, full of fire.

“That was just a taste of what’s going to happen tonight, Princess.”

“Tonight? What about right now? You...” I fade off, my hips moving closer to him until my sensitive center hits his erection.

“Gonna wait until I have time to do all the dirty shit my mind is mixing up when we get back.”

“But... Tanner...” I’m confused. I’ve never met a man who is happy to get me off and not himself.

“That was for you. And, selfishly, a bit for me, because I love eating that sweet cunt of yours. But tonight is for me.” I stare into his eyes, trying to find the truth in his words. Trying to find the ammunition he’s saving to use on me later, but there’s nothing but honesty and genuine happiness he made me come.

“Okay, Tanner.” His face lights up, and a smile breaks on his face as his hands go to my hips, gasping and putting me back down on the ground. He turns my body towards the bathroom and smacks my bar ass.

“Go, clean up, then we’ll leave.”

“You look happy,” Luna says, setting down a drink in front of me and leaning in on elbows the way she did the first time. Tanner, Hunter, and Zander are a few seats down from where I sit with the girls and something about this casual small-town night out is like something from an adorable sitcom. Again, I’m in a movie.

I freaking love it.

It’s funny. After years of living what others might see as a dream life, my dream was always is this—a simple night out in a small town bar with good friends and no one to impress.

“I am,” I say, and the words come out quickly, without thought, carefree. She laughs at me.

“You sound surprised.”

“I’m not, not really. It’s just... I didn’t fully expect this to work the way it has.”

“What do you mean?” Hannah asks from my left, leaning in to join the conversation.

“I just...” Pausing, I stir the ice in my drink with the cocktail straw. “I’ve never had good luck. I’ve always been a substitute for... other people or made to be what others needed me to be. This is the first time I’ve been free to be myself. And I kind of like who that is.” I continue to stare at my drink, avoiding looking at anyone. But when no one speaks for a few moments, I look up at Zoe, then Hannah, then Luna. They all have the same look, a mix of sadness and compassion. “And I like it here. Like the town. Love you guys, like getting to know my brother and my nieces. Being close to family. I came here on a whim because I didn’t know where else to go, but now that I’m here, it’s like this is where I was headed all along. And... I don’t know. I like it.”

“And you like Tanner,” Zoe says, knocking her elbow into me in a friendly way.

The blush hit my cheeks with a warm burn. I look over to where he's sitting with the guys, head back and laughing at something one of them said, and smile because he's just that gorgeous. Looking at him, hearing his laugh sends a shiver down my spine and warmth through my belly.

"Yeah, I like Tanner," I say, nearly too quiet, but Luna's used to hearing things over the noise of the bar and just smiles.

"Do know you what happened to me?" she asks as she pops the top off another drink for someone else, and the girls next to me get quiet and still. I bite my lip, unsure of how I should answer. Finally, I decide the truth is best.

"Uh, yeah. With the stalker guy?"

"Yeah. The best thing that ever happened to me," she says with a smile and laughs when my eyes bug out. "If it didn't happen, I wouldn't be with Tony right now, that much I can guarantee." Her eyes fixate on me, and in the way bartenders seem to do, she reads me, seeing past my icy fortress and nodding. "You'll get it soon." My belly freezes, wondering what she knows, what I revealed. "Anyway, when he took me, I was in Tanner's trailer."

"No shit?"

"Yup. He was out with Zee, getting a drink or something. Who knows? But after that... I don't know. We kind of bonded. He knew the guy about as well as I did, him being his employee. Neither of us suspected it. But something about knowing someone, trusting them, seeing them nearly daily for so long, and being fooled? It's... a shock."

"I can imagine," I say.

"Seriously, I would have never guessed," Zoe says, eyes wide with remembering. Being the police chief's daughter, I've learned she has insight on nearly every case within the town limits.

"Me neither," Hannah agrees.

"Anyway, he comes in a bunch. He was one of my 'bodyguards,' coming in to make sure I was okay in the months after. We talked a lot. People do that, confess to bartenders. He's... he's a good guy, Jordan." I nod, knowing where she's going with this.

"Yeah, I know."

"You stay, you give him a chance? It could be beautiful." She smiles at me but quickly looks over her shoulder at the front door. It hasn't even moved yet, but she somehow knew because in walks Tony in his uniform

and her entire face lights up. She puts down the glass she was drying, ducks under the bar, and does a running leap into his arms.

And, of course, he catches her with a laugh, smiling like even though I'm sure she does it all the time, he still finds it just as adorable as the first.

I look away, suddenly feeling like I'm intruding, but as I do, I catch Tanner's eye. They're soft as he looks at me, a smile playing on his lips. I smile back and down my drink, and I can't help but think maybe Luna was right. If I let down my walls, it could be beautiful.

"Hey, aren't you Jordan Daniels?" The moment comes long after my dance with Tanner and his delicious promises. Long after the girls and I have had a few too many drinks and edging into 'time to get home and make Tanner Coleman mine' territory.

But the words are framed in a way I've heard too many times before. It's a way that does *not* mean 'Jordan Daniels, sister to Hunter and Autumn, girlfriend to Tanner, employee at Coleman and Sons Construction.' It has my stomach turning.

"I-I'm sorry?" I'm making my way back from the bathroom, the girls staying behind to touch up make-up while I headed back to Tanner to tell him I'm ready to get out of here. I should have stayed. *I should have stayed in the bathroom.*

"You are! You're Jordan Daniels!" the girl shouts excitedly, grabbing my arm. She has a dyed blonde bob and a cute, grey top which, in any other situation, I'd ask where she got. But not now. "You're dating Jax Jackson!" The words make the ice re-form in my belly, leaking to my veins, overtaking me. I'm frozen stiff. At the name, eyes pull towards me, people looking to see who this stranger is talking to.

"I think you're mistaken. I'm sorry, I have to--"

"So this is where you've been! Why did you say no?!" Her eyes hold the same awe I've seen so, so many times before. Awe of an adoring fan who can't imagine, can't even fathom...

"Problem here?" The voice is low and assertive as a warm hand comes to my waist, tugging me back into a familiar hard body. Into safety.

Tanner.

“Oh, so *that’s* why you said no!” she says, her voice now a mix of disgust and envy as she takes out her phone, scrolling to get the camera—another familiar action.

“Tanner, we-“ But even over the music, I hear the distinctive click of the mechanical shutter going, forever capturing proof of who I am, and most importantly, where I am.

“Oh my God, my friends will never believe this!”

“Ma’am, did you just take a photo of me?” Tanner says, his voice angry and clued into what is happening.

“Not you, her,” the woman says, pointing at me, but it’s obvious Tanner would have been in the image.

“Did you ask if you could take a photo of my girlfriend?” Butterflies flutter at the term, but my mind is caught up on what a disaster this could be. This could change everything. Every moment of peace I’ve earned and enjoyed over the past month could be gone.

Will I have to leave?

Will *he* find me?

“She’s a celebrity. I don’t have to ask.” The woman’s snide voice grates at my quickly sobering nerves, but she’s right. When you agree to live in the limelight, you lose the ability to complain about shit like this. I feel Tanner’s body tighten next to mine. I need to lock this down.

“Drop it, Tanner,” I murmur under my breath, tugging on his arm as the woman walks away with an excited step to her, phone in hand, probably sending the image to all her friends or, even worse, trying to sell it to some tabloid. Shit.

“What was that?” The voice comes from behind me, and I turn to see Luna, a bar rag in hand, her face looking worried. When I move my eyes to Tanner, it’s clear why. His face is a mask of anger.

“Jordan’s been spotted,” he says, and Luna looks around to find the culprit, but she’s long gone, disappeared into the crowd and possibly from the entire bar. “Someone came over, recognized her, and took her picture.”

“Do you know who it was?” she asks because this is the kind of town where everyone knows everyone.

“Never seen her. Probably someone from out of town.”

“Oh, God, Jordan, I’m so sorry. Everyone here knows to leave you be. But someone not from Springbrook Hills....” I turn to Tanner.

“They’re going to know who I am.” My eyes are wide and anxious, my buzz having worn off instantly with the thought of facing my ex. Tanner wraps me in his strong arms, pressing my face into his chest and kissing my hair.

“Don’t worry, Dani. I’ll keep you safe. I won’t let them get to you.”

And though the words ease my anxiety, calm the fear, I know I can’t hide anymore.

TWENTY-FOUR

-tanner-

JORDAN STUMBLES into the cottage on wobbly heeled boots. Seeing the state the intruder left her in, Luna decided the girls all needed a few more shots to end the night on a bright note. A few shots took her from happy tipsy to happy drunk.

The drunken smile Dani gave Hannah when she left told me it was an excellent decision, even if I'm pretty sure she'll regret it tomorrow. But, for now, she's happy, content, and, more importantly, not dwelling once again on that fuck face.

Standing in the middle of the living area slash kitchen, she turns to me and drops her bag to the floor, not caring where it lands. Then, she throws her arms into the air and puts her head back before she shouts, "Come ravish me, Bossman!"

Of course, I immediately start laughing at her because this woman is adorable and hilarious when she lets her personality seep through that icy wall of hers. Her head comes back down, and her raised arms come to her full hips before she stares at me with attitude.

"What's so funny?"

"You."

Her nose scrunches up at me. "I'm not funny." I take a step closer to her, reaching her and putting a hand on her hip. Despite those boots, which add three or four inches to her height, she still barely reaches my chin.

"Yeah, you are, Dani," I say, my voice a quiet contrast to her drunken shouts.

“I love when you call me that.” Now it’s lowered, sexy but sweet as she tips her head back to look at me. I dip forward and gently press my lips to hers.

“I know.” We stand there, in the center of the small room, kissing, tongues dancing slowly as if it’s not nearly three a.m, and we don’t have to go to bed eventually.

“I’m gonna pay you back for before,” she says, hands going to the buttons of my shirt with shockingly nimble fingers.

“What?” But I know exactly what she’s talking about. The very fresh memory of her coming on my tongue, of her shouting my name just feet from where we stand, has had me adjusting myself in my pants all fucking night. The smell of her on my fingers never fully washed away, and I swear, each time I got a whiff, I wanted to take her out back, bend her over and fuck her there and then.

“I’m gonna suck you off, Tanner,” she says, and, yup, all of the tension I’ve been keeping at bay all night hits in full force, my cock hard as a rock.

“Baby, you don’t have-“ But then she’s on her knees in front of me. Tiny hands brush my budge and unbutton my pants, pulling down the zipper, my underwear, and my hard cock is out before I know it. Looking down, I see her gorgeous hair, strawberry blonde and begging for my hands, and those big hazel eyes looking up at me, slightly dazed. Her full lips are just an inch from heaven.

“Jordan, you don’t-“

“I want to, Tanner,” she says, and before I can object once more, her hand is wrapped around me, and she’s pulling me into her mouth. I watch as I disappear into her, first the head and then inch by inch until those full pink lips hit where her hand is holding me, picking up whatever she can’t fit.

“Jesus fuck Dani, your fuckin’ mouth.” She moans around my cock, the feeling reverberating down my shaft to bloom at the base of my spine.

And she starts to move. An inch out, then back in, getting me wet with her saliva, each slide moving easier. Each slide in and out, she takes more, becoming a bit bolder. My hand goes to the back of her head, and I gently guide her, not wanting to be that guy but also *really wanting to be that fucking guy*.

As if she knows, the way she always does, her hand braced on my thigh covers my hand in her hair, forcing it deeper, so I’m pushing her head

harshly, and she *moans*. The woman moans around my cock when I push her deeper into my cock.

“Fuck, Dani, you want me to fuck your mouth?” I won’t do it if it’s not what she wants, but if she does... And then her big eyes look up, and she gives me a tiny nod and *fuck fuck fuck this fuckin’ woman*. I push on her head, then pull on her hair to pull her back, repeating so I’m controlling the depth my cock goes, the speed, the force. With each movement, the head hits the back of her throat. Each tug of her hair pulls a small mewl from deep in her chest.

“Jesus, baby, you like that? You like when I fuck your face?” She moans. “You’re so pretty, with my cock in your mouth. God, Princess, so fucking good.” At this point, I’m not even sure if full sentences are coming from my mouth. All I can focus on is the feeling of my cock in her mouth, of her small mouth sucking, hitting the back of her throat, pulling her hair, the noises coming from her... But what happens next is what makes me snap.

A moan falls from her lips, but this one is different, more primal, more excited.

Looking down, I see one hand around my cock and the other...

“Fuck, Princess, are you fingering that pretty cunt of yours?” She looks up at me, her eyes hooded as she moans, and I see her arm moving quickly. When I listen closely, I can hear the quiet sound of her fingers entering her wet pussy. Immediately, I pull my cock from her mouth.

I need that instead.

Her moan of disapproval, of disappointment, is short-lived when she realizes what’s happening. I lay her down, right in the middle of her living room, and tug at her panties. Tossing them across the room, I hike her skirt up around her waist.

I wish I could take her shirt off, watch those tips bounce as I pound into her, but we’re so past that, I can’t focus on anything but getting my cock into her dripping wet cunt.

Rubbing the head through her slit, we both moan.

“Did sucking my cock make you this wet, baby? Was that what did it? Sucking my cock and knowing I’ve been thinking about you coming for me all night?” I’m crazed, but I need this. Need to tease her and fuck with her.

“God, yes, Tanner, please, fuck me,” she begs. That’s all it takes. My hands go to her hips, lifting them as I kneel between her legs, those heels

helping until she's bridged before me, and I slam into the hilt.

We both moan loud as I stop, deep inside my girl.

"So fuckin' good. This pussy is so fuckin' good. It's my fucking pussy, you hear me, Dani?" I don't know where this is coming from, but each word has Jordan clamping down harder, making it near impossible to move inside of her. She moans in response.

But it's not what I want.

One hand leaves her hip, and I pull it back, smacking her round ass and making her scream once more. She's close already.

"Answer me, Dani."

"Yes! It's yours, Tanner, fuck, it's yours!"

And with that, I move a hand to her clit, press down hard once, and she clamps down around me as she comes, taking me with her as I pound in deep one last time, coming inside her on the wood floor of her little cottage.

TWENTY-FIVE

-jordan-

SUNDAY MORNING, I wake up without Tanner or a hangover. My hand swats at what has become his side of the bed to find it still warm but lacking a body. The smell of coffee brewing wafts into the room, and I make an educated guess where my man is.

My man.

Just the words running through my mind make a shiver run down my spine.

When I enter the kitchen, his toned, tan back is to me as he stares out the window over the kitchen sink, facing Hannah's fairy garden.

"Pretty, isn't it?" I ask, coming behind him, pressing my cheek to his warm, bare skin, and wrapping my arms around his middle. He turns, holding a coffee cup above my head and wrapping his free arm around me.

"Gorgeous." He's looking straight at me, and I know he doesn't mean the flowers. A blush burns my cheeks, and I bury my head in his pecks, making him laugh. "Morning, Princess." He leans down and plants a soft kiss into my hair, which I'm sure is a chaotic mess. I mumble a morning, the words muffled in his skin, making his chest rumble once more with a laugh. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please," I say, but don't move, soaking in his warmth.

"Gotta let go if you want me to get you a cup." His laugh reverberates through me once more as I look up at him and scrunch up my nose in protest. "Fine, you want a sip of mine?" He holds up his mug. I nod like a

little kid, and he brings it to my lips for me to take a sip before placing it down on the counter behind him and wrapping me with both arms.

“Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Dani,” he says, leaning down again, this time to kiss me good morning on the lips. I’d worry about morning breath any other time, but this is Tanner. I can’t resist a kiss from this man.

“You got plans today?”

“Nope, you?”

“Wanna take you somewhere. You good with that?”

“Where?” I ask.

“It’s a surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?” I ask, arms wrapping around his neck as I roll up onto my toes. His head goes back in that deep laugh I’m starting to love.

“God, are you always this difficult?”

“Tanner, you know I am.” He laughs again.

“Fine, But I’m not tellin’ you. You good to come with me?” I think about it for a moment, but I know the answer already.

“I’ll go anywhere you want to take me, Tanner.”

TWENTY-SIX

-jordan-

“SO, BARE WITH ME, OKAY?” Tanner says. We’re driving into a complex of new builds on the other side of town from Sunshine Falls. Adorable cookie-cutter starter homes in a perfect row.

“What is this?” I ask, looking around and noting that most are unoccupied and for sale.

“We did this project last summer, into the fall.”

“You as in Coleman and Sons Construction?”

“Yup.” He won’t look at me, and while that *should* be normal, it doesn’t feel like it is. The way he’s drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, eyes darting side to side, has me anxious.

“Tanner, what-” I start, but then suddenly he stops in front of a cute Cape Cod-style house before parking and turning off the truck. The home we’re in front of is like the others, but also small things are different. The railing on the small porch is more intricate, the paint a slightly brighter shade of white where the other homes are cream, yellow, or beige. On the other houses, the shutters are in shades of red and brown, but this one has pretty, simple black shutters and a bright red door.

It’s adorable.

“This is mine.” I pause, confused, not sure what he means.

“Like, you worked on this one?”

“No. Well, yeah. But it’s mine. I bought it.”

“What?”

“We worked on this development last summer. I knew I wanted a house, had the down payment mostly. Planned to be a bit more comfortable around this time, when most would go up for sale.”

“And...?” He pauses with his hands still on the wheel, staring at the house.

“So I spoke with the developers, told them I wanted the last house on the property, up against the woods. But I’d get free rein. When we did the build, I did this after hours once the basics were done. Added things for myself, like the porch and skylights. Things that aren’t in the other houses. Made it my own.”

“So... it’s yours. And you built it?”

“Yeah, I guess. Did most of the work myself. I wanted it to be different, fit my needs. And next week, I can finally move in.”

“Move in?”

“Closed last week. It’s mine for good now,” he says, lifting a small silver key on a keyring on his finger and giving it a small swing. “Wanna check it out?” His smile is boyish and shy, but he’s excited about this. Excited to show me this.

“Yeah,” I say, and the words come out quiet before we both get out of the truck and walk up the small path leading to the porch. I run my hand along the stained wood in awe. “I love this. I always wanted one of those rocking chairs on a front porch to drink my coffee out in it each morning. Snuggle in a blanket with cider in the fall. The leaves change out this way, right?”

“Yeah, that’s why I added a deck out back, facing the woods. The trees will change, and it’ll be nice. I want to add a firepit too,” he says over his shoulder as he unlocks the door, opening it and gesturing for me to enter.

“In the desert, we don’t have that. And when we toured, I never stayed anywhere long enough to explore or see the change.” My eyes look around, seeing open space with high ceilings and a lofted second floor. My mind immediately goes to how cute that railing would look at the holidays with garland and lights, red bows...

Stop it, Jordan. This is not your home.

“It’s gorgeous, Tanner.”

“So I’m gonna put a TV here - cable was set up a few days ago, and I have furniture in storage from my apartment. Most of it is shit, but some is decent. Couch here, coffee table..” He points to different areas in the room,

telling me which parts he designed, and his plans and I can see it. It's exactly how I'd position things.

"You should do a big sectional," I say, pointing into a corner. "Have the guys over for beer and football."

"Or you could have the girls over for wine and gossip," he says, walking to me and wrapping an arm around my waist, pulling me in.

"This isn't my place, though, Tanner."

"It could be." His words make the butterflies flutter.

"I can't move in with you, Tanner."

"Not right now. But things keep going good?" He smiles at me, pressing a kiss to my nose. "I wouldn't mind you leaving a mess in my bedroom." I slap his chest even though warmth is flowing through me.

"I do not make a mess!" I say, with a laughing shout.

"Princess, for someone who likes things so organized, you are a tornado in your personal space. Or my personal space, for that matter."

"No way, that's all you!" He's not wrong, though. In this way, we are complete opposites. Where he couldn't organize business files to save his life, every other aspect is pristine. Whereas for me...

"Dani, I found a sock in the shower yesterday."

"No way, you're a liar." I'm smiling at him, the expression nearly cracking my face because I love this kind of teasing, especially after seven years of constant put-downs.

"And when I was at your place, I found a glue stick in the utensil drawer."

"I was using it and dropped it in there! It's a utensil, just for crafts." My voice is a full giggle now, and his return smile is blinding.

"Babe. Last week you lost your phone for three hours." Shit. I know where this is going.

"But--"

"It was in the fridge," he finishes, and I have no excuse for that, so I just laugh until he presses his lips to mine and shuts me up with a sweet, beautiful kiss. When he breaks it, he pulls back and looks at me. "Just saying, if at some point you want to spend more than the night wrecking my house, I'd be okay with it." I look at him and take in the sincerity of his look, of his words.

"Okay, Tanner. I'll keep that in mind." With one last kiss on my lips, he pulls back before taking my hand.

“I’d appreciate that. Now, are you ready for the rest of the tour?” And with that, I go on a tour of a home Tanner James Coleman built with his own two hands.

And it’s absolutely perfect.

TWENTY-SEVEN

-jordan-

THE MAGICAL WEEKEND ends on Monday when Tanner comes into my office trailer not long after leaving to start work for the day.

“Hey, honey, how’s it going out there?” The weather has been warming up, with Memorial Day right around the corner. This project is running close to the very end, with finishing touches like a basketball court and finishing the parking area going in now.

The smile melts off my face when he walks in, his cell in his hand and his face guarded.

“What’s wrong?” I say immediately, standing to go over to him.

“I don’t want you to freak out, Princess.” The words and tone have my body and mind on high alert. One of the guys showed me this. Not a big deal, but I don’t want you blindsided.”

“Blindsided with what?” He looks around, eyes stopping on the sofa nearby.

“Why don’t we sit down?”

“Tanner, you’re freaking me out.”

“Please, sit-“

“Tanner, seriously-“ He cuts me off with a hand on my arm.

“Dani, please sit down. It’s going to be okay, but need you to sit, okay?” Without responding, I do as he asks, sitting on the couch and looking at him expectantly. He sits next to me but doesn’t say a word.

“Okay, so, Jacobs just showed me this,” my eyes roll.

“What is it, some naked hot chick?” He laughs, but it’s half-assed like he’s doing it for my benefit.

“Not quite.” Before he can say any more, I snatch the phone from his hand and stare at the news article. My blood goes cold.

Why Jordan Daniels Said No Revealed: She Has a New Man!

Underneath is the photo of me at the bar, Tanner to my back, holding me close in a protective hold. It’s actually kind of a cute shot if you ignore my dazed look, and some random woman was completely invading my privacy.

Jordan Daniels, the ex-girlfriend to country crooner Jax Jackson, was finally spotted after nearly a month in hiding. It turns out the former love bird who broke America’s sweetheart’s heart has been living with an unknown boy toy in Springbrook Hills, New Jersey, a small sleepy town. Our sources are unsure of how the affair began, but we hear Jax is heartbroken over the news.

Jax is heartbroken over the news.

Instantly, acid burns my throat, roiling and threatening to come up.

“*Jax is heartbroken over the news?! Are you fucking kidding me?*” Tanner takes the phone from my grasp, setting it aside before he grabs me by the shoulders.

“Dani, cal-“

“That man has no fucking heart to be broken! Was he heartbroken when he was fucking every thin, blonde groupie with open legs and big boobs? Or what about when he was making me feel like shit, making me never want to leave the fucking house? Was he heartbroken when I had the flu and couldn’t even get up to get myself water? When he went to a fucking house party for fucking Justin Bieber instead of helping me? Or what about when I told him I didn’t want to have sex because we’d just gotten off 24 straight hours of traveling, so he left and didn’t come back for two weeks?” Tanner’s hands tighten on my shoulders, but I only register the move in the back of my mind. The rest is totally gone. “Or what about the time his PR team told me I was gaining weight, and I needed to go on a diet? Because when I started to cry, he said he couldn’t have a heifer on his arm. Or when I tried to fucking *help him*, and he hit-“ the word escapes before I can stop it, but thankfully I stop there.

Or maybe not.

Because the look in Tanner's eyes is absolutely venomous. The rage boiling there is near tangible, and all things considered, it should scare me.

But it doesn't.

Because the anger isn't directed at me.

It's not *caused* by me. It's anger *for* me. And it makes all the difference.

"Please tell me I didn't hear you say that."

"Tanner, I--"

"I could guess. But I still put fucking blinders on. But, please, Jordan, for the love of God, tell me I heard wrong. Tell me he did not lay a hand on your precious fucking body."

"Honey--"

"Because if he did, I won't wait until they come. I'll go hunt that fucker down and--"

"Tanner, stop. I cannot do this."

"Fuck the NDA, Jordan. No fucking judge would hear that and uphold anything."

"It's not that easy. I have zero proof of anything. The wall of silence is thicker than you'd think. It's not as simple as my word against his."

"Tell me everything."

"I won't do that," I say, and not because I don't want to. Because honestly, two minutes of venting was more catharsis for my soul than the past eight years combined. But I cannot put myself, put *Tanner* in a position where they can come after me, where they can sue me for defamation. From what my short Google searches have told me, regardless if it's based in fact, one can sue for defamation so long as it impacts their income or prestige.

Knowing how vital the squeaky clean image is for Jax's image, I know they'd go far. But, thankfully, my fury has simmered, the tears receding and freezing to make my ice fortress stronger, rebuilding the softening wall.

"Jordan, I--"

"I don't know what they could do. I don't have much to take. But you get involved? They could take Coleman and Sons, or at least try. You've worked too hard for that. It's your family business. I'm... I'm just me. I'm fine. I got free of it, and I just need to keep moving forward."

He's silent for some time, staring at me and taking in every muscle twitch, every feature, every thought passing through my eyes. He must see my resolve because he lets it go for now.

“There has to be something in there that breaks this stupid fucking contract.” He’s still angry beneath the resignation, but the anger is for me. Knowing someone is so unbearably outraged on my behalf is comforting. It’s something I’ve never had.

“I don’t know. I need a professional to look it over. I’ve called a few places, but it’s not cheap. I need to save up, I....”

“Tomorrow. We’re going to your brother tomorrow.”

“What? No! Tanner, no. Absolutely not.”

“He knows people, Jordan. He can help.”

“I don’t want him-”

“Won’t give him any details. Just ask him for info on a lawyer. Someone who can read over your NDA and give you advice. Legal advice. But you should talk to him about this, too. He’s good, Jordan. A good guy. Loves his sister, his nieces. Will love you like crazy, if you let him.” Once more, the tears stream slowly, like a faucet that’s been left to drip. “But for now, let me call him.” I stare at him, this virtual stranger who I thought hated me until a few weeks ago. And now he knows just about everything, and... doesn’t hate me. “Or we could go over there together before work. Talk to him together.” Together. Something about that hits me hard. What does together even mean, even look like? I have not a clue.

And hasn’t that always been my issue? When I was a kid, my mom told me not to tell anyone what her job was because they’d look down on me. I spent my childhood hiding traits from her I felt didn’t live up to my unknown siblings. I couldn’t have any friends over, no sleepovers or playdates. No siblings or cousins to help me or to play with. Then, when I was with Jax, I had to hide my ambition, my love for business. Had to play the perfect trophy girlfriend. To the public, I had to hide his abuse. Had to hide the misery which was festering in me, had to hide the fact any sliver of ‘me’ was gone, wasting away until I was a hollow shell. Until I was sheltered behind my icy castle, protecting what little of me I had left.

My entire life, I’ve been told the real me, the complete version of me, was less than. The sum of my parts didn’t add up to what or who I should be. I’ve been a lonely substitute, just filler until the real thing came around. I’ve lived a life hiding, dulling my sparkle to let others shine.

Maybe it is time to give everyone me, all of me, not the curated version I presented and see who is real. Then, see who is still there at the end.

With this in mind, I look at Tanner and nod, decision made. His eyebrow quirks in question.

“Let’s go together.” The words are quiet but strong, and something about putting them out into the universe relieves a weight sitting on me for 27 years.

“Okay, Dani.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

-tanner-

THE NEXT MORNING, I drive Jordan over to her brother's house. It's early, but I know Hannah is probably up, which means Hunter is definitely up.

As we walk up the front walk, a path I walked many times as a kid when Hunter lived here, the grand, heavy wood front door swings open.

"Oh, hey, Jordan! So good to see you." Hannah opens the door with a bag on her shoulder and keys in her hand. "I'm headed out the door to take care of the girls, but I want to set something up with you soon! Dinner! Or lunch!" she says over her shoulder as she bounces out the door to her car. "Bye, Tanner!"

That's Hannah. The friendliest person on the planet but always in a rush. Thank God she found Hunter, another person for her to take care of lovingly. But also, someone she'll let at least try to take care of her.

I look to Jordan, who is standing there, eyes comically wide.

"She scares me," she says, staring back at me and then over her shoulder to Hannah backing out of the driveway, waving at us.

"You get used to it," Hunter says from the doorway, dressed in a pair of khakis and a tee, a strange but fitting mix of business and casual. "Come in." He waves us in, shaking my hand and pulling in Jordan for a quick, friendly hug.

Years ago, you couldn't have convinced me Hunter Hutchins, my childhood best friend turned standoffish businessman, would welcome me

into his home causally and hug his near-stranger of a half-sister. But his girlfriend - no, fiancé now - has changed him for the better.

“You guys want coffee?”

“Uh...” Jordan’s eyes are still wide, trying to register and take in everything going on around her.

“Yeah, man, thanks. Black for me, sugar and cream for Dani,” I say, grabbing her hand and leading her to the table. I ignore the look Hunter gives me, a look telling me we’ll have a chat later. The conversation a brother has with the men in his sister’s life.

After a lifetime of having an older sister, I think he’s going to enjoy having a younger one to take care of.

“So what’s this all about?” he asks once we’re situated with coffee. Jordan nervously stirs hers, averting her eyes. It’s clear she’s uncomfortable, even embarrassed, about the situation she’s in, and that kills me. Nothing of it is her fault.

“Do you know any good lawyers who can look over an NDA?” I ask right out, not bothering with skirting the issue. Jordan’s entire body tightens at my words, and I put a hand to her lower back, dipping a hand under her shirt to stroke the skin in comfort. Then, to my surprise, she leans into me, her body loosening just a fraction.

“An NDA? Uh, I mean, I have a lawyer who can write them. So I assume he could look one over. I’d have to ask. Can I ask why?” I look to Jordan, seeking her permission to tell him what I know, which isn’t much. It’s not my place to share. Surprising me once again, she nods.

“Jordan signed one when she started dating her ex.”

“Oh.”

“She can’t talk about their relationship. I want to see how tight it is. It seems unconventional to have a 19-year-old sign something air-tight for an indefinite amount of time.” Hunter seems to think on that.

“Yes, that isn’t necessarily the traditional route. Is there...” He looks at his sister. “Is there something you want to talk about?” Silence blankets the kitchen table for minutes as Jordan locks eyes with Hunter, and I couldn’t be more proud of this woman. But I’m proved wrong once again when she speaks.

“I can’t... Tanner and I are...” she looks up at me. “Dating?” I nod, smiling at her. “We’re dating, I guess. And I have things... there are things he should know. About me. About why... why I left.” My mind continues

to turn, flipping through mental pages I've filled with theories of what could have happened. Why she left, why she gets scared backed into a corner. Why she's hiding. "I guess... I guess it's things you should know, too. And Autumn... Before you decide if... I... if we should... If I should stay here." My hand grips my coffee cup, and I open my mouth to speak, to tell her she's being ridiculous, but I don't get the chance.

"Jordan, you're staying here. You're my sister. Autumn... she's... she's angry about our mother. It hit her differently, being the oldest, being the girl. She thinks you got something she missed out on, and I think that hurts." Jordan scoffs beside me, going back to stirring her coffee.

"I'll pay for the lawyer," I say, changing the subject, knowing the 'benefits' Autumn thinks Dani got are non-existent. "I have the funds."

"Absolutely not," Jordan says, glaring at me now.

"Jordan--"

"I'll pay for any payment required, but I have an attorney on retainer. Can you get me the document today?" Hunter asks. Jordan goes to argue, I'm sure to tell him she will be paying, but the look on her brother's face holds no room for arguing. She nods and then reaches into the bag on her lap, pulling out a stack of papers. "This is it." He reaches over and grabs it.

"Perfect, I'll scan this over now." He smiles at his sister, and although I've never seen the resemblance, something in the look reminds me they're family.

TWENTY-NINE

-jordan-

“SO I WAS the worst dancer in the class, right? But it was a fancy, expensive class, so each kid got a solo at the recital,” I say, already wheezing with laughter at the thought of the story.

We’re sitting in the trailer days later, and I’m in Tanner’s lap, his hand pushing the piece of hair behind my ear.

“These were the classes your mom’s boyfriend paid for?”

“Yeah. So, everyone knows I’m shit, right? And I do too, but I dig the class, and some of the girls are my friends. I was essentially the class clown. But I couldn’t talk my dance teacher out of the solo. I was supposed to go to center stage and just do a twirl. That’s it.” Tanner’s eyes get a knowing look.

“But you never do what you’re asked, do you?” I laugh.

“No. So I tell my friends I’m going to do the damn moonwalk. Because, why not you know?”

Tanner laughs, seeing where I’m going. “Of course.”

“My solo comes up, and I turn my back to the audience and start. I don’t know why I turned around, maybe to see my friends’ faces?” I think back to the moment. “Anyway, because I’m backward, I don’t see the edge of the stage and fall off. My head hits a stage light, and that’s how I got this.” My fingers graze the tiny scar above my left eyebrow, usually hidden behind my hair. His fingers follow the movement, though his touch is softer, more reverent as his eyes lock on the tiny, discolored patch of skin. “My mom was furious. I needed seven stitches. She pulled me out of dance after.” My

mind goes to the argument we had. She was so mad. I was eight, and not long after, Vinnie, her boyfriend, disappeared.

“So you’ve been a klutz since then?”

“I think I was born that-” I start, but my cell rings, the sounds filling the small trailer. Grabbing the phone with confusion, I see a number I don’t have saved in my phone. “You know this number?” I ask, showing him the screen, but he shakes his head. My gut drops, remembering the last number I didn’t answer, but it’s not the right area code. “Probably a wrong number,” I say, swiping to answer and trying to stand, but his firm arm on my waist keeps me in place. I roll my eyes at him but lift the phone to my ear.

I’m an idiot.

“This is Jordan.”

“Jordan, where the fuck have you been?” The angry voice is familiar. My body stiffens, ice flowing through my veins. “Jordan, I asked you a fucking question.” Still, no words come. “I can’t believe you fucking did this to me. Fucking leaving me there like an idiot. Who the fuck do you think you are? You need to get your ass on the next plane and fix this shit. Out there fucking some hick when I gave your useless ass fucking everything for years. Got you out of Vegas, saved you from being a fucking stripper like your whore mom. But I guess some things you can’t escape, right Jordan? Your mother is a whore and looks like you are, too. Hope he’s getting it better than I ever got from you.”

Through his tirade, I’m frozen in mind and body. The words, so familiar, bring me back to some protective mode I thought I had shed. But something he says snaps me out of it, out of my silence.

“I’m not a whore,” my voice is timid but loud.

“What did you say?” After years of apologies, of taking responsibility for his shitty temper, Jax sounds a mix of outraged and confused.

“I said, I’m not a whore.” My voice is louder now, the blood rushing through my veins, making my skin hot. But it doesn’t block out the fact Tanner’s body beneath one has stiffened.

“The fuck you aren’t. Out in Bumblefuck, fuckin’ some random guy, leaving me to look like a fucking fool. Who the fuck do you think you are, Jordan? You’re fucking up everything we’ve worked for.”

“Everything we’ve worked for?”

“I spent hundreds of thousands on you to make sure this went smooth. Fucking clothes and shoes and spa trips. And this is what I get?”

“Jax, I didn’t want that shit!”

“You sure as fuck took it, though.”

“You made me! I had no choice; I couldn’t do anything! I wasn’t free! I had to do whatever you and your publicists told me to do!”

“You lived a good fucking life, Jordan. Don’t you act like you were a prisoner.”

“I WAS JAX!” The words vibrate through me, tunnel vision taking over. Years of pent-up emotions and words I never dared say slipping out. “I couldn’t leave! I had no fucking money. No friends, no life. All I did was manage your money, so you didn’t spend it all on YOUR whores you never bothered to hide or on some dumb fucking car or trip until you were fucking broke!”

“If you had taken care of me, I wouldn’t have needed them. Come on, baby. You know I love you, Jordan. You need to come back. We can fix this.” His voice has gone back to the sweet tone it always took on when I would threaten to leave. Threaten to tell everyone everything. And each time, as it got harder and harder to convince me of his lies, it would end with the threats. No one would believe me. People would hate me. I could never tell my side, or they’d take me to court.

“I loved you. I loved you so damn much. It blinded me, but don’t bullshit me, Jax. You always had whores. And you never fucking loved me. Don’t try to sell me your shit anymore. We both know. You loved the fairytale I could sell for you. Loved I could be the sweet part of your image. That you could pretend you wrote all of those songs for me, songs some fucking songwriter wrote.” Just another layer of lies the public can’t know. I lock eyes with Tanner’s, and though they’re angry, they widen a bit with shock and maybe even a hint of humor.

“You fuckin’ tell anyone that, Jordan, I’ll-“

“You’ll what, Jax? You’ll hit me? Too late. You already did that. After years of doing it with words, of killing me slowly each day, you finally did it. That’s the day I made my decision, you know. When I decided I needed to get out. I knew if you could hit me in a room full of people and not one would say a word, I would never be safe if I hitched myself to you permanently.” Tanner’s body stills completely, not a breath entering his body beneath mine, not a muscle moving.

“It was one time, Jordan. I said I was sorry, I didn’t mean-“

“What, you didn’t mean it? You didn’t mean to smack me across my face when I asked a simple question? Or you didn’t mean to laugh about it with your friends when I cried? Which is it, Jax? Imagine if the public knew that about our Cinderella story, yeah? Wouldn’t look too good for you.”

“You fucking bitch, don’t you-”

“You leave me the fuck alone, or I will. I don’t give a shit about what you say, about what you’ll do. You don’t let me live in peace, and I’ll tell everyone my side.” And before he can say another single word, I hang up, throwing the expensive company phone across the trailer and leaving a dent in the wall.

Long, uneasy quiet minutes pass as I stare at the small dent, wondering how you go about fixing a dent in a trailer wall. Does it go to the outside? I assume you can’t just patch it with some spackle. How does that-

“He laid his fuckin’ hand on you?”

Tanner’s voice is rough and dark, interrupting my benign thoughts. Somehow I forgot he was here, even though his tense body was still holding me in place.

“Wha-“

“He laid his fucking hand on you in a room full of men. No one said a fuckin’ word against him, and you’re still trying to cover his ass?”

“Tanner, it’s not-“ I turn my head from where the phone lies to the man whose lap I’m in and see the absolute rage in his eyes. It should scare me, but somehow the blaze just warms me through, thawing the remaining ice that’s left in me. Sitting here, with the man who is wholly outraged a man would lay a hand on a woman, on me, I feel nothing but safe.

“Jordan, you better make sure I never see that fucker, ever. If he ever crosses my fuckin’ path, he’s getting a taste of his own medicine.”

“Tanner, honey, you knew. It was only-“ His hands go to my jaws, pulling me close, so we are nose to nose when he speaks next.

“Jordan, one time is too many times. A man never, never touches a woman meaning to harm. Ever. And I knew he hurt you. But, I was not aware it was that fucking bad.” I stare into his eyes, and I can see he’s waiting for me to argue, to explain Jax’s behavior, but of course, he’s right.

“Okay, Tanner. You’re right.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“Honey, I can’t the-“

“Fuck the NDA. They’ve been using it for seven fuckin’ years to keep you scared, keep you quiet. I looked into it a bit. You can’t go sharing trade secrets, can’t tell the world he doesn’t write his own fuckin’ music. But the second he and his team spread lies, put you in danger? That shit is void, especially if this shit happened after you signed it. And Princess, if something happens where you get taken to court, you have a whole damn town to back you up and support you.”

What he says makes sense. Since escaping my nightmare, the limited research I’ve done tells me this might be the truth. But it’s always just been me. I’ve never had anyone to take my back. And now...

“Tell me what happened. What made you decide to leave?” His voice is quiet and protective, and the calm in it has me talking.

“We were in a break room. He was going on stage. It wasn’t the day I left. A few weeks before. He wanted me to order a bunch of shit to the room, expensive liquor, and dancers. But he’d already burned through his budget. I tried... I tried to tell him quietly. He could get mad. He’d yell and scream and threaten me, and no one stopped him. But he didn’t want to hear it. I tried to place the order, knowing I’d hear it later but save myself at the moment, but the card declined. I’ll never forget his face when I came back and told him. Someone in the room - God, I don’t even know who now. But someone made a joke about me spending all of his money. I think he was drunk, or on something maybe, I don’t know, because he’d never... but then... he did.” I don’t add the bit about the laughter, about one guy congratulating Jax for ‘putting that bitch in her place.’ I don’t tell him I felt like a scolded dog or how I cried myself to sleep that night. “I knew then. I knew I needed to get out. I think... I think his management could tell. Could tell I was close to breaking. That’s why they told him to propose.”

“Jesus fuck, Dani.” Tanner tucks my head into his neck, holding me there as silent tears leak, painful memories resurfacing.

“I swore I wouldn’t be like her,” I said, tears making my words rough and painful as they leave my throat.

“Like who, baby?”

“My mom. I swore... She had one good one. One good man. But God, the rest... they were all shit. I saw them hit her. Saw the bruises. I’d hide when they drank. Saw her cry and hit them back, force them to leave. Then cry and beg for them to stay. Each new model was the same. I promised myself if I did nothing else, nothing at all with my life, I wouldn’t be her.”

Some kind of catharsis is taking over me as I cry, years of infected wounds being washed clean with my tears. “I’d rather die alone than be her.”

“He came into my life, and I thought he was my reward. For living that life. For being the substitute for Hunter and Autumn, for being the consolation prize my whole life. But it turned out I was just following her fucking footsteps all along. So desperate to be something to someone, I’d take scraps, take anything to feel like I was important.” The last words ache when they leave me, but when they do, they leave me hollow, free of the shame of my past.

The hollow leaves me exhausted, a bone-deep tired coming from emotional trauma, a bone-deep tired that leaves your brain achy.

And right before I fall asleep, still dressed in my work clothes and in Tanner’s lap, I hear him whisper in my ear, “I know you’re scared, Princess, but we’re going to get you free.” And it’s the most beautiful sentence I’ve ever heard.

THIRTY

-jordan

“IT’S GOING TO BE FINE,” Tanner says as we walk up the steps to the cute brick house that is the Coleman family home. I’ve been told that Mr. Coleman, Tanner’s dad, built the large but still somehow quaint home when Tanner’s older brother was a baby, so it’s the house that Tanner was brought home from the hospital in, was raised in, had scraped knees and sleepovers in.

And I love it. It’s an old colonial style with a big, weathered wrap-around porch that isn’t necessarily the norm for this area, making it unique and beautiful. The front porch has the sweetest swing on it, and when I see it, I squeal.

“Oh my God, you totally need one of those!” I say as I grip his arm tight. He just shakes his head and laughs before dragging me up the steps and to the front door, where he knocks.

He knocks at the door of his childhood home.

Something about that is weird to me.

Maybe because I’ve been around Hannah and Sadie so much lately, both of whom treat everyone they meet like family and expect them just to walk in. I never had a family to visit, so I wouldn’t know, but do you knock at your childhood home? Is that expected behavior?

“Well, hello Tanner!” A woman opens the door and croons the words in a friendly tone. She has short, shoulder-length hair that’s dark and streaked with grey, pulled half back with a pretty tortoiseshell hair clip. She’s adorable, short like me, which means his father is probably tall, in her 60s,

and looks fabulous in dark jeans and a crisp white button-down. But, looking at her, I see Tanner immediately despite the height. It's in the shape of her eyes, the color of her skin, the warm smile that hits her face as she takes in her son.

"Hey, Mom," he says, leaning in to kiss her cheek, dropping my hand.

"Let me look at you!" Mrs. Coleman takes her son's hands in hers, pulling them and stepping back to take him in. "Handsome, as always." He rolls his eyes, but he expected this. She does this often, if not every time, and the roll of his eyes is just for show. Dropping Tanner's hands, she pulls him in for a big hug, coming up barely to his shoulder but still somehow rocking him from left to right like he's a little boy.

So maybe he did get the 'second-son-momma's-boy' experience.

"Mom, this is Jordan. My girlfriend." The word comes so smoothly, and it's the truth, so it shouldn't surprise me, but for some reason, it does. It's the lack of hesitation, the lack of embarrassment that shocks me. I remember the first time I was ever called Jax's girlfriend, even though we had been together for nearly a year and a half, was when we sat down with the group of image consultants who would one day become the bane of my existence.

"This the girlfriend?" one of them had said, tipping his head from left to right before nodding. "She'll do."

This reception is much different.

"Hi, Mrs. Coleman. It's so nice to meet you," I say, putting a hand out for her to shake.

"Oh, no, dear, I'm a hugger! Come here!" She pulls me in for a shockingly tight hug. "It's so nice to meet you too, Jordan! Welcome to our home!" And with that, she tugs me in, forcing Tanner to follow behind.

"So, Tanner, how's the business?" His father asks the question as his mom serves us meatloaf and mashed potatoes. She placed the plates in front of us, but no one touched a utensil until she sat with her own glass of wine and dish.

His father is just as I expected - tall, older, weathered and worn in the way that says he's worked with his hands and body his whole life. Though

Tanner looks like his mother, it's impossible not to see the similarities between father and son. He gave me a small, polite hello when we came in, but other than that, he went back to watching some game playing on the big screen in the family room.

Mrs. Coleman ushered me into the kitchen, telling Tanner to sit with his father. When we were in the delicious-smelling kitchen, she sat me at the island with a glass of wine and refused to let me help at all, except for when she called in her son to set the table. The entire time, she was kind, asking polite questions and telling me a bit more about herself, her son, her family, and the town of Springbrook Hills.

"Good, finishing up that Sunshine Falls project, then we have a few smaller ones into the fall. All good things."

"Thank God your friend gave you that contract, or you'd be screwed," he says, his voice gruff, disapproval spiking through it as he spears a chunk of his dinner and shoves it in his mouth. I fight my top lip, curling as I watch. Mr. Coleman seems nice enough, but something... just isn't sitting right with me. Plus, I don't like how he's downplaying Tanner's hard work already.

"He didn't give the contract to us. I worked for it, drafted the plan, gave him the offer." It's strange to hear Tanner's voice defensive. Typically, Tanner is laid back. He likes to fight with me, mostly because I like to push his buttons, but he's chill overall. Quiet, lets things go. But now, his body is tense, his entire demeanor... off.

"Back when I was running Coleman and Sons, we had to go door to door, looking for business. Of course, you have some fancy, rich businessman as a friend, and you don't have to. You're lucky."

"Dave..." Mrs. Coleman chides, and it's clear that she's seen this before when I look at her. Seen it begin, and from what I can tell, she didn't like the ending.

"Just saying, business was better off back then. Not relying on one guy to keep you afloat."

"Not relying on Hunter. Last year we worked on the complex with the new homes."

"You were back up for that. Not the main team. Just saying, you're changing the model too much. Should go back to the basics, Tanner." My gut is screwing up hearing this and hearing Tanner defend himself, hearing his father rip apart any confidence in the business.

The thing is, I've been through the records. I can see pretty far back, at least ten years, more, if I sift through paper records his father kept before Tanner took over. Pre-Tanner, the business was in shreds, barely hanging on. There was so much debt, so many unpaid invoices. The employee hours and overtime were out of control, clearly unmanaged. While my coming on board has helped to smooth out rough edges and find bits and pieces of things that fell through the cracks, Tanner has wholly turned his family business around, transforming it into a highly profitable business, a sustainable business. Plus, the men that work for him love him. They do great work, he no longer has much debt, and everyone is happy.

Knowing all of this, I make the poor decision to open my big mouth.

"I've seen the work they do. It's phenomenal. But more, the numbers are great. Tanner has reduced the business's operational costs in the past three years, brought the debt to nearly nothing, and is incredibly profitable. He's introduced profit sharing to help keep the men motivated. As a result, they always meet deadlines and run with minimal supply waste." Glancing at Joyce, I smile. "He's doing wonderful." She smiles back at me, pride shining through her eyes—pride and... relief. But then Dave speaks again.

"And how would you know about the business end of things?" Tanner freezes beside me. And like the idiot I am, I respond, not a single layer of caution to my words.

"Oh, I'm the office manager. I've been handling the books." Dave's eyes go cold, and I look at my glass of water to see if maybe the chilling look caused my drink to freeze.

Nope, just my stomach.

"You're dating your office manager?"

"Dave..."

"Is that wise?"

"Dad, let's—"

"I mean, she's pretty, I'll give you that. And you know this town. Everyone knows everyone's damn business, knows everyone's life story. Know her story, or most of it, at least. Know she's wrapped up with some country star. Is it smart to trust my business with some woman who's going to run off with a star? It sounds like you have a type, son." The rubble of my icy fortress starts to reconstruct itself, building block by block to protect me.

“David! I can’t-“ Joyce tries to cut in, but it’s like she’s no longer in the room. My hand goes to Tanner’s thigh, trying to reel him in, to distract him, but he’s suffering the same affliction as his father. It’s just the two of them now.

“It’s not your business, Dad.”

“That’ll always be my business, Tanner. My name’s on it.”

“No, your last name is on it. My name is on the invoices, on the loans. It’s on the contracts and the taxes and the paystubs.”

“All that wouldn’t be if I hadn’t given it to you.”

“Well, you did, and now it’s mine, and it’s doing fine.”

“You’re trusting some woman to manage your shit. Couldn’t do it yourself?” He pauses like he remembers he’s not alone and glances at me before delivering the killing blow to his son. “Your brother wouldn’t have needed some office manager.”

And there it is.

The confirmation I needed.

Tanner is just like me.

It makes sense. He took over the business when his brother turned it down. He was the backup, the ‘just in case’ son. What do they call it for princes? And heir and a spare.

And just like me, Tanner has spent years living in the shadow of his older brother, the brother to whom he was an unworthy substitution.

“A true business owner knows when to delegate. I have my associates in business management and am starting classes in the fall to work towards my masters in accounting.” Tanner looks at me, shocked by both my words and maybe because he’s now remembering I’m here. I shrug my shoulders, revealing the secret he didn’t know I had.

Now that my location has been revealed, I finally started searching, looking to get a scholarship or loans to finish my degree. It turns out that although I haven’t worked in some time, a good essay and killer grades from community college still qualify me for quite a few scholarships, and I’ll be starting a few online classes at Rutgers in the fall. Eventually, I’ll have to commute the hour for a few in-person classes, but I’m excited to get started.

A small smile breaks through the frustration and disappointment on Tanner’s face.

“But I know what the numbers say. I can read them. Coleman and Son’s Construction has never run more profitably and with less employee turnover than it is right now. That’s all because of Tanner. So far, all I’ve done is organize the data and help with invoices. He has spent years optimizing this business, so it runs smoothly. Did you know he spent nearly three years living in a trailer so he could take a pay cut, and the men wouldn’t? Shit, for six months, he went without a paycheck to fix the mess it was when it was given to him.” His dad flinches, and I probably should stop, but I can’t. Fury on Tanner’s behalf is pouring from me, and I admit, some may be deep-set anger towards my mother leaking out as well.

“I don’t think you-“

“No offense, Mr. Coleman, but what you think doesn’t affect me. I work for Tanner. I know what he’s done. I know what he’s built, what he’s building.”

“Tanner, you’ve been living in that trailer?” He sighs, looking at his mom.

“Easier. Close to the site so I can monitor things. Plus, it’s cheaper. Could... could save more.” I look at Dave and see his face is screwed up with annoyance but also... confusion.

“You weren’t paying yourself?” The gruff voice tells me everything I need to know, and fuck, fuck, fuck, I should have kept my big mouth shut. He’s torn, embarrassed, and beneath that, hurt.

“It wasn’t that big of a deal, Dad. Things were tight after I cleaned up... the books. Didn’t want to have to give out pay cuts. I wanted out of my apartment anyway and had money in savings. It was fine.”

“But... the business....” Shit, shit, shit! How did I create this moment!

“It was in trouble. I’d been telling you. Ben told you. The old model wasn’t working. Pouring money in, trusting the staff, the clients. It wasn’t working. We’re all good now, though. Jordan’s helped me get it, so it’ll be strong for more and more Coleman’s down the line.” His father is staring at him with pursed lips, unsure of what to say, and guilt is eating me alive. Dave’s mouth opens as if to say something, but thank God his mother swoops in.

“So, Jordan! Why don’t you tell us a little about yourself! I’ve been keepin’ my ears shut from all the gossiping birds in town as soon as I found out you were my little Tanner’s new girl!” And as much as I want to laugh

at Tanner being this small woman's 'Little Tanner' and poke fun at him, I take the lifeline offered to me and tell his parents a bit about who I am.

The silence on the drive back is killing me. It's clear Tanner is in his own head, but I can't take it any longer.

"I'm so sorry. I know I was way out of line, but I couldn't... I had to... he was--"

"Don't." I pause at Tanner's tight words. When I look at him, driving in the quickly darkening night, I see his jaw is tight, his eyes are on the road, but an unfamiliar feeling pulses off him.

"Don't?"

"Do not apologize."

"I should have kept my--"

"Do not apologize for sticking up for me." The words crack like a whip through the small, stagnant space, and I stay silent, unsure of what to say. "I should have warned him about you. About who you are. Both to the business and me."

I break my silence, though I don't know if that's my best choice. "And what am I to you?"

"An invaluable employee who is quite literally saving my business."

"I'm not saving it, Tanner. You did the hard work." He ignores my words all the same.

"And you're my gorgeous, kind, thoughtful girlfriend who gets adorably angry when someone questions me, apparently," he says, flashing his eyes from the road to me and back again, but it's long enough. Long enough to see the tiny smirk on his face, the smile in his eyes. I smile at his profile, relief washing through me, knowing he's not angry. So relieved I didn't cross some line I couldn't see.

"But you should know now; he's never going to see this the way you do."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not doing this his way. The way he wanted things done. He didn't spend years passing on some super-secret, father-son business knowledge to me like he did with my brother Ben, but he gave me what he

thought was vital to know. But I'm... doing things my way. I usually avoid any kind of work talk when I'm there, but the business was his whole life. I think that's why Ben dipped out. He saw his future in Dad and didn't want that for himself. But that is what happens when we talk about the business. As you can see, not the prettiest reaction." I nod, understanding.

"So, what was that?" I ask, looking out my window at the passing trees as we're driving back to the work site.

"What was what?" His eyes are on the road, but I know he's using it as an excuse to avoid the conversation we need to have.

"With your dad."

"That was family dinner."

"You know what I mean. The stuff about your brother and the business. That you're changing it too much?"

"That was my dad being my dad. Unfortunately, I am not living up to what he foresaw for his business."

"But... he was running it into the ground. Did he not know that?" He sighs, eyes staying on the road as he turns into the windy road leading to the camp.

"Look. I told you my brother was supposed to get the family business. He is the one my dad taught everything to. The books, how to find and schmooze clients, how to keep up employee morale." I try not to scoff because clearly, his lessons would have been shit. Tanner looks at me finally, a small smile playing on his lips. "Yeah. But he didn't teach me anything. When Ben told Dad he wouldn't take the business, Dad lost it. Ben ran off and calls on the holidays, but honestly, my parents haven't seen much of him. I go down to visit him, he works down the shore, but he doesn't come back to Springbrook Hills. For a while, Dad just kept working, no end in sight. I kept working like normal. But he was getting old and... well... I was Ben's substitute. Not quite what he wanted, but if he wanted to retire with his dignity intact, he had to give it to me. I didn't ask for it. One day he came to me when I was working on-site and said I needed to go downtown the following week and sign off on the business. That it was mine, that was it."

"No shit?" I gasp because who does that.

"Yeah. No training, no nothing. He just handed it over and threw me in the pot. It took me months to understand what I was looking at, and, honestly, I think Ben's declining the offer made the business fall apart. The

timelines add up for when he stopped caring. Stopping paying attention. It was struggling before, but after....” My eyes are wide when he parks and looks at me.

“But the business is thriving now. So why is he giving you shit?” Tanner sighs.

“I don’t know. My only guess is he thinks because he didn’t teach me, because I wasn’t raised knowing this would all be mine, I have no idea what I’m doing. After all, I was just the last resort.”

“But it’s doing better than ever. You’ve turned a small family business into a thriving company that supports a huge chunk of the town’s workforce.”

“My dad doesn’t see it that way. I’ll always be the less attractive option.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“You, of all people, should understand being the consolation prize to your parents.” His eyes bore into mine, and I see in his a reflection of the emotions being the less desirable sibling brings.

“What’s your brother like?”

“He’s... cool. He’s an artist now. Moved down state, lives at the shore as a tattoo artist, and runs his own shop. He’s pretty successful, but Dad won’t even talk about it. The fact his son was supposed to take over the ‘working mans’ family business and turned into, as he calls it when he drinks, ‘some pansy-ass tattooed freak.’”

“But... your dad seemed nice overall?”

“He is. He’s a great guy. Good friend, kind employer, great husband. Town loves him. He’s just not the best dad.” I have to wonder what that’s like, to have a parent who is a good person all around, but being a parent is just not what they were meant to be.

“I’m sorry, Tanner,” I say because it’s all I can think to say.

“We all have our war stories, Princess. Mine is much less traumatic and has a much happier ending than most. I could have had a mom like you and Hunter or Hannah. I had a good childhood. Parents loved me, brother loved me, and everything turned out of the best.”

“Just because your story isn’t dark and twisted doesn’t mean it doesn’t leave its own scars. Doesn’t mean that you can’t mourn what you didn’t have.” I hope he can feel my sincerity, that I want him to know that what he

feels is valid.” A spark hits his eyes, and it’s almost like a spark of recognition, of realization.

“Let’s go inside, Princess.”

THIRTY-ONE

-jordan-

“OKAY, where the heck are you taking me?”

Two weeks after the parental dinner disaster, as I’ve deemed it, we’re driving out of the tiny town of Springbrook Hills and getting onto the highway in Tanner’s truck. Summer has hit in full force, meaning I’ve been able to break out the tiny jean shorts Hannah made me buy on our shopping trip.

When Tanner picked me up after running some errands this morning, his eyes got all hot and gooey before I reminded him he told me he had a surprise.

I love surprises.

I love surprises so much, even Tanner’s unspoken promise, a reminder of what his mouth can do, wouldn’t distract me.

Much.

“It’s a surprise.”

“This sucks. I hate surprises,” I say with a pout, arms crossed over my chest like I’m Rosie and Hannah is refusing chocolate chip cookies. My eyes watch the scenery as we leave town towards the larger Bridgeville.

“No, you don’t,” he says, and I smile at the fact he already knows me so well.

“Shut up,” I say. It’s useless fighting. He knows me too well already. As we drive, I see we’re getting into the more typical New Jersey area of strip malls and restaurants, stores galore. But we slow when we approach an enormous used car dealer.

“Tanner... what are we...?”

“Gettin’ you a car, Princess.” I’m sorry, what?

“I’m sorry, what?”

“A car.”

“A what?” I feel like an idiot, but the words he’s saying are not computing in my brain.

“A car, Jordan. You know, something to take you from point a to point b? Put gas in it, it’s got four tires?”

“I know what a car is, Tanner.”

“Good, now get out and let’s go find you something you like.”

“Tanner-“

“Now, Jordan.” He moves to get out of his truck, but I grab his forearm, pulling it to keep him inside.

“Tanner, this is so nice. Really nice. I love that you thought of this, honey. But I... I can’t... I don’t... credit and money and....” While I’m finally getting a regular paycheck, I’m basically starting from nothing. Like the phone place told me, I have no credit. I have no savings. A car is just... not going to happen right now.

Much less a car from a nice used dealer and not some junk off of Craigslist.

“I’m co-signing. You’ll get the payment, but we’ll find you somethin’ reasonable. Dani, you need a car. Love drivin’ you around and would do it forever, but you need the freedom. You need to go where you want when you want, and I don’t like you having to call a cab to do it.” Those words. They hit me like a freight train. You need freedom. I didn’t know men offered that. After years of doing what I was told, going where I was told. Of living in a tiny box crafted by the man I was told loved me... Another one giving me freedom, giving me the chance to choose my own destiny? It’s everything. But still...

“That’s sweet, Tanner. But... I don’t have the kind of money I’d need for a down payment.” It’s embarrassing to say aloud, but Tanner knows my situation.

“Bonus.”

“What?” The word is starting to make me cringe, but I can’t stop saying it.

“A bonus. From Coleman and Sons.”

“Tanner, I can’t-“

“Jordan. You have saved us well over one hundred thousand dollars. Took so much stress off my plate. You’ve made everyone happy to be at work. Already got the offer written up.” He pulls a paper from his back pocket. “Full-time offer. It’s not much, but you’ll be salaried rather than the hourly you have now. Want you to come and go as you please, work the hours you need to get shit done, not to get in your time.” I blink at him. “There’s a signing bonus in there, not huge, but enough to cover a used car down payment. You can read it over and sign later today. I want you to read it over, understand it all. No more signing contracts without understanding. Anything you need me to explain, happy to do so. But this job is yours. The bonus is yours.” Again, I stare at him. “Babe, you good?”

“This is sweet, but... I don’t know, Tanner. I don’t want you to treat me differently because I’m your-“

“Started drafting this after your two-week period was up. Before we were even anything, you earned this. If you’re willing to stay in Springbrook Hills, you’re mine.” He means as an employee, but something in those words tells me he means it as more than that. It’s a test, in a way. Do I want to stay here? Will I let myself get rooted? I’m not dumb. I know that’s what he’s worried about. After his ex, he’s worried I’ll miss the wild and replace him with something more exciting.

But he doesn’t know all my life, I was dying for soil to dig my feet in, somewhere to nurture me, accept me. Want me.

So, without hesitation, I reply.

“Okay, Tanner.” He smiles at me once, a soft, sweet smile I haven’t seen before, and puts a hand to the back of my neck, pulling me in for a kiss that mirrors the look, and just then, I feel the roots plant.

“I need a keychain,” I say, looking at the rack that’s sitting in the waiting area of the used dealer. We’re waiting for the dealership to hand over my new car, a bright red two-door Jeep. Tanner approved because he said it’d do well on the roads, which can get ice and snow in the winter (snow!!), and I like I can take the top off when it’s hot and cruise around. Once we signed off on the papers, they took my new baby to the back to clean her up so I can take her home.

A car.

My own car!

I wasn't lying when I told Tanner I'd never had a car. I, of course, have my license and know how to drive a car. But before going on tour, I was a broke college kid working as a barista, paying for rent and school and food and barely managing to get by. A car and insurance and gas were so far out of my budget, I never even daydreamed about owning one.

And then, when I was with Jax, having a car of my own would have given me too much freedom. So, even though he could clearly afford to provide me with one, I was always driven around. My chauffeur was explained as needing security, of always having some kind bodyguard or protection. Now, I see it for what it was.

A babysitter.

And having no car was just another way to keep me in line, to keep me blind to what was happening to me.

My head shakes, trying to remove the thoughts as I spin the rack of jingling key chains, looking for something to commemorate the day.

"Why?"

"To hold my key, duh."

"I have lots of keys, no key chain." He's leaning against the wall now, ankles crossed, as he stares at me with a smile playing on his lips.

"That's a tragedy."

"Seems a bit extreme."

"A good key chain can tell the world who you are. It can say what you're into or what color you like. It can say which sports team you support or your initial. It can tell the world your deepest hopes and dreams with just a flash of your keys."

"A key chain can do all that?"

"Oh yeah, totally."

"Then I really am missing out," he says, and he's joking, of course, but as I swipe through them, I pause on the perfect option.

"I'll get you one," I say, grabbing my selection and walking with it held in my hand to the cashier.

"I'll pass, Princess."

"Nope, I insist. To commemorate the day." I look at him over my shoulder and smile. "Stay over there. I want it to be a surprise." He rolls his

eyes at me, but the smile tells me he secretly loves this, loves to entertain my goofiness. Loves...

The cashier hands me my change and goes to put my new purchases into a bag, but I shake my head. "Can you just cut the tags off?" She does as I ask before handing them over with a smile. I walk back to Tanner, barely hiding them in my closed hand.

"Give me your keys." I put out my other hand.

"What? No. Did you really buy me a key chain?"

"Absolutely. I don't give empty threats. Now hand over your keys."

"Dani, I don't need--"

"Jesus, Tanner, you're getting this damn key chain one way or another. Hand it over." He laughs at my stern look but drops a pile of keys into my hand. A menagerie of gold and silver, some capped with little multicolored tops to differentiate them. The keyring is heavy. I turn my back to him before slowly twisting the chain onto the keyring. Finally, it's on, and I look at it with a smile.

"Perfect," I say, looking at my hard work before turning to him. "Here you go!" I toss the keys back, and he fumbles, almost dropping them and making me laugh. He smiles back and gives me the look that tells me I'll get some form of payback tonight. Payback I am more than willing to take. Seeing the heat in my eyes, he shakes his head and winks at me before shuffling through the keys, looking for the addition.

"Best?" he asks, holding the loop of keys by a silver chain. On it is a dark blue half heart with the word 'best.'

"I have 'friends,'" I say, twirling the circular key ring on my finger. I stare at him with a smile, but it starts to fade as he continues to stare at me, eyes burning through me. "You don't have to use it. It's dumb, I know. I just--"

"Am I your best friend, Dani?" The words send a shiver down my spine, but his look melts me. It's intense and inquiring, like he genuinely wants to know the answer to this silly question. So I answer.

"Yes." The words come out scratchy and quiet. What started as a funny joke has morphed into something... more. "You are, Tanner." He continues to stare at me, taking a step closer. "I never really... had friends. But you? You're definitely my best one." He's the first person to work to get past my icy walls, the first to want to get to know me—the first to fight me for that right.

“Well, good, Princess. Because you’re mine.” He’s close now and wraps a hand around my waist, nose brushing my own before his lips hit mine. The kiss is soft and gentle, perfect for public consumption, but it says so much more.

It says what my words mean to him, what I mean to him. I wrap an arm around his neck and press my forehead to his once the kiss breaks, reminding myself we are in the middle of a service center waiting room before I open my mouth to speak.

And when I’m stopped from doing so by the employee calling my name, I’m equal parts relieved and upset because the words on the tip of my tongue could change everything.

THIRTY-TWO

-jordan-

AT THE BEGINNING OF JULY, I'm pulling my beautiful baby into the gravel lot, exhausted and in need of a long shower.

Today was the first day of Sunshine Falls summer camp, the first Monday after the 4th of July holiday. Thankfully, the project ended just in time with all equipment, trailers, and workers moving to our next project on the other side of town two days before Hannah and Miss Maggie, Luna's aunt, came to decorate and 'move in.' Unfortunately, Tanner couldn't make it to the Grand Opening Hannah set up because he's overseeing the new restaurant build, so I was sent in his stead.

I think he must have known what would be there because I am now a disgusting mess. Covered in dirt and sweat, I've never been happier this truck is used since the seats will need a good vacuum after I shower. Hannah's idea of a summer camp's grand opening included team-building activities like fort-building, an obstacle course, and even a tree-climbing contest. The woman is nuts, but those kids were so blissfully happy the whole day, it was worth it.

Having been one of the lower-income kids Camp Sunshine benefits, I would have killed to go there as a kid, to have someone like Hannah mentor me and help me over the obstacles a tough life drops in front of you. My brother found himself a good one.

That being said, the sticks in my hair and dried mud caking my legs are why Tanner is coming to my place tonight when he gets off. I desperately need to shower and scrub the dirt off. I glance at the clock on my dashboard

and realize I only have about five minutes until he arrives, but the thought flies from my mind when I notice the shiny black BMW with tinted windows sitting in my driveway.

And leaning against the cottage door is Jax.

My body goes cold seeing him there, seeing the angry look on his face. To his left is his asshole press manager, Daniel. The douche with the perfectly slicked back blonde hair he spends hundreds of dollars a month on, the perfectly tailored suit that's unnecessary out here. When I see them, I slam on my brakes, stopping twenty feet from any reasonable parking spot. And then I freeze.

A part of my mind knows I should have expected this. There's just no way I could have gotten away, lived a beautiful life without him following me, finding me. I did my best, hiding while I could, but I could only do it for so long.

And now here he is.

With a knowing smirk on his lips as he stares at me through the windshield of my truck.

"Get out of the car, Jordan." The words are loud but not a shout, like he somehow knows that no matter what, I could still hear his devilish words. They'll somehow drift to me, find me, turn my gut sour.

I don't move.

"Get out of the damn car, Jordan." He repeats the words, this time with more frustration in his voice.

I can't move.

Except I do, looking to my right to check the driveway of the big house, praying I'll see the opposite of what I know is there.

Because Autumn and Steve aren't home either. They're both at the grand opening and heading to dinner with Hunter and Hannah to celebrate.

It's just me on the sprawling property. I thought it was nice when I first moved here, the houses not too close together—a good balance of community and privacy.

Now I wish it was a damn townhouse.

“Don’t make me get you out of the car, Jordan.” I see him, but I don’t, my eyes glazing over and my body going into a familiar state of self-defense as I put the truck in park and turn the key to shut off my car. I sit there. I don’t move.

I can’t move.

He’s here. He’s here. What is he doing here? What is his plan?

What is my plan?

All this time, I was hiding and growing tiny, delicate roots and building relationships and finding myself; I didn’t think to make a plan. I spent a year planning a way to escape, and here I am, with nothing at all.

“Out. Of. The. Car.” Now, the words are tinged with anger, and my panic takes the wheel. Shaky fingers press my seatbelt and open the door. I’m no longer Jordan of Springbrook Hills. Once again, I’m Jordan, girlfriend of Superstar Jax.

I hate it.

But I’m also scared.

Because there’s something in his eyes, a crazed, unhinged look that scares me.

“Thought you’d hide here, this little piece of shit town?” He pushes himself off the door, so he’s standing straight now, staring down at me even though I’m a good twenty feet from him. I’m out of the car, but my feet are glued to the ground. The only thing keeping me from moving towards him, from reverting to who I’ve been, is those tiny, fragile roots. I need to protect them. Even though my mind is unmoving, nonfunctioning, something tells me those tiny strings keeping me held down to this town need to be protected at all costs.

“Leave me, make me look like a fucking fool. Run off, fuck some loser. Stay in some little shack behind your sister’s house.” A jolt runs through me. Shock, I think. “Oh, you didn’t think I knew? Baby, I know everything about you. I always knew where that brother and sister of yours were, always kept an eye out. I know more about you than you do.” What? He knew where Hunter and Autumn were all along? Who they were? And he never mentioned it.

My gut churns at the unknown level of deceit this man accomplished.

“I see it surprises you. I’m not sure why. Have to protect my image, Jordan. You know that. Need to know where all of those skeletons are.”

And he's right. I do know that. That's what it always boiled down to. His image. His career. The prestigious title of American sweetheart. The down-home country star dating the sweet, unknown hometown girl—a love story for the ages.

It was all a lie.

“What are you doing here, Jax?” Even his name - the fake stage name he created years ago - makes my skin crawl. His real name is Jonathan Smith, not Jax Jackson. He's as boring and basic as it gets.

“Bringing you home. Amber is planning the wedding as we speak.” Jesus, what a fucking egomaniac. To be simultaneously planning a wedding and tearing me up in the press. Of course, it's not him tearing me up, but his team knows the right people to leak the right things to and make him look like the martyr and me look like the villain.

“You're out of your mind if you think I'm coming back with you.” My voice is strong and confident, but the hands I shove in the loose gym shorts I'm wearing are shaking despite the summer heat.

“You are, Jordan. The public demands it. We have a flight to catch in,” Daniel looks at his ridiculously expensive watch. The expensive watch he can afford because of Jax and his image and his fans. “Three hours.” I look between them both, and something snaps in me. A dam breaking, the ice in my rebuilt fortress shattering into a million little icy daggers, ready to attack. After years and years of taking his shit, taking their shit, I'm done playing their games. Being their pawn.

“No.” My words are firm, and both men look taken aback. “Look here. I am not going fucking anywhere with you. I'm done. Do you hear me? Done. You leave me the fuck alone, leave my name out of your mouth, stop your crazy fucking fans, and we're good. Water under the bridge. You don't, I'm making this public.” Both men freeze, and it's like I'm the princess in the movie Rosie loves, the one where she can control ice and use it to her advantage. I thrive off it. “I'll tell them everything. How you've been cheating on me the whole time, how our romance wasn't as magical as you made it seem. Tell everyone how you kept me locked up like a pet to perform when it served you. The verbal abuse, the emotional abuse. Hiding you knew where my family was. The fake proposal. The drinking and the passing out. I'll tell them about how the last straw was you hitting me. Fuck, you push me hard enough, I'll tell everyone you don't even write those songs, how you need auto-tune to high heaven, your live shows are

recorded, and you fucking lip sync them.” Jax’s face is getting redder and redder, rage boiling with each word. But I’m past caring, riding the high of finally telling them off and standing up for me.

“You fucking bitch, you wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“We’ll come after you. That NDA you signed will come in handy.”

“What are you going to take away? The wages you never paid me? The clothes and shoes and jewelry I left behind? Do it.”

“We could come after your brother. He’s got money,” Daniel says with a smirk, and I don’t know how I know, but I know he’s been holding that secret close gleefully. Maybe for years. He knew all along who Hunter was, the millionaire owner of Beaten Path. I knew from Mom, of course, but I never once shared it, not even with Jax.

“You know, I’ve done some digging myself, Daniel. It turns out that NDA I signed isn’t as airtight or binding as you made it seem. Especially with all the surrounding circumstances. My age, the manipulation. The abuse-“ Jax cuts me off.

“I hit you one fucking time!” As if that matters. As if he thinks as long as it wasn’t often, wasn’t more than once, he should be forgiven. It’s no big deal.

“And the cherry on top, you and your team.” I give a pointed look at Daniel. “Started spreading lies, slandered my name, and making your fans send me death threats.” I finally logged into one of my many social media accounts early last week, shocked they weren’t locked, only to find the inbox filled with fans hating on me, threatening me harm on his behalf. A fire fueled by their press, by Jax’s silence on the topic. “If you don’t leave, don’t clear my fucking name and get your rabid fans off my ass, I’m going public. I’ll also be suing you for the lost wages you never paid me.” The last part just tumbles from my mouth, but I’ve been thinking about it for a while. The fact I have absolutely no savings, money, or credit when I have been working my ass off for years is slowly eating at me.

“You fucking bitch, I’m going to-“ Jax is coming my way, and for a single moment, I’m scared. He’s bigger than me. And angry. And the only one around is Daniel, whose fancy lifestyle requires him to continue to be a cash cow.

But then I’m not, and it’s because there is a large body standing in front of me, blocking my view, keeping me safe.

Tanner.

Tanner is here, and he is protecting me.

“You’d better re-fuckin’-think whatever you were about to say because you might be bigger than her, but I’m bigger than you, and I’m not scared of some asshole who picks on women to make himself feel better.” It takes everything in me not to laugh, not to throw my head to the sky and laugh and dance because Tanner is here, and someone is sticking up for me for once in my life.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Jax says, and now I realize his words are just the tiniest bit slurred. Not enough for the press to notice, but enough that if you’ve lived with him for years, you know he shouldn’t drive a car. Jesus.

“I’m Jordan’s man, and I’m not gonna let you even think about threatening her, much less laying a hand on her.”

“Oh, so you’re the nobody she’s fucking now.” He tries to peek around Tanner’s body, and I only know this because Tanner has his hands on his hips now, giving me a small window to watch through. “You should know she’s a real bitch and shit in bed. Totally fucking useless.” It doesn’t bother me. They’re words I’ve heard before, mumbled, or yelled to friends both behind my back and right in front of me. Tanner’s body tenses, but a hand on his back, calming him, has him staying put. “Real downgrade, baby. This ugly fuck is so far from what you had. Fuckin’ dumb caveman.” Now that... That has me walking around Tanner and towards the man who moments ago had me cowering.

And just like when we went to his parents, and his father questioned his work, I lose it. I lose sight of sense and reality. Tanner tries to grab my wrist and pull me back, but I shake him off. “What the fuck did you say?” I’m walking towards him, probably ten feet between us now, and, to be clear, I have no fucking plan. I have no clue what I’m going to do.

“I said, he’s a downgrade and looks like a fucking dumb caveman. You could do so much better. You’re pretty when you try.” And then I do it. The only thing I can think to shut his ass up and bring him down a peg.

“Well, at least he has a big dick and can make me come every fucking time. I’ve heard you fucking those whores, honey. They all fake it. They fake it because your dick is small, and you have no fucking clue what you’re doing, and you come in-” And even though Tanner has caught up with me, a firm hand grasping my wrist, I see it when it happens. When

Jax's hand comes back and he puts some speed and strength behind the swing, and I see when the back of his hand makes contact with the side of my face. It's like I'm having an out-of-body experience.

"You fucking bitch!" he screams, but I'm standing there silent, face throbbing, ears ringing like in one of those movies when the sound goes quiet because the world is moving too fast.

And then the world returns, a fast-forward sequence of rage and indignation, and I know I need to act.

"TANNER, NO!" I shout, throwing my body in front of his, blocking so he can't attack Jax, so he won't be in jail in a few hours. Daniel sees the same shit show going down, except he also sees Jax drunkenly pulling his hand back once more as if to hit me again for my indiscretion. Daniel and I are face to face, and it's like some unspoken understanding is happening between us, both needing to keep our halves away from one another.

"YOU FUCKING HIT A WOMAN, YOU PIECE OF SHIT? COME ON, HIT ME. BE A MAN," Tanner's bellow is in my ear, nearly deafening. Still, even as he tries to push past me, he's gentle, never forceful, and something about that, something about balancing the anger and the emotion with his need to keep me safe, makes me fall the last little bit, the final thread snapping.

But I have no time to think about it, not just because I am in the middle of a fight and my face is on fire.

Because Steve is running over, his car with Autumn and the kids idling in the drive. Could this get any messier?

"What in the fuck?" he says, reaching us and looking at my face. "Shit Jordan, what the fuck!?"

"This asshole just fucking hit her in front of all of us!" Tanner is still trying to get at my ex, but it seems like Jax is giving up his fight. This seems to both soothe and scare Daniel. I'm sure Daniel has never taken a hit from anyone in his life. "Take her inside. I need to take care of this asshole."

"Steve, call the police. I need to press charges and calm Tanner down!" I'm frantic because I see it now. Tanner beating Jax to a pulp, Jax suing Tanner for everything he has. Tanner doesn't have the money for the lawyers Jax could afford. He'd lose everything, the family business, his house. It would all be my fault. I turn, taking the risk he'll just run around

me. Steve is yelling towards Autumn to call 911 and call Tony and Zander, friends on the force.

“Tanner, honey, need you to calm down.” My hands are on his shoulders. It’s all I can reach right now, but I’m staring at him. Unfortunately, his eyes are on my face, and they burn brighter with anger.

“That fucker-“

“I’m okay. You kept me okay. I’m fine. But later, when I have a meltdown over it, I’ll need you, Tanner. I’ll need you. And if you’re in a jail cell, you can’t help me.” His eyes soften and cool, the battle in them furious. I keep going. “This is all fine. It doesn’t matter. You came when I needed you, saved me. I’m gonna need you tonight. I know it. Please, honey. Please.” I’m looking at him, and distantly I hear Jax yelling and Daniel trying to shut him up, but it’s just us now. Just Tanner and me. And he’s right there, so close to giving in, and then... he says the words.

“Okay, Dani.” He wraps me in his arms, cradling me there, and somehow I know everything will be just fine.

THIRTY-THREE

-jordan-

HOURS LATER, we're walking out of the station, hand in hand, as I hold an ice pack to my face at Tanner's insistence. We spent the last hours giving statements and pressing charges against Jax and Daniel. Steve was there as well since he wanted to press charges for trespassing.

And that's it. The pretty story of our fairytale relationship will collapse in a messy splatter across the papers tomorrow for all to see. I try not to think too hard about what it means for me and my life, what it means for Tanner and my... family, and this small town.

Fortunately, I have time to worry about all of that.

"We're going to the cottage and packing your shit up," Tanner says in a growl after he gently places me in the passenger seat of his truck, buckling me in like I'm a small child. His eyes are on the road as he gets himself in, starts the car, and points the truck toward Autumn's house.

"What? No, Tanner, that's unnecessary," I try to argue, but the set of his jaw tells me arguing will be futile.

That doesn't mean I'm not going to try.

"Don't care what you think. Your bitch of a sister sold you out, which led to that asshole finding you and laying his fucking hands on you. No fucking way are you staying with her."

"Honey, that's--"

"We've spent every night for weeks together. It won't be any different. If you want, after this is all settled, you can find your own place or go back there." I look over at him to see his face hasn't moved a fraction. "But I

meant what I said the other day. You can stay with me. I'm moving into the house in a week." Even though today has been on my list of absolute worst days ever, the warmth still enters my veins, thawing the ice that's been there since I drove to the cottage and saw Jax standing there.

"Tanner..."

"You're not leaving this town, Jordan." His eyes aren't on me still, but they don't need to be. I can feel the burn of his words, knowing what they mean to him.

I know what they mean to me.

"You might have been born in a city of sin and chaos, been raised there, and then lived life wild, but that's not you, Jordan. You're small town and family and friends. You're gigglin' with your girls at the local bar while the men look on and babysitting your nieces because you're a real-life princess. You're work boots and making badasses laugh at dumb fuckin' jokes because you're too sweet not to laugh. You belong here. I'm going to fuckin' prove it to you."

His words mean everything to me, mean everything to me as a woman who has never felt wanted, never felt rooted, but also as a woman who loves a man who was broken by wild. Who is rooted and needs a woman who wants that.

A man who wants to give me roots.

'Honey--

"Don't need to give me an answer now; you just need to pack. But just know that's where I'm at with this. With us." Finally, he parks and looks over at me, and in his eyes is vulnerability and openness. I can see everything in his look, and instantly I know the right answer.

"Okay, Tanner."

One more hour later, my things are packed up, and Tanner is putting them into the bed of his truck. It's dark now, the stars and fireflies lighting the sky in the warm July air. That's when Hunter comes running out from Autumn's house. When we pulled up, no one was home at the big house, probably back at the station, while Steve finished up his own charges and statements.

“Jordan!” he shouts, and behind him, I see Hannah following quickly behind. “Jordan, shit, fuck!” He meets me where we are and, to my all-consuming surprise, pulls me into him in an enormous bear hug, pressing a hand to the back of my head and into his soft tee shirt. “Shit, Jordan, are you okay?” He hugs me once more before pushing me back but keeps me in reach, his eyes running up and down me as if to assess my wellness with a simple look. It’s so... brotherly. Something a big brother would do to his little sister. It makes the tears already at the surface of my emotions, tears I was waiting to release when we got back to Tanner’s, come past my shield.

“Hunter, I, I’m okay, I-“

“Jesus, Hunt, it’s not a big fucking deal,” I hear shouted from the house. Autumn is strolling in our direction, arms crossed over her chest as if this entire scene is an inconvenience to her. Steve is walking behind her, but his face is stern and disappointed. I can’t figure out at who, though. Hunter lets me go and spins to face his - our sister.

“Not a big fucking deal? She’s been here since April, hiding out. I told you about the NDA, that there was clearly some more to her story we don’t fucking know. And you, what? Take the first press call you get and spill it all to them?”

“Oh Jesus, Hunter, she has you so fucking blinded by her cute looks and sob story. All I did was answer my fucking phone and answer a few questions. How am I to blame for this shit?!”

“Autumn, love you, but you know you’re in the wrong,” Hannah says, her voice quiet. My sister’s eyes flit to Hannah, then to me, and right before I see the mask of rage and anger slam down, I see hurt and betrayal. Fuck.

“He was waiting for her when she got back. Him and his manager, or whoever the fuck. She was all alone, no one else here. He’s abused her in the past, was running from him. You’re smart, Autumn. You don’t have to be told explicitly to know that shit. They fucking threatened her. He hit her. Look at her face, Autumn.” Everyone looks to me and those who haven’t yet seen the bruise flinch. “Who knows what would have happened if I hadn’t come.” Tanner is behind me, pulling my body into his protectively.

“Autumn, this is a big deal. I cannot believe you’d do this to our sister.”

“Oh God, this shit again. We don’t know this woman, Hunter!”

“Cut the attitude, babe,” Autumn’s husband Steve says. I’ve spent some time with Steve, mostly the few times I’ve come inside the big house to get to know my nieces. He’s quiet, a straight talker, and it’s clear he loves

Autumn and his girls more than anything. But he's not one to bullshit. He also saw the chaos and drama clear as day a few hours ago. "Know you're angry with your mom. That's valid. No one is arguing that. But this is your sister. She needs your help. Do not punish her for shit that bitch did years ago. Is this how you'd want Sara to treat Rosie?"

"Seriously, Autumn. I get it. Mom fucked us both over. But that's not Jordan's fault. What you did was wrong, and you owe her an apology." Autumn scoffs, throwing her hands in the air in defeat like we're all idiots, and she can't bother with us any longer.

"Just you wait, Hunt. You're all going to fall in love with her, let her in, and she's going to disappear, just like Mom did." She looks around, angry venom in her eyes hiding what I recognize as deep hurt in her soul. I would know. My wounds from Mom look similar. Her eyes land on Tanner. "You better prepare, Tan. She's just like Courtney. Gonna wrap you the fuck up, chew you up, and spit you out. You don't deserve that." I hear Hannah gasp from beside us, but I see the flash in Tanner's eye at her words.

The flash of fear recognized.

The reminder I am a temporary place filler until the perfect fit comes along. A convenient substitution like I've always been.

"Autumn!" Hannah shouts. "I cannot believe you just said that!"

"Go. Now, Aut," Hunter says to Autumn, but his eyes are on her husband. Steve looks at his wife with a frustrated fury before grabbing her arm and walking her back to the house.

"I'm just saying what we're all thinking!" she says over her shoulder. "Nothing against you, Jordan, but you just don't fit here."

And even though that's my life story, even though I know now all of my fears are true, I decide while I can, I'll take what this group will give me, accept the scraps. Even if I'm a replacement, a convenient placeholder, I'll take the love and warmth and friendship they offer for now.

Because a part of me, somewhere deep and dark, I know she's right. I don't fit. And if I never get this family for myself, never get that group of supportive people to spend the rest of my days with, at least I'll have these memories to keep me warm.

THIRTY-FOUR

-tanner-

THE FOLLOWING day we go out after work to Luna's.

Normally, I don't go out after work, not when I have to be on-site in the morning, but after the night we had yesterday, we needed this after waking up to see the swollen side of Jordan's face. Needed a reminder the old world she lived in is a memory, and she's surrounded by people who love her, who care for her. Hunter was the one who shot me a text this morning saying he wanted to meet up with us.

Hunter and Hannah are officially as taken by Jordan as I am. It's so easy to fall for this woman. Whenever I go anywhere without her, I get questions about where she is and how she is. If we're together, there's always someone coming over and talking with her. Somehow, in the short six weeks, she's been here, she's made an entire town fall in love with her, including me.

Not that I've told her. Not that I plan on letting her in on that fact anytime soon.

I want her to feel settled, to feel comfortable before I drop it into her lap.

For now, she's staying with me in the trailer and then in the house when I move in officially next week because there is no way in hell she's staying at the cottage. Not when Autumn is so fucking bitter with her.

What I didn't tell her was Autumn wanted Jordan out of the cottage. Wanted her to move out, citing they had a deal, a deal where Dani wouldn't bring drama into the girls' lives. And while I understand, while I even agree

with it, we all know Jordan didn't bring this drama to Autumn's home. Autumn did, giving details on where she was staying to the one person who couldn't have it.

It turns out a 'reporter,' who ended up being an assistant of Jax's, called up the Sutter house, and Autumn answered. She gave out exact details on where to find her sister.

I shake my head, forcing those thoughts out, trying to welcome the rush of noise and music in the bar into my mind to overtake them.

"How's she doing?" Luna asks, leaning on the weathered bar top and looking down the bar where Jordan is laughing with Hannah and Hunter. Since she was a little girl, Luna has been gorgeous, always has been cheering on the football team in the stands with her brother. While she's always been a friend, something happened when my employee kidnapped her, bringing her to my worksite and into my trailer. I've never had a sister, and Luna does not need any more brother figures in her life, but from that moment on, she got another.

"Alright. Laughing and being Dani, but underneath, she's still shaken. Last night was hard." My mind goes back to getting her ready for bed, to cleaning the bruised skin that asshole left behind, getting her dressed and tucked in. Her finally breaking down in my arms, in the dark shroud of night. I held her as she told me how angry she was, how stupid she felt. How disappointed she is Autumn can't get over her anger, instead taking it out on Jordan. How scared she is.

And during her catharsis and over the sound of my shushing, then the sound of her heavy breathing as she fell asleep, I realized she needed this. Someone to hold her while she cries, something I don't think she's ever had. This woman might have lived wild, but she doesn't want to. Not any more. Maybe never. She needs someone who will reach out and hold her down, to nurture her until roots grow and she's planted here. She's not as wild as she's tried to convince everyone of, not as freewheeling and uncaring. She spent her entire life being told by people who she is, and maybe to a degree, she became that, but that's not who she is.

And I think I'm the man to hold her down, to give her what she so desperately has been seeking.

"Dani?" Luna says with a smile, and I roll my eyes. "That's sweet, Tanner." I ignore her and look towards my girl, still smiling, happy, and carefree. She did a good job covering the bruise with a mound of makeup,

but I still know it's there. The thought has me curling my fingers on my beer. "You're good for her." The words are softer now, and I look at her. "Met her that first night. Read her. I'm a bartender. I do that. She was lost then. Lost and drifting and scared. Less so when she came in with the girls. Ever since the two of you...." She looks at me with a small smile and a raised eyebrow, making me roll my eyes. "You know. Since then, she's... lighter. Happier. She fits here, Tan. Fits right in with the crew. It's like she belonged here since the beginning." She's right, of course. I've noticed it too. But, being Luna, she can't let shit go. "You need to drop your wall, Tanner." I pause, knowing where this is going.

"You were hurt once. It had to suck. Know the band, know Courtney. Not a fan. Neither is Ace if it helps." Of course, Luna's brother Ace, the guitarist in Hometown Heroes, the band my ex ran off with, would know Courtney. Hell, she still works with the band now as their manager, a gig she got by fucking her way there. "She's nothing like her. She loves it here. Craves normalcy. Courtney would be out, and she'd always be looking around, waiting for something... else to come around. Never found it here. But Jordan? She found what she was looking for, Tanner." I nod because I'm not sure what else to do and because she's right. Instead of saying a word, I lift my drink and take a long pull.

"You should know; they're coming back for a while. A month, I think? She'll be here, too." Every muscle in my body freezes at the words.

"What?"

"Ace called Mom. They're coming home for a while before they start the fall tour, staying here." My stomach churns with the knowledge. "Just didn't want you blindsided if you see her around."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"Anytime, Tanner. Just... don't let it get to you. Don't let her fuck with the good you've got going on here." Before I can answer, Hunter, Hannah and Jordan wander back our way, and Hunter throws a gleeful, unbearably happy arm around my shoulder.

"No serious faces, Tan. We're out having a good time, celebrating family and Jordan staying in town and the fact my fiancé will hunt her down if she tries to leave our chaos." Right then, I'm unbearably thankful for my best friend, who always knows exactly what's going on in my mind and how to get me out of it.

THIRTY-FIVE

-tanner-

THAT WARNING IS TIMED PERFECTLY because the next night, my phone rings.

“Hello, this is Tanner Coleman,” I say as I answer. It’s a local area code but not saved to my phone. There’s always a chance it’s a potential new client, so I always try to answer professionally even though this isn’t the business line.

“Uh, hey, T. It’s me.” She doesn’t need to say anything else. Only one person on this planet has called me ‘T.’ “Uh, Courtney.” Her voice is gentle and nervous, and right about now, I’m regretting the drunken night with Hunter when he convinced me to delete her number from my phone. Because there is no way, I would have answered the number otherwise.

“Courtney. Wow.” It’s all I can say, and I feel like an idiot, but damn, *what the actual fuck*.

“God, I honestly didn’t think you’d answer,” she says with a short, nervous laugh. There was a time I found her laugh sweet and innocent, adorable even. Where I’d do anything to make her feel more at ease. But not anymore.

“I wouldn’t have, but I deleted your name, so I thought you might be a client.”

“Oh.”

“Is there a reason you called?” I want to get off this call. I want to get off this call and get a beer, call Hunter, or find Jordan and remind myself what a woman meant to be mine feels like in my arms. Hearing her voice

brings back too many emotions long smothered, long worked through, and overcome.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m, um. I’m headed home in a few weeks. The guys and I.” *The guys and I.* The band she left me to go tour with will be in town to relax before their tour. I mentally thank Luna for the heads up. Otherwise, this would be even more of a shock. Either way, I play it off.

“Town’s small, sure you remember. I know.”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I wanted to... Wanted to see if...” I cut her off, wanting this to be over, not wanting it dragged out. What the fuck does she want from me?

“Honestly, Court, I’m busy. Got things to do.” *I need to get off this phone to get away from the memories and anger her voice is dredging up.*

“Of course, sorry. I wanted to see if we could meet up. Talk a bit. Clear... clear some things up.” I stay silent for what feels like long minutes, unsure of what to say. It’s been ten years since she left. Years since she ran off with some bassist, packed up her things. Ten years since she left the engagement ring I’d saved for a year to give her on the coffee table of the apartment we shared. What the fuck could she have to say now? It’s not like she’s never been in town. Somehow, she’s never crossed my path. Why now?

“Tanner? Are you still there?”

“Shit, yeah, sorry. Look, Courtney, I don’t think this is necessary. All of that was a lifetime ago. I-“

“Please, Tanner. It won’t be long. I promise.” I try to understand what she’s saying, thoughts flying through my mind at a million miles a minute. *Why now?* And also, *what the fuck could she have to say to me?* Yet, despite that, I can’t help but wonder if I say no, will the door ever fully close for me?

Maybe this is the closure I need, what I need to move forward in my life. Move forward with Jordan.

“Fine.” The word feels like sand in my mouth, uncomfortable and dry, but they’re out there now.

“Oh, great! Thank you, Tanner. I’ll be home next week. Does Monday evening work for you?” Without a thought, I agree, just trying to get her off the phone and get to Jordan so she can explain this mess to me.

“Yeah, just call me when it gets closer, and we can set it up.”

“Perfect, thanks, Tanner. I can’t wait to see you.” Something about her words grates me. If we’re meeting to explain things and tie up loose ends that have been dangling for ten years, why is she excited? I’m already dreading it, the thought churning nauseously in my stomach. But instead of saying anything, I hang up, wondering what the fuck I just agreed to.

What just happened?

I’m sitting in the same place, still staring at the blank TV screen, when Jordan walks into the living room, her long red hair wrapped up in a towel and a pair of sage green short pajamas on. Seeing her knocks me out of my daze immediately and to a separate, much more enjoyable one. I’m reminded of what a good, loyal, kind woman is like. The kind of woman I can genuinely see myself with, not just the woman I could see myself with when wearing the rose-colored glasses of youth.

I need her now.

“Hey babe, who was - oof!” she says as I stand, ducking into her belly and standing so she’s over my shoulder, her legs kicking the air and giggling. “Tanner! Put me down!”

I walk down the hall to the master bedroom, which houses an enormous bed in a giant, intricate bed frame and not much else before I throw her onto the middle. Her red hair has fallen from the towel, probably laying wet in the hall on the wood floor, but I can’t seem to care. It’s damp, falling over her shoulder as she leans back into her hands, biting her lip.

“You’ve got me here. What are you going to do with me now?” she says, teasing me, and I fucking *love* this version of her. It’s a version coming out more often, one that’s peeking a nervous head. It’s clear to me that for years she hid this part of herself, the part that was outspoken, silly, a bit of a smartass. And now, with me, she feels safe letting her out.

I decide to go for it, eager to see if she’ll play along.

“What do you want me to do?” With my words, her cheeks flare with blush and boom, the other side of her. She’s half sex kitten and half shy schoolgirl, and I want each part just as much as the other. And like every time she’s around me, every time she looks at me or speaks, she surprises me.

“I want you to tell me what to do.” The words come from her mouth so quiet, I almost don’t hear them. But the blush blooms on her cheeks, dipping down her neck and disappearing into the v-neck of her top.

“Do you, now?” I ask, leaning up against the wall and taking her in because she’s just so fucking beautiful. Laying there like a pinup, hair tumbling, body nothing but curves covered in satin. This woman is everything I didn’t know I was dreaming of. She bites her full bottom lip, nervous, but when I just stare at her, she speaks.

“I like when you... talk to me.”

“What do you like about it, Dani?” I pull over a chair sitting in the corner, turning it so I can straddle the seat and watch her on the bed. Her eyes glaze over before answering.

“I like... your voice. And... the words. I like the words you say.” The blush is burning now on her fair skin, and I know if I put a hand to her cheek, it would be warm against my skin.

“Take your shirt off, Jordan.” My words are curt, a demand rather than a request, and now her eyes blaze to match her skin. Excellent decision, Coleman. Sitting up, her arms cross her front and pull the green shirt off, revealing beautiful tits and peachy nipples. She doesn’t like to wear a bra to bed, a fact I love. She stares at me, looking for her next order. “And your shorts.” She gently wiggles out of the satiny pajama shorts, tugging them awkwardly before tossing them into a corner.

Her eyes are hooded, mouth slightly parted and when I glance between her legs, I can see a faint shimmer of wet already building. “Spread your legs.” My cock quickly becomes uncomfortably hard, but I won’t rush this. Her long legs part, spreading, so her toes are pointing in opposite directions and revealing her delicious pussy to me. Her hands are behind her on the bed, her tits pointing to the ceiling with each already labored breath.

“Are you wet?” She nods without checking. “Show me, Princess. Take a hand, run one finger up your pussy.” She does as I ask, taking just one finger and pulling it from bottom to top, a slight jerk of her hips when she brushes her clit before putting the finger in the air. The wet gleams there in the light, and I groan. “Take two fingers and rub your clit.” A mewl slips from her lips before moving the hand down, stroking herself with two fingers, just like I told her. “Such a good girl. Faster now, Dani.” Her fingers speed up, and her hips move in time.

It doesn’t take long before she’s moaning and frustrated, needing more. I know my girl. She likes to be full. A whimper from parted lips tells me she’s frustrated.

“What’s wrong, not enough?” She shakes her head, biting her lip. But she’s a good girl and knows how the game works. I would never have thought Dani would be the type to enjoy this, enjoy our game, but here she is, doing exactly what I ask. “You feelin’ empty?” She moans as she hits her clit a little harder, hips bucking before she nods frantically. “You want a finger?” Another nod. “Okay, baby. Scoot up the bed, then take your other hand and finger yourself with two fingers.” Obedient as ever, Jordan takes her hands and starts to fuck herself near violently, moaning and bucking her hips. Her hands block most of her efforts, but the wet sounds coming from her cunt, the moans coming from her mouth are more than enough.

“Another,” I say, and she groans before fitting a third finger inside her, head going back and hitting the headboard. I know this sound - she’s almost there. “Stop, Jordan.” She does, but now her eyes are open and on me,

“What? Tanner, no!” The frantic look in her eyes almost makes me smile, but I’m standing and taking off my shirt and pants, and the desperate look goes from anxious and needy to absolutely hungry. “Oh.”

“Fuck yeah, ‘oh.’ Lay down, feet in the bed, legs wide, baby. You know how I like you.” The words have her eyes glazing once more, but she scoots her ass down, putting her feet in the bed and using her hands to pull her thighs apart for me. I stand in front of her, naked and stroking my hard cock, taking in the glorious sight in front of me. She’s so wet, she’s dripping a small puddle into the sheets, and her hips won’t stop undulating, trying to find some kind of relief.

“Such a pretty good girl you are, Dani,” I say, and her pussy convulses, the contraction visible from here. I groan, kneeling to run my tongue up her clit just once, just getting a taste. Jordan screams, the scream cutting out as I move over her body and slam into her without warning.

“Fuck! Tanner!” Her pussy convulses around my cock, and I know it won’t take her long, the feeling so perfect.

“So fucking tight, Dani, so good. This fucking cunt.” She moans my name, still holding her legs back the way I like. Tomorrow she’ll proudly show me the tiny bruises she gets on the inside of her thighs from holding herself open, and I’ll kiss each and every one with reverence. “This mine? This my pussy, Dani? Do I own it?”

“Yes! Fuck!” she shouts, coming and clamping around me as I continue to pound into her. The whites of her eyes show as they roll back into her

head, and I slam in one last time, emptying into her, knowing I want this in my life forever.

Long minutes later, we're facing each other as my cum drips from her, our panting breaths slowing. Soon after we started, we had the talk. We were both tested, came back clean, and Dani had an IUD inserted, making condoms delightfully a thing of the past.

I push a hair behind her ear, the same hair I noticed I do push back a lot once she pointed it out. "So when do your online classes start?" She looks at me and blinks, confused. "For your bachelors? Rutgers?"

"You ask this *now*?" she asks with a giggle, and I smile at the sound.

"Now's the best time. There are only a few minutes after I fuck you where my head isn't on finding time to fuck you again. Now I'm clear to think about other things." Jordan stares at me for long moments before shrugging.

"That makes some kind of weird, twisted sense."

"I know," I say, agreeing before I squeeze her side. "So, classes?"

"In the fall. I'm going to have to take them during lunches, I think. Or stay late. Don't worry, it won't get in the way of my work, and I'm only taking two classes this semester-" I cut her off.

"Dani, you take whatever classes you need. Made you salaried, so you don't have hours to keep, just work to do. But you advancing your business knowledge is only going to benefit me. I meant to talk to you about supporting you, paying some of the way."

"That's unnecessary."

"Don't play this game with me. I can and will pay if it's something that can help-"

"No, I mean, it's covered. I... I applied for a bunch of scholarships. For about a year. I was planning... planning to leave for a while. I wasn't sure if I'd go back to school, but I needed a way if I wanted to. So I have enough for like... my entire Masters when you add in the scholarships from my community college grades." I blink at her. "I told you, I... I'm good at this."

"Of course you are. I just... I didn't realize you'd been planning... that. For so long."

"I needed to plan for the future. I needed... to know what to do. It was a bright spot when things were shit."

“What else did you plan for your future?” The words pop out without even registering in my brain, and as soon as I say them, I want to take them back. She doesn’t need me leading her around, digging for an answer.

“I didn’t plan for a handsome, small-town man to sweep me off my feet if that’s what you’re asking. Didn’t plan to fall for my boss.” She giggles but then freezes when she realizes what she said. “Shit, I-”

“I didn’t plan to fall for my employee, either,” I whisper, my eyes taking in hers. The confession is there, clear as day, and she hears it.

“But you did?” The words are so soft, so quiet. If I weren’t so close, it could have been a whisper of sheets against skin. But I hear it all the same.

“Oh, yeah.” Her smile is blinding before we kiss, kissing long and sweet, rolling around in bed until she’s moaning, and I’m coming inside her again.

It’s not until long after she’s asleep on my chest I realize I didn’t tell her about my call.

THIRTY-SIX

-jordan-

I'M SITTING at my desk the following day when the call comes through. It seems to be a trend, getting shit calls when I'm in a small, contained area. Tanner had just walked through my door, a stern look on his face before it rang. I raise a finger at him, smiling at the sweaty brow that's revealed when he takes off his hardhat. God, that man is hot as hell.

Having learned my lesson from last time, I quickly Google the number with a local area code and see something unexpected.

Springbrook Hills County Prison

Well, shit.

"What is it?" Tanner says, making me realize I said it aloud. I look up at him, meeting his eyes.

"County jail."

"Answer it." He says the words without a pause, without hesitation, but I hesitate. I stare at the device like it will bite me, unsure of what to do. It's still ringing in my hand when Tanner stomps over, swiping my phone to answer and hitting the speaker button.

"Hello?" I try to get the words out, but they're craggy like my voice has been unused for weeks rather than moments. I clear my throat. "Hello?" Better.

"Hello, this is a collect call from the Springbrook Hills Country Prison. An inmate with the name of Jonathan Smith is trying to reach a Jordan Daniels."

“This is she.” My hands are shaking, so I move to sit on them. I’m not sure why since there’s nothing he can do to me now. But I still feel the need to hide them, hide my fear.

Since Monday, I’ve been getting calls incessantly from press asking for my side of the story, as well as people on Jax’s team looking to get in contact with me. They’ve been hard at work in between trying to contact me, trying to make Jax look the victim, making me look like the jilted lover, the jealous ex.

Nevertheless, somehow, it’s not working. It’s not working, and I haven’t had to say a *single word*. The police reports have been made public, clearly detailing that Jax and Daniel showed up uninvited, trespassed on private property, assaulted, and threatened me. Not only did Tanner and Steve give full witness statements to most of the events, but the security cameras Steve had around the property became evidence against them.

But even more interesting are the ‘insider sources’ revealing information to the press that was never meant to be known. Headlines have ranged from ‘Anonymous source says he witnessed Jax hit Jordan in a crowded room, then laugh about it’ to ‘JAX JACKSON BROKE?! How the country star mismanaged his money and lost the love of his life’ (barf) to, my personal favorite, ‘I’M PREGNANT WITH BABY JACKSON: Jax Jackson’s mistress comes forward claiming she is pregnant with the stars’ child.’ If that last one is true, I pity both the woman and her poor baby.

“Do you accept the call and the associated charges?” The woman’s bored voice breaks through my thoughts.

“Yes,” Tanner answers for me, his voice loud and clear. He picks me up from my desk chair before moving into a nearby chair with me in his lap, phone in hand. He’s covered in dirt and sweat, and I should probably be grossed out, but... I’m not. I’m grateful for his nearness. Thankful he’s here for this.

“Jordan?” Jax’s voice isn’t what I expect. Gone is the cocky, all-knowing tone, and it’s made way for more of a stressed and tired one. I don’t answer, but interestingly enough, neither does Tanner. “Jordan? You there?” I’m still confused by this call, why he’s wasting it on me. He hasn’t been to the judge yet, that much I know, and until he does, he’s being held.

“Fuck, Jordan, I don’t have time for games. I only have a few minutes, you bitch.” Annnnd there it is. The asshole I know and despise. Because it’s

never too far down, is it? It also snaps me out of whatever freeze or confusion I was stuck in.

“What do you want, Jax? Because as far as I can see, you’re the one who needs *me* to be on this call. Not the other way around. I have no problem hanging up.” Tanner’s arm squeezes me with pride, giving me the strength I need.

“Goddammit, Jordan. I’m sorry. Look. I need you to drop the charges. We need to talk, to fix things. We can-“

“Absolutely not.”

“What?”

“I said, absolutely not.”

“What do you mean, ‘absolutely not’?” God, was he always this self-centered and dense? Oh yeah. He was.

“I mean, there is no way I am dropping the charges. Absolutely no way I’m talking to you. If I had it my way, this would be the last time I talked to you unless it was in a courtroom. So you better say whatever you need to.”

“You fucking bitch, I’m going to-”

“I’d remember that this is a recorded line, Jax.” That’s Tanner, his firm, sure voice rumbling through me, comforting me.

“Fuck this. I don’t know why I even bothered to call you.”

“Why *did* you call me, Jax?”

“Management told me to.” I roll my eyes. Of course. He does whatever his handlers tell him to. “The press is eating me alive. They’re saying I’m a cheater, that I abused you.”

“That’s all true, Jax.”

“You know it’s not. It’s exaggerated. They don’t know my side.”

“*Your* side? Your side for why you hit me? Called me names and made me feel like shit? Shut me off from the world, only taking me out to show me off when it suited you?”

“Goddamnit, Jordan, this is why I can never fuckin’ *talk* to you. You always twist shit.”

“Jax, you backhanded me in front of my own home after tracking me down in front of multiple witnesses.”

“My career is over if you don’t fix this, Jordan.”

“That was never my responsibility. Your career, your image was never mine to uphold.”

“Fuckin’ useless. You always were, no good—shit in bed, just something pretty to look at. Even then, nothing special. I only kept you around because the team told me to. You’re fucking nothing without me.”

“Jax, if all I am is whatever you want me to be, I’d rather be nothing. But the truth is, *you* are nothing without *me*. Not the other way around. And I’ve *found* who I am since leaving you - not lost it. And, honey? What I found is so fucking beautiful, it makes my soul ache.” With those words hanging in the air between us, I swipe the phone to hang up, chest heaving and body quaking slightly.

Despite that, I feel good. I feel *strong*. I feel better than I could have ever imagined. Finally, I get to be my own person, especially now that the threat of Jax and NDA’s and contractual agreements is gone. I’m free.

I’m no longer a substitute for someone.

I’m my own person, no longer living for others.

And *damn*. Does it feel good.

Tanner lifts me and turns me in his lap, so I’m straddling him, and pulls me into his chest, using a big hand to press my head there.

“I’m fine, Tanner.”

“I know, Dani.”

“Really, I am.”

“Know that.”

“Then why are you holding me like I’m going to break.”

“Holding you because I am so fucking proud of you right now. You’re beautiful and fearless. So fucking amazing, standing up to him, standing up for yourself. I just want... I want to hold you and soak in this moment with you. It’s one you’ll remember forever. And I’m privileged to have been there for it.” He’s right, of course. The first time I truly stood up to someone on my own behalf, this moment will always stick with me. But I know what will stick is how I feel *right now*. How I feel being held by this man, having this man believe in me and support me.

My hands go to his jaws, warm and prickly with a day’s worth of scruff. I pull him to me gently, pressing my lips to his. The hands on my hips tighten as he returns the kiss, soft and full of emotion, before he breaks it off, pressing his forehead to my own.

“Love you, Dani.” His body stills after he says it like the words slipped out without meaning to, and I see his eyes have widened, shocked by the sound of them. “I mean, I-“ I cut him off, giving him the relief he so

desperately needs. I would love to drag it out, watch the panic, but I just can't.

"I love you too, Tanner. So much." Once more, our lips meet in a slower caress, tasting and learning each other in this new stage of things—tasting and expressing the words that just left our lips.

"You're so beautiful. So strong. It scares me." His honesty melts the remaining ice, letting him in, opening myself to everything. Everything good and everything that could hurt me.

"I'm scared too."

"You stay by my side, and I'll make it so you're never scared again, Dani." Those words, the nickname. It's everything I've ever wanted from a man.

"Okay, Tanner."

The moment is beautiful and touching and everything I could ever hope for.

If only I had remembered to ask him why he'd come into the trailer that morning.

THIRTY-SEVEN

-Jordan-

Leaving the work site at five on the dot that day, I'm excited to be heading... home? Home, I guess.

We've been living together, however temporarily, for a week. Over the weekend, I helped him start moving into the house. Now that everything was completed, and he got most of the furniture from his old apartment out of storage, it was time to get out of the trailer and into the house he built.

And I followed him, bringing all the crap I'd moved from Autumn's cottage to the trailer and then to the new house. It's been strange but nice, having a place to go at the end of the day, having someone to spend the nights with. We've been spending nights together for over a month, but spending nights versus actually *living* together changes something.

I have been lucky enough to have a house or apartment, or, occasionally, a tour bus, to live my entire life. I've met people who weren't so fortunate, friends or co-workers of my moms, fans, and roadies. But what people never truly realize is that there is a tremendous difference between a house and a home. It's a cliché thing to say, but the reality is a home isn't four walls and a roof. It's safety, and security, and warmth. And it comes from the people that dwell within those four walls with you, people who want nothing more than for you to feel that safety and security, who want to give you that warmth.

Finally, after years of not being enough, not being worth giving that to, of not living up to my mother's wishes for me, years of not being the perfect trophy to Jax... Finally, I have someone who likes me and all of my baggage. Who thinks I'm enough. Who isn't constantly pointing out how I

could improve or not meeting some unseen standard. Someone who likes my snark and my goofiness. Who doesn't roll his eyes when I trip or ask me if that's *really* what I'm wearing out. Someone who lets me be free, who lets me live *free*.

And *that* is what it's like to have a home.

It's something that this tiny town unexpectedly gave me, a gift I will not take for granted.

These are the thoughts running through my mind as I drive to Tanner's. I stopped at the bakery downtown on my way to grab a dozen of the chocolate cupcakes with vanilla frosting and salted caramel drizzle he loves as a 'just because.' He left the site early, not long after the call from Jax came to meet with a new potential client who contacted me last week. It's a developer who just bought a chunk of land looking for a contractor and construction company to be the primary on a massive housing complex. It could change everything if he gets this deal.

So whether the meeting went well or poorly, I want to be there with cupcakes, to celebrate or commiserate.

I think that's what a good girlfriend does, right?

Except, when I drive down the road, noting a few of the homes now have lights on and cars in the drive and two others have moving vans, there is a car I don't recognize parked on the street. Screwing up my nose, I try to think about whether Tanner mentioned having someone over today. Maybe the meeting was at his place? It would be strange, but who am I to say.

Stepping out of the Jeep, I grab my bag and keys and walk to the pathway lined with the little solar lights we put in last weekend. The sun charges them during the day, and they add a muted light to the drive, perfect for clumsy me who may or may not have already tripped up the walk in the dark.

When I reach the door, only the screen is closed, the front door open and letting in the fresh air. Although it's mid-July, it's a cooler day, and the fresh air feels nice. And then I hear voices.

Tanner's.

And a woman's.

"I just really miss you, Tanner." The words drift to my ears, my stomach clenching, but I go into denial mode instantly. *Maybe it's his mom. Perhaps it's the developer. Or Luna. Or Hannah. Or...*

But all of my mental gymnastics fall flat when on the living room couch, Tanner sits next to a lithe platinum blonde. Her face is tear-streaked, and, unlike me, she's a beautiful crier. As I stand in the all, confused and frozen, I watch her move from the other side of the couch until she's right next to him. I can't even take the time to note he was sitting far from her, or when she got closer, he leaned away. Because the next thing I know, her hand is on his arm, and she's leaning to brush her lips on his.

A woman is on Tanner's couch, trying to kiss him.

Although my heart is screaming, "Run!" I stay and watch, having seen way too many romance movies where the guy pushes off his assailant right after his love interest runs. And it happens. It's a small consolation when he immediately pushes her away before their lips can touch, standing and stepping back from her.

And when I get a look at his face, it's flushed with confusion and memories and anger, but I can't stay. I can't stay a moment longer and watch this happen, watch this unravel.

I need space. I need to go... somewhere.

And when I trip over my own feet, walking backward, causing both of them to turn my way, I know.

I know who this is.

I may have never seen her. I may have never even had her described to me, but I know.

This is Courtney.

His high school girlfriend.

His fiancé.

The woman he once loved and wanted to marry.

The woman who replaced him with something more exciting.

And now, the evil voice in my head that sounds like a strange, demonic mix of Mom and Jax is saying, "And now he's replacing *you* with something better. The original. She's back, and you're gone."

As I catch my footing, I take in both of their faces. Tanner with the same mix of confusion and anger, which morphs into then horror, Courtney with confusion and then *smugness*.

I want to punch her in the face.

But I turn around on my heel and walk away as I beg with my tears not to fall. Not yet.

THIRTY-EIGHT

-jordan-

“JORDAN, STOP, LET ME EXPLAIN,” Tanner says, and the phrase, one I’ve heard from men my whole life, one I listened to the very first time I saw Jax sleeping in our bed with some fan. The phrase he stopped saying, and I stopped caring about, coming from Tanner, makes a malicious chuckle come from my lips.

What could he *possibly* have to say? Because I know it’s total fucking bullshit. It always is. They’re all the same.

I realize now I was the perfect substitution, the perfect placeholder. The new girl who didn’t know how gorgeous and sweet Courtney was, a temporary fixture in town. The one who doesn’t know the baggage, who didn’t see the one who got away. The perfect woman to warm his bed until the one who broke him came back. And why wouldn’t she? He’s a fucking catch. And now that I’ve seen them together, it’s all crystal clear.

As always, once my worth is used up, when they realize I don’t live up to expectations, I’m done. On to the next one. Or the first one, in this case.

I can’t blame him. She’s beautiful, and they have history. What did he call it? Town royalty. Together, they’re perfect. I’m the misfit half-sister who doesn’t belong.

He deserves better.

I should have known. I was dumb to convince myself otherwise. “It’s fine, Tanner,” I say, walking down the steps with a bounce in my step, trying to play it cool. Trying to seem casual, trying to convince myself this

one doesn't hurt more. *Trying to keep it together as my world crumbles around me.*

"Jesus Christ, Jordan, cut the shit. Come back and let me explain." He sounds *angry*. He does *not* get to be angry. I stop in front of the cheery red Jeep he helped me pick out, realizing I'll have to sell it.

I'll never be able to drive this without thinking of him.

Bummer. I really liked this car.

"It's fine. I get it. She's her. I'm... me. You're a good guy, Tanner. I hope you're happy, really, I do." My voice cracks on the last word, and I try not to cringe as I dig in my purse for the keys, trying to find them so I can drive away, far, far away from here. "If you don't mind, I'd like to keep my job. For a bit, at least. Until I find something else." Finally, my fingers grasp the cool metal ring with the silly 'friends' key chain on it will also need to be trashed. I grip it hard, letting the metal bite into my skin, trying to take the edge off of everything else I'm feeling. *It doesn't work.* I unlock the door and hop in, starting the engine before I even close the door. Trying to do so is useless, though, since his hand is on the frame, holding it open.

"Jordan, please, don't be an idiot. I pushed her off. She just showed up. I didn't know what to do." He's standing there, arms to his side, and God, he's beautiful. "Talk to me. Let me explain. It's not what it looks like. I swear." I look at him, a sad smile on my lips, and his eyes hold genuine remorse. I want to give him that chance. The chance to explain. The opportunity to prove me wrong. I *want* him to prove me wrong.

And I almost let him explain.

Except, then I look to the front door and see *her* leaning in the doorway, feet planted on the girly doormat *I* picked out, a hip cocked and arms crossed on her ample, fake as fuck chest. On her lips is a smug fucking smile.

"Please, Dani. Give me a chance." It kills me—that name.

"Don't call me that," I say, tugging my door to try and shut it, the rawness in my throat back, burning.

"Don't be like this." My hands go to the keyring, and with surprising ease, like it was never meant to be there in the first place, I locate the key chain and start winding it through the ring to remove it. I need it *gone*.

"Just being me, Tanner. You be you. Let me be free." That hits a nerve. I see it in his eyes. It's then something changes, a flip switches.

“I’m not playing this fucked up game with you, Jordan. You want to grow the fuck up, you come to me, and we’ll talk. I’m not gonna force you, though. Not gonna fight you. I know you’re wild, know you want to be free. I won’t pin you down. If you want to use this shit as some fucked up excuse to put in between us, fuck it. I won’t stop you.”

And that’s it.

That’s all I need to hear from him.

He knows, knows this would never work. We’re too different. He won’t fight for this, won’t fight for me.

It’s not worth it.

And my whole life, all I’ve wanted was someone to fight for me.

For my mom to accept me, not just take me as a consolation prize.

For my dad to want me in his life.

For someone to fight my fear, to get through the ice.

For Tanner to fight for me to be his.

God, I can’t even get my own *sister* to like me. So what was I doing, thinking this beautiful man would fight for me?

“Don’t worry, Tanner. You won’t have to pin me down, won’t have to fight for me. If you could bring any of my things I left here to work on Monday, it would be great,” I say, tossing the ‘friends’ key chain to the ground at his feet as I tug on my door one last time.

And just ask, I expected, he doesn’t put up a fight, stepping back and letting me slam the door before I drive away, flying down his street and away from him.

THIRTY-NINE

-jordan-

THE PROBLEM IS, as I'm driving away from Tanner's, I realize I have no clue where the fuck I'm going. Luna's isn't open today, and Rise and Grind is closed by now. I've been enough of a burden to enough people, so I don't want to call any of my tentative friends for a couch to crash on. I need to regroup, though. I need somewhere to stay for the night, somewhere to be while I figure out my next steps. So, in what can only be described as a poetic turn of events, I head towards the grimy motel with the sweet front desk lady.

"Well, hello Jordan! What a pleasure to see you here!" Edith coos when I walk into the empty reception room.

"Hey, Edith. You got any open rooms for the night?"

"Of course, honey. We always have room!" This doesn't surprise me, but instead of cringing, I smile before paying for a room for the night. Unlike last time, I have the money to pay for the room, at least now.

When I unlock the door, tossing the keys onto the bed, and throwing my purse on the floor, I'm reminded of just how unappealing this place is. It's not *gross* per se, just... old. It's in the way the wallpaper is tinged with yellow, and you can tell nothing has been changed out since smoking in hotel rooms was made illegal. It all kind of smells like cigarette smoke and body odor and baby powdery perfume.

Still, it's a bed to stay in and a bed that doesn't require me depending on or bothering anyone else.

And when I lay in the bed, flopping down, that's when the tears come.

I cry.

And I cry.

I cry for everything I've ever cried for and all the tears I've held back.

I cry because I was never enough for my mom.

I cry because I gave everything to Jax, and I know now it would never have been enough.

I cry because my sister despises me, punishing me for our mother's sins.

I cry because I don't know who I am. Because I thought I had found it in this small town, but now... I'm not so sure.

And most of all, I cry because Tanner Coleman broke my heart into a million pieces, and I don't even blame him.

Hours later, when the room is dark from night falling and a lack of me remembering to put on the dingy lights, my stomach growls. Take out is in order. I need menus - I bet Edith would have them.

When I step out, I hear the door click behind me, and immediately I'm struck by flashing lights.

"Jordan! Did Jax hit you?!"

"Jordan! How do you feel about Tanya's pregnancy?"

"Jordan! Have you been tested for STDs?" Jesus, how personal could they get?

The paparazzi have found me. Of course, finally, the day I *really* do not want to deal with the paparazzi, they corner me. Feeling for my keys frantically to lock myself in the hotel room and gather a Plan B, I remember tossing them onto the bed. Looking at my Jeep as an escape option, I remember with dread right next to the hotel room keys are my Jeep keys. *Shit*. I'm being blinded by lights and know in a few hours photos of me, blotchy faces, and puffy-eyed will be all over the tabloids with speculations about why I was upset.

Running through my options, I sprint to the front desk, photographers following me.

"Edith!" I shout into the street, heading towards the front desk. But it seems in this small town with minimal visitors, the front desk closes at

dusk. Instead, a cheery “Be Back Tomorrow!” sign is flipped towards me, a yellow smiley taunting and teasing me.

Facing towards the building, my back to the photographers, I pull out my phone and call Sadie. Then Hannah. Then Hunter.

No one answers.

Finally, I’m out of options - or, at least, numbers saved on my phone. I curse my flighty nature and inability to remember to ask for people’s numbers.

And then I call the last number on my phone and, thank god - they pick up.

FORTY

-jordan-

“THANKS AGAIN, Autumn. I... I didn’t know who else to call.” The words come out embarrassed and quiet. She was the only number saved to my phone I hadn’t tried, other than Tanner. I’m not sure how it even got in there - maybe Hannah? Who knows.

But as I scrolled past it, something told me to try her.

And by the grace of God, she answered.

Even more shocking, she drove to the motel and picked me up in less than five minutes, speeding off before anyone could follow us.

“It’s fine.”

“I know... I know I’m not....” I’m not sure what to say. Your favorite person? Your friend? But she cuts me off, shocking me once again.

“You’re my sister, Jordan. I’d do the same for Hannah, for Hunter.” I look at her now, really, truly look at her and see the normal hard cast her face reserves for me alone has cracked. “You’re family. You needed help.”

I’ve seen her with the others when she doesn’t know I’m there. With Hannah, she’s funny, kind. Caring. A big sister. With Hunter, she’s teasing and even a little protective. With her girls, she’s an open book, loving and understanding even when it’s clear they’re getting on her last nerve.

Something about the dark surrounding the car, about her cracked facade, and my depleted shield, torn down with the showdown just an hour ago with Tanner and... her... Something about it makes me open up.

“I’ve never had a family.” The words tumble, and I’m embarrassed by them. I stare ahead, watching the headlights of passing cars and ignoring

the quick turn of her head towards me before it goes back to focusing on the road. Giving me time. Space. Letting me... what? Open up?

If that's what she wants, that's what she'll get. Unfortunately, I have no more energy today for games.

"She wasn't a mom to me. She gave me a place to stay, fed me. But she isn't family. I was never..." I sigh, knowing it's time to tell her. To try and get her to understand. "She missed you guys. Talked about you all the damn time. I told you she had pictures and clippings. Didn't tell you everything I did was compared to you. I made a travel soccer team when I was nine. Not a big deal, but I remember coming home excited. Told her." A pitiful puff of air leaves my lips, a sad impression of a laugh. "She told me I must not be that good because *you* made a travel team when you were six. I never played soccer again. Why bother if I couldn't do it better than some fictional sister whose ghost I was always battling? I graduated high school with a 3.9 GPA. She told me you were valedictorian." Out the window, the passing cars having turned to passing houses, front porch lights instead of headlights. "God, for a while - maybe from ten to sixteen? - I hated you both. Never met you, but God, I hated you. In my mind, because of you, I was never enough. I was a shitty substitution for the perfect children she left behind. I was why she had to run, why she left what she knew behind." I see we're pulling onto Autumn's street when she tries to open her mouth to interrupt.

"I know it was her own fault. I get it now, as an adult. No one made her leave. Or stay away. No one told her to cheat on your dad, to be stupid, to run. But in her mind, it was her only option. And it was because of me. She never let me forget that." Autumn moved the car into her driveway, parking but leaving the car on.

"You had it hard. I know that. But you had Ron. He's a good guy. Loved you. Never let you feel her leaving. Never let the shit of the world get to you, never let it touch you if he could help it. I was raised in a strip club break room, flattening one's while dancers tried to avoid handsy bouncers. I spent nights sneaking into my elderly neighbor's apartment while her shit men fought with her, hit her." I look at her, her face pale even in the dim light of the moon.

"I don't need that look. I don't... I'm good. I came out... okay. I just... I thought maybe if you knew. If you knew not having her in your life made you the lucky one, not me. If you knew...."

“I’m a piece of shit.” Her words are cracked and splintered with painful emotions.

“What? No.”

“All this time, I thought you were some stuck-up bitch. You got mom, got to live an exciting life, arm candy to some country star.” I roll my eyes. “Hunter tried to tell me. Hannah. Shit, even Steve told me to sit down with you, talk to you. I was so... so blinded.”

“It’s valid. You were left behind. Your emotions are valid, Autumn.”

“Maybe when I was 9. Or 16. Or 25. But, not... Jordan, I’m 37. I’m a mother. When I had the girls, I remember thinking I couldn’t imagine leaving them the way she did. They’re the ages Hunt, and I were now. I can’t see it.”

“She isn’t a mother. She’s a flawed woman, a child herself.” My mind flits over the dozens of arguments I had with her where I felt like I was the parent telling her what she could and couldn’t do.

“It’s not even that. Women leave their children all the time. But to do that? Treat you like that, force you to grow up like that? To compare you to us? To make you the villain. Fuck, to force you into that monster’s arms, to make him the better option?”

“It wasn’t her,” I say, feeling weird defending our mother all the same.

“One day, you’ll have kids. You’ll have kids, Jordan, and you’ll see every single step you make as a parent shapes your kids’ future. Everything you say and do will one day shape their decisions. Of course, it can end well regardless. Just look at Hannah. But you can push a child to feel such shit, to leave such a gaping hole in them where a mother’s love should be, she looks for it anywhere. Even if where she finds it is a prison.”

“So you know about... what happened.”

“I know enough.” Her eyes are on mine, glassy, the vision of her blurred with unshed tears. “That’s why I answered tonight. Steve told me... I’d been meaning to... But I’d like to hear the story. From you. If you’d like to share it.”

I pause, unsure of what to say for just a moment, but the answer is obvious. “I’d love to tell you mine if you tell me yours.” Her lips stretch in a smile that’s a bandaid on her raw emotions. I know because my own awkward smile is doing the same. And then something snaps, and she throws her hands out, pulling me in and wrapping me up in a huge hug as we both bawl our eyes out.

Even over the center console, awkward and uncomfortable, every molecule in my body is cheering as I cry in my big sister's arms.

We jump apart, both of us letting out a girlish scream when a tap comes from the driver's side window. For a moment, panic runs through me, thinking some fan or paparazzi followed us here. But we laugh when we see Steve ducking to look in the window with a worried expression. Finally, Autumn rolls down the window.

"Jesus, Steven, you scared the shit out of me!" Autumn yells at her husband. Her mascara has run, dripping down her cheeks. I know I look the same.

"You two, uh, okay in here? You've been parked out here for like, fifteen minutes." He looks past his wife to see me, and the look on his face confirms, yes, I look like a disaster.

"Can't a woman have a moment with her long-lost little sister?" Autumn asks, pulling me over once again with an arm rounding shoulder. The console digs into my side, but I don't care. Instead, I smile big at Steve.

"I was wondering when you'd drop the bitch act," Steve says, smiling at his wife with pride and opening the door to let her out.

"Shut up, Steve," she says as she turns off the car, steps out, and moves a hand to tell me to do the same.

Then I go inside to be with my... family.

FORTY-ONE

-Jordan-

“So then he starts *screaming* and calling in our dad because he was *sure* I was dying.” Autumn is laughing so hard, tears leak down her cheeks, now free of mascara. Her head is thrown back, and I see our mom for a moment.

“How was I supposed to know?! I saw blood!” Hunter says, and Hannah’s head falls to the table with her laughter as Autumn and Hunter argue about the time he learned about female menstruation and pads. “I was like, 7!”

“So Dad comes in, probably expecting to see the entire bathroom covered in blood and an ax murderer. Hunter’s in the hall, crying because to him, I’m already dead. I’m crying because I’m 11, have my period, and my dad and brother are barging in on me.”

“Oh my dear God,” I murmur under my breath, trying to laugh and sip wine with wide eyes, taking in the story.

“Dad looks at me, looks at Hunter, sighs, and then! Then the poor man just walks away!”

“Oh, poor Ron!” Hannah says, a snort of laughter coming out.

The girls are long asleep, and Hannah, Autumn, and I are two bottles of wine deep while Steve and Hunter look on, entertained but knowing someone has to get us to bed safely. We’ve spent the last hour telling stories, the light and fluffy kind which teach you about a person in a good way, leaving out the heavy stuff. I told them about my graceless end to my dance career and the time I fell on the red carpet after stepping on a huge country star’s dress train. Hunter told me about the time Autumn got caught with a boy in her room and when he forgot his line during some school play.

It feels normal. Like a typical, fun night with family reminiscing about life and history we shared. And even though we don't share this story, we don't share these memories, there is the understanding there will be more. More memories, more stories I'll be around for. One day, we'll be sitting here talking about when Steve caught Autumn and me hysterically crying in her car.

"What about the time you *stole my clothes* while we were in the river and made Tanner and me walk home naked?" Hunter says, glaring at this sister. Hannah and I stare between them with wide eyes.

"Oh shut up, you walked like ten feet, and then I got you." Autumn rolls her eyes, taking another sip of wine.

"How have I not heard this?" Hannah asks.

"Because it's embarrassing. Autumn and her friends drove Tanner and me to the river, and we went cliff jumping near the tracks. We didn't bring swim trunks, but Aut wouldn't let me get back in her car if we had wet, dirty clothes. But then her friends started egging us on. We were young, and girls were questioning our courage." The girls at the table all scoff and laugh, but Hunter continues. "So we stripped down and jumped, but when we got back, they had run off with our clothes."

"You didn't have to walk home naked. I was parked like, 100 feet away."

"Same difference." We all laugh at his red face, and it's clear it still annoys him to this day.

This is what I missed out on. It hurts, knowing it's something I can't get back.

Moments pass, long moments as I sit in my thoughts, but somehow our conversation shifts to where I don't want it to go.

"So, where is Tanner, Jordan?" This comes from Hannah. Sweet, kind Hannah, and as much as I want to be frustrated or ignore her, I just can't. I don't think anyone can be unkind to this woman.

"Yeah, why didn't you call him before?" Autumn asks, looking at me, confused. "Were you *leaving* his house?"

"Things... things with Tanner are... done."

"Done?" Hannah says, confused and surprised. I sigh, unsure of what to say. These people are Tanner's friends, Hunter, his *best* friend.

"I just... we weren't meant to be."

“Jordan, I’ve lived here my whole life. Saw him through everything. If there is one thing I know, it’s the way that man looks at you? It’s more than meant to be.”

“Well, maybe not with me, at least. Maybe with Courtney.” The word is sour in my mouth, and it takes too much in my inebriated state not to say anymore.

“Courtney? That chick that ran off with the band?” Steve asks. He didn’t grow up here like the rest of them, moving here after meeting Autumn.

“One in the same.”

“He hates Courtney, Jordan,” Hunter says, his eyes glued to me with a mix of confusion and compassion in them.

“Not anymore,” I say, looking around, trying to find *anything* else to talk about. “She was at his place when I came over today. She was trying to kiss him.”

“What in the actual fuck?”

“Are you serious?”

“No way!” The voices are a racket in my mind as the memories, temporarily buried under happier, newer ones, of connecting with Autumn. The confusion on his face, the words he said, the smirk she gave me in my rearview as I drove away.

“I don’t know. He pushed her off, but he didn’t tell me she’d be there... I don’t know. It’s fine. We... We were a poor match anyway,” I lie, knowing for a moment, even if in the next reality set it, for just a moment we were perfect.

“That’s bullshit,” Hunter says, picking up his phone like he’s about to call his friend. My stomach drops. I laugh, trying to sound carefree and like it’s not a big deal.

“Seriously, no. It’s no biggie. We... we talked about it,” I tell a white lie to get them on my side, to get them to drop it. “He wants quiet and easy. I’m... I’m too wild. It would never work.” I repeat his words, each one of the lies slicing into me. They’re quiet for a while until Hunter talks, eyes on me the whole time.

“Autumn, do you remember the dog Tanner had?”

“Oh, shit. The one you guys found? The mutt?”

“Yeah. We found him when we were hiking once. Poor thing was skin and bones. Afraid of people. I don’t think it had a family, or maybe they all

ran off. But he was a puppy, maybe six months, nine. Skittish. Tanner came back for weeks, feeding that dog. Every day. Brought it food, scraps. It would take the food and run. But eventually, it would be waiting for Tan each time he came. Let him pet him. One day, he just followed him home. Tanner had that dog for years. I think he died two, maybe three years ago. Old and happy. But he was still wild. It would disappear for days when we were in high school. But he always came back.” I stare at Hunter, trying to figure out what he’s telling me. It’s obviously part of a bigger story.

“Tanner loves wild things, Jordan, always has. He just needs to know at the end of it all, he won’t lose it. It won’t run for good.”

And for a split second, I have to wonder if maybe I should have stayed, listened. Talked to him.

I wonder if maybe I fucked it all up.

But why was she *there*? Why didn’t I know she was there? Why was she there when he *knew* I wouldn’t be?

That’s the part that kills the most.

“You know, Mom left and something in me... I couldn’t let myself get tied up with someone, not after seeing my dad fall apart when Mom left. So I put everything in Beaten Path. Forgot about everyone, about everything. Then I met Hannah, and everything got equal parts... confusing and easier. I wanted to run a few times. Wanted to use any excuse to distance myself. I didn’t want to get hurt, not how Mom hurt our dad. But eventually, I realized the risk was worth it. The risk of getting hurt was worth the chance of having her in my life. But I needed to close all of those doors first. I needed that closure before I could see what was in front of me.” He looks at Hannah, who is smiling at him with watery eyes.

“Maybe he was just closing some doors, Dani.”

His words, his use of the nickname no one uses, no one but Tanner, breaks the last of the ice wall protecting my heart from my family. I realize all those years of pain and abuse and bending over backward for people who didn’t appreciate me was so one day, *one day*, I could sit at a table in my sister’s home and enjoy the people who appreciate me.

People who love me for me.

FORTY-TWO

-tanner-

“WHERE IS SHE?” They’re the first words that leave my mouth when Hunter steps out of his Bronco the next day.

After kicking Courtney out, I sat down in the house holding the stupid ‘Friends’ key chain she forced me to get and knew I fucked up.

I don’t know what I expected when Courtney came over.

When she called in the morning asking to meet up after work, I completely forgot Jordan and I wouldn’t be heading home at the same time.

And then, when that fuckwad called right as I was about to tell her about our awkward evening plans, my original reason for coming into her office flew from my mind. Same with the night Courtney originally called. Dani came in wearing those pajamas, hair a damp mess, and, fuck, she was all I could think about.

It seems to happen a lot when Dani’s nearby. The world melts away, and it’s just her there.

When Courtney climbed into my lap, not long after telling me she’d made a mistake, life on the road wasn’t what she thought it would be. She wanted to give ‘us’ a try again. I was utterly shocked. So shocked I couldn’t move as she moved to sit closer to me and leaned in. So shocked, when I stood to get away, I still couldn’t speak, flooded by memories and emotions, both good and bad.

What no one ever tells you about young love is regardless of the fact you will never, ever want to go there again, regardless of the fact you’ve

grown and realized staying together would have ruined you, a part of you will always love them, always hold those feelings for them.

It's similar to listening to a song you loved when you were ten. It might make you cringe, might be the worst song ever made, but when it comes on the speaker, it brings back just a hint of that youthful gleam, the joy, and warmth it brought when you were ten and didn't know any better. Then, like muscle memory, you're smiling and singing along.

But then Jordan was standing there with hurt and betrayal and... acceptance in her eyes. That icy wall back and reinforced, thicker than ever.

Seeing it made me angry.

Seeing it and knowing she reconstructed that wall between us without even giving me a moment to explain *infuriated* me. Then, when I told her nothing had happened, she didn't want to listen to my explanation.

And the dumb shit flew, telling her I wouldn't fight for her and she needed to come to me.

A whirlwind of fuck-ups and terrible timing.

Why the fuck would I tell her I wasn't going to fight for her?

Of course, she wouldn't believe me, wouldn't think that I was telling the truth when I said nothing was happening. The woman was in my home - our home - without Jordan being there or even knowing. After a history of men who cheat, who lie, who say whatever they need to say to get their way, of *course*, she wouldn't want to sit with me and hear me out.

I needed to make her.

I needed to prove to my woman I would fight for her, now and always, the way no one was ever willing to do her whole life. Not her useless father, not her bitch of a mom, not her scum of the earth ex.

But what did my dumb ass do? I let her go.

And now I have *no idea* where she went.

I saw her Jeep outside the motel, but when I saw if she was checked in, Edith, the sweet old lady whose cat I used to watch when she went out of town cursed me out, said Jordan had walked in with red eyes and 'I know dang well you're the cause of that, Tanner Coleman.' She refused to tell me what room number she was in. Walking out of the front office, I was prepared to knock on every damn door. But then I had cameras on me, blinding me with their flashes.

"Why was Jordan crying, Tanner?"

"Did she go back to Jax?"

And finally, “Who picked her up?”

That one, I stopped, grabbing the photographer by the scruff of the neck.

“Someone picked her up?”

“Yeah, a black SUV. She locked herself outside of her room. The woman inside had run out, so she closed up the main office. They came and got her. Now get off me, man,” the pipsqueak of a boy says. A black SUV. In this area, it could be *anyone*. Everyone from officers to soccer moms has giant black SUVs. I tried to go inside to find out who she was picked up by, but I was stopped by Edith once again.

“You made that girl a wreck. Not giving’ you squat, except maybe a call to your momma. Tell her you’re runnin’ a-muck breakin’ young girls’ hearts. You should be ashamed.” I ignore the part where Edith acts like I’m a 15-year-old boy still who fears his mom. Instead, my mind hyper focuses on the first half.

You made that girl a wreck.

Jordan is out there, with... someone, and a total wreck.

In a town still unfamiliar to her.

After her ex and his team threatened her.

Fear coursed through my body, and all that went through my mind was *I need to find her. I need to explain. I need to fix this.*

So I spent the night calling everyone I knew, everyone *she* knew, without response. Literally, *no one* answered my call. I left at least a dozen messages to Hunter and just as many with Steve. Tried Hannah and Sadie. Even Luna was no use. By six a.m., after a sleepless night spent pacing and driving around, I was parked outside Hunter’s, sitting on his step, waiting for his ass to come home. So when Hunter finally pulls up at 9 a.m., I’m equal parts pissed the fuck off and anxious.

“Tanner James Coleman, you have a lot of explaining to do.” Before Hunter can say a word, his fiancé is in front of me, hands on her hips and malice on her face.

“Hannah, not in the mood for this shit, I-“

“Yeah, I bet you’re not. Too busy breaking poor Jordan’s heart.” Another pang of guilt. But also of relief. Because if Hannah knows where she is, if she’s seen her safe, then she’s okay. And she’s still in town. Probably.

“Look, Han, love you. You’re great. But right now, I cannot find Jordan, and I need to find her.”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Why do you need to find her?” she asks, and to me, the answer is obvious.

“Because I-“

Hunter is picking her up by the waist and moving her behind him, so he’s standing in front of me instead.

“Tanner.” Hunter’s voice is clipped and fuck, clearly pissed off. What *the fuck*.

“Where is Jordan?” I ask my question for what feels like the millionth time.

“Safe.” That’s all he says. The word relaxes me but also gives me *nothing*.

“Great. Where is she?”

“I don’t know if I want to share that information.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Hunter?”

“Are you? You’re fucking around with my little sister, breaking her heart, telling her she’s too wild to be worth your time.” *Okay, so that sounds fucked up when it’s said like that.*

“That’s not what happened.”

“So you didn’t tell her you wouldn’t fight for her?” *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

“I did but-“

“And then Autumn had to save her from the motel where the press found her. Do you know what Jordan told Autumn?” *So now the Hutchins/Daniels kids decide to be best friends? Jesus Christ.* And, of course, it’s when I need them to be on *my* side. All the town’s most stubborn people are angry at me; all have the wrong idea. I wouldn’t be surprised if Hannah called everyone and told them not to answer my calls. That’s probably *exactly* what happened.

“Hunter, man-“

“That she came home early, found you sitting on your couch with fuckin’ *Courtney* straddling you.” *Goddammit!* Fuck, fuck, fuck. “Courtney, man?” The disgust on his face and voice is warranted but frustrating.

“It’s not-“

“You’re lucky it was Hannah who got to you first. If it were Autumn, she’d have ripped you a new asshole. She’s fuckin’ pissed, man.”

“They’re good now?”

“Who?”

“Autumn and Jordan.”

“Seems you being a dick cracked something between them. They’re good now. Best friends. I think she outranks Hannah now.” Hunter’s voice sounds less angry, more relieved. His face holds less “I want to kill you for hurting my sister,” and more “At least my sisters are friends.”

“Thank fuck for that. At least something good came from this fuck fest. Where is she?”

“Tanner, she’s fucked up. We had a good night, but she’s broken up. I think you need to give it time, I think-“

“I can’t afford to change my entire business and build her dream camp. But Hunter, if I could, I would. Right now, I just need to let her know I’ll fight for her. Tell her I fucked up, I’m going to fight for her, for this. Then I’ll leave. I’ll let her have whatever space she needs.”

“Tanner, I don’t-“

“Do you love her?” The words come from Hannah, who has arms crossed over her chest and a stern look on her face. But beneath the disappointment is the softness she’s known for.

“Yes,” I answer the question without a moment of hesitation.

“You gonna convince her to stay here? In Springbrook Hills?”

“Fuck yeah.” She sighs.

“She’s at Autumn’s.” Hannah looks at her fiancé when he makes an angry sound, and he scowls at her. “What?”

“Is that smart? Telling him?”

“Oh, God, Hunter, get over yourself. If you were in his shoes, you would do whatever it took to find me.”

“I wouldn’t tell you I wasn’t going to fight for you.” Hannah glares at him with an eyebrow raised, and I want to laugh, knowing what’s coming for him.

“Oh, no, you’d just tell me I was a distraction you didn’t need in your life?” Hunter immediately realizes his fuck up. When the duo first started dating, Hunter was wholly consumed with his business and making it a success. Before he got his shit together, he almost lost Hannah by telling

her he needed to put his business first. It seems my best friend and I have a similar ability to fuck shut up without meaning to.

“Baby...”

“Don’t you ‘baby’ me, Hunter. We’ll talk later.” She turns to me. “She’s at Autumn’s. In the guest room, not the cottage. When we left, she was playing with Rosie.” Something in me lightens with the knowledge Jordan might have overcome the barrier holding her back from connecting with her sister. In the way Hannah has, she nods at me. “She’s good with Autumn now. They had a long talk. Lots of tears. I think they... understand each other now.” I nod.

“Can I go over there, do you think?” My question is directed at Hannah, but Hunter answered.

“Absolutely not.” Hannah elbows him in the side.

“Ignore him; both he and Autumn are making up for not being big siblings all these years. But I’d give it some time. Send Aut a text. Tell her I okayed you, so she doesn’t do a big sister flip out because you were a dick. She’ll tell you when it’s a good time to come. Until then, just... think of what you’re going to say. A grand gesture wouldn’t hurt.”

A grand gesture? Never in my life did I think I’d have to do something like that. But for Jordan, I’d do it all and then do it again and again and again until she understood she’s it for me and I *am* going to fight for her.

FORTY-THREE

-jordan-

“SO YOU DO THIS OFTEN?” I ask, kicking my bare feet up to brick surrounding the firepit out behind the tiny cottage. With summer in full swing, the entire backyard is full of flowers Hannah planted, an area she lovingly calls her ‘fairy garden’ even if she doesn’t live there anymore.

I’m sitting out here with Autumn, both of us sipping wine and eating pizza as we stare at the blazing fire.

“Not often, but enough. It’s been a while since we’ve needed one of these cry it out and drink wine nights. The last one was when Hunter broke up with Hannah and still lived here. She was a mess. Sadie and I brought wine and cake, and we got it out of her system. Helped her work through some things. It’s... it’s a good place for something like that.” I nod, not looking her way. Hannah told me once about how Hunter had messed up, and, at the time, I thought it sounded like a dramatic love story. But now, staring at the fire with my heart in pieces, I can relate to how healing being out here could be.

Autumn has other issues she wants to heal, though.

“I’m sorry, you know,” she says, then lifts the bottle that’s between us and refills her glass. I look at her, confused.

“Sorry?”

“About... before. When you first came here. I was a bitch. You’re... you’re my sister. That’s obvious. Even if you had lived some sunshine and rainbows life, if you’d lived the best parts of childhood with Mom, her leaving wouldn’t have been on you. It wasn’t fair of me to put her shit on

you.” When I look over at my sister, she’s staring into the flames, studiously avoiding my eyes.

“It was valid. A valid reaction. I think anyone would have acted that way.” I pause, thinking. “Except maybe not Hannah, since she’s the nicest person on the planet.” Autumn laughs.

“You’re probably right.”

“But regardless, being afraid to open up to someone directly involved with the woman who completely abandoned you when you needed her most? That’s normal.”

“But I’m your big sister. And you... you had it rough. I had Hunter. I had my dad. You had...” I wonder how much I should tell her.

“I had the promise of you.” Finally, she looks at me, but her eyes hold confusion. “I’ve known about you and Hunter for as long as I can remember. She talked about you both so much, you became superheroes in my mind. ‘Hunter is a football star.’ ‘Autumn earned valedictorian.’ ‘Hunter is starting his own business.’ When I was really little, she just told me how kind and smart and perfect you both were.” My mind drifts back to the conversations I’d have with my mom. “Some nights there were... not great. She’d have guys over. Mean ones. Some nights I’d sneak across the hall and stay there. Some nights I just hid in the big walk-in closet was my room.” Autumn gasps. “No, I swear, it wasn’t too bad. But... those nights, I’d put a blanket over my head and tuck myself in, and I’d make up stories. I’d imagine you two were coming to save me. You’d knock down the door and take me back here to live with you. Sometimes I’d imagine you were actually magical, that you’d apparate like in Harry Potter and just poof! Take me back.” Autumn looks at me, and the glassiness in her eyes reflects the flames before us.

“I always knew about you, and you were my hero. But all you knew was when you were nine and needed a mom most, yours disappeared. Then when I came in, you did the math. It’s not hard to figure out I’m the cause of her leaving.” My eyes drift back to the fire.

“I’m grateful for it all, you know. I met some amazing people. Kind people, my neighbor. Some of the dancers would let me play with their makeup backstage or teach me how to do my hair. She had this boyfriend who was as close as I got to a father figure for a few years. He was kind. Showed me what I should look for in a man. But I also learned to fend for myself. To be me. I lost that for a few years. I wish I had someone then who

knew me, who could have seen through it and snapped me out of it. But it led me here. To Springbrook Hills.”

“Are you staying here?”

“Where?”

“In town. Springbrook Hills. I don’t think you’ll have to hide out here much longer if you don’t want to. It’s a big world. You could go anywhere. Start over anywhere.”

“I’ve seen the world. Or enough of it, at least. I’ve never had roots. I’m finding I enjoy letting them grow.” Autumn smiles at me, a genuine, warm smile.

“Rosie will be pleased. She said you do her hair the best, even better than Hannah.” I laugh.

“I love that little girl. And Sara. And this whole town.”

“Including Hunter and me?” And I want to laugh and cry simultaneously at the anxious expression on her face. Because she wants that, wants me to love her and stay in part because of her.

“Autumn, you’re my big sister. Of course, I love you.” She looks at me, smile watery, and I know the same smile is reflected on my face, a smile we must have both gotten from our mom. It’s then we both stand, a little tipsy, and hug each other, crying like little girls because we never got the chance to be little girls together, sisters teasing and annoying each other.

A part of us still needs that.

Hours after, we’re laying in the gigantic bed together, drunk off our asses and eating a pizza Steve delivered. This part is also something she does occasionally, getting drunk in the cottage with Hannah and sometimes Sadie or Luna, forcing Steve to bring them back food to offset the drunkenness. But now we’re lying in bed together, staring at the ceiling and soaking in our thoughts.

We’ve talked about my ex and how I got caught up in that, about how she met Steve. (He was renting a room in a house where her friend lived. The story is just as magical and storybook as anyone could hope for.) I’ve told her more about growing up with Mom, skirting around the shitty parts and telling her the fun things about living in Vegas, and she’s told me about

plans for Hannah and Hunter's wedding. Hannah asked her to be a bridesmaid, which, for some reason, brings a pang of jealousy to my belly. Apparently, Rosie called 'dibs' to being a flower girl as soon as Hunter started dating her nanny, which is totally something I would do, further proving Rosie is my mini-clone. My phone on the nightstand buzzes with another unread text, Tanner's name flashing on the screen. Once again, I put it back face down, message unread.

"Are you going to talk to him?" Autumn asks.

"Hmm?" I decide to play dumb.

"Tanner. Are you going to talk to him?" I sigh.

"Well, I work for him, so...."

"You know what I mean." God, she's got this bossy big sister thing down already.

I do, of course. Am I going to give him the time to explain the Courtney thing? He's been texting me on and off all day. Some are asking me to call him. Some say we need to talk. Some are dumb things, like asking if I like the Harry Potter movies or books better. I stopped reading the messages when he asked me what color 'we' should paint the master bedroom.

I sigh again. "I don't know. I feel like I probably owe him that much. But also, I've seen men pull shit over on women, twisting stories to convince them nothing happened. Something always happened, Autumn. Always."

"You've known some shitty men."

"Yeah," I agree because I really have. We're quiet for a moment, watching shadows move on the ceiling.

"Tanner's not one of them." I look over, and Autumn's face is turned to mine, a serious look on it.

"Autumn, I-"

"I'm just going to say this the once, and then I promise I'll support you no matter what. You want me to hate his guts; I hate him. You want me to convince Steve to take us to ShopRite and buy toilet paper and eggs to throw at his house? I'll call him right now. Wanna slash his tires? I'll find a knife. But hear me out." I sigh before nodding. "He's not that guy. I've known Tanner since he was a kid, saw him grow up. Once I found them downstairs at my dad's, there was a hole in the wall. Hunt tried to tell some huge story to get out of it. Tan stood up and told me it was him. He's good. Solid. The kid couldn't lie to save his life, and from what I know, that

hasn't changed. He didn't want the business. Everyone knew it. Everyone also knew Mr. Coleman was underwater with it; it was always moments from collapse." This is a surprise to me. I've talked with many people in town, telling me stories about Hunter and Autumn, about the company, about Tanner. Never once did anyone insinuate they knew it was a mess. "No one talked about it openly. But behind closed doors? We all knew. Ben left town, went to be a tattoo artist, follow his creative path. It broke his dad. Tanner stepped in, took it over, fixed everything. He didn't want the responsibility, but when it was given to him, he took it and excelled." This I knew.

"That's who he is, Jordan. Reliable. Honest." I'm silent for a few long moments, taking in what she said. It doesn't go against anything I already knew as fact. That's the Tanner I know. The Tanner I knew even before I liked him. "Didn't ask my opinion, but I think you should give him a chance to explain."

I lay there, staring at my sister and living a moment I daydreamed of for years. Laying with my sister, being girls, and talking about boys. Getting advice from my big sister.

"Yeah. Probably." It's the best I can do at the moment.

FORTY-FOUR

-jordan-

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I wake, and Autumn's gone. Rubbing my eyes and rolling out of bed, I shuffle to the bathroom. In lipstick, she wrote, "Went home. Come over for breakfast. Love, A."

Seeing it brings a smile to my face. *Love, A.*

I quickly brush my teeth and hair, shocked I'm without a hangover before I toss my greasy locks up with a scrunchie I find on the counter. Most of my stuff is still back at... I sigh, looking down at the pajamas I borrowed from Autumn and knowing I need to get my stuff from there soon. Shuffling from the bathroom to the kitchen, I pause when I see a tall to-go cup from Rise and Grind beside a rolled-up newspaper.

"What the..." I reach the cup and smell the caramel latte, my standard order, and pick it up. On the side, scrawled in Sadie's handwriting, reads, "He knew your order without asking." *What on...*

But then I see the bright pink post-it. It's a post-it from my desk in the office. I know because the very corner of it is stained with ink, where I left an uncapped marker too close. Each page in the stack is black. My brain focuses on that aspect for too long before shifting to what's written on the paper.

The scrawl is familiar because I've seen it on hundreds of sheets of paper - purchase orders and contracts and lunch orders. It's basically chicken scratch, stark lines, and light curves I've trained myself to decode.

Tanner's.

How did he...

But what's written on the note stops my heart.

"I'm going to fight."

That's it.

That's all it says.

But that's all it has to say. It says everything.

And beneath the note, the rolled-up newspaper. I unroll it to find it's not a newspaper, but a tabloid. Years of being in the press' eyes have forced me to ignore the tabloids at the grocery store checkout. Still, I recognize this as one that's unusually cruel, often finding anonymous sources to reveal deep secrets and standing unfortunately close to the truth. I remember once they did an expose on Jax and whether our relationship was real, two, maybe three years ago. It resulted in a whole month of planned outings and sweet photo ops.

But instead of Ben or Jen or Brad or some other celebrity, I see myself.

And Tanner.

Both of us, staring at each other with a look of... god. Love. Completely enamored with each other. From my outfit, I know it's the night at Luna's, the night ending in a fan outing us. But this shot never hit the papers, so I have no idea where it came from.

The title snaps me from my reverie.

"Jordan Daniels' boyfriend tells all: Jax used and abused Jordan."

What the fuck! How did he... He's going to... Oh my god.

Instead of panicking, I take the paper and the drink and flop into the nearby couch, still in shock. And then I read.

The magical fairytale of the country music scene ended earlier last month when Jordan Daniels, long-time girlfriend to country star Jax Jackson, ran off stage after he proposed on stage at Madison Square Garden.

Or did it?

We're learning from many sources Jordan and Jax may not have been the lovely, beautiful couple we were told all along. Just like we reported previously, there was more to the country cuties' relationship, and it seems Jax wasn't as much of a knight in shining armor as he appeared.

Our most compelling evidence comes from Jordan Daniels' new love, Tanner Coleman, Coleman and Sons Construction owner in Springbrook Hills, New Jersey.

“Jax was manipulative, abusive, and controlling through most of their relationship,” he tells us during an exclusive interview. “I won’t say much about specifics - that’s for Dani to say, not my place.”

A small sob breaks from my chest, but I continue reading.

“But Jax manipulated Jordan into traveling with him, secluding her from friends and family until he was the only person in her life. Then he continued to control her to further his career. He needed to be the all-American country guy, and she cemented that image.” Coleman tells us throughout their relationship, Jackson and his team created tight rules and expectations for Miss. Daniels. While Mr. Coleman wouldn’t comment on any prior abuse suspicions or accusations, Police reports state he was there when Jackson assaulted his ex on the property of her half-sister.

“She deserves so much more than being the villain of this story. She won’t come out and do this, protect her name, or stand up for herself. But I will. I’ll fight for her, fight for the world to see her as the kind, quiet, beautiful woman I know her as.”

The article goes on to express other accusations of abuse and manipulation from other ‘eye witnesses,’ and I have to wonder who they are and where the fuck were they for the past years.

But I skim over that before re-reading those words again and again.

I’ll fight for her.

Autumn’s words come rushing back to me, words of giving him a chance or listening to him, and I know... I need to talk to him. So I slip on a pair of flip-flops, grab my coffee, and head to Autumn’s to talk to her and borrow more clothes before heading over to Tanner’s.

Except, when I open the door, I’m stopped by Tanner, standing in the gravel parking area, his back to his truck, watching me from the door.

FORTY-FIVE

-tanner-

WHEN SHE WALKS out of the door, the silly bright blue door I feel like I've been staring at for hours, she's dazed. She's standing in a pair of adorable pink shorts and a t-shirt that says 'Mama Bear, and I have to assume they're Autumn's. So when I showed up this morning with the drink and paper, planning to drop the goods at the front door and leave, Autumn told me she had, and I quote, 'softened her up for you.' Then she told me to leave the things in the cottage for her and let Dani sleep in.

So I did just that, standing out in the warm summer sun and waiting for her to come out.

Waiting and thinking how even with this 'grand gesture' - a gesture I ran past Hannah to make sure it would work - there is still the chance she won't have the reaction I'm praying for. She'll look at the paper, see me, and think it's not enough to mend the hurt I gave her when I told her I wouldn't fight for her. The split second when I let my confusion and frustration win over instead of taking care of the vulnerable woman in my care.

And that's the thing about Jordan: she plays it like she's strong and independent like she needs no one, nothing can hurt her. But it's all an act. Her mother taught her to respond that way, and Jax reinforced it. But my girl wants someone to fight for her and care for her. To protect her. Treat her like the prize she is, not like a replaceable substitution.

If one good thing came from this mess, it's the fact Autumn and Jordan have, in some way, forged a relationship. Hunter told me they spent the night in the cottage drinking together, goofing off, and giggling so loud they

could hear it from the big house. It's the only thing keeping me from going crazy because, at the very least, Jordan got one thing she really, truly wanted. Something she's been in denial of wanting since she came to Springbrook Hills. A sister.

It also means she's standing in front of me in pajamas and flip-flops, her mass of red curls a pile on her head with a look of shock on her face. But beneath the shock is... relief. And joy.

I need to thank Autumn.

We stare at each other for long moments before I speak.

"Nice pajamas." *Nice pajamas? Are you kidding me, Coleman? That's what you say?* But a small smile creeps onto her lips, a smile she tries to fight uselessly.

"Thanks." And silence again. "I got your note."

"Good." *Good?!* Why can't I say anything logical? Why can't I spill it all out, win her back? It's like seeing her, barefaced and open, a mess in front of me has me stunned. I realize now a small part of me worried I'd never see her like this again, and another scared part is soaking it in because if this goes wrong... this will be the last time.

"Did you go all the way to the worksite to steal a post-it from my desk?" Of course, she'd notice. I laugh a bit, grateful for the slight break in the tension.

"I mean, I own the business. They're kind of my post-its." She rolls her eyes before stepping aside in the doorway and sweeping a hand inside.

"Want to come in?"

"Only if you let me explain everything." She stares at me for long moments, and I worry I fucked it all up. I said too much, did too much. But once again, she shocks me when her eyes soften, and she waves a hand at me before walking inside.

When I come in, she's sitting on a single chair, not the grey couch, and it's clearly intentional. She doesn't want to be right next to me. Wants space. As much as I understand, a small part of me hates it. So I sit on the couch and stare at her as she takes a sip from the latte I picked up at Rise and Grind.

"I meant to tell you she called. That she was coming." The drink stalls at her lips, her body freezing, but I move forward. "The first time, the night she called to say she was coming into town. I answered and thought she might be a client or something. I deleted her number. It's been so long..."

Well, I wouldn't have answered if she had been saved on my phone. She called, and I went to tell you, but you came out of the shower, so fuckin' beautiful and... well. You know how that goes." She laughs a small laugh, moving finally to bring the drink down, but her eyes move from me to the cup.

"The second time, she called to say she was in town and she wanted to meet up that night. To come to our place and talk." When I say 'our place,' her eyes dart to mine. *Yes, baby. Our place. You're not there, then I'm selling it and moving back to the trailer.* "I came in that morning to tell you. No way in hell would I have gone alone. Wanted to run it by you, drive home together and face it together."

"Jax called." The words are soft, but I see it clicking.

"Yeah. That fuckwad called and I... honest to God, Dani, I forgot. My mind was so focused on taking care of you. Making sure you were okay. And then I had to leave for my meeting last minute, and I figured I'd tell you when you got home. But when I got home, she was there. No fuckin' clue how she found the house, but in this town? Well, you know. Big mouths share way too much fuckin' info. She was at the door, waiting for me. I told her it wasn't cool, showing up without giving me a heads up, but I didn't know what to do." Jordan looks at me with an 'uh, you dumb ass, you kick her ass out' look, and I agree, but... "I know. I know. But I froze. I haven't seen her in years. I just... I froze, and I made the wrong choice. I invited her in. Sat on the opposite side of the couch as her, I swear and then...."

"What happened then, Tanner?" Her words are nervous like she's afraid to hear what happened next.

"We talked. She explained why she left, which was exactly what she had said back then - she was suffocating, didn't want to be here forever. She was young and stupid. Glossed over cheating on me, but when I mentioned she just... brushed it off like it was no big deal. I wanted to be done with it, so I let her tell her story. Whatever she felt like she needed to say to move forward and stay out of my life." Jordan nods as if she understands the rationale. Is that what she's doing now? Letting me say what I need to say to move on? *Fuck*. I keep talking, though. It's all I can do. "She was cryin', a total mess. And then... then she got up, moved to my side of the couch, and tried to kiss me. Swear to God, Jordan, I did not expect it. I froze. I... I

don't know what happened. I pushed her off, stood up. I swear I did. Pushed her off because it's *not her I want*."

"I saw that part." A mix of fear and hope hit me. Fear because if she saw it, knew I stopped it, then why did she fight me? "I saw it, and I didn't see it. All I could see was... her. And it all... God, Tanner. I've spent so long being conditioned that every man... and you... You're not that. I know it. But at that moment, to me, you were. I had to get away."

"And I let you get away." Finally, her eyes leave the cup and stare at me, and there it is. *Hurt*. She's in so much pain. It hurt her, me letting her go, my not fighting. Of course, it did. I proved her right, proved no one fights for her. No one thinks she's worth it. But now, it's my job to prove *I will fight for her*. I stand from the couch and kneel before her where she sits. "I fucked up, Jordan. Never should have let you go that night. Should have chased you, found you, forced you to fucking listen to me. Fought for you. And, I swear, I tried. Minutes after you drove off, I stood there, staring at your taillights. I went inside, kicked that bitch out. Drove for *hours* looking for you. No one would answer my calls. Found the Jeep at the motel. Edith was so fuckin' pissed at me, wouldn't say a word. I basically assaulted a paparazzo outside, trying to figure out where you'd gone. Didn't find you anywhere. I was crazy, scared out of my mind someone took you. Sat outside Hunter's until he came home."

"He didn't leave here until like, nine though," she tells me what I already know.

"Yeah, and I sat outside his house from five until he pulled in. I thought he was going to rip me a new one. Thank God for Hannah. She stopped him. I knew you were safe then and needed to make a plan." I grab her hands in mine, placing her cup beside me. They're so small, so warm. God, these hands. I love these fucking hands with their chipped nail polish and the little freckle right above her thumb knuckle. I can't help but bring it to my lips, pressing a small kiss there. My heart stills when her hand moves from my grasp to hold my cheek.

"The article?"

"I tried not to cross any lines. Talked to Hunter's lawyer ahead of time, but the NDA is full of holes. He's going to call you soon, has things to share. But I knew... I knew no matter what, you'd never come forward and stick up for yourself. You were going to let this fall under the rug, let it wash over. But, Princess, it's time for someone to stand up for you, for

someone to fight to make your voice heard. Not gonna stand by and let people speculate about you anymore. Not on my watch.” With my words, a single tear falls. “I was afraid of you. Afraid you’d want wild and free and not safe and comfortable. That’s what I got to give. And you told me, Jordan. You told me and showed me who you were, what you wanted. But a part of me was too afraid to believe it. Too afraid to take what you were giving me.”

“I never wanted to be wild, not once. I was forced into it. This life, this world, this town? You? It’s what my daydreams were filled with when I was a little girl. I wanted easy and safe. Wanted to be fought for, to feel loved. I wanted to family and the community.”

“I know, Dani. I fucked it up. But I will spend the rest of my days on this earth proving it to you if you let me.” Her beautiful hazel eyes bore into mine, spending long moments reading deep into my words, finding the layers and hidden meanings until something clicks in hers, and she nods a small, sweet nod.

And then she bends the tiniest fraction so her lips can reach mine, and she kisses me, saying what she needs to with actions instead of words. Telling everything I need to hear, her forgiveness and acceptance, her belief and her truth all in one gentle touch of skin. My hand moves to her neck to move the kiss forward, to deepen it, to get... more...

“Auntie Jordan! Mommy wants to know if you want pancakes and if you need clean clothes!” A tiny redhead walks right in the front door just then, not bothering to knock and stopping when she sees me kneeling before Jordan, my face in her hands and her lips on mine. We’re both frozen in motion. “Oh. Hi, Uncle Tanner.” She looks around, taking in the room before looking back at us. “Are you coming for pancakes?” I laugh, standing and taking Jordan’s hand.

“We’d love pancakes,” I say.

“Okay, let’s go. Also, just to let you know, I’m already booked next summer for flower girl, but I’m open to taking on the role any other time.” Jordan looks from her niece to me, tips her head back, and laughs and fuck, it’s the most beautiful sound in the world.

And I know I will continue to fight for Jordan Daniels until the day I die, chasing her around the world if I have to.

EPILOGUE

-jordan-

“HI, THIS IS JORDAN?” I answer my phone with the care I’ve learned from experience. While I no longer worry about Jax or his PR team calling me, I still get at least one or two calls a week from the press, hounding me and asking for quotes or details. This one has a local area code, so I’m confident it *should* be safe.

It’s been two months since I finally freed myself of the chains of my past. Two months since Jax and Courtney, since Tanner and I overcame everything standing in our way.

And just like Edna told me would happen, just like I knew with that first kiss, I am whole with the other half of my soul. Somedays, I have to wonder if my mom leaving and Courtney and Jax all were an elaborate plan for Tanner and me to meet at the exact moment we needed to, at the perfect time for our souls to line up.

Tanner thinks I need to stop watching so much ‘woo-woo stuff’ on the internet.

I think he’s boring.

“Yes, hi, this is Aaron Cooper. I’m contacting you because your brother, Mr. Hutchins, asked me to look over your case?” Not long after the Jax fiasco, Hunter’s lawyer came back to tell me most of the NDA was full of loopholes making it easy to break. What was left was then made useless with Jax’s attack. While I haven’t gone to do any kind of expose on my seven years with Jax, it’s nice to know I can share my story freely. Now Tanner, Autumn, and my new friends all know the full extent of what

happened. There wasn't much left to tell Tanner by the end of it all. But a night in the cottage with wine, pizza delivery, and a whole lot of tears was the bonded I needed with my sister, my soon-to-be sister-in-law, and my new friends, or 'soul sisters' as Sadie calls them.

I love it here.

But when the contract lawyer looked at the document and then heard all of the news about the attack, he informed Hunter I should look into suing for a number of things. Assault, emotional abuse, defamation of character, and back pay for working for him for so long without a paycheck.

I hemmed and hawed about it for two months. Part of me wanted to put it into my past, to just forget it and let it be. But another part remembers those lost years, the loss of schooling, the fact I had nothing to my name when I left. It took a full two months of living a normal life, of working and creating bonds and nurturing those delicate roots, before Tanner convinced me to give Hunter the all-clear. Then, Hunter reached out to a few contacts to get info on who would be the best option for this kind of suit.

I guess now they're getting in touch with me.

"Oh, yes. Hi, how are you?"

"I'm well, thank you, Ms. Daniels. Do you have a few minutes to chat?" Just then, like he seems always to have the ability to do, Tanner walks in, sweat-covered and smiling at me. When he sees me on the phone, he tips his head to the door, silently asking if he should leave. I shake my head, tilting it towards the tiny couch for him to sit. Then I put my phone on speaker.

"Yeah, I do."

And the lawyer proceeds to tell me I have a near-perfect case. Some witnesses have come forward with first-hand experience, including the sweet roadie from all those years ago. Dozens of reports of the terrible way Jax treated me, of the hard, unpaid work I did, of his intentional defamation of me after we broke up.

After maybe ten minutes of talking about the next steps and taking notes for what I need to get together evidence-wise, I thank her before hanging up and looking at Tanner.

We're both silent for long, long minutes.

"I'm so fucking proud of you," he says, finally breaking the silence. Those words, more than any of the beautiful things he's told me since we met, mean the most. To finally have someone on my side, someone proud of

me, and someone excited to see me stand up for myself? It means everything.

Even more, it means everything to know that he's standing by my side through this all, holding me up so I can take these significant steps.

"I can't believe I'm doing this."

"I can. You've always been strong as can be, Jordan. You just needed people to believe in you."

And with that, knowing my nightmare is over, knowing at the end, I got the guy and the fairytale, I smile and kiss my man.

Next Spring

-jordan-

“Well, hello, Mr. Coleman, what can I do for you today?” Tanner walks into the office trailer, and I smile sweetly at him.

I know exactly why he’s here.

My thoughts are confirmed when he turns the small, mostly useless lock on the trailer door behind him.

We’re at a new location right outside Bridgeville, working on a huge project. Tanner told me he got the big development job not long after the meeting. It’s a complex of new townhouses and will last over at least three years, meaning in so many ways, Tanner finally did it. He took this nearly failing business and made it a success, with strong, consistent income and work.

I am so, so proud of this man. So proud to call him mine.

But right now, it’s the burning look in his eyes that’s got me interested.

“You got panties on under that dress?” A thrill runs down my spine as I look down to see the pretty, flowery yellow sundress I’m wearing to celebrate spring. It’s one of many clothing pieces I’ve bought on shopping outings with the girls. Although my style has veered from ‘country princess,’ Tanner told me he wanted to bend me over in it when I did a fashion show for him, so I kept it.

I just smile at him instead of answering.

“Serious as fuck, Princess. You got panties on under there and you like them, you better take ‘em off now before I tear ‘em off.” My eyes widen.

So, I may have been teasing him all day, sending naughty texts, knowing he’s just a couple hundred feet away from me, doing physical labor out on a job.

Texts like, “I can’t wait to suck your cock tonight,” or “I’m already wet for you.”

And the few times I needed to leave my office, wearing that same pink hardhat he got me almost a year ago now, his eyes were burning and glued to me. But I didn’t think he’d come in during the middle of the day and threaten to *rip my panties off*.

“Tanner, the guys-”

“Sent ‘em home.”

“What?” I can feel my eyes widening, bugging out as I look at him.

“It’s 2:30. Sent ‘em home. I watched them all leave. Just you and me on site right now. Now, swear to fuck, Dani, you take off those panties, and you do it right now cause after you fuckin’ teasing me all day, I need to be inside you.” My shocked eyes stay on him as he approaches me. “We’ll do this one quick; then I’ll get home and do it right.” He’s in front of me now.

“Tanner-”

“Got it, I’m ripping your panties.” His rough hands go under my armpits, pulling me up and out of my desk chair and slamming my front to him. My feet barely touch the ground in the little booties I’m wearing. His lips are on mine, and any confusion leaves my body. As soon as his lips are on mine, my world rightens and makes sense. Every time Tanner is within my space, life seems doable. As soon as his lips hit mine, everything smooths out. He’s all I need.

An arm moves to wrap around his neck, his hand slipping up the back of my leg to the crease of my thigh and ass, then up until he groans. The sound runs through me, vibrating from his chest through mine and moving straight to my clit.

“Jesus fuck, baby. When did this happen?” I pull back and smile at him. “Know you went to work in them.” He’s talking about the panties I took off not long ago. While I didn’t expect him to send all of the men home and fuck me in the office, I thought he might slip a hand between my legs the drive home. Why not make it easier?

Seeing the devious look on my face, he smiles and shakes his head, turning me, so my back is to him. He presses my upper back until I’m bent over, my hands pressed to the desk. I have a feeling I’ll never be able to look at my workspace the same again, and I’m not mad about it.

Tanner flips up the short, floaty skirt, so the cool air conditioning hits my bare skin, the warm flesh overheating. With his gaze on me, it feels like my skin is on fire.

“So fucking pretty. Be a good girl and stay just like that, okay, Dani?” His words send a shiver down my spine. Never in my life when I daydreamed of leaving my prison did I think I’d like something like this, but every time he calls me his good girl or tells me he likes what he sees? *God.* “Answer me, Princess.”

“Yes, honey.” He murmurs some kind of approval, but blood is rushing to my ears, making everything fuzzy. Tanner steps back to survey what’s before him, what’s his, before running a thumb through my drenched slit, dragging wetness to my ass spread in the air for him. He presses his wet thumb into my pussy, just enough to have me moaning and pushing back to get more.

“Jesus,” The words are an enamored murmur on his lips before his thumb moves. I mewl in protest, ready for him, needing him until something wetter, warmer runs up my slit, once again dragging from my clit to my soaking entrance.

His tongue.

Tanner is on his knees behind me, licking my pussy.

“Oh, god, Honey.”

“That good? You like when I lick this pretty cunt?” My center clenches, and I know he sees it happen when he moans aloud before going back, now savagely eating me. His mouth licks at my wetness, his large hand grabbing my ass as his thumb enters my pussy and starts to fuck me shallowly. My hips begin to move in earnest until I’m riding his face, bent over my desk as my boss eats me from behind. God, and I’m *close*.

But when his drenched thumb moves up to my puckered asshole and slides in, my wetness acting as lube, I scream his name, so close to the edge I just need...

And just like that first time, he stops.

“Tanner, no!” I shout as I look over my shoulder to see his standing behind me, my wetness shining on his face, his thumb still in my ass as I try to move to get some friction, some movement... anything.

“Patience, Princess. Be my good girl and stay still, then I’ll make you come.” My eyes glaze over with lust as I watch his free hand move to his belt, undoing it and unzipping his jeans before he takes out his thick cock, already dripping with precum

Unlike the first time, without any preamble, he slams into me. The feel of his thick, hard cock slamming in balls deep, the scratch of his jeans which are just tugged down enough, the pulse of his thumb in my ass - it’s all too much as I throw my head back and shout once more, so fucking close to the edge. In the haze of sensation and sex, I can just barely think how I’m glad he ordered the men to leave because the walls of this trailer are thin.

“So fucking good, Dani. Every damn time. This cunt was made for me,” he says in my ear, bending over, so his body lays on mine as he pounds into me, each thrust pushing my body up the desk. Pens and papers drop, but I don’t care.

“Tanner.” The noise coming from me is pathetic, a mix of a plea and a mewl, but he knows. He knows I’m close. And with the way his hips are moving on me, I know he isn’t far behind. His lips latch on my neck, sucking once before standing straight again.

“I got you, baby. I know what you need.” He knows when it’s like this when we get like this, I need just a bit more, a bit rougher, a bit...

His hand goes into my hair, twisting the length of my strawberry blond locks around his hand and pulling so my head comes back, each strand of hair tugging and sending a jolt of pleasure through my body straight to my clit, which is rubbing against the desk as he slams into me. I shatter around him, convulsing and shouting his name as colors explode behind my eyelids.

“Fuck!” Tanner shouts, pounding in twice more before sinking deep and moaning, pumping into me. We sit like that for long minutes, his hands bracing on the desk to keep his weight off of me as we catch our breath.

“Holy shit,” I say under my breath after those long minutes have passed, and Tanner’s deep chuckle reverberates through me as he laughs.

“I have to tell you something.”

The next day I’m standing in the middle of Autumn’s kitchen, holding cabinets open and trying to find a snack to devour. I do this often, coming to Autumn’s to gossip or complain, for Sunday dinners, or to babysit when Hannah’s not available. This time it’s because the men are picking the girls up from school before we have family tonight.

In the past year months, we’ve come a long way. From two women who knew nothing about each other to sisters who steal each other’s shoes, bitch about their men, and can’t go more than a day without talking.

If I think too long about it, about the fact I’m living my childish dreams of having *this* sister, I start to cry.

At the tone of her voice, I turn to Autumn and see her leaning against the kitchen island, a nervous look on her face, and wringing her hands.

“What is it?”

“It’s a secret. You can’t tell anyone. Not Tanner, not Hunter. Definitely not Hannah because she has a big mouth, and then the whole town will know in a week.”

“Oh, my God, Autumn, what is going on?” I step closer to her, trying to read the look in her eyes, but it’s one I’ve never seen. It’s almost like my ultra-confident, take no shit big sister is... nervous.

“Serious, Jordan. Steve doesn’t even know. I need you to promise.” I get closer and grab her hand.

“Aut, I promise. I won’t tell anyone. But you’re freaking me out. What is it?”

She looks at me and takes a deep breath before letting it out.

“I’m pregnant.” A shiver that starts at my hair runs down my body as I squeeze her hand convulsively.

“What?”

“It’s early. I took the test this morning. But I was late, and I’ve been feeling off and-”

“Autumn, did you just say you’re pregnant?” I meet her eyes, and they’re starting to water. She nods. “And.. no one knows? You told me?” Once again, she nods, but the movement is wavy because now my eyes are filling. “Not even Steve? Or Hannah?” She shakes her head, pausing as she looks at me before answering.

“I wanted to tell my sister.” But, of course, we both know that means more than just the words.

“Oh my God, Autumn. You’re pregnant?” I say, my voice cracking, and the tears in my eyes don’t stand a chance as hers start to fall.

“I’m scared, Jordan,” she admits, her voice small as I pull her in and hug her. I hug my sister. My *pregnant* sister. My pregnant sister who trusted me most of all with her biggest secret. My head pulls back to look at her, confused.

“What? Why? This is amazing!”

“I’m older.” I roll my eyes. Autumn will be turning 39 in October. She’s not ancient. “Medically. Medically I’m older. I had Sara when I was 28, and it was easy. Rosie when I was 33 and she was early, went to the NICU for a

week. But now..." I look at her, and I can see her nerves. But still, right under that emotion is pure, unadulterated excitement.

"We'll figure it out. This baby is going to be just fine." I pull back from our hug and put my hand on her still flat belly. "A baby!" I squeal with excitement, and every part of me is so thankful I get to be here for this. So grateful for all of the crap which led me to Springbrook Hills as my last resort.

"A baby!" she says back, and then we both promptly burst into tears and hug.

Seconds later, the front door opens, Steve walking in with the girls, Tanner and Hunter not far behind, all coming over for dinner that night.

"You guys okay?" Hunter says, a look of worry on his face.

"Oh, don't worry, Uncle Hunter, They do this *all the time*. Daddy says it's them *bonding*," Rosie tells Hunter like she's not sure about that, and we laugh. But through the rest of the night, I keep looking at Autumn and smiling, our little secret that won't be a secret for long between us, and the feeling is sweet.