



*Redemption* SERIES

# BAD

*alibi*

JESSICA PRINCE

# BAD ALIBI

a Redemption novel

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JESSICA PRINCE

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## Don't Miss Out

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It was hard for me to step away from Hope Valley, even temporarily, but taking the trip to Redemption made it so much easier!

I'm so in love with this new, incredible town and the amazing folks in it, and can't wait to give you more.

[Click here](#) to sign up for my newsletter so you can stay in the know about all the Redemption series news to come

And if you want the scoop on all good things before everyone else, [click here](#) to be a part of my amazing reader group, Jessica's Princesses

## Discover Other Books by Jessica

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# Prologue

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FARAH

STEPPING ACROSS THE THRESHOLD INTO THE ENTRYWAY OF the old Victorian, I was hit with the smells of wood rot and mold.

I was far from an expert when it came to construction, but considering the state the house was in, I wouldn't have been surprised to learn the whole place needed to be ripped down to the studs.

And that didn't bother me one damn bit.

“Uh, Ms. Hyland?”

At my realtor's voice, I stopped gazing around and turned my attention to him. “Please, call me Farah.”

“Okay, Farah. I have to admit, I was more than a little surprised when you asked to view this property.” He looked around at the rambling pile of rubble with undisguised dismay. “It's ... well, a disaster, really.”

“It's not a disaster, Mr. Clark,” I insisted, taking in what was probably a stunning parlor back in the day. Where the tin ceiling tiles probably once added character, they were now completely covered in rust. The gaudy floral wallpaper was peeling, and rodents had eaten holes in the drywall, exposing wiring that would undoubtedly fail inspection. What was once a gorgeous home had been abandoned, left to rot away. “It's a fixer-upper.”

“That may be. But with your budget, you can easily afford a place that's move-in ready. This ... this will take a *lot* of

work.”

I knew he was trying to talk me out of the place, but I felt a sense of belonging in this house. It had been neglected far too long, just like me. With the help of the two people I held most dearly, I'd been able to pull myself up and put the pieces of my tattered life back together, and now that I was strong enough, I was going to offer this old girl the same chance.

The shape of the house might have been a deterrent to most people, but to me, the challenge made my blood sing and filled me with excitement.

I was a twenty-six-year-old woman who, until recently, had never had to work for anything. All my life, I'd had things handed to me on a silver platter. But those things came with a million strings attached, and the saddest part was, most of what I had, I'd never wanted in the first place.

Just like every generation before me for as long as I could trace back, I'd been born and raised in Connecticut, living the entitled life that came with the Hyland name. My great-great-grandfather had struck it big in steel, setting my family up to be one of the richest in all of New England. The Hylands were the very definition of old money, and with the name came expectations I'd always hated.

From the time I came into this world, my entire life had been planned for me. Everything from what college I'd attend and what I'd major in to the man I'd eventually marry had all been chosen without my say. Hylands didn't make waves. We were expected to sit back, keep our mouths shut, and just go with it. But because I had a mind of my own and dared to question my parents' plans for me, I was labeled the black sheep of the family.

All my relatives looked down their noses at me, snickering and whispering behind my back at family events.

As far as my parents were concerned, I was a stain on the family name. I was the daughter of Geoffrey and Margo Hyland, for God's sake. My father was the oldest son and heir to the Hyland Steel fortune. I was to do as they said without batting an eye, and the fact that I believed I should have a say

in my future made me a huge disappointment to them—something they'd begun making all too clear to me as soon as I was old enough to understand words.

After so many years of having my own parents despise me, that strong will I'd been born with had been beaten into submission. I stopped thinking about what *I* wanted and became the obedient daughter they'd always desired.

I attended Cornell University because that was where *they* wanted me to go and got a worthless degree in Fine Arts because *they* deemed it appropriate. After all, it wouldn't do for a Hyland woman not to be educated, but we weren't actually supposed to work. It was our job to marry money, pop out babies, and volunteer on the boards of several *respectable* charities.

I'd begun dating Lance Maryweather, the son of my parents' best friends, not because I was attracted to him, but because it had been arranged by our families. And when he proposed the winter before last, I'd said yes because, according to my father, it was a wise business move, having the princess of a steel fortune married to the heir of a line of thriving department stores.

We'd been set for a spring wedding, because spring was the ideal time for a lavish outdoor wedding for the upper crust of society. Our mothers had been in fits, planning the wedding of the century, and for months it was all anyone could talk about. Everyone who was anyone would be in attendance, and I was going to be the envy of all the women in my social circle. Or at least that had been the plan.

Then one night had changed everything in a way that was irreversible. It had changed *me*. But then, nearly dying had a tendency to do that to a person.

I woke up in that hospital bed a broken shell of my former self. It had taken months to pull myself together, but once I had, I knew I'd been given a second chance, and there was no way I was letting it go to waste.

Starting fresh hadn't been easy. Cutting ties that had kept me tethered to a life I never liked nor wanted had been an

arduous task, but I'd done it. Breaking things off with Lance had been the easiest part. Truth was, knowing I wouldn't be stuck with him for the rest of my life was a serious weight lifted off my chest, but my parents were a different story. In spite of how they'd made me feel growing up, I still craved their approval. They were my blood, and having them turn their backs on me hurt more than I could have imagined.

I guess, in the back of my mind, I'd held out hope that they would understand why I needed to do what I'd done. But I'd been wrong.

By the time I'd finished shaking off the dregs of my old life, I only had two people left to support me. Fortunately, they were more than enough. With their help, I held on to the strength I needed to start this next chapter of my life.

I was a whole new Farah. Granted, I was a new Farah who didn't have the first clue what she wanted to do with her new life, but still, it was exhilarating to have the chance, and I wasn't going to squander it.

Turning back to my realtor, I felt my lips tug up in a smile so big it made my cheeks ache. "Anything worth having is worth putting in the work, Mr. Clark. Make an offer."

He raised one brow, giving me an incredulous look. "You're sure?"

"Oh yeah." Tipping my head back, I scanned the house that would hopefully soon become my home, feeling an unfamiliar warmth begin to unfurl in my chest. "I'm absolutely positive."

# Chapter One

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FARAH

“SO, WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT’S THE DAMAGE?” I asked nervously. I’d been standing in my brand new house, anxiously gnawing on my thumbnail the whole time the contractor had been looking everything over, and I couldn’t shake the sense that I’d bitten off more than I could chew when I finally got the keys to the old girl last week.

Lowering the clipboard he was holding to his side, he gave me his attention, and I couldn’t help but notice just how handsome the man was ... all tall, muscular, and commanding. I normally would have been in a state of panic at being alone with a man like him, but he’d been nothing but professional and polite since pulling up in his big truck earlier, and his demeanor had put me at ease.

He let out a heavy sigh as he looked around the would-be parlor. “I’m not gonna lie to you, Ms. Hyland—”

“Farah. Please,” I said quickly. I couldn’t stand it when people called me Ms. Hyland. It was something my mother insisted everyone address her as, like it was an honorable title or something, and I wanted to distance myself from that as much as possible.

His eyes shined with kindness as he amended, “Farah. Well, truth is, it’s gonna be a lot of work.”

“Just how *a lot* are we talking here?”

He scratched at his scruffy jaw hesitantly before giving it to me straight. “None of the plumbing or electrical is up to

code, so that'll have to be dealt with. The drywall is more mold than anything else, and there's barely any insulation. There's some serious foundation work that needs to be done, the whole roof needs to be replaced, and—”

“So, basically, what you're saying is *everything* needs to come out.”

He gave me a sympathetic smile that ratcheted up his attractiveness. “Yeah, basically. And that's just the big house. There's no telling what else will need to be done to the rest of the property.”

The Victorian sat on several acres of land that had been unattended for decades. The landscaping was in disarray, with grass and weeds and thickets growing so high and dense, it was a danger to walk in. There were several other buildings on the property, including a greenhouse, shed, barn, detached garage, and what looked like a carriage house, all just as bad off as the main house.

I released a sigh, giving myself a few seconds to feel the disappointment before shaking it off and moving forward. That was my new motto, after all. Shake off the bad and move on. “All right. When can you start?”

His expression registered surprise for about three seconds before he spoke again. “You know, some people like to get more than one bid before they decide on a contractor, Farah. If you'd like to get a few more quotes first—”

“What do you think of this house, Mr... .”

“Morrison,” he offered. “But you can call me Clay.”

I nodded and smiled, repeating my question. “What do you think of this house, Clay?”

“I think ...” He paused long enough to take another look around before returning his attention to me. “I think you got your hands on a treasure. Always loved this house. If I could've afforded it, I'd have snatched it up for myself. I'm just glad someone finally did and is willin' to put in the effort to return her to her former glory.”

My smile grew ten-fold. “That’s exactly what I think. Now, let’s say I was to look into another contractor, and he claimed half the stuff you said needed to be done didn’t, what would your response to that be?”

His features grew hard and serious as he stated, “I’d say the guy was lazy and cuttin’ corners. That he wouldn’t do this place justice, and it would be more than likely you’d call me again to make the *necessary* repairs.”

That warmth I’d felt the moment I walked into this place began to come back in force, telling me that everything was working out exactly as it was supposed to. All my life I’d ignored my instincts, and it had gotten me nothing but misery. From now on, I was going with my gut. And my gut was telling me that Clay Morrison was the man to put my trust in. “Great. Then when can you start?”

With a low chuckle, he gave me a nod of understanding. “I’ll have a crew in here to start demo first thing Monday morning if that works for you.”

“Awesome,” I said in a soft whisper. Clay and I parted ways shortly after that. I locked the house up, climbed into my car, and started the engine just as my cellphone began to ring.

With a huge grin still pinned to my face, I hit the button on my steering wheel to activate the Bluetooth as I put the car in gear. “Perfect timing. I was just about to call you. I have the best news.”

Jase’s deep timbre filled the cab. “You came to your senses and dumped that pit you call a house?”

Rolling my eyes at the road before me, I warned, “You know, you keep insulting my home like that and you won’t be invited out to stay with me.”

Jase laughed my comment off.

“I’m serious,” I insisted. “You can spend the holidays with Mom and Dad.”

“Christ,” he grunted through the line. “Now you’re just being cruel.”

I was, and I couldn't help myself, pushing my big brother's buttons was something I'd always gotten a kick out of. "They'll spend them like they always do, breathing down your neck, interrogating you on when you're finally gonna settle down and get married to one of the picture-perfect Stepford wives they have picked out for you."

"All right, I give. No need to play dirty."

I couldn't help but smile at his surly attitude. I mean, I *was* his little sister, and it was my job to annoy him every chance I got. "I'll call truce if you promise to stop knocking my new place. Deal?"

"Deal," he relented on a grunt. "Sorry, sweet pea. I just worry. You're down there all by yourself, and it's driving me crazy I'm not there to look after you."

My breath stuttered in my chest, and that familiar niggling started in my sinuses, alerting me to oncoming tears. I sniffled loudly, trying to beat them back as I cleared my throat, hoping to dislodge the lump that had suddenly formed before I spoke. "I know, bub," I said quietly, using the nickname I'd given him when I was a little girl. "I miss you like crazy, but I'm good down here. I promise."

His voice was gentle and full of love as he replied, "I know you are, honey. You're the strongest, bravest person I know. Doesn't mean I don't wish I was there to have your back."

It was stating the obvious, but *God*, I loved my brother. If it hadn't been for him, I wasn't sure where I'd be today. He'd been my self-appointed protector for as long as I could remember. While my parents spent most of their time ignoring me, he'd been my constant companion. On the rare occasion my mother or father would decide to acknowledge my existence, it was usually to berate me for not being perfect, and during those times, I could always count on Jase to stick up for me, coming between me and their venom whenever necessary.

When I woke up in the hospital all those months ago, his were the first eyes I saw. I could still remember the broken, ravaged look on his face when I said his name. It was his arms

that wrapped around me first, offering the only strength and security I'd ever had. And it was his shoulder I'd cried on when the memories of that awful night came flooding back.

With his help, I'd started moving past it, and while I might not be back to 100 percent, I was slowly but surely getting there.

"That's because you're the best big brother in all the world. Now, enough with the mushy stuff already. You're gonna make me cry, and I'm driving."

His chuckle sounded through the speakers and settled in my chest. "All right, no more mushy. So tell me your good news."

That excitement I'd been feeling just minutes ago came rushing back, along with that warmth I'd begun to feel after moving to Redemption a few weeks back. "I found a contractor, and work on the house starts next week."

There was no hiding the glee in my voice, and when Jase responded, I could hear him smiling. "That's amazing, sweet pea. I'm happy for you."

"It'll take a while," I continued. "There's a lot that needs to be done, but I'll be sure to send you pictures of the progress so you don't freak."

"I'd appreciate that. You tell Bennett yet? He'll want to know."

A wave of nostalgia crashed into me at hearing that name. The only other person besides Jase who'd ever shown me any affection was our driver, Bennett. He'd been working for our family for years, starting off with my grandfather before moving to us when Grandpa passed away of a heart attack years ago.

He'd been such a huge part of my life for so long, that, in spite of the fact he was already in his seventies, he was more of a father figure to me than my own had ever been. He'd taught me how to ride a bike and roller skate. Every ballet recital or cheerleading competition I was in, Bennett was in the audience, beaming proudly. He wasn't just a driver to me.

He was my family, putting himself in the role of parent when it became obvious my own couldn't be bothered with me.

He was at my high school and college graduation. He attended every football game just so he could watch me cheer on the sidelines. He'd been there when I was crowned Homecoming Queen, and he'd been the one to dry my eyes that very same night after I caught my boyfriend making out with my best friend at the dance.

Bennett was present for every single milestone in my life, and the truth was, I was in Redemption because of him.

This was the very town he'd grown up in, and he'd spent years telling me stories of his childhood. So when the time came for me to start over, I'd picked a place I'd never been, but had such fond memories of, all because of Bennett.

I'd often asked him why he'd never gone back if he missed his hometown so much, and he'd always brushed my question off. Then one day, the day of my eighteenth birthday, he'd given me the truth. He *had* planned to go back. Until my brother and I came into his life. He'd fallen in love with us just as we had with him, and he couldn't bring himself to leave us behind.

He blamed himself for not being there that night to protect me, and no matter how many times I tried telling him it wasn't his fault, I just couldn't seem to get through. He felt like he'd failed me, and I could see the pain in his eyes every time he'd looked at me.

I wasn't just an employer to him. I'd been like a daughter, and as far as he was concerned, he'd fallen down on his job.

As much as it hurt to leave him and Jase behind, it was what I needed to fully heal, and when I told Bennett where I planned on going, I'd nearly come undone at the tears that formed in his eyes before he pulled me into a crushing embrace and whispered how proud of me he was.

"Not yet, but I will," I told my brother.

"Good. I know he'd love that. He's missing you something fierce, sweet pea."

That lump in my throat returned, doubling in size and making my voice rough and husky. “I miss him too. I miss both of you, but I worry about him with Mom and Dad. If they knew I got the idea to move here from him—”

“They won’t find out,” Jase assured me. “Only people who know the reason behind you picking that town are the three of us, and none of us are telling.”

That was a bit of a relief, but I still had other concerns when it came to Bennett. “I hate thinking of him with them,” I admitted in a soft voice laced liberally with concern. “You moved out years ago, and with me not there anymore ...”

“I’ve got my eyes on things, little sis. No need to work yourself up. You know as well as I do that man’s more than capable of taking care of himself.”

Jase had a point. Bennett might have been viewed as nothing more than the hired help by my folks and the circles they ran in, but that didn’t mean he put up with their shit. Truth be told, I honestly believed my father was a little scared of Bennett. He might have been a good twenty years older, but he was still a big man, and there was some serious power in his aging frame.

He’d never spoken a word when my dad would go into one of his indignant rages, mainly because he didn’t need to. He was so big and intimidating, all he had to do was stand there silently with his arms crossed over his wide chest while giving you this *look*. I’d never been on the receiving end of that look myself, but I’d witnessed him give it to my father enough times that I knew it could rattle even the sturdiest of men.

Jase admitted to me once that he’d gotten *the look* when Bennett caught him and a bunch of his friends getting drunk at a party when he was sixteen. He said it was so scary that he and his buddies nearly pissed their pants.

“I know,” I said, blowing out a frustrated breath. “I’m probably overreacting, just ... promise you’ll look out for him, okay? You’ve seen firsthand how vindictive Mom and Dad can be when they don’t get what they want.”

A sound akin to a growl vibrated out of the speakers. “I still can’t believe they disinherited you.”

“I can,” I replied with a biting laugh. “I don’t know why you’re so surprised. That move was totally in their wheelhouse. But it doesn’t matter. I still have the trust from Grandpa that they couldn’t touch, and that interest is more than enough to live on, even with the cost of the house and the renovations. Losing that money isn’t the end of the world. It’s not like I’d done anything to earn it anyway.”

“That’s bullshit,” he spat angrily. “You earned it simply by being born into and surviving this cesspool of a family. And after what you suffered through? I can’t believe they’d be so —”

“Jase, enough,” I clipped, stopping him before he could complete that thought. It was bad enough I now had the nightmares and anxiety that came with what had happened to me that night. I didn’t need my loved ones constantly bringing it up. It was something I’d lived through that would, unfortunately, always be a part of me. That didn’t mean I was okay talking about it all the time.

“Christ, I’m sorry, Farah. I didn’t mean ...”

The agony was clear in his voice, and I found myself softening mine in an attempt to make him feel better. “It’s all right. But now it’s my turn to tell you there’s no use in getting worked up. It’s over and done with. I’ve moved on.” Or as *on* as I could move, seeing as the scars—both mentally and physically—still lingered.

There was silence for several seconds, and I knew my brother well enough to know he was trying to gage the sincerity in my voice. “You sure, honey?”

“Positive,” I answered truthfully. “Besides, I was already thinking about getting a job anyway.”

“If you want a job, not a doubt in my mind you’ll get one,” he said with sincerity, and I felt that burn through me. My brother. He’d always had complete faith in me and believed I

could do anything I set my mind to, no matter what that anything was.

“I love you, bub,” I said, my voice scratchy with emotion.

“I know, sweet pea. I love you too. Down to my bones. And even though you’re living a thousand miles away now, I’m always here for you. *Always*. You got that?”

I sniffled again, blinking the tears from my eyes so I could see the road before me. “That’s it,” I declared fiercely. “I don’t care how angry it makes Mom and Dad. I get you for Thanksgiving.”

Jase chuckled before he stated, “I can give you that.”

“Keep being sweet, and I’m taking Christmas too,” I snapped.

“My Farah wants Thanksgiving and Christmas, I’ll make it happen. You know that.”

God, my brother.

Lifting a hand off the steering wheel, I batted at the tears that had fallen onto my cheeks. “All right, bub. I’m sure you need to get back to work, so I’ll let you go.”

“Okay, talk soon. And I’ll be looking out for those pictures once construction gets underway.”

We hung up just as I pulled to a stop at a red light. The sound of a loud, rumbling engine starting up shot through the air, and I looked to the right just in time to see a man on a motorcycle pulling out of the parking lot of a bar I’d seen in passing a few times during my trips into town, but had never paid much attention to.

The place was called Bad Alibi. I remembered thinking that was a pretty cool name for a bar the first time I saw it, but other than that, I hadn’t given the place much thought. However, as I looked to the old saloon-style building now, I noticed a sign posted in one of the front windows. It had to be fate, seeing that help wanted sign just after I mentioned getting a job to my brother minutes before. It was fate that brought Bennett into my life with his stories of this beautiful town. It

was fate that had led me to look online myself to find that stunning Victorian after dismissing every house my realtor had shown me. So I had to believe that seeing that sign now was fate extending her hand once more.

I'd never imagined myself working at a bar, especially one that, from the number of motorcycles out front, catered heavily to bikers.

But I was a whole new Farah. And New Farah could do anything she wanted.

## Chapter Two

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FARAH

MY EXCITEMENT AND CERTAINTY THAT I WAS MEANT TO DO this lasted all of ten and a half seconds—exactly as long as it took for me to hit my blinker, turn into the parking lot of Bad Alibi, and park my car.

Shaking off the nerves suddenly coursing through my body, I forced myself to kill the engine and climb out. I hooked my purse over my shoulder and started for the door.

The moment I stepped inside, I instantly regretted that I hadn't found the time yet to throw out the wardrobe from my old life and go on a shopping spree, and as I looked around at the people currently staring in my direction, I mentally penciled that in as the next item on my to-do list.

To say I was out of my element here was downright laughable. I stuck out like a pimple on the tip of your nose that popped up just hours before prom.

The black floral-print silk blouse I was wearing had cost a small fortune, something that was obvious just by looking at. I might have been wearing jeans like most everyone else in there, but where theirs looked worn and comfortable, mine had bejeweled back pockets and I'd spent as much on them as most people spent on one month's rent.

“Can I help you, darlin’?”

At the feminine voice, I turned toward the bar and locked eyes with the pretty brunette who looked to be in her mid-to-late fifties standing behind it. I gave her a sincere yet shaky

smile and started her way, the heels of my Louboutins clicking on the distressed wood floors with each step I took. “Hey. Hi. Yes. I mean, I hope so.” I extended my hand across the bar. “I’m Farah.”

She took the handshake I offered with a polite, “Nice to meet you, Farah. I’m Darla.”

Getting down to brass tacks before I could lose my nerve, I stated, “I’m here about the sign in your window.”

Her head cocked to the side as she gave me a questioning look. “Sign?”

“Um, yeah. The help wanted sign? I was hoping I could apply for the job. Whatever it is.”

Her brows drew together, and she gave me a slow once-over before finally meeting my eyes again, still looking confused. “You wanna work *here*?”

At the disbelief in her voice, it was my turn to be confused. I mean, it wasn’t as if the bar was a dingy hole in the wall. I hadn’t exactly had a lot of time to scope the place out, but from what I’d been able to see, it was pretty decent. “Well, yeah.” Then a sinking feeling hit the pit of my stomach. “That is, if you haven’t already filled the position.”

“No offense, hon, but I’m not really sure this is the place for you.”

I felt my shoulders slump as I deflated a bit. “If it’s experience you’re worried about, I waited tables in college.” Another example in a long line of ways I’d disappointed my parents. *A waitress at a college bar? Unspeakable!* “It’s been a few years, but I can pick it back up in no time. Or if it’s a bartender you’re looking for, I can learn. I’ve always been a quick learner. Hell, I can even bus tables.”

Giving me eye contact so direct I couldn’t help but fidget under her intense scrutiny, Darla leaned in, resting her forearms on the bar and clasping her hands together. “You’re new in town, aren’t you?”

I wasn’t sure where she was going with that question but answered anyway. “Yeah. I just moved here a few weeks ago.”

“Where’d you come from?”

I hesitated for several beats, getting the impression that my answer was going to make or break her decision. “Connecticut.”

“Of course you did,” she said with a dry laugh that made my back grow stiff.

“I’m sorry?”

She let out a sigh, and I got the feeling that she found having to deal with me as annoying as swatting at an incessant gnat. “Look, it’s not a lack of experience I’m worried about. From your fancy getup, that expensive-as-hell purse, and that Merc you cruised up in, not to mention the fact you come from a place known for havin’ more WASPs than a damn hive, I’m willin’ to go out on a limb and say you’re from money. And the only reason a chick from money would ask about a job at a bar like this is because she’s either lookin’ to slum it for a bit, or she’s on the run from somethin’. Both of those scenarios bring drama with them, and neither are somethin’ I’m in the mood to take on.”

Humiliation crept in, heating my neck and cheeks as I lowered my voice and declared, “Excuse me, but you don’t know me well enough to make a snap judgement like that.”

“Oh honey.” She let loose another humorless laugh as she stood tall. “I know you. Trust me.”

“No you don’t,” I snapped, losing hold of my temper, something I hadn’t done in years. “You do *not* know me. If you did, you’d realize how insulting everything you just said about me really is.”

She arched a single brow. “So you’re sayin’ you *don’t* come from a line of rich-ass, entitled snobs?” My mouth snapped shut, not because I was offended, but because I couldn’t deny that. With the exception of Jase, my family was the very definition of rich, entitled, and snobby. “See?” Darla said when I took too long to answer. “Told you I knew you. And while I appreciate you comin’ in, I’m gonna have to pass. I need someone dependable that’ll last. I hire you and you

decide you're done sowin' your wild oats, I'm left one waitress short and have to go through the hiring process all over again, which, honest to God, is *not* somethin' I enjoy."

She started to turn, dismissing me completely, and just like that, the dam broke. My mouth opened and words began pouring out before I could attempt to stop them.

"Yes, you're right. I come from money. And you're right that my family is full of a bunch of rich, entitled, WASP assholes. But you were wrong to paint me with that same brush. I didn't come in here because I'm looking to *sow my wild oats* as you so politely put it, and I'm not on the run from anyone. I'm here because I've just recently moved to town to start fresh. Sure, I might not *need* to work, but that doesn't mean I don't want to. And, yes, I have a trust fund that I could easily live on for the rest of my days, but I'm not that kind of person. I like to be useful. I like helping wherever I can. I never really fit in with my family, mainly because I felt a woman's worth was more than lunching and shopping, something my parents and I never saw eye-to-eye on.

"I'm here because I never cared much for the life I was stuck with, and that includes the philandering asshole I'd been engaged to. You might look at me and see a spoiled brat with money, but I promise you, that's not who I am. I learned the hardest way possible that life is short, and since learning that lesson, I promised myself I was going to start living for me, and *that's* why I'm here."

By the time I finished my rant, I was breathing heavily and my hands were shaking so badly I had to clench them into fists. Everything that had just come out of my mouth had been completely unplanned. Never in my life had I laid myself bare like that for anyone, especially a stranger.

The moment I registered all the personal details I'd just revealed, my eyes went wide and that trembling in my hands moved throughout my arms. The only thing keeping me from melting into a puddle of embarrassment was the fact that it was still relatively early, so the crowd in the bar wasn't very big, and I'd been speaking in a hushed tone the whole time, so no one else had heard me.

“Sit,” Darla ordered, pointing to the stool beside me.

“I—what?”

Spinning around to the fridge tucked in behind the counter, she whipped the door open and pulled out a bottle of beer, uncapping it as she returned to me, and said, “Park it right there and drink this. You look like you’re about two seconds from keelin’ over.”

“Oh, um ... I don’t think—”

“Sit,” she repeated in a tone that left no room for argument. So I sat. “Drink.” Admittedly, she was slightly scary, so I picked up the beer and took a big gulp, wincing at the harsh bitterness as it went down. I heard humor in her tone as she asked, “Not a big beer drinker?”

When I looked at her, I saw the harsh, bossy demeanor was gone and she was grinning now, making her a million times more approachable. “Not a big drinker in general.” Having said that, I took another huge gulp, needing the fortification the alcohol would provide. The second drink went down a little smoother, but I still sucked in a hiss between my teeth and cringed, putting the bottle down. “Thanks. That helps.”

She resumed her position with her arms resting on the bar. “You good now?”

My cheeks heated, and I knew from experience that they were glowing a bright red. “Yeah, I’m good,” I mumbled, looking down and picking at the label on the bottle with my thumbnail. “Sorry about that. That whole speech kinda got ahead of me.”

“Don’t sweat it,” she replied casually. “Happens to the best of us. So you said you have waitressing experience?”

My head shot up and my eyes went big as they locked on hers. “I—yeah. Yes. I do. I have waitressing experience,” I answered quickly.

She gave me a quizzical look before stating. “This place can get pretty rowdy. You sure you’re up for that?”

I ignored the uncomfortable prickling in my skin at that, and declared, “Absolutely!” with a bit too much enthusiasm. “I worked at a bar on my college campus for three years. If I can put up with a bunch of drunk college students, I can put up with anything.”

“Not so sure about that,” she noted with heavy skepticism. “This is a *biker* town, hon. You get what that means, right?”

I wasn’t sure I fully comprehended what she was trying to get at, but I wasn’t about to admit that to her. “I can handle it. I promise,” I insisted.

“Fine,” she relented on a huff. “I’m willin’ to give you a trial run—on a few conditions,” she added hastily when my excitement threatened to overtake me. “First, you don’t wear clothes like that for work.” She pointed to my ensemble, and I cast my eyes down to look myself over before returning them to her. “Nothin’ wrong with it, necessarily,” she continued, speaking in a way that told me my style was definitely not her cup of tea. “But this job pays shit. All the money comes from tips, and if you come in here lookin’ like you’re ready to head to a yacht party, these people’ll eat you alive.”

Something came over me just then, and I felt my lips stretch into a teasing smirk. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’d never wear *this* to a yacht party. An event like that calls for a sarong, wedges, and a bathing suit.”

“Good, you can be a smartass,” Darla said with an approving smile. “You’ll need that here. That leads me to condition two. I know some places are all about the customer bein’ right, but this is a bar in a biker town. You don’t take shit from these guys. Got it? You work your ass off to sell as much booze as possible, but that doesn’t mean you have to put up with assholes bein’ handsy. Someone gets in your space that you don’t want there, you got every right to get them out.”

My stomach twisted into knots, and I had to swallow down the burn of acid crawling up my throat as I nodded and croaked “Got it.”

Back in college, handsy guys were just part of the job, and I’d been able to brush them off easily enough. But everything

was different now, and a part of me worried at how I'd react to a situation like that today. However, I couldn't spend the rest of my life hiding. I'd never know if I could move past that night if I didn't put myself out there and try, so I sucked up my courage, telling myself I'd cross that bridge if or when I came to it.

"I got three other girls who work the floor," Darla continued, oblivious to the silent war waging inside of me. "My husband usually mans the bar alone during the day with myself or our other guy coming on once the sun goes down, 'cause that's usually when things pick up. One of my girls just started takin' night classes over at the community college, so she can't handle the evenin' shifts and had to cut back to part-time. Another one's a single momma with a toddler, so shit can get hairy for her. That means I may need you to pull a couple double shifts every now and again. That gonna be an issue?"

I gave my head a shake. "Nope. Not at all. I can help out whenever." *Because, so far, I don't have much of a life.*

"Good. I'm sure the girls'll appreciate that."

"So ... I have the job?" I asked on a squeak.

"You got the job, darlin'," Darla answered with a chuckle. "First shift's tomorrow at seven. Just don't make me regret it, yeah?"

"I won't, I swear!" Hopping off the barstool, I reached into my purse and pulled out a couple bills. "This is for the beer. Thank you so much, Darla. You won't regret this."

Her forehead pulled into a frown as she pointed to the beer still more than half full and asked, "You're not gonna finish that?"

"No time," I replied, walking backward with a big grin on my face. "I've got non-yacht-worthy clothes to buy."

With her laughter following me, I exited the bar and practically skipped to my car, beeping the locks along the way. As I climbed in and started her up, I did it with the biggest, happiest smile on my face.

I was in a new town. I had a new home and now a new job.

New Farah was off and running. And I couldn't wait to see what was in store for her next.

## Chapter Three

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FARAH

I WALKED INTO MY FIRST SHIFT AT BAD ALIBI WITH SUCH strong jitters I worried the butterflies in my belly might actually carry me away.

The place was already bustling, with about three quarters of the tables already full. The pool tables were all taken, and most of the barstools around the long, U-shaped bar along the back wall already had behinds planted on them.

I did my best to keep my nerves from showing, offering polite smiles to the people whose eyes I caught as I passed on my way to the bar.

“Well looky here, you must be the new girl.”

At the unfamiliar voice, I lifted my head and spotted a big, burly man standing behind the counter. He had one hand braced on the bar top, and the other resting casually on his thick waist. The man stood an inch or two above six feet and had a belly that protruded slightly over the waistband of his worn-out jeans. But as weird as it sounded—seeing as every visible inch of him was thick, from his neck to his arms to his barrel chest—that belly worked for him. He didn’t look sloppy, he looked solid. And judging from his ease behind the counter and the white hand towel he had tucked into the side of his jeans, I could only guess he was the husband Darla had told me about.

“Hi,” I greeted with a smile once I rounded the bar and stepped behind it. “I’m Farah.”

“Buck. Darla’s old man” Grabbing the hand I’d extended, he gave it a shake so strong my whole body shook with the force of it. “Nice to meet you, pretty Farah. She told me she hired a new waitress, but she didn’t say she was such a looker,” he said, giving me a wink.

“For cryin’ out loud, Buck,” I heard from behind me and turned just in time to see Darla coming around the opening of the bar. “What’ve I told you about flirtin’ with the staff? These girls don’t need the likes of you fawnin’ all over them.”

Releasing my hand, he divested his wife of the case of beer she’d been holding and put it on the bar before looping an arm around her waist and pulling her flush against his side. He bent low and gave her a loud, smacking kiss before lifting his head and grinning down at her. “Aw, don’t worry, babe. You know I only got eyes for you.”

Her cheeks flushed as she gave his chest a smack. Rolling her eyes, she looked to me and said, “Ignore him. And if he ever annoys you, just let me know and I’ll take care of him.” From the teasing in her tone and the way she stayed pressed to his side like it was the only place she wanted to be, it was easy to see the love between Darla and Buck.

“Don’t let her salty demeanor fool ya,” Buck shot back. “I got this one wrapped around my little finger—Ah! Christ woman!” he yelped when Darla reached over and gave his side a wicked pinch.

Her eyes narrowed into slits, but her look held not an ounce of fire. “Better watch it, or you’ll be spendin’ the night on the couch.”

Buck’s bottom lip poked out. “Aw, don’t be like that, sugar.”

I let out a laugh as I watched the two of them. Something told me it was the other way around, and that Buck was all too happy to be wrapped around *her* little finger.

Darla broke from her husband’s hold and turned her focus back to me, giving my new clothes an approving once-over. I felt a sense of relief, and the tension that had taken up

residence in my shoulders since I first walked in finally began to loosen. The jeans I was wearing were nowhere near as fancy as the ones I'd worn the day before—which, along with the rest of the wardrobe from my old life, were now sitting in a goodwill bin—and hugged my hips and thighs in a way I thought looked pretty good. And with the help of the platform wedges made up of a ton of caramel-colored leather straps twisting around the tops of my feet and ankles, my ass looked pretty nice as well. Up top I was wearing a ribbed, burnt orange racerback tank that I'd been leery of at first, but, after ten minutes of arguing back and forth, I'd let the woman at the store talk me into purchasing.

Where my mother had always been waif thin, my genetics strongly favored my father's side. That meant, since hitting puberty, I'd been top-heavy, with a smallish waist, a round behind, and wide hips, something Mom had all too much fun using against me. She loved to ride me about needing to lose weight, and thanks to that, I'd grown up with body image issues and had always dressed to hide myself. But when I'd confided in the friendly saleswoman that I was looking for clothes for my new job as a waitress at Bad Alibi, she'd been adamant that form-fitting was the way to go and would lead to bigger tips. The tank stretched across my chest and belly, and while I'd been self-conscious at first, the look I was getting from Darla helped to put me at ease. "See you took my advice on the clothes. You look great, hon."

I opened my mouth to thank her, but Buck spoke before I had a chance. "Number of dudes that tracked her ass from the door to here, I'm willin' to bet she cleans up *big* tonight."

My stomach sank like a lead balloon, but I did my best not to let my anxiety rise to the surface. I could do this. Hell, I'd spent the better part of an hour giving myself a pep-talk in the mirror earlier. If at any point I found myself getting overwhelmed, I had about a million techniques to help keep the panic at bay. *I could do this.*

Darla let out a sharp, piercing whistle that shook me out of my musings and waved over a stunningly gorgeous, dark-haired woman. "Farah, this is Shane," she said, introducing me

to the other waitress. “She’s gonna show you the ropes. You good to go?”

“Ready.”

At my answer and resolute nod, Shane spoke. “Come on. I’ll show you were to stash your purse, and then we’ll get you set up.”

I moved out from behind the bar and followed after her, turning right down a hall that led away from the crowd. We passed two doors, the one on the left marked “Ladies”, the one on the right “Men’s”. A little farther past the women’s restroom was another marked, “Storage.”

“That’s the stockroom,” she noted as we moved past it, continuing to the very last door at the end of the hall with a sign that said “Staff Only.” “And this is the office. Both these rooms stay locked at all times. New hires usually have to wait three months to get a set of keys, so until then, just ask any one of us if you need in these rooms.”

“Gotcha.”

She unlocked the door and pushed it open, leading me through to the wall on the far left with a bunch of cubbies built in. “You can put your stuff there,” she said, pointing to an empty cubby that had a piece of paper with my name on it taped to the bottom. “Everyone here is pretty good about not messing with other people’s stuff, so you don’t have to worry about stashing your things, but just to be on the safe side, it’s smart to leave cash and credit cards at home.”

“Thanks for the heads up. I’ll do that.”

She moved to the battered desk and pulled one of the drawers open. “New hire packet,” she announced, holding up a sheaf of papers before heading back my way. “You can fill these out when you get home and bring it back on your next shift.” I took the packet and stashed it and my purse in my cubby while Shane pulled an apron from a tiny closet and extended it to me, continuing to give me the lay of the land as I tied my apron in place. “The bar’s split into two sections right down the middle. You’re on section two tonight, but if

you start getting overwhelmed, just let me know and I'll try my best to give you a hand. The pool tables tend to get really crowded, so we're both in charge of those and'll split the tips from there at the end of the night. Just keep an eye out and check in with them every once in a while, and I'll do the same."

The instructions continued as we headed back to the bar where she gave me my float, the cash I was responsible for keeping track of in my apron so I could make change for customers. Then I was handed an order pad, pen, and tray and sent on my way.

It took ten minutes for my nerves to finally loosen their death grip, but once they did, I got into the swing of things easily enough. I kept a smile pinned on my face the whole time I worked, and, while it was a bit of a struggle, I made sure to maintain eye contact with everyone I waited on. A couple of the guys flirted harmlessly while other customers cracked jokes, and as the minutes ticked by, I'd discovered everything I'd told Darla was the truth. Waitressing was like riding a bike for me, and I'd picked it right back up like it was nothing, rushing back and forth, filling drink orders and hustling food to keep the people at my tables happy.

As evening turned into night, the crowd continued to grow, and Shane and I were right in the thick of it. My smile eventually began to feel normal, and I found that being around these people was easier than I'd expected. For the most part, everyone was friendly and welcoming to the new girl on staff.

I'd just headed back to the bar to deposit a load of empty glasses and fill another order when the door opened. Instinct had me turning in that direction to see where the latest customer would sit, but the moment I set my eyes on the man who'd just entered, everything around me seemed to slow to a stop.

Bikers had been filtering in and out of Bad Alibi all night long, but there was something different about this one, something that drew my attention to him and refused to let it go.

The guy was big in a way that I just knew, even at five foot seven, I'd feel small if I were standing next to him. A soft-looking navy T-shirt covered wide shoulders that led to a thick chest that traveled down to a trim waist, and denim that could only be that expertly faded after a million washes encased bulky thighs. On his feet were a pair of worn, dusty motorcycle boots—what I'd come to discover was the standard footwear for men in Redemption, Tennessee—and as he walked, the overhead lights glinted off the chain that hung from his belt loop to his back pocket. His darkish blond hair was cropped short at the sides and back, but left longer on top, styled in an attractive disarray, and he had at least two-week's worth of growth on his jaw that was a couple shades darker than his hair. But what drew my attention most was the black ink on his large biceps and carved forearms. It started beneath the sleeves of his tee and went all the way down to his wrists, covering nearly every inch of available skin.

From this distance, I couldn't make out any of the patterns or shapes in the tattoos, but that didn't make them any less eye-catching.

As though feeling my intense perusal of all that was him, the man turned in my direction, and I sucked in a sharp gasp the moment our eyes collided.

*Stop staring, you moron,* a small voice inside my head screamed, but for some insane reason, my body wouldn't cooperate. I was frozen stiff, even my eyeballs refused to budge.

One corner of his mouth quirked up in a knowing smirk, having caught me, and I felt a sensation shoot through me that I hadn't experienced in a *very* long time. My insides tingled like my blood had gone electric, and the dip in my belly had nothing to do with anxiety this time.

As he continued through the bar toward the section with the pool tables, my traitorous gaze tracked him the entire way. I watched as he closed in on a large group of men, passing out fist bumps and back slaps. I continued watching as a woman in a skintight cami and jean shorts so short you could see the bottoms of her butt cheeks threw herself against him and

wrapped her arms around his neck. I watched as he looked down at her with a grin that just screamed sex as he muttered something that made her giggle, all the while his hands were coasting down her back and coming to rest on her behind, giving it a long, hard squeeze.

The way my body was behaving and the crazy reaction I had just from looking at this guy shook me to my core. Warning bells started going off in my head, but I just couldn't make myself look away.

I'd been so transfixed by that man I hadn't realized Buck was trying to get my attention until his hand appeared in front of my face, and the snap of his fingers pulled me from my daze.

Jerking around to face him, I met his concerned gaze head on. "Sorry. What?"

"You okay?" he asked, studying me closely. "You've gone a little pale there, sweetheart."

"Oh, uh ..." I cleared my throat, trying to give myself enough time to formulate a convincing lie. "Yeah, I'm good. I think I'm just a little tired. I guess being on my feet for so long will take some getting used to."

He didn't look convinced, but thankfully let it go. "All right. If you're sure."

"I'm sure," I answered with a grin I hoped would pacify him, and luckily it worked.

I grabbed the tray he'd loaded and headed back to the floor to serve drinks, glancing briefly toward the pool tables to see the guy now sitting in a chair with that same bleached blonde woman resting on his lap.

My smile was a bit wobbly as I took care of my tables, and I couldn't seem to shake off the discomfiture I'd been feeling since the stranger walked in.

I silently sent up a prayer that Shane would be able to head over to take the man's order, but when I looked and saw she was slammed with her section, I knew I was out of luck. I was going to have to go over there and do it myself. Just looking at

him from a distance had been enough to throw me completely off balance. My gut was telling me that getting up close was a *very* bad idea.

Shaking off my unease, I tucked my tray beneath my arm and moved across the floor, climbing the two steps that would take me up to the pool tables on shaky legs.

Careful not to focus on the man, I looked around at a few of the guys I'd already served throughout my shift. "Hey guys, how are we doing over here?"

"Just fine, sweetheart, thanks," a man who'd introduced himself earlier as Scooter answered, giving me a warm smile. From the looks of him, he was well into his fifties or sixties, and from the deep lines carved around his eyes, it looked like he spent most of his time laughing, something I knew for a fact since I'd heard it several time already.

I returned his grin with comfortable ease. From the outside, Scooter looked rough and wild with his long hair and scraggly beard, but he'd been a complete sweetheart all night.

He'd introduced me to the guys he was with, but I'd learned so many new names already I could only remember about a quarter of them. The group was an eclectic mix of all different ages, from men who looked to be around my age, all the way to guys the same age as Scooter. They'd been loud and somewhat rowdy, but they'd all seemed nice.

"Could we get two more pitchers of Bud when you get a chance, darlin'?" a man I thought I remembered as Danno asked.

I turned my smile to him. "Sure thing." I looked around the rest of the group for more orders before finally forcing myself to turn my attention to the man who'd made my heart beat at a dangerously fast pace.

His eyes—a beautiful hazel that looked amazing with his tanned skin and dirty-blond hair—were already on me, and I got the distinct impression he'd been watching me from the moment I entered his space.

I did my best to keep my expression neutral while my pulse skyrocketed. “And for you two?” I asked, tilting my chin to the woman still sitting on his lap who now had her face buried in his neck.

He gave me a slow, measured look from my cute new shoes to the top of my head, completely ignoring the chick who was currently trying to fuse herself to him. The way his eyes took me in made me shiver in a way that was both good and bad. I couldn’t deny that he was attractive, but the visceral reaction I’d had to him made that all too familiar panic squeeze at my chest.

“Two shots of tequila and whatever you got on tap,” he finally answered. As soon as the words left his mouth, I nodded and spun around, hightailing away from him as quick as I could without breaking into a run.

Shane was waiting on her drinks at the end of the bar when I came up beside her and slapped my tray down, spouting off my order to Darla.

“So far so good?” Shane asked, drawing my gaze to her.

“Yeah. It’s not too bad.” I chanced a quick peek back to the group I’d just left and saw that the chair the man had been sitting in was now empty. A scan of the area showed him standing at one of the pool tables, a cue in his hand, waiting as another guy lined up his shot. The woman who’d been on his lap was now sitting at a high-top table tucked into the back corner, chatting with a couple other women who were all dressed like her in barely-there clothes. “Hey, do you know who that guy over there is?” I asked, tilting my head in his direction. “Dark blond hair, navy tee, at the second table?”

She looked toward the pool table I indicated for a split second before whipping back around to me. “Cannon Banks? Girl, you’d be smart to steer *way* clear of that one.”

My eyes went big, and I lowered my voice to a whisper as I asked, “Is he dangerous?” Something in my gut told me Cannon Banks was all *kinds* of dangerous.

She gave her head a shake. “Only to your ovaries.” At my questioning expression, she continued to explain. “He’s not a criminal or anything like that, he’s just a dawg with a capital D. That chick sitting over there drooling after him?” I nodded, letting her know I knew who she was talking about. “She’s just one of many, babe. That dude’s broken more hearts in this town than half the male population combined. You seem like a sweet girl. I’d hate to see you turn into one of his castoffs.”

“Wait ... Oh. No!” I said on a yelp. “No, no, no. It’s not like that. I’m not looking ... That is, I’m not on the market. Like, at *all*. You don’t need to worry about that happening.”

Shane’s features grew sympathetic. “Darla said you mentioned a cheating ex.”

I had, but that wasn’t even half the reason I was currently—and for the foreseeable future—anti-man. “Yeah,” I mumbled. “Anyway, I was just asking because I got a vibe off him when he first came in.”

She let out a snort. “Yeah, you and every other woman in a three-town radius from here. Me and the other waitresses call that the Cannon Effect. You’re really pretty. No doubt you’re already on his radar, so watch your back, yeah?”

With that word of warning, she picked up her loaded tray and headed off. Leaving me shaken. I didn’t want to be on his radar. I didn’t want to be on *any* man’s radar. I hadn’t been lying when I told her I was off the market.

I was still plagued with nightmares from the attack every night. I could still recall the cigarette smoke on his breath and the feel of his rough, calloused hands pulling at me viciously. That night remained in my mind with disturbingly perfect clarity. The panic attacks might have subsided, but I was nowhere near ready to put myself out there.

And now that Shane had laid everything out for me, I knew my gut instinct to stay away was spot on. Sure, I hadn’t felt that stomach-swooping, pulse-pounding, skin-tingling sensation I felt when he walked through the door with another guy in so long I couldn’t even recall the last time it happened,

but there was no way in hell I was going to let something as trivial as attraction push me off the course of my new life.

Even if he was the first man I'd been attracted to since that awful night.

## Chapter Four

---

FARAH

I FELT THE COLD METAL OF THE BLADE BITE INTO MY NECK. I felt the weight of his body press harder against my back, shoving me into the side of my car with so much force it pushed the air from my lungs.

The rancid smell of cigarette smoke made my nose burn and my eyes water as his breath fanned across my neck. “Fuck me. Knew a rich bitch like you’d smell good. Tell me, that cunt of yours smell just as sweet?”

I opened my mouth to scream, only to have the sound cut off when his big gloved hand slammed over my lips, muffling the noise.

I thrashed and struggled as hard as I could, trying my best to kick the man who’d just come out of nowhere and pinned me against my car.

“That’s it, little girl.” He let out a vicious laugh that made my blood turn to ice. “Show me what you got. Not worth it if you don’t put up a fight.”

I screamed from behind his hand again, but it was no use. The lot where I’d parked was cast in shadows. There was no one around to see or hear me.

Fear gripped at my chest, squeezing it in a vice-like grip as panic clawed at my throat. I was so terrified; it was getting harder and harder to breathe, but I didn’t stop fighting. I couldn’t. It was all I had. The man was so much bigger than I was, so much stronger, that flight wasn’t an option.

A shiver of revulsion wracked my body when I felt his nose brush the hair from my shoulder and trail up my neck.

“Now we’re gonna have a little fun.”

I came awake, sucking in a gasp so big my lungs burned as I shot up to sitting in my bed. My whole body shook, and a fine sheen of sweat coated my skin. The covers were tangled around my legs from where I’d been thrashing in my sleep. Just like every night for the past several months, it took a while for the dream to release me from its clutches.

“Just a dream, Farah,” I said to myself, blowing out a shaky breath as I lifted a trembling hand to brush the damp hair from my forehead. “It was just a dream. You’re safe.”

Closing my eyes, I concentrated on taking deep, calming breaths as I clutched the sheets in my hands and dug my toes into the mattress. “Warm sheets, soft bed, lavender candle,” I whispered.

It was one of the methods my therapist had taught me to help fight off my panic attacks. Focus on your surroundings to help keep yourself grounded. Lavender was supposed to have a soothing effect, so each night before I went to sleep, I lit a lavender candle on my bedside table.

“Warm sheets. Soft bed. Lavender candle.”

I repeated the mantra over and over, reminding myself where I was until the fear finally ebbed out of me.

My body loosened one muscle at a time and the tremors eventually stopped.

Turning my head, I looked at the clock beside my bed, the bright red numbers showed it was just after seven. I barely had four hours of sleep.

Bad Alibi closed at two, and after shooing out the last remaining stragglers, closing out, and cleaning up, I didn’t get out for another forty-five minutes, meaning I hadn’t fallen into bed until after three in the morning.

Throwing my legs over the side of the bed, I slowly pushed to my feet. There was no use lying back down now. I

was wide awake. The nightmares did that to me. After each one, I was left shaken to the point that sleep would allude me for the rest of the day.

My feet ached and my legs throbbed. I'd been working at Bad Alibi for a week and a half now, and all those long hours on my feet helped to show me just how out of shape I was.

Every muscle in my body made itself known as I started for the bathroom. The Redbud Inn, where I'd been crashing since my move to Redemption, and where I'd stay until my house was livable, boasted about their updated amenities, one of which was their state-of-the-art massaging showerheads, and I was pleased to say they hadn't lied. The spray did wonders on my sore neck and shoulders.

And that was just one of the reasons I loved the cute little inn. When you drove up the lane, the first thing you saw was an adorable two-story cottage, complete with white clapboard siding, black shutters, and a bold red front door. I'd been nervous at first, thinking I'd taken a wrong turn somewhere until I turned into the small gravel lot at the side of the house and spotted the detached, L-shaped building farther back on the property with its own parking lot. There were ten rooms in total, each bigger than you'd expect with a recently updated bathroom and kitchenette area. And if that wasn't great enough, there was a small, separate building that contained a washer and dryer.

The woman who ran the place, a sweet, beautiful redhead named Poppy who looked to be about my age, had waived the fee to use the laundry saying I had that perk since I was a long-term guest.

Another perk was that I'd gotten to know Poppy, and we'd hit it off extremely well. If I hadn't worried I was getting ahead of myself, I might have even considered her a friend.

After a long shower, letting the water work out the kinks in my back and wash away the chill from that terrible nightmare, I finished getting ready for the day, sliding on my new jean shorts and another tank top, this one a light cream color with a paisley design in light pink and dark brown.

I blew my hair out, leaving the long blonde tresses a bit wild and wavy—something old Farah never dared to do; her hair always had to be *perfect*—and slapped on the bare minimum makeup-wise. With that done, I slipped my feet into a pair of flip-flops and headed out the door, ready for my new morning ritual of coffee and conversation with Poppy.

I was halfway down the sidewalk when a big bang from the room I'd just passed jarred me to a stop. I stood motionless, worry twisting my stomach into knots. Another crash sounded from inside, but this one was followed by a loud, feminine cry that couldn't possibly be mistaken for anything other than pleasure.

My mouth fell open as I stayed rooted to the sidewalk, unable to move as a series of male grunts followed shortly after the woman, well ... *finished*, indicating that the early morning activities of the couple in the room had come to an end.

Not wanting to be caught eavesdropping, I forced my feet to move and scurried through the parking lot and across the few yards that led to Poppy's place. I slowed when I reached the steps leading up the wrap-around porch to the back door.

Rapping my knuckles on the screen door, I called out, "Poppy?"

Her face appeared through the screen a moment later, a big smile on her lips. With that smile, her heart-shaped face, and big blue eyes, she looked one of those beautiful porcelain dolls.

"Hey! Come on in. I just made a pot of coffee." The screen door creaked as I pulled it open, and when I stepped inside, I was immediately welcomed by the smell of coffee and cinnamon. "I've got cinnamon rolls in the oven. Just a few more minutes if you want one when they're done."

"Ooh, yes please!"

"Then make yourself at home. I'm surprised to see you here so early. Didn't you get in really late?"

“Uh, yeah.” I moved to the coffee maker and made myself a cup of coffee as I fibbed just a bit. “Insomnia. Not a big deal, I’ve been functioning on about four hours of sleep for a long time.” *Almost a year, to be exact.* Turning to face her, I propped myself against the edge of the counter and grinned behind the rim of my coffee mug. “Speaking of being up early, the couple in room four were already going at it. Talk about early risers.”

Poppy let out a snort. “Not surprised, given who stayed in there last night. One of the downfalls of running an inn in a small town is the one-nighter guests.” She let out a dramatic shiver, curling her top lip as she added, “Makes me feel like I’m running a brothel sometimes. I’m not looking forward to cleaning *that* room later today.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask who was staying in that room, but I didn’t, deciding to give the rambunctious couple their privacy.

Poppy and I hung out long enough for me to finish my coffee and have a cinnamon roll. Running the inn was a twenty-four hour job, and I didn’t want to get in the way or wear out my welcome, so we said our good-byes, and I started back to my room.

Pulling the cellphone out of my back pocket, I brought up the text string between my brother and me and began drafting a message to him as I walked. So far, I loved my new town, and I was excited for the life I was building. The only downside was not having Jase and Bennett close, so I did my best to stay in regular contact.

I’d been so wrapped up in my task I hadn’t been paying attention to where I was going and walked smack into something incredibly hard. My phone fell to the concrete, and I would have followed after it had it not been for what felt like steel bands wrapping around my waist. It took a moment to register that what I’d walked into was a person ... a very strong, very *solid* person.

“Whoa. Careful there, new girl.”

“Crap, I’m so sor—” The apology died on my tongue when I looked up into a pair of hazel eyes. I’d seen those very eyes at least four times for the past week and a half, but only from a distance. Now, seeing them up close, I noticed they were even more beautiful than I’d originally thought. His eyes were flecked liberally with gold and ringed with dark green around the edge of the iris. They were eyes a person could drown in and never come back up for air.

“You good?”

At his low, husky voice, my gaze cast down to a pair of lips I hadn’t let myself fully study until that very moment—full, pink lips that looked like they were *made* to kiss. The bottom lip was slightly plumper, while the top had the perfect cupid’s bow shape to it.

Lost in a daze, I allowed myself to do what I’d wanted to do for the past week and a half, but never let myself, seeing as I was doing my best to keep a distance from Cannon Banks, like he was Patient Zero for the bubonic plague. I studied his gorgeous face. Beneath the dark scruff laid a perfectly square jaw that looked strong enough to cut glass and sharp, distinct cheekbones. His nose was just slightly crooked, like he’d been punched in it once or twice, and it hadn’t set correctly, but strange as it sounded, it worked for him. If it wasn’t for that slight curvature and the bump right in the middle, his nose would have been almost *too* perfect. But how it was only added to the tantalizing ruggedness that was his face.

“Hummingbird.”

My gaze shot up to his, my brows pulling into a quizzical frown. “Hummingbird?”

He removed an arm from around my waist and reached up to pull one of my hands from his chest. His long fingers circled my wrist and pressed against the pulse point on the underside. “Seemed fitting. Your pulse is racin’ like crazy.” One corner of his mouth tugged up in a smirk that made my belly flip. “Do I make you nervous?”

“I—huh? No! Of course not. That’s crazy.”

*Liar!*

This wasn't good. When it came to Cannon Banks, I needed to remain distant, not pressed up against him from chest to hips so damn tight not even sunlight could get through.

Taking a step back, I put pressure on the arm he still had around me until he had no choice but to let me go.

I put a good five feet between us but still felt it wasn't enough. He'd been in the bar a handful of times since that first night, and each time he walked through the door, my body responded. I'd spend the entire shift feeling like one big exposed nerve. Shane's warning still echoed in my head, and the fact that he'd gone home with two different women besides the one I saw him with that first night only proved her point.

He took a step closer, and my body stiffened, thinking he was going to touch me again, but instead, he bent low and retrieved my phone from the ground at his feet.

"Oh, um, thank you," I mumbled, holding out my hand, but instead of handing it over, he turned it right side up and looked down at it. I stared in shock as he brushed his thumb across the screen, scrolling through my texts like it was his right. "*Excuse* me," I cried, reaching for my phone, only to have him dodge me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Jase your man?"

"What? No," I clipped, going for my phone again, and this time managing to swipe it away from him. "Not that it's any of your business."

He gave me a slow, measured look, his eyes trailing from my face down my chest, all the way to my legs, and I suddenly felt very aware of every inch of skin on my body. "You sure tell a guy who's not your man you love and miss him an awful lot."

Something inside of me snapped at his nosiness, and the anxiety I usually felt in his presence was replaced with agitation. My eyes narrowed in indignation as I closed the

screen on my phone and stuffed it back in my pocket. “That’s because he’s my brother, and I *do* miss and love him. And you had no right to go through my phone like that. It’s an invasion of privacy.”

“You got a man?” he asked like he didn’t hear the incredulity in my tone. Or maybe he just didn’t care.

“That’s none—”

Before I could get my answer out, the door beside us opened. A woman with heavily highlighted brown hair sauntered out of the room and immediately pressed herself against Cannon without so much as a glance in my direction.

“Last night was *amazing*,” she said in a seductive purr as a secret smile split across her face. “This mornin’ too.”

A quick peek at the door she’d just exited, and I now knew exactly who I’d overheard having sex earlier.

*Of course.*

I looked back to Cannon and saw that, while he’d slung his arm carelessly around the woman’s shoulders, his attention was still fixed on me and, once again, an explosion of butterflies went off in my belly.

Finally realizing there was a third person in their little huddle, the woman looked in my direction and gave me a not-so-pleasant once over. “Who are you?”

“I’m no one,” I returned quickly. “And I was just leaving.”

I wasn’t sure what the hell it was about this man that affected me in such a way, but whatever it was twisted me into knots.

Shane was right. He was a *dawg*. “Have a nice day,” I muttered, looking down at the sidewalk as I skirted past the two of them.

Cannon’s whiskey-rich voice called out just as I reached the door to my room. “See you soon, Hummingbird.”

And for some reason, I had the sinking feeling that was a promise.

## Chapter Five

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FARAH

PULLING IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE, I PARKED MY CAR BEHIND one of the several work trucks that lined the drive and leaned down for a better look through my windshield. My lips parted on a gasp before my cheeks pulled up in a smile at what I was seeing.

The newly installed front door opened, and Clay stepped through, moving across the wide porch and resting a shoulder on one of the pillars while he waited for me as I climbed out and snapped a few pictures with my phone to send off to my brother.

“It looks amazing!” I exclaimed as I stuffed the cell in my back pocket and all but skipped toward my house. Most of the rotted wood along the outside of the house had been replaced, and there were men currently working on painting the exterior a nice, subtle dove gray while another crew was up on the new roof, nailing down the new shingles. The porch, once at risk of caving in on itself, had been restored, wrapping from the front door all the way around one side of the house. All the windows had been replaced, so there was no more broken glass or ugly boards in sight.

Clay hit me with an easy grin as he stood tall. “You say that now, but you haven’t seen the inside.”

“I don’t care,” I replied giddily as I climbed the three steps to stop in front of him. “*Anything* is better than how it was.”

“All right, but don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said with a chuckle before holding out an arm for me to precede him.

The moment I stepped inside, I let out a loud, gleeful squeal that was drowned out by the sounds of nail guns and drills. “Oh my God,” I breathed as I moved farther into the entryway and did a slow spin. “This ... is ... *awesome!*”

I finished turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees before facing him again, grinning so big my whole face hurt. The entire place was *gutted*. There wasn't a single piece of drywall or insulation as far as my eyes could see. The old, crumbling staircase that you couldn't climb without risking life or limb had been torn down, in its place, a basic, albeit sturdier structure that would do the job until Clay and his men could build something grand.

“Gotta say, darlin’, you’re probably the first woman I’ve worked for who’s gotten so excited at the sight of exposed studs.”

“Exposed studs means progress!” I cheered. “And I’ll admit, I don’t have the first clue about this kind of stuff, but it seems like you’ve already gotten a lot done.”

He crossed his arms over his chest as he looked down at me. “Well, for a novice, you’d be right. The foundation’s been fixed, my guys are puttin’ the finishing touches on the new roof, and with the walls down, we’ve been able to start on the electrical. The majority of the major fixes are well under way, so as of now, we’re ahead of schedule. And while we were guttin’ the place, we came across somethin’ I want to show you. Come have a look.”

I followed him through the foyer, past the parlor to the right and the formal dining room to the left, all the way to the back of the house. A quick peek showed that the soon-to-be-new kitchen on the left was completely empty, waiting for the custom cabinets and countertops I’d ordered. To the right was the living space where Clay was currently leading me. The instant we cleared the threshold I jerked to a stop, my jaw dropping in wonder. “Holy crap, is that ...?”

“Figured you’d like it,” he said on a humor-filled mumble.

“It’s shiplap!” I felt my inner *Fixer Upper* nut bubbling to the surface. “Who in the fresh hell would cover that up?”

“So I take it you want us to keep it?”

Warmth bloomed in my chest as I looked up at him. “Definitely.”

With that done, Clay started leading me back through the house, showing me what all had been done, and what was left.

I had to admit, I didn’t care all too much as he talked about the new water heater and AC that was being installed. I knew, along with the plumbing and other stuff, it was crucial, but I was too busy imagining what the place would look like once the walls had been rebuilt and all the pretty new fixtures I’d chosen were installed.

By the time the tour was done, I felt like I was walking on air. I waved at him over my shoulder as I climbed into my car and started it up.

As I headed down the gravel drive, I grabbed my phone and swiped at the screen. A call had come through while Clay and I had been discussing the master bathroom configuration, and, assuming it was Jase calling about the most recent photos I’d just texted him, I’d let the call go to voicemail so I wasn’t distracted.

Dividing my attention between my phone and the road, I hit the button to listen to the new voicemail and put it on speaker.

“Farah, it’s Lance.” My back stiffened and my fingers clenched around the steering wheel, hearing my ex-fiancé’s voice come through my cell. “This is ridiculous. It’s been *weeks!*” He paused, letting out a breath of frustration, and I could almost picture him sitting behind the obnoxiously large desk in his office, pinching the bridge of his nose like he did every time I did or said something he found annoying. And he found pretty much everything I did and said to be annoying.

“This has gone on for long enough. I’ve given you your space while you ran off to find yourself, or whatever the hell it is you’re doing in that podunk town, but it’s time for you to come home.”

“*What?*” I cried, looking at my phone in shock like it could actually answer back.

“I’ve spoken with your parents,” he continued, “and we’ve agreed that if you drop this silly charade and come home, we can continue with the wedding plans.”

“You selfish, egotistical, son of a bitch!” I shouted at the disembodied voice, every word out of his mouth making my blood boil.

“But I’ll warn you, I’m not going to wait forever. You’ve made me look like a fool, running off like this, Farah. However, I’m willing to forgive and forget—”

“You have *got* to be kidding!” I continued to yell as I stabbed at the screen, silencing Lance’s infuriating voice. But that wasn’t enough. I was *pissed*. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so angry.

My vision went red as I turned my attention from the road and hurled the offending phone across the car. “You can take your forgiveness and shove it right up you’re a— *Shit!*”

My rant morphed into a frightened yelp as I looked back to the road just as something gray and white darted out in front of me. Slamming on my brakes, I jerked the wheel to avoid hitting whatever it was, sending my car sliding right into the ditch.

By the time the vehicle finally jerked to a bone-jarring stop, I was breathing heavily and clutching the wheel so tightly it was a wonder my fingers hadn’t fused to it.

I managed to peel my hands away and open the car door, stepping out on wobbly legs.

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered as I rounded the hood and saw that the front driver-side tire was blown out and was currently resting atop a humongous jagged rock.

“Oh my goodness! Are you all right?” I turned from the mangled tire and looked up toward the road. An older woman with an attractive blonde bob was standing in the open door of her car, staring down at me in concern.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” I turned back to my car, giving it a slow inspection. For the most part, the car seemed to be relatively intact, but there was no way in hell I was getting it off that rock and out of the ditch on my own. “Something jumped out in front of my car and I swerved to miss it.”

“Looks like that may be the culprit right there, sweetie.”

Glancing in the direction she was pointing, I saw a familiar ball of white and gray fluff sitting at the edge of the road. “So you’re the one to blame?” I asked accusingly, narrowing my eyes at the cat.

In response, it let out a meow, lifted one of its front legs, and began cleaning its paw. I didn’t speak cat, but I was pretty sure that was the equivalent of shooting me the middle finger.

“You could be hurt and not realize it. You didn’t hit your head, did you?” the woman asked, coming around her car to the edge of the ditch while wringing her hands in front of her. “Maybe I should call 911.”

“No, that’s really not necessary,” I insisted, moving around to the passenger side and opening the door to grab my purse. It took a bit of searching, but I managed to locate my cellphone under the seat. Unfortunately, thanks to my outburst after Lance’s message, I’d managed to shatter the screen. I lifted my head to the woman and winced, holding up the broken phone. “But any chance you know the number for a tow truck company?”

She gave me a sympathetic grin and waved me over to her. “You’re in luck. My husband owns a garage in town. Let me put in a call. Come on outta that ditch, and we’ll get this whole thing sorted out.”

I carefully navigated the small incline as she pulled out her phone and made a call. Once I reached her side, I offered her an apologetic smile as she disconnected. “Thank you so much for this. I don’t even want to think about what would’ve happened if you hadn’t stopped. My luck, I’d have started walking and gotten myself lost in the mountains or something.”

From up close I could see a hint of gray laced through her blonde locks and faint lines around her eyes and mouth as she smiled at me, revealing she was probably somewhere around my own mother's age, but unlike the Hyland matriarch, this woman had aged beautifully and gracefully *without* the assistance of Botox or a plastic surgeon.

"It's not a problem at all, honey."

"I'm Farah, by the way."

She gave me a sweet, kind smile. "Good to meet you. I'm Beverly, but everyone just calls me Bev."

"Thank you again, Bev. I really appreciate all of this."

"Don't think anything of it." Her smile faded and her face turned stern in a way I imagined all other mothers but mine would. "But for future reference, you should never brake or swerve to miss an animal. This could've ended up a lot worse."

Bennett would have said the same thing, only he probably would've coupled it with *that look* and a litany of curse words.

"Yeah, I know. I just reacted. I didn't even have time to think."

The cat chose that moment to saunter up to us and plop its butt right back down by my feet, meowing again like he wanted my attention.

"Don't look at me like that," I snapped, not giving a single damn if I looked like a lunatic, standing on the side of the road, arguing with a cat. "This is all your fault. I don't want to hear it."

All of a sudden, the mangy feline began to purr, and proceeded to rub its head against my calves.

"Hate to break it to you, sweetie, but it looks like this little bugger's claimed you."

"Oh, no. I can't ..." I took a step backward, but that cat followed, purring contentedly as it curled around my foot and lay down.

Bev chuckled lightly. “I’m not thinkin’ you have much of a choice.”

I had to admit, the damn thing was kind of cute, but ... “I can’t keep it. I don’t have a home for it. I’m kind of living out of a hotel room for the time being.”

“Redbud Inn?” Bev asked curiously.

“Yeah. Just until the work on my house is finished, but that’s still a while off.”

“Don’t you even worry about it,” she said, bending low to scoop the cat up off the ground. “Poppy’s the sweetest little thing. She won’t mind you havin’ a pet while you’re stayin’ there.”

I hesitated for just a moment before taking the cat she all but shoved into my arms. “I’m not sure ...”

“Sure you are,” she stated emphatically. “Every girl should have a pet.”

*A pet.*

I’d never in my life had a pet before. My parents forbade it no matter how many times I’d asked. I’d wanted one so badly that, when I was thirteen, I’d found a stray dog eating out of a dumpster and took it home with me. I knew my parents would lose their minds, so I did my best to hide the little thing in my room, sneaking it leftover scraps after dinner and only taking it out to use the bathroom while my parents were gone or had already fallen asleep.

While I was at school, I kept it in my bathroom and stuffed a towel under the door to try and muffle its whining. Then, on the third day, I came home and discovered he was missing. I was frantic looking for him. I could still remember the blank look on my mom’s face and the chill in her voice when she caught me searching.

*“If you’re looking for that ugly mutt, it’s gone.”*

*My eyes began to sting with tears I couldn’t let fall. If she saw, she’d yell at me for being so soft. “Wh-what did you do with him?”*

*She lifted that ever-present glass of wine to her lips and drank. "I had Bennett take him to the pound. He's probably being put down as we speak."*

I'd waited until I got to my room before breaking down, and that night I'd cried myself to sleep. But I should have known better. Bennett cared too much for me to ever break my heart like that.

After school the next day, he'd swung by his house before taking me home. As it turned out, he'd gone against my mom's wishes and decided to keep the dog himself. All because he knew how much I loved it. For years I'd go over to visit him every chance I got, and when he passed away from old age my senior year of high school, I'd been comforted by the knowledge that my sweet Bennett had given the old boy a great life, and that he'd known unconditional love from the both of us.

Forcing myself out of bad memories and back to the present, I looked at the soft, fuzzy bundle in my arms, and right there, on the side of the road, with my car in a freaking ditch, I made a decision.

"I'm gonna call you Crash."

Bev tossed her head back and let out a hoot of laughter. "Oh, that's just perfect!"

And it really was.

## Chapter Six

---

FARAH

THE GUY WHO SHOWED UP WITH THE TOW TRUCK LOOKED at my Mercedes sitting lopsided in the ditch before turning to me with a furrowed brow. “Anyone ever tell you not to swerve for animals?”

Hugging Crash tighter to my chest, I let out a heavy breath and mumbled, “Yeah, I might’ve heard that somewhere before.”

Fortunately, one of the blessings of being new and relatively unknown in this town was that I didn’t have anyone who could hold this over my head. If I’d been back home, Jase would have had a field day, giving me all kinds of crap. I never would have lived this down.

“Just hook the car up and get it back to the garage, Franky,” Bev said in a bossy tone, and with how fast he moved to do her bidding, it appeared he was used to it. A while later, my car was out of the ditch and hooked to his big truck. “Come on, Farah. I’ll give you and Crash a ride. Franky’ll meet us at the shop.”

Crash napped in my lap as Bev peppered me with questions, showing genuine interest once I told her I’d only moved to town a few weeks ago.

“I’ve been wonderin’ who bought the old Laughlin place,” she said when I told her about my new home. “People all over town have been talkin’ about that place finally bein’ scooped up, but no one really knew by who.”

“You’re looking at her,” I murmured while idly scratching Crash’s fuzzy head.

“That place was a real gem back in the day. So sad that somethin’ with a history like that fell into such disrepair.”

My ears perked up and I sat up a little higher in my seat, turning to get a better view of Bev. “History?”

She glanced to the side quickly, giving me a look of surprise. “No one’s ever told you the story of that place?” At the shake of my head, she let out a wistful sigh and began telling me how that magnificent house came to be. “It’s just the most romantic story. So back during the Civil War, Tennessee was pretty divided, and once the war ended, there was still a lot of bad blood. One of the town’s wealthy founders, Merle Carroll had a young daughter named Mary. Mary had gone and fallen in love with a man by the name of Jackson Laughlin. Problem was, Jackson was a poor former Union soldier, and Merle was a hardcore Confederate. He found out his daughter was in love with a man he viewed as the enemy and absolutely *refused* to allow them to be together. But Jackson wasn’t giving up. He was head over heels for Mary, and he was determined to make her his wife.”

“Oh my God,” I gasped, leaning in her direction as I eagerly awaited the rest of the story.

“Jackson barely had two nickels to his name, but every day, he’d make the trek through town to knock on old Merle’s door and ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage.”

“That’s so sweet!”

Bev smiled. “Yeah. I mean, of course Merle said no over and over again. Told Jackson that his little girl deserved better than some broke, penniless man who couldn’t give her the life and home she deserved.”

I was on the edge of my seat, literally and figuratively. “So what did Jackson do?”

“He told the old man he’d prove he could give his daughter a great life. He worked himself to the bone, doing any job he could, scrimping and saving every dollar, and while he was

doing that, he was also building Mary the home of her dreams.”

My jaw dropped as I sucked in a dramatic gasp. “No way!”

Bev’s lips tilted into a blinding grin as she looked over at me and winked. “Oh yeah. Built that house by hand. Took him forever, but once he finally finished, it was so grand, so beautiful, that even stodgy old Merle couldn’t bring himself to deny his baby girl a man who’d work his fingers to the bone—literally—to give it to her. They got married, he moved her in, and they had themselves a whole bushel of kids.”

“Wow,” I breathed, turning back to face the windshield. “Now I love it even more.”

“As you should. The house stayed in the family for generations until a little over twenty years ago when the bank foreclosed on it. Robert Laughlin had gambled away most of his family’s money, so he couldn’t keep up with the payments. On top of that, he was also a lazy slob, so the house was already falling apart. It was so bad already that even the few who could afford the place didn’t want to take on the work, so it just sat there for years and years. And now it’s all yours.”

Now it was all mine. A stunning home that had been built by a man for his woman as a show of love and devotion.

Oh yeah, I *totally* loved my new house.

While I allowed myself to swoon over one of the most romantic love stories I’d ever heard, Bev made a left turn, past a long fence into a large forecourt. The structure ahead of us looked like a typical mechanic shop, only on a much larger scale. The metal-sided building had five bays stretched side by side with what looked like an office at the very end. I thought nothing of it at first, that was until I looked at the big letters along the top of the building that spelled out Banks Body and Auto Repair.

My stomach sank and my palms grew clammy as I read and re-read the sign. “Banks?”

“That’s right, dear. It’s my family’s name.” *Oh fresh hell.* Did that mean ... No, it couldn’t. Fate had been so good to me

lately. She wouldn't possibly hand me this new potential friend if she was somehow related to the one man I'd been avoiding because he made me feel things that scared the absolute shit out of me.

I mean, Banks was a relatively common last name ... *right?*

It had been two days since I *literally* ran into him at the inn, and in that time, I'd probably thought about him at least twenty times ... a day. God, I was a mess.

She parked her car and killed the engine just as the door I'd assumed led to an office opened, and a big man around her age stepped out. He was the kind of attractive that you knew just by looking at him, he'd been a panty-burner back in the day. I sat and stared up at him as Bev opened her door and climbed out. Before she made it past the hood, he'd come down the set of stairs and was right in her space, hooking a long, solidly built arm around her waist and pulling her against his front.

He kissed her with a possessiveness I'd never in my life experienced with a member of the opposite sex before pulling back and looking down at her with a cat-that-got-the-cream grin.

Shaking off the envy at seeing this big, powerful man so clearly besotted with his wife, I grabbed the door handle and pushed it open, laying a snoozing Crash on the passenger seat before making my way around the front of Bev's car.

Sensing my presence, the big man's head came up and his lips pulled into a smile beneath his beard when his eyes landed on me. "Well hey there, beautiful."

"Honey, I want you to meet Farah. Saw her get into a bit of an accident on the road earlier, so I called Franky to tow her car here. Farah, this is my husband, Cliff Banks, but everyone just calls him Banks."

"Hi, Banks. It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise, sweetheart," he replied, then his brows tugged into a deep V. "You okay? Not hurt or anything?"

“I’m fine, thanks. But that’s more than I can say for my car.”

“A cat darted right out in front of her as she was drivin’,” Bev told her husband. “She swerved to miss him and ended up in a ditch with a blown-out tire.”

That frown remained in place as his deep, rumbly voice declared, “You should never swerve to miss an animal, darlin’. That’s all kinds of dangerous.”

I curled my lips between my teeth and bit down to keep from laughing at the utter ridiculousness of being scolded by three different people at three separate times for braking for a cat. I thought I’d been spared the lectures since no one here really knew me. I guess I was wrong.

“Think that’s a lesson learned, darlin’.” Bev looked at me with humor dancing in her eyes, and I felt my own doing the same. Then in the blink of an eye, our shared look was broken with just one word.

“Hummingbird?”

My skin broke out in goosebumps at the sound of Cannon’s rich, smoky voice. My head whipped around to where he was coming out of the closest open bay. A pair of blue coveralls were covering his legs with the sleeves tied around his lean waist, giving me the perfect view of the white tee that was streaked with black smudges stretching across his powerful chest and shoulders. His tattoos were on full display, and I had the insane urge to reach out and trace the intricate designs with my finger. Those infamous motorcycle boots were on his feet, and he was wiping at his hands with a rag, drawing my attention to his long, thick fingers.

The instant his gaze landed on me, a smirk stretched across his face, and he looked me up and down just like he had that very first night at the bar. My whole body blushed at his perusal. Hell, even my legs felt like they were on fire beneath my jeans.

“Gotta say, this is a pleasant surprise,” he said as he made his way in my direction, stopping just a few feet away.

Bev's head swiveled as her eyes bounced between the two of us. "You two know each other?"

"No." I answered at the same time Cannon said, "Yes."

Bev and Banks looked between the two of us with open curiosity.

"I'm a waitress at Bad Alibi. We've seen each other there, but that's it," I added quickly, ignoring the way Cannon's eyes on me felt like lasers against my skin. "We don't actually *know each other*, know each other ... if you know what I mean."

God, now I was rambling and saying stuff that didn't make any damn sense. That was how off balance he made me feel.

"At least not yet."

I whipped around at the proximity of his voice. I hadn't realized he'd moved closer until I felt his breath whisper across my ear and neck and the press of his hand against the small of my back. The heat from his large palm radiated through my shirt, and it felt like my skin was on fire.

Other than the occasional hug from Jase and Bennett, I hadn't been touched by a member of the opposite sex for eight long months. Much to Lance's detriment, that had included sex. After what that man had taken from me that night, I hadn't been able to bring myself to be intimate, not even with my fiancé, something my ex couldn't—or more to the point, *wouldn't*—understand.

But right now, standing beneath the sun in the forecourt of a garage, I wasn't frozen with panic. As a matter of fact, that simple touch lit me up inside. And that terrified me for a very different reason. I wasn't ready to feel something like this. I wasn't ready to be attracted to another man. My body and my mind were at war with each other when it came to Cannon Banks, and I felt like I was being torn in half.

The two of us had entered into a staring contest I hadn't realized was taking place until Banks cleared his throat.

I shook off the daze Cannon managed to put me in any time we were near each other and took a step back, breaking

from his hold and clearing my throat as I struggled to get my body in check.

When I looked to the older couple, I discovered they were watching the interaction between Cannon and me with far too much interest. And for some reason, Bev looked positively giddy as her gaze ping-ponged between us.

“Farah here got herself into a bit of an accident earlier,” Banks explained to Cannon. “Franky’s on his way in with the car. You got time to have a look at it?”

“I’ll take care of it,” he answered then turned his attention to Bev. “Ma, why don’t you take Farah into the office? Get her some coffee or somethin’ while you guys wait.”

*Ma.* Well, there you had it. Cannon wasn’t just related to the sweet woman who’d been a blessing earlier. He was her freaking son. *Damn it all to hell.* I guess six degrees of separation wasn’t that uncommon in a small town like this.

Bev moved close and stood up on her toes, placing a kiss on Cannon’s scruffy cheek. “All right, honey. See you in a few.”

With that, Bev took my hand and began leading me away.

In spite of my brain screaming at me not to, I couldn’t help but look back over my shoulder just in time to see Cannon’s eyes trail from my ass to my face. Then he gave me a wink that made a whole swarm of butterflies erupt in my belly.

*Oh yeah,* I thought as I followed after Bev. *This man is all kinds of dangerous.*

## Chapter Seven

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FARAH

I'D DONE MY BEST TO IGNORE BEV'S KNOWING GRINS AND sideways glances as we hung in the office and waited for news of my car. It was almost as if she could read every thought in my head and knew just how discombobulated her son made me.

Problem was, I didn't have anything to distract me. My phone was now a worthless block of plastic and glass, and Crash—who I'd gotten out of Bev's car—was still sleeping. The lazy bastard.

“So,” Bev started, breaking the silence that had enveloped us as the minutes ticked by. “Do you have a boyfriend, Farah?”

“Uh ... no. I don't.”

Her eyes flashed as her grin grew bigger. “That's surprising. A gorgeous girl like you. I'd have thought some lucky man would've snatched you up by now.”

I didn't mention Lance, knowing that would only lead to more questions I had no desire to answer, so in response, I simply shrugged.

The expression on her face indicated she wanted to delve deeper, but before she had a chance, the door to the office opened and Cannon stepped inside, minus the coveralls this time.

“Hey honey,” Bev said brightly. “So what's the damage?”

He planted his hands on his trim hips and answered, “Well, the good news is, there’s only some minor scratches to your front fender, nothin’ that can’t be buffed out. And you didn’t damage the front axle.”

I released my bottom lip from between my teeth and asked, “And the bad news?”

“Your rim is bent to shit, so it’s not gonna be as easy as just replacing the tire.”

“O-kay,” I dragged out. I was clueless about car repairs, but if I had to guess, a bent rim wasn’t a good thing. “So what does that mean? Can you fix it?”

“Can’t fix a bent rim, Hummingbird. You’re gonna need a new one. And seein’ as we don’t get a lot of Mercs comin’ through here, we don’t have one on hand. I gotta order one.” His attention shifted over to a snoozing Crash, and when they returned to me, I saw the admonishment in his gaze loud and clear. “That the cat you swerved for?”

“Yes.” I quickly lifted my hand to cut him off, knowing full well what was coming next. “And before you say it, I’ve already heard it from Bev, Banks, *and* Franky, so I don’t need a lecture from you too.”

Bev’s laughter sounded from behind me as Cannon grinned. And *damn* it was a good grin. “Well, since you learned your lesson, I’ll let it slide, Hummingbird.”

Ignoring the heat that endearment caused to spread through my limbs, I kept my expression flat as I asked, “So how long do you think it’ll take for a new rim to come in?”

He lifted a tattooed arm and scratched his jaw, causing his thick bicep to stretch the sleeve of his shirt. “Hard to say for certain, but I’ll put a rush on it, try and get it here in two or three days.”

It wasn’t the most ideal situation. Fortunately, the inn was close to Bad Alibi, so I could easily walk to and from work.

As if reading my dismay, Cannon spoke again, pulling me from my musings. “You on at the bar tonight?”

I gave my head a shake. “I don’t have a shift until tomorrow.”

“All right. Just gimme a few minutes and I’ll give you a ride back to the inn.”

My stomach twisted as he began to turn away. I struggled enough as it was just having this man in the same building, there was no way I could handle riding in a car with him. “You don’t have to do that.” I spoke quickly, bringing him to a stop. “I mean, I appreciate the offer, but I’ve already taken enough of your time.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bev interjected. “He’s happy to help. Aren’t you, sweetheart?”

“Really,” I continued to argue. “I can just walk. I’m sure the inn is close.”

“Carryin’ that cat the whole way?” Bev let out a snort. “Absolutely not.”

Panic began to swell in my chest, however, it wasn’t the debilitating kind I’d been dealing with recently. “I could call a cab. I don’t want to put anyone out.”

Once again, Bev was there to shoot me down. “Didn’t you say your phone was broken?” I looked in her direction just in time to see triumph spread across her face. “It’s settled,” she said, hooking her purse over her arm. “Cannon will give you a ride back.” Before I could object further, she moved to Cannon and lifted up, placing another kiss on his stubbled cheek. “Now, I’m off. I’ve got some errands I have to run. It was lovely to meet you, Farah. I’m sure we’ll see each other again soon.”

With that, she waltzed right out of the office.

“You done tryin’ to avoid me?”

At Cannon’s question, I pulled my eyes from the door Bev had just disappeared through. He moved in, coming to a stop less than a foot away. It wasn’t close enough to be a total invasion of my personal space, but it was enough that I could smell crisp, clean cotton mixed with a hint of motor oil. It

shouldn't have been a pleasing combination, but on him it *really* was.

“I-I'm not—”

“Yeah, you are.” His words briefly pulled my attention to those full lips. “I'm not blind. You've been bustin' your ass to avoid me since the first night you saw me at the bar.”

My chest rose on a stuttered breath as I stared up into those golden-flecked eyes “Th-that's not ... I mean ... I don't—”

“Either I make you nervous, or you've got a problem with me. So what is it, Hummingbird? You nervous?” His head lowered at the same time he reached up to tuck a strand of hair that had fallen from the knot at the top of my head behind my ear. “Or does the princess who drives a car worth almost a hundred grand think she's too good to talk to a mechanic?”

“Of course not!” My back shot straight and a chill skated over my body at the implication that I was just as shallow and judgmental as my parents. “I'd never think something like that,” I snapped, the offense clear as day in my voice. “I didn't even *know* you were a mechanic until just a little while ago. Not that it would've mattered because I think it's a perfectly respectable profession. Without mechanics, idiots like me who brake and swerve for cats would be screwed! And that car was a gift. I didn't realize how much it cost until you pointed it out, but now that I do, even I'll admit that's a ridiculous amount for someone to spend on a vehicle. I'd never judge someone on how they choose to live their lives. For crying out loud, I might drive a Mercedes, yes, but I'm a waitress at a bar! What kind of person would that make me to look down my nose at someone else for their chosen profession?” I didn't give him a chance to answer. “I'll tell you. It would make me a *terrible* person. And I'm not a terrible person. Not to toot my own horn or anything, but I'd like to think I'm pretty nice. Or at least I try to be. So I'd never think I was too good to associate with you. That's absolutely ridiculous!”

By the time I finished my rant, my chest was rising with each heavy breath I pulled in.

“So I make you nervous,” he said in a low, hypnotic voice as he stepped even closer. “Tell me, Hummingbird. Why do you think that is?”

Oh sweet, merciful hell. I’d really stepped in it this time. Just like I had during my first encounter with Darla, I’d gone off on a tangent and revealed more of myself than I should have. I just couldn’t stand the thought of him thinking so little of me, and I’d gotten lost in an effort to make my point.

“I ... it’s not ...” I trailed off, unable to formulate words with him standing so damn close.

His lips tugged up into a smirk, and once again, my focus was pulled their way. “I’ll give you some time to think on that,” he said with a rough chuckle. Then he stood tall, grabbed my hand, and started leading me out of the office.

“Wait!” I cried out, pulling him to a stop so I could bend down and scoop up the still-snoozing feline. Once I had him tucked in the crook of my arm, I chanced a look in Cannon’s direction and nodded. “Now I’m ready.”

His eyes glinted with amusement as he looked from the cat to me, but he didn’t say a word as he took my hand again and pulled me out of the office and down the steps to the lot. He stopped beside a matte black motorcycle and paused like he was giving it some thought before turning back to me and looking down at the cat in my arms, then spun to the open bay and shouted, “Yo, Shorty! Toss me the keys to the Ford!”

A few seconds later, a man who was *definitely* short popped out of the bay and threw a set of keys in Cannon’s direction. He easily tagged them out of the air with one hand and began pulling me farther along the garage.

“Was that your motorcycle?” When he brought me to a stop next to an old red pickup truck, I glanced back over my shoulder with curiosity and began chewing on my lip.

“You ever been on a bike, Hummingbird?” he asked, drawing my attention to him once again. When I shook my head in response, another smile stretched across his handsome

face. "I'll take you out another time. Can't have you tryin' to hold on to me while you got that cat in your lap."

"I don't know ..." I hesitated. The thought of being on a motorcycle was both exciting and terrifying at the same time, and as I looked back at Cannon's, I couldn't decide which feeling was stronger.

His hand came up, and he took my chin between his thumb and forefinger, turning my head to meet his gaze. "You'll love it, baby, I promise. One ride with me and you'll be hooked."

I kind of believed that, but I wasn't so sure it would be smart. I was a big enough mess as it was, thinking of sitting beside him in a truck. Being pressed against his back on a motorcycle might give me a heart attack.

Without another word, he opened the passenger door and guided me in. I watched with no small amount of fascination as his big, strong body rounded the hood and climbed in beside me. The moment he was seated, Crash hopped off my lap and moved across the bench seat to his side, leaning against Cannon's thigh as he lifted a front paw and began bathing it.

"Cute cat," he muttered, using his long index finger to give its head a scratch. The moment he did that, the damn thing started purring like crazy. "What's its name?"

"Crash."

At my answer, Cannon's head came up, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You named your cat Crash?"

I felt a grin of my own pull at my mouth as I shrugged. "Considering how I came to get him, it just felt right."

At that, he didn't just chuckle. Oh no, this time, his head fell back on a full-blown laugh that sounded so nice I couldn't help but stare. The thick column of his throat worked as the most attractive sound I'd ever heard washed through me, and I couldn't help but wonder just how much stronger that smell of clean cotton and motor oil would be if I were to press my nose against his neck.

Once he got a hold of himself, he turned to me and said, “It’s a good name, baby,” and my grin pulled even bigger.

As ridiculous as it was, for some reason his approval of something as stupid as a cat’s name settled in my chest and felt ... well, *really* good. “Thanks.”

I settled in as he started the truck up and pulled out of the forecourt, feeling a bit more at ease as the rumble of the engine vibrated through me, lulling me into a sense of comfort.

As I watched through the window at the scenery passing by, I couldn’t help but think about just how beautiful my new town was. Redemption was a biker town, no doubt about it. There were several stores that catered heavily to the motorcycle enthusiasts, and even the cutesy little boutiques sold clothing I imagined would be comfortable for a woman riding with her man. A lot of the buildings along the main strip had that old, retro saloon feel to them. The downtown area kind of reminded me of a modern-day *Tombstone*, nestled in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains.

Even with all the bad memories that plagued me from my upbringing, I couldn’t deny that Connecticut held plenty of beauty of its own, but it was nothing compared to Redemption, Tennessee.

I’d known for weeks just how amazing this place was, but I’d always been the one behind the wheel whenever I drove through, so I hadn’t been able to get the full effect until just now.

I was so lost in soaking everything in, I hadn’t realized we weren’t at the inn until Cannon killed the engine and I looked out the windshield to see we’d parked in front of a pet store.

“What are we doing here?”

He pulled the keys from the ignition and shifted to shove them in the pocket of his jeans before tilting his chin down at Crash. “You plannin’ on keepin’ him?”

“I was hoping to. If Poppy’ll allow it.” I reached across the seat, giving my new cat a scratch behind his ear. “I’ve never

had a pet of my own before.”

“Poppy’s good people. She’ll allow it, Hummingbird.”

Hope swelled in my chest and came through my voice as I asked, “You really think so?”

“Know so, darlin’. And since that’s the case, you’re gonna need some supplies for this little guy, yeah?”

“I—” Any other words I could have possibly thought of died on my tongue as I stared across the truck, my eyes suddenly stinging with impending tears. I’d been with Lance for years, and never once had he done something so thoughtful that it put me on the verge of crying. I’d grown up not realizing a woman should want more from her man. At best, my father treated my mom with cold indifference, so when Lance started showing those same traits even before his ring was on my finger, I thought nothing of it.

But after weeks in this new town, I’d witnessed Buck bend over backward for Darla. I’d seen male customers pull out their wives’ chairs. I’d watched couples in love slow dance to country ballads playing on the jukebox at the bar.

And now this.

It took several seconds to compose myself, and as I fought to keep the tears at bay, Cannon sat in silence, patiently waiting to follow my lead.

“You didn’t have to do this.”

“One thing you need to learn about me, baby; I never do anything I don’t wanna do. Now say ‘thank you,’ and let’s get this shit done, yeah?”

My tongue peeked out to wet my bottom lip just before my mouth pulled up into a smile. I wasn’t sure why, but I found his bossiness amusing. “Thank you, Cannon.”

“Any time, Hummingbird.” With that, he shot me a wink while pushing the driver side door open.

And as dangerous as it was, I might have swooned just a little bit.

## Chapter Eight

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FARAH

AS WE WALKED THROUGH THE AISLES OF THE LOCAL PET store, I held Crash against my chest tightly, like he was my own personal shield against all the curious glances Cannon and I had received since stepping through the automatic doors.

“All right, baby,” he spoke in that whiskey smooth voice of his as he brought the cart he was pushing to a stop in an aisle loaded with cat stuff. “Where you wanna start?”

“Uh ...” I glanced at the myriad of items lining the shelves. “Maybe ... food?”

Those beautiful hazel eyes sparkled with amusement as he stared down at me. “That a question?”

“Um, I don’t ...” I chewed on my bottom lip for a second. “I’ve never had a pet before. I’m not really sure what’s needed to take care of a cat.”

I watched in fascination as his chiseled features grew soft right before my very eyes. It was an *incredible* look on him. “That’s okay. Between the two of us, I’m sure we can figure it out. First, let’s think about what’s needed to keep that little guy alive, then we’ll take it from there.”

I let out a small laugh and followed him as he started down the aisle.

Things had gone smoothly for a while. We’d gotten a litter box, a couple toys, a small bag of dry cat food as well as a few cans of wet in case Crash preferred variety, but now I was at a

standstill in front of all the litter options, trying to decide between all the different boxes.

“Not that hard a decision, Hummingbird,” Cannon said, the laughter evident in his voice as he came to a stop beside me.

“You’d think,” I replied flatly as I studied the different labels. “But you’ve got easy clumping, then there’s odor eliminating. What I can’t figure out is why the hell there isn’t an option for both! I mean, that would be common sense, right?”

I saw his body shake with silent laughter from the corner of my eye. “Odds are, that is an option. But this is a small shop in a small town. My guess, they don’t carry a lot of the stuff you’d find in a bigger store.”

My shoulder slumped on a sigh. “Well, hell.”

“Go with odor eliminatin’, darlin’,” he offered. “Just my opinion here, but since you’re stayin’ at the inn for the time bein’, stink would be the bigger of the two issues.”

I gave that some thought as I chewed on my bottom lip again. “That makes sense.”

I reached for the big box of odor eliminating litter only to have him grab hold of my wrist to stop me. That simple touch sent an electric pulse up my arm and caused me to suck in a sharp inhale.

“That’s heavy, baby. I got it.”

“It’s okay. I can—”

“I’m sure you can. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna let you. You’re already carryin’ the cat. I got this.”

Since we’d left the garage I’d noticed countless times that he’d opened my door or place his hand on my back so I could enter first. He manned the cart as soon as we entered the store. He’d even gone as far as getting all the items on the higher shelves so I didn’t have to reach up.

“Um, wow. Th-thank you. That’s really sweet.”

He dropped the box into the cart, the bulk of it making all the other items inside jostle before turning back to me, his features having gone hard again. “It’s common courtesy. No need to look so surprised. A guy with tattoos can have manners also, you know. It’s not unheard of.”

My eyes went round as I spoke quickly. “Oh, no! I didn’t mean—it’s not that. I’m just not used to it, is all. I’m surprised, but it’s a pleasant surprise. The guys I grew up around ...” *Were spoiled, self-centered, insensitive assholes*, “weren’t really known for being thoughtful. Hell, I don’t think a single one of my exes would’ve even offered to pump gas for me. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

The tension melted from his frame, and I followed beside him as he started walking at a slow trek down the aisle once more. “Sounds like you grew up around a bunch of pricks.”

I let out an indelicate snort as I paused and reached out to run my fingers along a leopard print collar. “That’s a serious understatement.”

“That why you packed up and moved down here?”

Deciding against the leopard print, I reached for the nice brown leather one hanging beside it and pulled it from the holder as I tossed it in the cart and muttered, “One of the reasons.”

We started walking again as Cannon spoke. “Well, then I guess you made a good choice pickin’ Redemption. That kinda behavior is just how we do it down here.”

I couldn’t help but give Cannon a small grin as I looked up at him. That warmth I hadn’t been used to was becoming more and more commonplace with each day I woke up in this town, and I knew down to my bones that I’d been right in following my gut. “I *definitely* made a good choice.”

All of a sudden, Cannon’s hand came up to brush a strand of hair from my forehead as he returned my grin with one of his own that made my belly melt. “Glad you think so, Hummingbird.”

The softness in his tone coupled with that gentle touch and tender look was enough to expel the air from my lungs, and I suddenly understood just what Shane was talking about when she explained the Cannon Effect to me, because I was dangerously close to falling into its snare.

And I feared if that happened, I wouldn't be able to pull myself out.

### *CANNON*

SHE WAS PULLING AWAY.

I thought I was making progress. I'd seen Farah smile a thousand times during the nights I watched her at Bad Alibi, but that smile had never been directed at me, at least not until today. And while the ones I'd gotten weren't anywhere near as big and beautiful as the ones she gave her customers on a regular basis, I still felt it in my dick each time I earned myself one in the short time we'd been together.

But now she was back to freezing me out.

As I pulled into the parking lot of the inn, I chanced a quick glance in Farah's direction. Where she'd been relaxed and loose on the way to the pet store, she was now holding herself stiff as a board, pressed up against the side of the truck in an effort to keep as much distance between us as possible.

That pulse in her neck was pounding like crazy. I had no doubt that if I were to place my hand on her chest, I would have been able to feel her heart beating like a drum, and I would've been lying if I said I didn't get off on the fact I had such a strong effect on her.

It was clear as fucking day she wanted me. But her hardcore resolve at fighting the attraction was frustrating as hell.

The moment I pulled into the spot in front of her room, her hand was on the door handle, jerking it open in an attempt to escape quickly. "Thanks so much for your help today," she

mumbled, her eyes averted as she reached for the plastic bags full of shit for her cat that she'd kept between us the whole ride back. But I wasn't letting her off so easy.

I moved faster, killing the engine and scooping the bags up before she had a chance. "I got it."

"You don't have—"

I shot her a look that shut her up as I threw my door open. "Said, I got it, Hummingbird."

She pulled that plump bottom lip between her teeth, a move that drove me out of my goddamn mind, and nodded, looking resigned to letting me help. Not exactly the reaction I'd been hoping for, but I'd work with what I got.

With Crash in her arms, she climbed out of the truck and headed for her room. I waited behind her while she unlocked the door, and as soon as it was open, I made my way inside.

"Well, um ..." She dropped the cat on the ground and began fidgeting with her hands as a blush spread up from her neck. "Thanks again for everything," she repeated, staring anywhere but at me.

Ignoring her obvious attempt to push me out, I stepped farther into the room, dropping the bags on her bed and taking a long look around. "How long are you plannin' on living out of a hotel?"

She surprised me by answering instead of kicking my ass out. "Hopefully not much longer. It depends on when the work on my house is done."

I stopped my perusal to look back at her in surprise. "You got a house?"

The topic of her house seemed to perk her up. That iciness in her demeanor melted a bit, just as it had back at the store, and the small grin that pulled at her pink lips made my dick stir behind my jeans. "Yeah. This amazing old Victorian on Windmill Road."

My eyebrows slammed down in a deep frown. "Jesus Christ. Please tell me that's a fuckin' joke."

Her forehead pinched and her head tilted to the side in confusion. “No. I’m serious.”

“Farah, baby, that place is a goddamn pit. There’s a reason it’s been sittin’ empty for more than two decades now. It’s a fuckin’ death trap.”

For some reason, that statement filled her with excitement, and her face grew animated in a way I’d never seen before, and damn if it wasn’t fucking stunning. “Oh, I know! It was a disaster! The place had to be ripped down to the studs.”

“Who’d you get to work construction?” I asked. She was a single woman, living in a new town, and there were assholes everywhere that wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of her.

“Clay Morrison. So far, he and his guys have done an incredible job. I swear, Cannon, if you saw it today, you wouldn’t even recognize the place!”

She did a little hop and clapped her hands together, and I felt my frown fade away. “I’m glad, baby. Clay’s a good guy and does incredible work. You chose well.”

“I went with my gut.”

I arched a brow and looked at her curiously. “Huh?”

She began moving around the room, her voice full of life as she paced and explained, “All my life other people made decisions for me, and most of the time I hated those decisions. I mean, you saw my car. How ridiculous is that car?” Just like back in the office at the garage, she’d gone off on another tangent, asking questions she gave me no chance of answering. “When I moved here I promised myself I wasn’t going to let anyone else influence my decisions, I was going with my gut. That Victorian might’ve been an eyesore, but as soon as I saw it, I just knew, you know? I knew that was supposed to be where I lived. And then your mom told me the history of the house earlier today, and it made me even *more* sure that I’d picked right. It was the same with the bar. I was just driving by and saw the help wanted sign. So when I had to hire a contractor to restore it, I went with my gut. I’m just glad to know I made the right choice.”

The woman was hot enough to make me hard with a single look, but when she got like this she was something else entirely. Something so much more.

When she finally stopped talking, she sucked in a much-needed breath and turned to look at me with a shy, nervous grin. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“When you ramble like that, all I can think about is how much I wanna kiss you.”

*FARAH*



MY BRAIN MALFUNCTIONED and my lungs stopped working and began to burn with the need to exhale. I couldn't seem to get anything to work right as his words played on a continuous loop in my head.

“Wh-what?” was all I managed to get out once I was able to speak.

The room suddenly felt far too small. He was so ... so ... *big*, his presence so consuming that it took up all the space.

The smell of clean cotton and motor oil filled my nose as he moved toward me. He was so close his gorgeous face was all I could see, and with each second that passed, I felt myself drowning in those golden hazel eyes. “I said I wanna kiss you.” The heavy rasp of his voice made my toes curl at the same time anxiety gripped at my chest. He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, letting his fingers linger on my skin, slipping down until they caressed the pulse in my neck. “Your pulse is racin’ again, Hummingbird. Wonder why that is.”

For a second, I was convinced he was about to kiss me, and as much as that thought terrified me, I found I was also excited. But instead of lowering his head toward mine, he dropped his hand and took a step back.

“I’ll be here tomorrow to pick you up.”

My eyelids fell in a slow blink. “Huh?”

“Tomorrow, baby. I’ll swing by around ten to pick you up.”

Now that the fog of his closeness had worn off, I felt a chill slide against my skin. “But ... why?”

“Heard Ma say your phone’s broken. I’ll take you to get a new one. And I’ll be on my bike, so even though the sight of your legs in shorts is a goddamn wet dream, need you to wear jeans, yeah?”

*Oh God.* He remembered what my legs looked like in shorts. And more to the point, he *really* enjoyed the way they looked. I shouldn’t have liked that, but I did.

*Not smart, Farah.*

“Cannon, you don’t—”

“Ten, Farah. Be ready.”

With that, he walked out of my room, leaving me completely flustered. I stood rooted to the spot as I listened to the rumble of the truck coming to life, and it was only once the sound faded into the distance that I was finally able to move, heading over to lock the door.

Once that was done, I spun around and collapsed back against it, pulling in my first full breath in the past few minutes.

My hands shook as I reached up to rake them through my hair. One touch, one *almost* kiss, and I was a goddamn wreck.

No doubt about it, there was no *way* I was getting on the back of his motorcycle tomorrow. Even though there was a part of me that really wanted to. I couldn’t handle it. My mind was a swirling disaster after one encounter.

The only thing left to do was go back to my original plan.

I was going to avoid Cannon Banks like my life depended on it. I had to ... for the sake of my sanity



I SPENT the rest of the evening trying to decompress. I took a long, hot soak in the tub. I poured some essential oils in the

water, hoping they would help me de-stress, lit a couple of candles I'd gotten from Poppy—who, by the way, was totally okay with me keeping Crash, and might have fallen even more in love with him than I had—and placed a damp cloth over my eyes to block out the light. I stayed in there until the water turned cold and the rumble of my hungry stomach would no longer be ignored.

Wrapped in the cozy robe that came with the equally cozy room, I padded on bare feet out of the bathroom, lit my lavender candle, and used the landline in the room to order Chinese takeout.

When I'd first moved to Redemption, I was a little worried there'd be a lack of takeout options, and I was excited to discover that my fears were unwarranted.

Once I finished with that, I dialed Jase's number. If there was a soul on the planet who could sooth the turmoil rolling through me like my chest was one big wave pool, it was my big brother.

The second his deep voice came ringing though the line, I felt the tightness in my chest begin to ease.

“Hey, bub. Did I catch you at a good time?”

“Farah? Jesus! I've been going out of my mind all day! Where the hell have you been, and why aren't you picking up your cell? I was this close to getting on a goddamn plane.”

It took some effort, but I managed to swallow down my giggle. He'd been overprotective for as long as I could remember, and it only made it worse whenever I laughed. “I'm so sorry. I would've called you earlier, but ... I kind of broke my phone. It's been a day.”

“How the hell did you break your phone?”

I blew out a breath and rolled my eyes to the ceiling. “I might have thrown it across my car after listening to a voicemail from Lance.”

“What the fuck?” He barked so loud I had to pull the phone from my ear.

“Jase—”

“That’s a joke, right? Tell me that’s a fucking joke.”

A tension headache began pulsing behind my temples. “I wish it was.”

His voice came out as a growl. “That motherfucker. He’s got some balls. What did he say?”

I relayed my ex-fiancé’s insulting message, then waited as Jase raged through the line. “I’m gonna kill that son of a bitch. I swear to God, I’m gonna kill him.”

“Jace, just calm down.”

“Fuck calm!” he thundered. “Who does he think he is, talking to Mom and Dad? Christ, I hate thinking of all those years you were with that prick.”

“Bub, just relax, it’s not like I plan on calling him back. I’ve got nothing to say to him, and I’m pretty sure you’ve reached your quota on cuss words for like a year.”

“I’m a man, sweet pea. Hate to break it to you, but we don’t have a quota. It’s just how we are. And you just admitted to breaking your phone. Act as casual as you want now, but we both know you’re full of shit.” I lifted the candle to my nose and inhaled deeply to try and calm my frayed nerves. “You’re sniffing that candle of yours, aren’t you?”

My forehead pulled into a frown as I put the candle back on the bedside table and grumbled, “No. Shut up, stupid.”

My brother’s bark of laughter filled my ear. “You’re such a grownup, Farah. Why I’d ever think I needed to worry about you is beyond me.”

I let out a laugh of my own and felt the last of that tension melt away just as a knock sounded on my hotel room door. “All right, jerk. As much fun as this is, my dinner’s here, so I should let you go. I’ll call you tomorrow as soon as I get a new phone.”

“All right, sweet pea. Enjoy your dinner. And if that prick calls you again, you let me know.”

“Don’t do anything,” I said in warning, my chest clutching at the thought of my brother doing something that could get him in any kind of trouble. “I’m serious, Jase. Just leave it alone, okay? And don’t tell Bennett.”

“I won’t.” His answer was immediate. *Too* immediate, and I knew him better than to think he’d ever agree to something so easily.

“Promise me, bub,” I pressed, knowing that would work.

His voice grew soft as he replied sincerely, “I promise, little sis. But I’m serious. I need to know if he keeps bothering you, okay?”

“I promise too.”

That answer seemed to put him at ease, and I heard him let out a heavy sigh. “Thank you, sweetheart. Means a lot to me.”

We shared “I love yous” then hung up, and I spent the rest of the evening enjoying outstanding Chinese food.

## Chapter Nine

---

FARAH

MY STOMACH RETCHED AT THE FOUL STENCH OF CIGARETTE smoke.

*“Now we’re gonna have a little fun.”*

I came awake with a start, shooting to sitting as the nightmare gripping me tightly. Clenching the covers in my fists, I dug my toes into the mattress and concentrated on deep breathing.

*“Warm sheets, soft bed, clean cotton, and motor oil.”*

That last one ripped me from the clutches of my dream faster than I’d ever come out of it before. My eyes shot open, and I looked around the empty room as my chest heaved with each labored breath I took. I hadn’t realized until that moment the smell I’d come to associate with Cannon was still lingering in my room from the night before, and not only that, but it had helped ground me more than the lavender candle ever had.

Pulling my knees to my chest, I rested my forehead on them and wrapped my arms around my legs. *“Shit.”*

A weight hit the bed, followed a second later by Crash’s soft, rumbly purr.

Uncurling from my protective ball, I reached out and stroked his downy head. *“I’m all right, buddy. Just a bad dream.”*

He let out a meow and butted his head against my thigh. The comfort he was unknowingly giving me worked wonders

to calm my rapidly beating heart.

“You’re kind of a sweetie, aren’t you? When you aren’t making people drive their cars into ditches.”

In response, Crash rolled onto his back like a dog, telling me clear as day he wanted his belly rubbed.

I laughed and did as he not-so-subtly demanded, all the while, thinking back to yesterday with Cannon and that almost kiss at the end.

If I were being honest with myself, I’d wanted that kiss. For months, I’d cringed at the thought of male affection, but I’d wanted to feel Cannon’s lips on mine with a desperation so fierce it shocked the hell out of me.

Even before that awful night, the intimacy between Lance and me had been laughably absent. Our sex life had never been passionate. I was barely more than a body that he could roll over in the dark of night, rut on top of for a bit, and groan out an orgasm before I’d ever been close to getting off. If I thought back on our relationship, nowhere in those careless, quick couplings was there any kissing.

Maybe that was why I’d been so aloof when I walked in on him screwing my supposed best friend, Felicity, in the bed we’d bought together. The truth was, when I opened those doors and saw her on all fours with him bent over her back, drilling into her from behind, I’d barely flinched. I didn’t care that my fiancé was cheating, that he was betraying me with my friend. I didn’t care that he was showing more passion in those handful of seconds I’d witnessed than he ever had in our entire relationship. If anything, I was relieved that it was officially over between us. I simply slipped his ring off my finger, placed it on the dresser, and mumbled something about having movers come to get my things before turning and walking away.

And that was the end of it. Just like that. No tears, no heartbreak, no screaming or yelling or raging, at least on my part. For me, walking away was easy. I didn’t love him. I wasn’t sure I ever had. But one month after I’d been released from the hospital, he’d shown himself to be the worst kind of

human. When he got in my face one night because I couldn't bring myself to have sex after what had been taken from me, ranting and raving about how a man had needs, and enough time had passed that I should be over it by now, any small, niggling feeling of affection that *may* have been there died instantly.

But there was something in me, deep in my gut, that told me just a kiss with Cannon Banks would be a million times more combustible than anything I'd ever gotten from my ex, and I wasn't sure I could survive that. Not after I'd been so broken and was just starting to piece myself back together.

Turning from Crash, I glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand and nearly had a heart attack.

I hadn't slept past seven in the morning in months, but the red digital numbers showed it was already a quarter to ten. Cannon would be at my door in fifteen minutes, and I couldn't be here when that happened.

Much to Crash's displeasure, I threw the covers off and scrambled across the mattress, crawling on all fours and falling off the end of the bed in a heap of frantic limbs. I quickly brushed my teeth, splashed some water on my face, and threw on a pair of jeans and a plain V-neck tee. Slipping on another pair of flip-flops, I grabbed my purse, shoved my room key into my back pocket, and hightailed it out the door and across the parking lot toward Poppy's house with barely five minutes to spare.

Poppy's voice greeted me as soon as the screen door creaked when I pulled it open. "Morning, babe. I was wondering when you'd be by. Your insomnia must have—" The words died and concern twisted through her expression when she turned from the stove and got a good look at my frantic state. "Oh my God. What's going on, Farah? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Before I could answer, thunder rumbled through Poppy's open windows. We both looked out just as that matte black motorcycle I'd seen at the body shop the day before came into view, and good *Lord*, did Cannon look fine straddling it.

“I promise I’ll explain everything later,” I spat out in a hurry. “But Cannon’s only a handful of seconds away from discovering I’m not waiting for him in my room like he’s expecting, and I need you to hide me.”

Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“If he comes here, just say you haven’t seen me.” I clasped my hands together in front of my chest and begged, “Please, Poppy. Pretty, pretty please? Do this for me, and I’ll buy you the stand mixer you were drooling over in that catalogue the other day.”

Her eyes went big and her lips parted in shock. “In Tiffany blue?”

“Yes! Whatever you want,” I replied quickly. I’d buy her that stand mixer in Tiffany blue for the simple fact that she’d been such a good friend since I moved to town. But if she did this for me, I’d buy her a *dozen* stand mixers to show my appreciation.

She nodded in agreement, then turned to look out the window above the sink that gave her a clear view of the rooms and parking lot farther back on the property.

“Crap!” she cried, dropping the spatula in her hand. She rushed over to me and began pushing me down the hall off the kitchen. “He’s coming. Quick, hide!”

She shoved me into a little half bath nestled beneath the stairs and slammed the door behind me.

I collapsed onto the toilet and began chewing on my bottom lip nervously. This was ridiculous. I was a grown woman for Christ’s sake. Cannon had been nothing but incredibly nice and helpful, and here I was, hiding in a freaking *bathroom* to avoid him.

I’d reached an all new low.

After a couple of minutes, I rose to my feet and slowly crept to the door, pressing my ear against the wood. I heard the sound of muffled voices, one distinctly male, but no matter how hard I strained, I couldn’t make out what was being said.

I don't know how long I stood there, feeling like the biggest idiot in the world, but after a while, I heard the rumble of Cannon's motorcycle again and felt my shoulders sag. However, the relief I'd expected to feel at his departure was nowhere to be found. Instead, I felt like a terrible person who'd just let something great slip right through my fingers.

The bathroom door was flung open a few seconds after the sound faded, and I looked at Poppy with a sheepish grin. "Thanks for doing that."

She nodded and waved me out of the bathroom. "The coast is clear. Let's get some coffee, and you can tell me what the hell is going on."

I followed her into the kitchen and plopped down on the barstool she pointed to as she went about pouring us each a cup of coffee and doctoring mine to perfection.

She placed my mug in front of me and leaned onto her elbows across the island, settling in before ordering, "All right, girly, start talking."

"How ...?" I cleared my dry throat, trying to get some relief against the scratchy tightness. "How did he seem? Did he look ... mad?"

"Oh yeah," she answered with big eyes and a nod. "He looked pissed, and, I'm guessing here, but I think it's safe to assume he didn't believe me when I told him I didn't have a clue where you were."

"Damn." I let out a breath and lifted my mug to my lips.

"So what was that all about?" she pushed, excitement and curiosity lighting up her eyes. "I mean, why was he here to pick you up? And most importantly, why in the world did you hide instead of going with him? I don't know if you've noticed, but that man is *crazy* hot."

"Believe me," I mumbled around the rim of my mug. "I know."

After a fortifying gulp, I dove in. I told her *everything*, from how off-kilter I felt the very first time I laid eyes on him at Bad Alibi to literally running into him outside of room four

after hearing him and that woman having sex, then everything that had happened the day prior. By the time I finished, my mug was empty, and I felt like a boulder had been lifted off my shoulders. Jase and Bennett were the only people in my life I'd ever been able to confide in, but after my attack, they'd taken overprotective to a whole new level. There was no way in hell I'd be able to talk to either of them about something like this. I'd never had any girlfriends I could talk about guy problems with. If I'd tried, they would have either spread what I told them far and wide behind my back, or held onto it to use against me in some nasty way. But Poppy was unlike any of the cold-hearted, opportunistic women I'd grown up with, and being able to get the whole story off my chest was a relief I never expected.

“Oh wow,” she breathed, looking at me in complete shock before grinning huge. “You *like* him.”

My back shot straight so fast I nearly toppled off the stool. “*What?* No! No, it's not—”

“You do!” she chirped proudly. “You totally like Cannon Banks. So what I wanna know is why you're avoiding a guy you're crushing on.”

There was no use in denying it, I *did* like him. That was the problem. Dropping my head into my hands, I let out a pained groan while wishing a hole would open in the floor and swallow me.

“Hey, hey.” Poppy reached over, putting pressure on my wrists so I'd lower them. When I finally looked back up, her face was awash with concern. “I was just playing around. I thought it was cute how you acted all scared and nervous. I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to upset you.”

I let out a shaky breath. “You don't have anything to apologize for.”

Her head cocked to the side as she studied me inquisitively. “Is it the other women? Because I'd could totally get that. Okay, yeah, the guy sleeps around, but you should know, he only ever does that when he's single. I've known Cannon pretty much my whole life, and he's not a cheater.

When he's with a girl, he's *with* her. He just ... doesn't date a lot. But I think he likes you. I mean, I'm no expert, but I don't think a guy gets that mad at being stood up unless he really likes the girl."

"It's not that," I said with a shake of my head. "Well, not *totally* that." Even I couldn't lie to myself and say it didn't bother me, seeing him with all those other women, but it wasn't like I had any claim on the guy. Like Poppy said, he was single, so he wasn't *technically* doing anything wrong. "It isn't him. It's me. I'm a mess."

*And isn't that just the goddamn truth?*

Poppy's eyes shined with sympathy as she placed her hand on mine and gave it a squeeze. "Because of your ex?"

My eyes began to sting, and as frustrating as it was, I couldn't stop the tears from welling up as I sniffled. I'd told Poppy a little about my life before Redemption, but I only gave her the bare bones. I was engaged, he cheated, I broke up with him and moved here because it was time for a fresh start. I'd never spoken of that night nearly a year ago with anyone but my therapist back in Connecticut, not even to Jase and Bennett. They knew what happened because they'd been at the hospital, but we'd never sat down and actually discussed it.

"No, it isn't because of Lance," I murmured, starting down into my mug at the dregs of coffee swirling around the bottom. "I was attacked," I finally admitted, my voice so quiet I would have worried she hadn't heard had it not been from the gasp she sucked in.

There was no going back now. The three words that would start the avalanche of emotions were now out there, floating in the space between us, so I figured I might as well give her everything.

"I'd gotten my wedding dress from this exclusive place in New York, so I'd driven into the city for a fitting. Usually, I had our driver, Bennett, take me to things like that, but I'd gotten into this huge fight with my mom earlier that day about something stupid and just wanted to be by myself, you know? I wasn't in the mood to be around people. And as I was

walking to my car ...” I had to stop for a second, and once I had my bearings, my voice shook as I relayed the rest of the story. “He came out of nowhere. At first, I thought he was robbing me. I mean, you hear about purse snatchers in the city all the time. But ... that wasn’t the case.”

Her fingers clenched around mine as she whispered, “Oh my God.”

“I swear, Poppy, I can still remember his voice clear as a bell. I still remember what he smelled like. I think that might be the worst part ... remembering.”

“Farah, honey, you don’t have to—”

I kept going, feeling the need to get the story out like I was sucking snake venom from a wound. “I fought as hard as I could, but he was just so big. After he raped me, I thought that was it. I prayed that it was over and he’d just leave.” I lifted my shirt to reveal the small, faint scars. There were three just beneath my left breast. Those were the ones that punctured my lung. There were two more a bit higher that she couldn’t see through my bra, the two that had nearly ended my life.

I let out a humorless laugh as I lowered my shirt back in place. “My parents were pissed. They paid a cosmetic surgeon a fortune to remove the scars, but the doctor couldn’t get rid of them completely. Mom and Dad couldn’t stand the sight of them. It was just a reminder to them that I was tarnished now. I remember overhearing my mom ranting to my dad one night after she thought I’d gone to sleep. She was worried no man would want me with those scars on my body.”

“Oh, Farah—”

My voice came out bitter and abrasive as I continued. “I nearly died on the way to the hospital, and again in surgery, and all they cared about were the goddamn scars. Do you know they actually told me I was lucky that Lance still wanted me? And he was just as bad. He could barely look at me until I had them removed, and every time he saw them, he curled his lip in disgust.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks, but at that, Poppy's face flushed with anger. "Those fuckers didn't deserve you."

I choked on a burst of bewildered laughter. Hearing something like that coming from the sweet, soft-spoken woman in front of me was totally unexpected. I hadn't thought it possible after telling that horrible story, but I actually felt a smile tug at my lips at the rage blanketing her adorable features. "You know, Pop, a word like that coming out of your mouth just seems so wrong."

But apparently she didn't see the humor in the situation like I did. "This isn't a joke," she clipped furiously. "I'm being serious. Your parents are assholes. And that ex ... I wanna track him down and punch him right in the balls. I'm *glad* you left Connecticut and moved here. They don't deserve to breathe your air."

My laughter dried up and my smile faded away. That burn returned to my eyes, but this time, it was due to the sincerity in Poppy's voice. She actually cared about me. I'd never had a friend give a damn about me before, and I had to admit, it felt *amazing*.

"I'm glad too," I croaked, emotion making my throat thick. "But I'm glad because, if I hadn't I wouldn't have met you."

And that was the God's honest truth.

I had Bennett and Jase, and while they'd always been enough, it felt incredible to have more people in my life. I had Poppy. I had Darla and Buck and Shane. I had the customers I was getting to know at the bar. New Farah had *people*.

Like I'd told Cannon last night, I'd gone with my gut moving here, and it was the best decision I'd ever made.

"Did the police ever catch the guy who hurt you?" Poppy asked, bringing me back to reality.

I gave her a sad smile and shook my head. "There was nothing to go on. He'd worn a ski mask and hoodie so I couldn't give them any kind of description. They'd done a rape kit at the hospital, but the police couldn't find a match in the system."

“I’m so sorry, Farah. I hate that that happened to you.”

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“And I’m sorry I pushed about Cannon. If I’d known, I never would’ve—”

I waved her concern off. “It’s okay. And you were right. I do like him, and that’s why I’m so terrified. I hid from him in a bathroom for Christ’s sake. He’s the first man in a really long time I’ve felt any kind of attraction to, and I’m spiraling because of it.”

“That’s totally understandable,” she insisted. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through, but I will say this: the fact you’re here right now, rebuilding your life, is a testament to how incredibly brave you are. You might see your behavior as spiraling, but all I see is one of the strongest women I’ve ever had the privilege of meeting.”

I let out a small laugh, batting away the wet that had trailed down my cheeks. “You’re pretty awesome too.”

The sadness drifted out of her expression and she smiled. “Thanks. Now, stop sweating this Cannon business. When you’re ready, you’ll figure it out. In the meantime, we need to go get you a new phone.”

And with that, my new friend and I loaded up in her Jeep Wrangler and went to get me a new cellphone.

## Chapter Ten

---

FARAH

TUCKED BACK IN THE VERY CORNER AT THE END OF THE bar, I kept an eye on the door as I waited for Darla to fill my order.

It had been four days since I blew Cannon off, and I hadn't heard a single word from him. And with each day that passed, I felt worse and worse about my shitty behavior. I'd spent the majority of every shift at Bad Alibi watching the door, just waiting for him to come in, and each time it opened, only for someone else to enter, a ball of disappointment grew in my belly until it was so big I couldn't hardly think of eating.

I knew what was happening. I'd known for two days now, ever since I got a call from Banks that my car was ready instead of his velvet-voiced son.

Cannon was avoiding me. And I couldn't blame him one damn bit.

When Poppy dropped me off at the shop, Cannon had been in the first bay, bent over the open engine compartment of a Dodge Challenger. As if feeling my eyes on him, his head turned in my direction. The moment our eyes met, a tiny smile formed on my lips, and I lifted my hand in a wave. I'd shifted to start in his direction, but when he turned back to the car and resumed working like I wasn't even there, I'd chickened out.

He was done with me. I'd acted like a bitch and blown him off, and now he was done.

And *man*, that hurt.

I'd been psyching myself up to apologize, hoping I'd see him at the bar, but he hadn't shown.

I was so busy watching the door like a hawk, I didn't feel Shane approach until her tray hit the counter beside me and she let out a heavy sigh.

Smudges of purple stained the skin beneath her eyes, and while she still looked gorgeous, the exhaustion was obvious. "You okay?"

Her smile was tired and barely reached her eyes. "I'm okay. Just beat. Brantley hasn't been sleeping well the past few nights."

My heart tugged at the mention of Shane's son. I hadn't met him in person, but she'd shown me pictures, and he was the most adorable four-year-old boy I'd ever laid eyes on. I didn't want to pry, so I hadn't asked a lot of questions, but from what I'd been able to gather, Brantley's dad wasn't in the picture at all, and Shane was left holding the bag completely alone. I hadn't once heard her complain. She loved that little boy to pieces, but there were times like tonight, where the strain of being a single mother was written heavily on her face.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen her and wished there was some way I could help. One night she'd gotten a call and had to leave before the end of her shift. Her son was running a high fever, and the sitter had taken him to the emergency room. Shane had been in a panic, and seeing that broke my heart.

When Darla and I were closing the bar down and had gotten on the subject of Shane, she let slip that Shane wasn't just struggling with single motherhood, but financially as well. Apparently poor little Brantley got sick often, and Shane was being buried under the weight of all those medical bills.

I'd been sick to my stomach after hearing that. There I was, with more money than I'd ever know what to do with, and a woman I'd come to know and care about was silently drowning in debt. Since that night, Darla and I had worked out an agreement. I'd give her all my tips and she'd slip some into Shane's apron whenever she took her break, and at the end of

the night, when she closed us out and reconciled our float, she'd sneak in the rest.

It wasn't much, but it was the best I could do, at least until she got to know me well enough that she wouldn't balk at the thought of taking money from me. I just hoped that happened sooner rather than later.

"I'm sorry, Shane. Is there anything I can do?"

This time, her smile was bigger. "No, but I appreciate you asking, babe. Means a lot."

I wrapped my fingers around her forearm and gave it a squeeze. "Of course. I'm here if you need anything, even if it's just a babysitter for a few hours so you can catch up on sleep."

Her features softened in a way I'd only seen whenever she spoke about her son. She pulled my hand from her arm, but instead of letting it go, she wrapped her fingers around mine and held on tight. "You know, I wasn't quite sure what to think when you first started here. I was afraid you wouldn't stick, but I'm glad you did, and I'm even happier that I've gotten to know you. The fact that you'd offer something like that after everything you've already done means the world, Farah."

I frowned in confusion. "But, I haven't—"

The weariness on her eyes melted away completely and was replaced with appreciation. "I've always been good with numbers, babe. I keep a running tally of my tips every night. I know what you're doing."

A spike of worry lanced through my chest as I bit down on my bottom lip nervously before asking, "You're not mad?"

"That you're a good person who wants to help where she can?" She laughed with a shake of her head. "No. I've got my pride, but I'm not stupid. I know I need the help, and believe me, I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth."

My shoulders sagged in relief. "I'm so glad to hear that. I was worried you'd think I was overstepping. I mean, I know we don't know each other well, and some people get—"

Her hand gave mine another squeeze, cutting me off before I could go into full rant-mode. “I appreciate it, babe. More than you know. And I’m also totally planning to take you up on that babysitting offer. I just hope that, one day, I can return the favor and do something for you.”

With that, she grabbed her loaded tray and moved back out to the floor. She couldn’t have known, but she’d already returned the favor ten-fold just by being a friend to me.

I followed suit and was in the process of dropping off a bunch of empties when the door to the bar opened. Hope swelled in my chest when I looked over and saw Cannon making his way toward the pool tables, but that hope was immediately dashed when he continued across the bar without once looking in my direction.

Clay had shown up about an hour earlier and had joined Scooter, Danno, Fletch, and a couple other regulars, and now they were all greeting Cannon with the same back slaps and fist bumps he’d received the first night I saw him.

“Sweetheart?” At a gentle brush on my arm, my head turned to Jeb Franklin, a sweet old man who sat on the same barstool every night, from ten to close.

I offered him an apologetic grin. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Just askin’ if you were all right, darlin’. You spaced there for a bit.”

“No. Yeah. I mean, I’m good.” I gave my head a shake to try and get my words in order. “Sorry. Sometimes I just do that. Space out, that is. Bad habit.”

He smiled, showing several missing teeth beneath a scraggly beard that had seen *way* better days. He might not have been the most handsome man, but his kindness made him a million times more attractive than any of the men I’d known back in Connecticut. “Happens to the best of us, girl. You’re good now.”

I gave his shoulder a pat, collected my tray, and tucked it under my arm as I started for the pool tables. I’d chickened out

at the shop, but I'd been waiting for this moment for days, and I wasn't going to let it go by without apologizing. It was the very least I owed this man who'd shown me more consideration in one afternoon than I'd received from most other people in my life combined.

Cannon was sitting at the end of the cluster of tables next to the racks of pool cues. A different gorgeous woman had taken the chair next to him, and while she wasn't actually in his lap, she'd scooted herself close enough to invade his space.

He was smiling in her direction as she leaned in to whisper something in his ear. My stomach roiled at the sight of it, but when I looked closer, I saw one of Cannon's elbows was propped casually over the back of his chair, and the other was resting on the table. She was in his space, but he wasn't touching her.

Pasting a smile on my face, I did my best to keep the nervous tremble out of my voice as I said, "Hey guys," and gave the group at large a wave.

They turned to me, and the guys in the group greeted me with the same enthusiasm they had Cannon. Well, everyone *but* Cannon, that was. All I got from him was a cursory glance before being dismissed as he turned back to the leech of a woman at his side.

All right, so this was going to be harder than I thought. But that was okay.

Looking at him straight on, I asked, "Cannon, can I get you a drink?" proud and somewhat surprised that I managed to get the words out without stuttering or adding in a thousand "ums" and "uhs" into the mix.

Those hazels returned to me for all of three seconds. "Shot of Maker's and a beer backer. Whatever's on tap." Then he looked back to the woman. I stood motionless, my eyes unable to move from his profile.

"Um ..."  
*Shit. And here come the nerves.* "Anything else?"

He turned back to me slowly, giving me that once-over he always did, only this time, there was no heat in his eyes. In

fact, they were so cold I had to suppress a shiver. “No.”

At Cannon’s chill, my courage bolted so fast it practically left a cloud of smoke in its wake. I needed to take a step back, give myself time to regroup and think up my next move, so I exited the area and headed back to the bar to put in Cannon’s order.

As I waited, I reached into my apron and pulled out the keychain I’d gotten a couple days ago. The miniature Harley Davidson dangling from a silver ring was nothing special; hell, if I thought about it, it was pretty stupid, but when I’d gone into a little shop in town earlier that week, I’d spotted it hanging on a display, and immediately thought of him.

So, once again, I’d gone with my gut and bought it.

With Cannon’s drinks in hand, I headed back to the pool tables. I didn’t bother trying to get his attention this time. I simply placed the shot glass and beer on the table in front of him, then pulled the keychain out of my apron and put it down beside them.

I turned to move away with the plan to ask Shane to cover that section for the rest of the night when he spoke, his rumbly voice bringing me to a stop. “What the hell is this?”

I didn’t want to, I *really* didn’t, but I slowly spun on my heel to face the group once more, looking from the tiny Harley hanging from the end of Cannon’s index finger to his face. “It’s a keychain,” I answered.

“I see that. Care to explain why you left a cheap keychain on my table?” he replied in a cold tone I’d never heard him use before.

My stomach plummeted to the ground. I knew the little motorcycle was a lame idea, and I never should have given it to him. I should have just thrown it into the garbage and forgotten all about it. But I hadn’t. It was done, no sense in being embarrassed by it now.

“It’s just a gift.” I replied flatly. “I saw it and thought of you. I wanted to say thank you for everything you did for me with the car and ... well, just everything.” I managed to keep

my gaze pinned on Cannon, even as my cheeks burned with embarrassment and a hint of anger. I got that he was mad at me, and he had every right, but that didn't stop the righteous indignation from steeling my spine. Ignoring the curious eyes bouncing between us like they were watching a tennis match, I planted a hand on my hip and narrowed my eyes. "Is that a sufficient enough explanation for you?"

The iciness had melted from his features, but he didn't speak as he continued to stare up at me, almost as though he was at a loss for words.

That was fine with me.

"Anybody else need anything?" I asked in a clipped tone, looking at everyone but the chick latched onto Cannon like an anaconda.

"No, sweetheart," Scooter answered on behalf of everyone at the tables. "We're all set for now."

I offered the man I'd come to like a great deal a smile and a chipper, "Great!" Then I spun around and bolted down the steps, all the while telling myself it didn't matter if Cannon hated my gift.

When the truth was, it *really* did.

## Chapter Eleven

---

CANNON

“WHAT THE HELL MAN?” AT CLAY’S CLIPPED TONE, I turned to see he looked pissed. “What the fuck crawled up your ass?”

Scoot and Danno looked just as mad. Even Fletch, who was laid back and level-headed as hell, looked like he wanted to punch me in the nuts for how I’d just treated Farah. Then again, to hear those assholes talk, they thought Bad Alibi’s newest waitress was sweet as pie.

Ignoring all the stares, I focused on Clay and shrugged. “Don’t know what you’re talkin’ about. Nothin’s up my ass.”

“That why you just treated sweet Farah like she was a piece of dirt under your boot?” Scooter snapped. “For fuck’s sake. She got you a gift and you acted like an asshole.”

I lifted the shot glass to my lips and threw back the whiskey, savoring the burn as it made its way down my throat and settled in my gut.

“Swung by your folks’ place yesterday,” Danno said, chiming in on the action. “Know your mom’s met her. How do you think Bev’d react if she heard how you treated that poor girl?”

“Fuck me,” I grunted, sucking back a huge gulp of my beer. “How about you assholes get off my back, huh?”

I knew *exactly* how my mom would react. She’d skin my ass alive.

All she'd talked about since meeting Farah on the side of the road the other day was how sweet she was, how pretty, how amazing ... I hadn't seen her so goddamn hopeful for a setup since my childhood girlfriend Sage rolled back into town after years away. When that hadn't worked out, Beverly Banks had been disappointed, but now that she'd met Farah, hope had sprung eternal once again.

The fact of the matter was, I didn't need them jumping down my throat for how I'd acted. I felt bad enough all on my own.

I could see that pulse thrumming like crazy in her neck when she first approached, and that smile, even as shaky as it was, had my dick stirring to life. Being pissed was so much easier when she wasn't around.

Then she'd gone and given me that goddamn key chain.

*"It's just a gift. I saw it and thought of you."*

*"I saw it and thought of you."*

Hearing that she'd been thinking of me nearly did me in. It was just a fucking keychain, but when she explained its purpose, it took everything I had to keep my seat. All I'd wanted to do was throw her over my shoulder and carry her somewhere where I could *finally* taste that sweet mouth of hers.

I felt something on my chest and looked down to see a set of blood red nails dragging across my shirt. I'd been so wrapped up in feeling like a dick that I'd completely forgotten Hailey. She'd spotted me the moment I walked in and made her way over. I hadn't come to the bar looking for a hookup, but it was obvious she had. I'd been polite because the two of us had fun together a couple of times, but that had been the extent of it. I'd had a certain skittish blonde with a sweet smile on my mind for the past week, and no other woman had been able to hold my interest.

She leaned close, a seductive smile on her glossy pink lips. "Forget about the waitress, baby. How about we get outta here,

huh? We can head back to my place and have a little fun of our own.”

Grabbing her wrist, I removed her hand from my body and sat up straight. “Sorry, darlin’, that’s not gonna happen. But I’ll see you around, yeah?”

Her mouth turned down in a frown, but I knew the look was only from disappointment and not because there was something deeper on her end. I was up front with all the women I took to bed. They knew the deal and were just as happy with the arrangement as I was. We were all about fun, nothing serious. I never once lied or led a woman to believe there was a chance for more between us. And every woman I fucked was looking for nothing more than the no-strings fun I had to offer.

I could tell she was hoping to change my mind, but she didn’t push her luck. Another thing I made clear was that if I was done, I was *done*. I never went back.

And Hailey and I had been done for months.

She took the hint and bailed, no doubt going on the prowl for another man, and I sucked back more beer, all the while tracking my little hummingbird’s every movement.

I usually caught her watching me several times throughout her shifts, but after how I’d acted, she didn’t look back in my direction once. I watched as she smiled and chatted with other customers, resting her hand on their shoulder, or throwing her head back on a laugh, and the whole time my gut twisted into knots. I wanted those smiles, goddamn it.

“Thinkin’ our boy here knows just how bad he fucked up.”

I twisted my head and gave Danno a glare. “Christ, you guys are worse than Ma’s book club ladies. You all grow vaginas when I wasn’t around?”

Scot grinned at me over the mouth of his beer bottle. “Boy, talk shit all you want, but you just turned down available pussy so you could sit here and make googly eyes at another chick. For you, that means you’re either sprung, dead, or your dick quit workin’. Now, I see you breathin’ with my

own two eyes, so what is it? Sweet Farah got you all tied up, or you need one of Danno's little blue pills?"

Danno flipped Scooter off while the rest of the guys busted out laughing. Sometimes I really fucking hated the assholes I considered family.

Turning back to face the crowd, I scanned the area for Farah and found her leaning against the bar, listening to something Darla was saying. She nodded her head and reached over the counter. Darla dropped a set of keys in her open palm, then Farah moved down the hall that led to the back of the building.

"Where you goin'?" Clay asked when I pushed my chair back and stood a second later.

I pocketed the keychain while cutting my eyes his way. "How about you nosey assholes get yourself another round and stay outta my business."

I didn't listen to their heckling as I cleared the steps that took me to the main area and started toward the hallway. I had more important things on my mind than my buddies being pricks. Mainly, getting to my skittish hummingbird before it was too late.

*FARAH*



I WAS STANDING on my tiptoes, stretching my arm as high as I could to reach the bottle of vodka on the top shelf when the door to the stockroom slammed shut. Sucking in a startled gasp, I nearly knocked the bottle over when I whipped around.

Cannon was in my space before I knew what was going on, reaching up to grab the bottle before it could crash to the ground. "What's your game, Farah?" he clipped, slamming the vodka down on the shelf beside my head.

My heart was thundering in my chest as I looked up into those angry hazel eyes. "Y-you're not allowed in here."

“Answer the goddamn question. What kind of game are you playin’?”

My back went stiff as I narrowed my eyelids in a glare. “What the hell are you talking about? I’m not playing any games.”

He let out a humorless chuckle. “Bullshit.”

“It’s not bullshit!” I snapped. “Now get out. You can’t be in here.”

He stepped closer to me, and the already-small room was made even tinier by his big presence. Reaching into the pocket of his jeans, he pulled out the Harley keychain and held it between us. “I’m not leavin’ ’til you tell me what the hell you’re playin’ at.”

“I’m not playing at anything,” I cried, throwing my arms out at my sides.

“I was just trying to be nice!”

He took a step toward me, forcing me to back up and bump into one of the shelving units that lined the walls. “So you give me a keychain ’cause you’re tryin’ to be *nice*? After fuckin’ standing me up?”

My heart started pounding against my ribs so hard it hurt. I wanted to run. I wanted to chicken out and bail. Unfortunately, he was blocking the door, so I went with my second option. Attitude. “Fine! If you don’t want the keychain, give it back.”

“Cut the shit,” He clipped so fiercely I jumped.

“You know what? I don’t have time for this. I’ve got better things to do than stand here while you act like a *complete* asshole, so how about you head back to your latest conquest and leave me the hell alone.”

I wasn’t sure if the fire that flashed in his eyes just then was good or bad, but as he stepped closer, lifting his hands to rest them on the shelves at my head and effectively pinning me in place, I got the distinct feeling that I was the prey and Cannon was the hunter. I was very aware that this man could easily overpower me without even trying, but I wasn’t scared.

Something in my gut told me that he'd never hurt me, but that didn't mean the panic wasn't still lingering beneath the surface.

"You jealous, baby?" he asked, one corner of his mouth hooking up in a seductive smirk that would have worked on me had his question not reminded me of Shane's warning.

My back went straight, my shoulders squared, and I lifted my chin indignantly. "Hardly," I spat in return. "If anything, I feel sorry for her. Being one of *many* must really suck. I just hope, for her sake, she doesn't develop actual feelings before you toss her out like trash."

Cannon instantly took a step back, like he couldn't stand being so close to me. My stomach sank as his features grew hard as stone.

"You don't have the first goddamn clue what you're talkin' about," he clipped, his voice craggy with anger.

I regretted the words the instant they passed my lips, and I would have given anything to take them back. I was judging a man I barely knew on something that was none of my business. That made me no better than the people I'd moved here to escape.

"Cannon, I—"

"Hate to break it to you, darlin', but the only thing any of those women ever wanted from me was my dick, and seein' as we were all unattached, I was happy to oblige. You want me to apologize for bein' a single man and takin' what was offered to me, that's not gonna happen." His top lip curled in a look of disgust as he took me in one more time. "Christ, fuckin' sucks to find out I was so goddamn wrong about you, but I guess it's better to know now. At least I can stop beating myself up, tryin' to figure out a way to win you over."

He took a step back and started to turn, and I was hit with an overwhelming feeling of panic. Only this time, it was a very different kind of panic. This wasn't the freezing dread I experienced after each nightmare. This was something else. This was a palpable fear that I was about to let something that

had the potential to be really great walk out of my life, and the thought of that happening made me sick to my stomach.

I acted on instinct, my gut taking over. My lips parted and went on a tangent. “I’m sorry,” I blurted out quickly, sincerity dripping heavily from those two words. “I’m so sorry, Cannon. I made a snap judgement, and I knew as soon as I said it that I was wrong. That’s not me. I’m not a bitch, but that was a bitchy thing to say. I just ...” I paused, raking a shaky hand through my hair as I struggled to find the right words to show him just how bad I really felt. “I don’t know how to act or feel around you. You were so nice ... and helpful. You were being so sweet, and I freaked out. Me standing you up was a shitty thing to do. I’ve felt terrible about it for days. And yes, I know the keychain was stupid, but I just ... I needed to do *something*. I wasn’t trying to play games with you, Cannon. I’m trying to find my footing around you, but I don’t know how.”

The tension that had been pouring off of him in waves suddenly stopped. The atmosphere in the room shifted again, only this time, it wasn’t full of anger. It was ... something else.

The granite softened out of his features and his voice was much softer when he spoke again. “Tell me why you’re freaked out.”

“I—what?”

He cut the foot of space between us in half. He was all I could see and smell, and the effect was intoxicating. “You said you freaked because I was being nice. Tell me why, Hummingbird.”

“Because you scare me,” I admitted on a whisper, the words coming out before I could give them a second thought.

That seemed to surprise him. “What?”

My brain was screaming at me to shut the hell up, but I couldn’t. Keeping everything to myself was just too exhausting. “You scare me. You have since the first time I laid eyes on you.” I let out a pathetic chuckle while shaking my head. “You’re just so ... *you*.”

He arched a single brow and hit me with a panty-melting smirk. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No. It’s a good thing. A *really* good thing. But it’s overwhelming for me. And, yes, I’ll admit, I got a little jealous when I saw you with those other women, but I was wrong to judge you. Then, the other day at the pet store, you were being so nice, and I just ... I didn’t know how to handle it.”

The humor washed from his expression. “You don’t know how to handle someone being nice to you?”

I knew my eyes were filled with sadness as I shrugged and answered, “I didn’t have a whole lot of kindness in my life, at least not until I moved here. I’m trying to get used to it, but it’s hard for me.”

His fingers caressed my face, sliding from my temple to my jaw until his palm came to rest on the side of my neck. “Jesus, baby. You’re killin’ me right now.” I felt that touch in my bones, in my veins, in every single part of me. His touch made my blood sing and my belly flip. It felt so damn good that I leaned deeper into it. As soon as I did, he lifted his other hand and held both sides of my neck.

“I’m sorry I stood you up,” I said in a barely-there whisper. “And I’m even more sorry I acted like such a bitch tonight.”

His fingers pressed deeper into my skin. “I know, Hummingbird.”

“And I’m sorry for giving you a lame keychain.”

His chuckle reverberated through the small space. “It’s not lame. I love that you saw somethin’ and thought of me.”

I felt myself perk up a bit. “So you like it?”

“Yeah. I love it.”

A smile lifted my cheeks and stretched so big it made my face hurt. “Good.”

“Just one thing. My bike’s a Triumph, baby.”

My head tilting and my forehead pinched in a frown of confusion. “I don’t know what that means. What’s a

Triumph?”

At that, his chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh that made my skin tingle. “Fuck me, you’re cute. Triumph’s the make, baby. You come for a ride with me, I’ll show you the difference.”

My lips parted in surprise. “You ... you’d still take me for a ride? Even after—”

“Yeah, Farah,” he cut in gently. “More I think about it, the more I like the idea of bein’ the first man to put you on the back of his bike.”

He leaned in closer, and once again, I was sure he was going to kiss me. While there was a big part of me that wanted it, a really big part, I knew I wasn’t ready. Not yet.

But before that could happen, the door to the stockroom opened and Shane’s head popped in. “Hey, Darla sent me to —” Her mouth clamped shut and her eyes bugged out when she saw the clinch Cannon and I were in. Shane was the first to act. After several seconds of silence, her face lit up with a huge, knowing grin. “You know what? It can wait. I’ll just ...” Her words trailed off as she grabbed the knob and pulled the door closed.

“Oh my God,” I groaned over Cannon’s laughter, squeezing my eyes closed and letting my head fall back. “That was so embarrassing.”

“Farah, this is a bar in the middle of a biker town. I’m willin’ to bet good money, she’s walked in on way worse than this.”

He had a point. Shane had warned me to always announce myself before going into the bathroom. But her interruption was a wake-up call. As much as I didn’t want to leave the privacy of this little room, this was my place of work and I had a job to do.

“I really should get back out there,” I said softly. “Darla sent me in here for a bottle of vodka a while ago.”

He took a beat to scan my face as if he were gaging my level of freak out, and once he saw I was good, he took a step

back, grabbing the vodka bottle he'd put on the shelf behind me and handing it over.

“All right, Hummingbird. Get back to work. I'll see you out there. And think on that ride.”

He pulled the door closed behind him, and I took a second to calm my nerves and, most especially, my hormones. Then I left the stockroom, hoping Darla wasn't too pissed I'd taken so long.

## Chapter Twelve

---

FARAH

I ROUNDED THE BAR AT A FAST PACE, OFFERING DARLA A contrite look as I handed her the bottle. “I’m so sorry—” I started, but she waved me off with a chuckle.

“It’s all good. Shane told me you were ... wrapped up. No harm.”

And the embarrassment just wouldn’t end.

“Still. It won’t happen again.”

She let out an indelicate snort and a mumbled, “Uh huh. Right.”

With a roll of my eyes, I pulled the keys from my apron and passed them back to her, then I grabbed my tray and did a quick round of my section.

Shane was already standing there when I hit the bar. Ignoring her giddy expression, I spouted out my order to Buck. “Two Jack and cokes, three drafts, and one George Dickel, neat.”

Buck went about filling my order, and I kept my focus on him while Shane’s eyes drilled holes in the side of my head.

“So,” she dragged out once it became obvious I wasn’t going to initiate conversation. “Cannon Banks, huh?”

“It’s not like that,” I replied, finally giving her the attention she wanted.

She blew out a raspberry with her lips. “Oh please. Two hot, consenting adults shut in the stockroom with barely enough space between them for sunlight to get through? It’s *totally* like that. Good for you, girl. He’s all *kinds* of hot.”

My lips parted in surprise, and I felt that all-too-familiar heat hit my neck and spread up my face like wildfire. “Wasn’t it you who warned me off my first night working here?”

She waved my comment off like it was nothing. “Yeah, but that was before. Now I’m just excited for you.”

“Before what?”

Her face lit up as she leaned in close, lowering her voice like she was about to share a secret. “Before I caught him staring at you like you were a big, juicy steak, and he was *starving*.” At my shocked expression, she gave it to me straight. “Babe, every time he’s in here, he watches you like you’re the only person in the room.”

My chest felt too tight. The blood coursing through my body heated. I suddenly felt like I’d been thrust right back into high school and had just found out that the most popular boy was planning to ask me out. My voice was a barely-there whisper as I closed more of the space between us and asked, “He does?”

Her lips pulled into a grin as she answered gently, “Yeah honey. He does.” Her gaze drifted over my shoulder for a beat before returning to me. “Hell, he’s doing it right now. I’m surprised your clothes haven’t gone up in flames with how hard he’s staring at you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you.”

For some reason, her saying that made me feel like I was floating on air. I slowly turned, pretending to do a scan of my section so I could look in his direction without being obvious. Sure enough, he was watching my every move, and the second our eyes locked, those sinful lips curled up in a smile that took my breath away. Never in my life had I been the focus of a man like Cannon Banks, and the sensation was absolutely exhilarating.

“Looks like your man needs a refill,” Shane muttered, pulling my attention back to her. “Better get up there.”

“H-he’s not my man,” I stuttered, feeling like my face was two seconds away from catching fire.

“Just a matter of time, honey. Just a matter of time.”

She took off, moving in the opposite direction of the pool tables, and with no other choice but to cover that section for the time being, I grabbed my tray and headed over. I looked around and, for the first time, noticed that the woman from earlier was nowhere in sight. As ridiculous as it was, I freaking *loved* that. As I climbed the two steps, all eyes came to me, but I could only feel one set.

“There she is!” Scooter exclaimed the instant I stopped at their table. “Hey, darlin’. You got perfect timin’. We need you to confirm a rumor that’s been goin’ ’round.”

“Not sure how much help I’ll be,” I said, grinning down at the older man. “I’m still too new in town to be up on all the gossip.”

“Well, this one’s about you, sugar,” Danno added.

At that, I felt my whole body go on alert. “A rumor about me?”

It was Scooter who spoke next. “That’s right. Now, you said you’re from Connecticut, right?”

I nodded tentatively in confirmation. “That’s right.”

“And your last name’s Hyland.” *Oh shit.* “That mean you’re one of *the* Hylands?”

I chanced a peek at Cannon to see he was looking at Scooter in confusion. “Who the hell are *the* Hylands?”

My limbs went stiff, my fingers gripping the tray I was holding in front of me so tight I could feel the lip of it cutting into my skin as Scooter turned to him and answered, “They’re one of the richest fuckin’ families in the US of A. Ain’t you ever heard of Hyland Steel?”

I couldn't take my eyes off Cannon as Scooter continued to explain my family's legacy. I hadn't come to this town with the intention of hiding my identity, but I knew firsthand there was a stigma when it came to the kind of wealth my family had.

Cannon's gaze shifted to me, the expression on his face so inscrutable I had to look away.

"Uh, yeah. That's my family. But I'm not involved in that business."

"Christ girl!" Fletch hooted. "You got money like that layin' around, what the hell you doin' slingin' drinks in a bar?"

I knew he hadn't meant to be offensive, but that comment rankled. Trying not to let my frustration show, I kept my tone light as I responded, "Never was much for sitting on my ass, being lazy."

"Good for you, darlin'," Scooter said. "Shane told me all you been doin' to help her. You're good people."

My focus was finally pulled from Cannon when I looked at Scoot with big eyes. "She told you about that?"

"Girl's my niece," he answered, pride weighing heavy in his voice. "Practically raised her. Been watchin' her break her back tryin' to take care of that sweet baby for years now, so when she told me you been havin' Darla sneak your tips into her cut each night, the wife and I almost had our wills redone to add you."

Heat infused my limbs. I dropped my head, trying to hide behind the curtain of my hair when everything around us went still.

"You really did that?" Clay asked with astonishment.

"Wasn't no one time thing either," Scooter continued. "She's been paddin' Shane's tips since damn near the beginnin'."

"I just wanted to help," I said on a timid whisper.

When Fletch spoke, the admiration in his voice rang out loud and clear. “That’s real good of you, honey.”

The group lapsed into a silence that sat heavily on my chest. I hated being the center of attention. When all eyes were on me, I felt like I was going to come out of my skin. I was seconds away from bolting when I felt something brush down my arm.

I looked over just in time to see Scooter’s grizzled fingers wrap around mine, and when I met his gaze, he was smiling with a fondness that made my heart ache.

“Thank you, darlin’.” His tone was soft and gentle, but the meaning behind the words beat out like a drum. “Don’t know if I’ll ever be able to put into words what that meant to me, so the best I got is *thank you*.”

I returned his smile, turning my hand so we were palm-to-palm. “That’s more than enough, Scoot,” I replied, giving his hand a squeeze. “And you’re very welcome.”

“All right,” Danno called out. “So how about another round,” And just like that, the mood shifted, and I let out a breath of relief as I pulled out my order pad and began jotting down a slew of drink orders.



THE REST of the shift was blessedly uneventful. There was no more mention of my family or their money, and the guys over by the pool tables continued to drink, growing louder and more hilarious as one hour bled into the next.

The bar remained packed, and Shane and I ran our feet off for the rest of the night.

At one point I looked back and noticed that Cannon had taken off. I shook off the apprehension that niggled at me at his sudden disappearance and buried myself in work, telling myself it was late, and he was probably just tired. I was sure he’d tried to wave or get my attention somehow, and I’d just been too swamped to notice.

Closing time rolled around, and I shoed Shane out of Bad Alibi just as soon as the doors were locked, telling her I'd handle the prep work for the next day. After all, she needed sleep a *lot* more than I did.

By the time I hit my room at the Redbud Inn I was still riding a bit of an adrenaline high from everything that had happened with Cannon earlier.

There was no way I was getting to sleep, so after greeting Crash, washing off my makeup, and pulling on my PJs I climbed into bed and snuggled down with my phone in hand. It was the middle of the night, but Bennett had always been a night owl. The man functioned on even less sleep than I did. He'd stay up all hours reading one of his beloved murder mystery novels, so I knew he'd be awake.

Sure enough, he picked up halfway through the second ring, his voice coming through the line and wrapping around me like the most secure blanket in the world. "Everything good, my sweet Farah?"

*My sweet Farah.* God, I loved that. I loved *him*. I'd never just been *Farah* to him. I was always his sweet Farah.

"Everything's fine, Ben. I just got in from a shift and couldn't sleep. Figured you'd still be up, so I took a chance."

His deep chuckle had grown raspier with age, but it was still one of the most comforting sounds on earth. "You know me well, child. But just a heads-up, calls at this hour usually mean bad things. Have a care, darlin'. My old ticker's not what it used to be."

"Oh spare me," I giggled. "You know as well as I do that you're gonna outlive us all."

That earned me another laugh. "That might've been the case a couple months ago, but since you moved away, I've been under a lot more stress, worrying over you."

I didn't want to cause Bennett any stress, but it meant everything that he cared enough to worry as much as he did. "I love you too, Ben. And if you ever want to get to me, you

know where I am. I'll buy your plane ticket myself if it means I get to see you."

"A few more weeks without seeing your pretty face, I may just take you up on that."

That went a long way in easing some of the tension a long shift at the bar had set into my muscles. But there was something that had been weighing on my mind since I moved to Redemption. I'd always shied away from asking, worried there was a story there that Bennett didn't want to tell, but now that I'd discovered just how incredible this little town was, I had to know. "Hey Bennett? Can I ask you a question?"

"Anything, my sweet Farah. You know that."

"Do you ever regret not coming back? I mean, I know you said you didn't want to leave me and Jase, but do you ever look back and wish things had been different?" My question was met with such a long silence, I began to worry I'd overstepped. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked that. It's not my place—"

"We're family. Whose place would it be to ask a question like that if not yours?"

I burrowed deeper into the bed and began tracing the pattern of the pretty quilt with my fingernail. "I know."

"What's really on your mind, sweetheart?" That was just his way, always cutting right to the chase.

I inhaled deeply, summoning the courage to admit what had been worrying me for weeks. "This place is amazing, Ben," I started quietly. "I always had this picture of it in my mind from all the stories you told us growing up, but now that I've seen it firsthand, it's even more beautiful than you described. I guess ... Well, I just worry that Jase and I held you back."

There was a seriousness in his tone I'd never heard before as he demanded, "Get that thought outta your head, girl. I don't ever want you thinking like that. You hear me?"

"Ben—"

“I’ll give you honesty, because that’s what you deserve, but after tonight, I never wanna hear you questioning your worth to me. Got it?”

It was hard to speak past the massive lump in my throat, but I managed to eke out, “I-I got it.”

“The truth is, I never had any intention of being gone as long as I have. If you and your brother hadn’t come into my life, there’s a strong possibility I would’ve gone back. But let me make one thing perfectly clear. Not once, not even for a second, have I regretted that decision. Home is where the heart is, girl, and as much as the two of you do my head in, you and Jase *are* my heart. You’re the best things that ever happened to me, and there’s not a single day I haven’t thanked the good Lord above for bringing you to me.”

The tears came so fast, I wouldn’t have been able to stop them if I tried. “I’m glad to hear that,” I croaked, batting the dampness off my cheeks. “Because I feel the same. I don’t know where I’d be if you weren’t in my life. You and Jase were the only bright spots I ever had. You saved me, Bennett. And I’ll love you for the rest of my life. I want you to know that.”

“My sweet Farah,” he whispered, his voice jagged with emotion. “I love you too, precious girl. Have since the moment I first laid eyes on you, and I will until my time on this earth is done.”

It was hard, but I managed to swallow down the sob that threatened to burst from my throat. “How hard do you think it would be to convince you and Jase to move down here with me?”

His laughter rang in my ear, making me giggle. And just like that, the tears dried up. “Not sure about that fool brother of yours, but I been thinking of retiring for a good while now.”

I shot up straight in the bed and blurted, “You can live with me! I’ve got so much room, Ben, I’ll never be able to fill it all. But if you wanted your own space, there’s a carriage house on my property that I’m converting into a little house. You say the word and it’s yours.”

I could hear the smile in his voice as he stated, “Let me think on that. In the meantime, you make sure to keep in touch, yeah? And I’m not talking middle-of-the-night phone calls.”

“I’ll keep in touch, I promise,” I whispered through a big smile.

“All right, darlin’. Now get yourself some shut-eye. Talk soon.”

“Talk soon, Ben. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Once we ended the call, I rolled over and put the phone on my nightstand then turned off the lamp beside my bed. A second later the mattress depressed with Crash’s weight as he hopped up and curled into a ball beside my chest.

And with his gentle purring in my ear, I fell right to sleep with the biggest smile on my face.

## Chapter Thirteen

---

FARAH

“PWETTY, FAWAH! PWETTY!”

Brantley launched himself at me, and I caught him with ease. Flopping to my back, I extended my arms and lifted him in the air, laughing as he giggled himself sick.

“You’re pretty handsome yourself, kiddo.”

“Careful, doing that,” Shane warned as she came around the back of the couch and flopped down. “More than once, I’ve played airplane with that kid and gotten puked on for my troubles.”

I shot her a look of panic and quickly sat up, pulling the rambunctious toddler against my chest. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Anytime.” Shane giggled and went back to folding the huge pile of laundry in the basket at her feet.

When I’d repeated my offer for babysitting at work the night before, she’d taken me up on it. I showed up earlier this morning with two coffees in hand and spent the better part of my day keeping little Brantley entertained while Shane got some much-needed housework done.

One of the perks was I also got to hang out with her outside Bad Alibi, and over the past several hours, we’d gotten to know each other a lot better.

“Thank you again for doing this. I can’t tell you how much you being here has helped. I haven’t had the chance to do

laundry in two weeks. I was running dangerously low on underwear. One or two more days and I would've had to start turning them inside out."

My top lip curled up as I laughed. "Well, I'm glad I was able to help so you didn't have to start recycling."

"You and me both." She added a folded T-shirt to the growing stack on the coffee table while shifting the subject. "So, I've been meaning to ask, what's up with you and Cannon?"

My good mood immediately dampened. It had been a week since that night in the stockroom, and while Cannon hadn't necessarily been avoiding me, something was different.

He'd been by the bar a couple of times, and he was always polite, but things just seemed ... off.

"I don't know what's going on with Cannon," I admitted, letting a squirming Brantley go so he could run free. He raced over to the bin of toys Shane had tucked into the corner, and I shifted closer to the couch so I could help Shane fold clothes. "Something's changed," I explained, grabbing one of Brantley's tiny T-shirts. "I don't know how to explain it, but he's been different with me this past week."

"How do you mean?"

I heaved out a breath and reached for a pair of little toddler jeans as I gave that question some thought. "I don't know how to explain it without sounding stupid."

"You aren't gonna sound stupid to me, Farah. We're friends. You can tell me anything."

Her referring to me as a friend was the push I needed, so I dove right in. "Well, he just seems, distant. Before, he'd call me Hummingbird and, I don't know. I guess I just really liked that he had his own personal nickname for me. Now he just calls me darlin' or babe like the rest of the guys. The only time he really talks to me is if I initiate the conversation, and even then, he's barely giving me anything, you know? Like, I get the feeling he's just phoning it in, hoping it'll end soon. I

mean, I could have sworn he was going to kiss me in that damn stockroom last week, and now *nothing!*”

She arched her brows and let out a snort. “Girl, I saw the look on his face when he had you pressed up against those shelves. I thought he was gonna do a *lot* more to you than just kissing.”

I thrust a finger in the air and exclaimed, “Exactly! And he offered to take me for a ride on his motorcycle, but since then I haven’t heard anything. He’s never mentioned it again.”

I hadn’t realized I was twisting the jeans in a chokehold until Shane reached over and pulled them from my hands, giving me a sympathetic look. “You know, people discount women’s intuition all the time, but I’m telling you, it’s a *very* real thing. If you feel like he’s being different, he probably is. Listen to your gut. I say you track his a”—she shot a quick look in Brantley’s direction before amending—“his *butt* down, and ask him straight up, what’s going on.”

The plan had merit, but I wasn’t sure I had the guts to do something like that. Turning away from her and back to the clothes, I mumbled, “I don’t know, maybe.”

“Hey.” Sticking her hand in front of my face she snapped to get my attention. “Don’t do that. Don’t get all nervous and start doubting yourself. You’re awesome. You’re a hot, awesome chick who deserves to know what the hell is happening. You need to march yourself down to that garage and get some answers.”

“I appreciate the solidarity, honey, but I kind of turn into a mess when it comes to confrontation.”

Dropping the socks she’d been pairing up, Shane leaned down and rested her elbows on her knees. “Ask yourself this: could confronting him make you feel any worse than you do right now? Trust me, sister, uncertainty will eat you up inside.” Her chest rose on a deep inhale as she turned her eyes to Brantley. “Every day I wake up and wish I’d gotten the chance to ask Brant’s dad what the hell had changed, what had gone so wrong he needed to bail.” I could read the sadness clear as day in her face when she looked back at me. “I didn’t have that

chance, but you do. There's no point in sitting around moping and wondering, when you can just find out, right?"

I reached over and took her hand. "You're right. I'll talk to him."

She shook off her melancholy and forced a smile onto her face. "Good."

"But, you know ..." I paused, questioning if I should say what I wanted to say. But she'd called us friends. And friends were honest with each other. "Whatever happened between you guys, whatever changed, it doesn't matter. It's *his* loss. You know that, right?" Shane's eyes began to shine with unshed tears. "You don't need to wake up and wonder what went wrong. You only need to remember that you came out on top. Because you're amazing, and Brantley's the best kiddo in the whole wide world."

She lifted her face to the ceiling and I knew she was blinking the wet from her eyes. When she looked back to me, the sadness was gone. "You're pretty damn amazing yourself."

A moment later, Brantley decided he was done with his toys and plowed into me with every ounce of strength in his little four-year-old body, taking me to my back in the middle of the living room floor. "Pwetty Fawah! Let's do aiooplane again!"

Leave it to a toddler to make everything better.

MY STOMACH WAS a jumble of nerves as I pulled my car into the forecourt of Banks Body and Auto Repair the following morning. I was taking Shane's advice and getting some answers, but I'd decided to go about it a bit more delicately.

I'd been up all night, trying to think of a convincing excuse to track Cannon down, and sometime around three this morning, I'd had a lightbulb moment. So, after a few short hours of sleep, I'd climbed out of bed and gotten ready, taking longer on my appearance than I had since moving to town.

My hair was hanging around my shoulders in long, sleek waves, and instead of just my customary mascara and lip gloss, I was wearing a full—yet subtle—face of makeup. I wore a new pair of bootcut jeans that hugged my behind, hips, and thighs, and the wedges I'd worn my first night at Bad Alibi. The sleeveless chiffon top was a hint dressier than all my other clothes, but it still worked. It was flowy from my chest all the way to my hips, with the exception of a fun little drawstring that cinched at my waist, and the cream color looked awesome with the blush cami underneath.

Overall, I was pleased with the whole look, and hoped that Cannon might feel the same.

He was strapping something that looked like a sleeping bag to the back of his bike as I parked and climbed out, and as soon as I saw him, an explosion of butterflies sprang to life in my belly. Banks was standing beside him, and their conversation came to an abrupt stop the moment they spotted me.

Banks smiled big and pulled me into a hug. “Well hey there, beautiful, this is a pleasant surprise. How you been?”

“I’ve been good, thanks. How are you and Bev?”

“We’re good, darlin’. Bev’s good. She’ll be sorry she missed you.”

I stepped back and stuffed my hands in the back pockets of my jeans. “Tell her to give me a call. We can do lunch or something.”

“I’ll tell her. It was good seein’ you, honey, but I better get back to it.”

He gave me one last hug before turning on his boots and moving back through the bay door.

Those nervous butterflies came back when I shifted my attention to Cannon and smiled. “Hey.” *Lame start, Farah. Jeez.*

He returned my grin with a much more platonic one. “Hey, back. What brings you by, darlin’? Somethin’ wrong with the Benz?”

He'd just given me the perfect segue into my excuse for being there. "Oh no. Nothing like that. The car's fine, but I wanted to ask you a favor."

Leaning back against his bike, he crossed his arms and ankles and gave me his full attention for the first time in a week. "Shoot."

"Well, um ..." I bit my bottom lip before finally saying, "I was hoping maybe I could talk you into going car shopping with me. I mean, it's a little ridiculous to have a fancy sedan around here. I've heard there are some great places up in the mountains, but I'm not sure it would hold up on those roads. I thought I'd get something a little more dependable, you know? Maybe an SUV? But I don't really know much about cars, and I figured, since you're a mechanic, you'd know what I should be looking for."

As soon as the last word left my mouth, something in Cannon's eyes shifted. It was almost like a shutter had fallen over them.

"Wish I could help, Farah, but I'm actually gonna be outta town the next couple of weeks."

My stomach sank like a rock. "Out of town?"

"Yeah. Me and some of my buddy's do a two-week road trip each year. I'm actually takin' off as soon as I finish loading up."

"Oh, well ..." I looked to the motorcycle to see there were saddlebags attached that I hadn't noticed before. "That's okay. I mean, I could wait until you got back—"

He pushed off the bike and stood tall as he lifted a tattooed arm and scratched at the back of his neck. "Maybe one of the other guys could help you. Or my dad. But I really should finish up here and get on the road."

I was being blown off. Granted, it was in the nicest way possible, but it still hurt like hell.

My skin broke out in goosebumps, my stomach revolted, and my brain screamed at me to just bail out. But I wasn't going to do that. I was New Farah, damn it. And New Farah

wasn't a coward. "What's going on, Cannon?" I asked, deciding my best bet was to just jump right in. "I don't know what's changed, but *something* has, and I want to know what it is."

His chin jerked back in surprised. I'd always been skittish as hell around him, so for me to be so forward was a shock.

Well, he could join the club, because I was pretty shocked myself.

"Darlin'—"

"See?" I yelled, pointing my finger in his face. "That right there. That's exactly what I'm talking about. What happened to Hummingbird? What happened to taking me out on your bike?"

He didn't bother making excuses or lying. He gave it to me straight, and when he did, it felt like I'd been punched in the gut. "Look, Farah ..." I wasn't sure what was coming next, but I had a bad feeling that anything that started with "*Look, Farah*" in that tone wasn't going to fill me with warm and fuzzies. "You're a sweet girl, but this isn't gonna work out."

And there you had it. I was right.

Giving my head a shake, I tried to piece my thoughts together, but I couldn't make sense of what was happening. "What isn't going to work out?"

His expression hardened. The ink on his arms danced as he crossed his arms over his chest again. "Don't do that. Don't play games. You know exactly what I'm talkin' about. You're attracted to me. That's why you get so damn nervous every time I'm around."

I wasn't going to bother denying it. Not only because he'd see right through me, but because I was done lying to myself. "And you're attracted to me."

"I am," he confirmed, but the way he said it didn't make me feel good. "But like I said, it's not gonna work out."

My sinuses began to sting, and I fought hard to keep my eyes from welling up. I knew what this was about. I'd sensed

the shift in him the other night, but I'd stupidly hoped I was just imagining things. "This is because of who my family is, isn't it?" I asked, my voice coming out scratchy. "Because of the money?"

"We're from two different worlds, Farah. There's no way this ever would've worked."

As badly as I wanted to crumble, I wouldn't. I held my head high and my shoulders square as I declared, "How could you possibly know that? You barely know me at all."

His bark of laughter was harsh and cutting. "Come on, babe. You roll into town in a hundred-thousand-dollar ride. You shell out cash for that house like it's nothin' then don't even blink at the cost of havin' it restored. You work at a bar, but give every dime you earn to someone else. It's commendable, no denyin' that. What you're doin' for Shane is amazing, but the fact you can afford to do it just goes to show how different we are. You can ditch your fancy-ass clothes and buy new ones, but it doesn't change anything. We're just too different."

My heart felt like it had just been torn in half as I nodded sadly. "I see."

"Christ, I'm just a mechanic. What the hell do I have to offer that you can't get for yourself?"

My voice was a whisper as I said, "And the fact that you just said that proves how right you are. We *are* too different, because I'd never care about something like that. You could be a panhandler or beat on buckets like they were drums for money, and the only thing that would matter to me was that you were happy."

"Farah—"

"I grew up with money. But that was all I ever had. If it wasn't for my brother and the goddamn family *driver* I wouldn't have ever known what it was like to be loved. You think you have nothing to offer me because your bank account is smaller than mine, but what you don't get was that you gave me everything just by being *nice* to me."

“Hummingbird—”

The look on his face was like I’d just cut him wide open, but I didn’t care. “I never had friends until I came here. I was engaged to a man who only wanted me because I looked good on his arm for photos. I didn’t know what it was like to belong or feel included in anything until I moved to this town. You had all of that from the moment you came into this world. And the saddest part is that you don’t see the truth. I might have been the one with the money, Cannon, but your life was so much richer than mine could have ever been.”

“Farah, baby—”

He took a step in my direction, and I immediately moved back. “Be safe on your trip, Cannon. I’ll see you around.”

With that, I turned and climbed back into my car.

And somehow, I managed to keep the tears at bay until the door to my room at Redbud Inn closed behind me.

## Chapter Fourteen

---

CANNON

THE TRIP HAD BEEN ABSOLUTE SHIT.

For two weeks I rode around the country, seeing some of the most beautiful sights in existence. And all I could think about the whole goddamn time was the sadness in Farah's eyes just before she turned and walked away from me.

“Okay, this has to stop. You're seriously bumming me out.”

The sound of Sage's voice pulled me back to reality. The rest of the guys I'd gone on the ride with had all made the trek back home, but for my last stop I'd headed to a small town in Virginia called Hope Valley to crash with one of my oldest friends.

Sage and I had dated back when we were kids, and even though there were years between then and now where we hadn't seen each other, there was always a part of me that thought we'd get back together. But that had just been young love holding on to something that was long gone. Sage was now married and settled down, and while her husband, Xander, and I hadn't hit it off in the beginning, we were tight now.

There was no lingering feelings or unrequited love between me and Sage, but she was still my family. We'd grown up together. Her dad, Judge, had been tight with my old man, Danno, Fletch, and Scooter since they were kids, so the bonds with all of us ran deep, and I was just glad to have her back in my life.

I'd come to Hope Valley hoping it would pull me out of the funk I'd been in for the past two goddamn weeks, but there was no such luck.

"You've been here for three days, and you've moped the entire time. I'm getting depressed just looking at you. Snap out of it!"

To get her point across, she kicked my feet off the coffee table, nearly causing me to spill the beer I'd been holding.

"Christ, Chestnut." I shot her a dirty look and wiped at the suds that had splashed across the front of my shirt. "I'm not mopin'. I'm watchin' the game. Chill out, would you?" I pointed to the TV Xander and I had been camped out in front of, but the truth was, I hadn't paid attention to a single minute of it.

She slammed her hands down on her hips and glared. "You're moping. I know moping when I see it, and that's *exactly* what you're doing."

"I don't mope," I declared, returning to my kicked back position and reaching my free hand across the couch to give their big dog, Bear, a scratch behind his ear. "This is me relaxin'." I turned my head in her direction and gave her my most charming smile before saying something I knew would set her off. "How about you head into the kitchen and make me a sandwich so I can get back to it?" No doubt I'd pay for that one later, but pushing her buttons was too much fun.

"Xander, baby, we have a shovel out in the shed, don't we?"

He looked over at his wife, one brow arched. "Why?"

"'Cause I'm about to murder him, and I need to make sure we have the necessary tools to hide the body."

As used to her dramatics as I was, Xander shook his head on a low chuckle and turned back to the TV without a word.

"Empty threats," I continued to needle. "You'd miss me too much if I was gone for good."

Sage stepped over my legs and shifted her dog, Bear, to the middle of the couch so she could sit on the other end. But instead of being quiet and letting me pretend to watch the game, she kept pushing. “What’s going on? You might as well just tell me, because if you don’t, you know I’ll call Bev.”

I turned to her with an incredulous laugh. “Did you really just threaten to call my mom, Chestnut?”

“Bet your ass I did. And you know I will, so start talking.”

I knew her well enough to know she was full of shit about killing me, but when it came to calling my mom, she meant business. And the last thing I needed was Beverly Banks on my ass. Especially if it was about Farah.

Pursing my lips, I blew out a frustrated breath and sucked back more of my beer before giving in to my pushy friend.

“There’s a woman back in Redemption. Before I left for this trip, I fucked everything up.”

“Well ho-ly shit,” she crowed. “Cannon Banks is sprung for a woman!”

“And we’re done.” I dropped my feet to the floor and started to push up.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Sage grabbed my arm and pulled me back down. “I was just kidding. I’m sorry. I’ll stop, I promise.”

I shifted on the couch to face her, lifting a skeptical brow, to which she mimed zipping her lips and locking them tight.

“That’s it. That’s all there is to the story. I fucked it up. The end.”

“Well *how* did you fuck it up?”

“I found out somethin’ about her, and I didn’t handle it well.” She waited for several seconds for me to expand on that, and when I didn’t, she waved me on. “She’s rich, Sage.”

Her forehead puckered in confusion. “*Okay*. So?”

“Like really fuckin’ rich. You ever heard of Hyland Steel?”

Her eyes went round and her lips parted on a low whistle. “Yeah. Okay, so she’s filthy stinking rich. I’m still not seeing the problem here.”

“Of course you don’t. You’re a chick. You wouldn’t get it.” I turned to Xander and pleaded, “Come on man, help me out here.”

He tossed the remote onto the coffee table, stood from the chair he’d been lounging in all afternoon, and started in the direction of the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Sage called after him.

“To chop firewood.”

“But it’s September! It’s barely cold outside. There’s no need for firewood.”

He planted his hands on his hips and cut his eyes at his wife. “Well, it’s either that or stay in here, listenin’ to you two gab about relationships and feelings while my scrote shrivels up and my balls burrow into my stomach. I choose option A.”

“God! You’re such a pain in the ass,” Sage shouted at his back.

“Love you too, Shortcake. Come get me when dinner’s ready.” Then the back door closed on him.

Sage’s eyes returned to me mid-roll. “Just ignore him. Now explain to me why this girl of yours being loaded is a problem.”

“What aren’t you gettin’, sweetheart? I’m just a mechanic, for Christ’s sake.”

“You aren’t *just* anything,” she snapped, fire flashing in her gaze. “Last I checked, you owned half of that garage outright, with plans to buy your dad out of the other half in a few years so he can retire. And from what your dad told mine, Banks Body and Auto Repair is doing so well, you’re thinking of opening a second garage within the next year or so.”

“What’s your point?”

She reached over and pinched me in the underside of my arm. “My *point*, jackass, is that you aren’t *just* a mechanic. You’re a small business owner with plans to *expand* that business. That’s nothing to sneeze at.”

“I love you for sayin’ that. Means the world, sweetheart, but it doesn’t change the facts.”

Her forehead pinched together in a frown as she asked, “Did this chick say something to make you think you aren’t good enough for her? ’Cause if she did, I’m jumping in my baby right now, driving down to Tennessee, and kicking her ass.”

“Christ, no. It wasn’t anything like that.”

I’d thought back on what she said a million times over the past couple weeks, and every time I did, I hated myself a little more.

*What you don’t get was that you gave me everything just by being nice to me.*

Fuck, but I wanted to ride up to Connecticut and beat the shit out of her parents and that fucking ex of hers.

“She’s not like that, Sage. I told you. I’m the one that fucked up, not her.”

She was silent for a beat before gently asking, “You really like this girl, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I replied just as quietly. “I do.”

Her expression was awash with sympathy as she leaned closer. “Oh, honey.” Then she smacked me in the back of the head. “You’re such an idiot!”

“Jesus Christ! What the hell was that for?”

“*That*, my friend, was for being a man. A stupid, moronic man! You finally met a woman you want to spend more than one night with, and not only do you screw things up, but you take off for two weeks without *fixing it*?” She hit me in the head again before shooting off the couch. “I love you with all my heart, Cannon, you know that. But I swear to God, you are the dumbest boy in school.”

My voice rose as I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. “What do you want me to do, huh?”

“I want you to get on that bike and haul ass back to Redemption and *fix* this. I told you a year ago that if you just opened your eyes you’d find what I found with Xander, but you didn’t want to hear it. Well, now it’s happened, and I am *not* gonna let you ruin my chance of throwing this in your face.”

“For fuck’s sake, you’re feral today. You on the rag or somethin’?”

She emitted a low, menacing growl and, I swear to Christ, my balls shriveled up at the sound of it.

“Fuck me, it’s only gotten worse.” Sage and I were so consumed in our yelling match that we didn’t hear Xander reenter the house. When I jerked around toward the kitchen his back was already to us, and he was booking back out to safety. *Fucking coward.*

Sage took a calming breath before tilting her chin up and taking on a haughty air of superiority. “I’m gonna pretend you didn’t say that because finding out my best friend’s finally started falling for someone has put me in a good mood. But if your ass isn’t on that bike in the next thirty minutes so you can grovel at this woman’s feet, so help me, Cannon Banks, I’m calling your mother.”

*Well fuck me.*

  
THIRTY MINUTES LATER, all my shit had been stuffed into my saddlebags and I was standing in Xander and Sage’s driveway hugging my girl goodbye.

“You know you’re a giant pain in the ass, right?”

Her arms tightened around my waist before she let go and stepped back to look up at me. “I know. Xander tells me all the time. But one of these days, you guys are gonna see that I’m right about everything, and you’ll be thanking me.”

I shook my head on a laugh while Xander and I shook hands. “All right. Talk soon, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Sage replied. “Probably sooner than later. I’m thinking we should probably do Thanksgiving in Redemption this year.”

Xander laughed as I rolled my eyes to the heavens. Then with one last wave, I climbed on my bike and started it up. I had a three-hour ride ahead of me, and hopefully in that time I’d be able to figure out how to make things right with Farah.

And if I didn’t, Sage and my mother both would make sure there would be hell to pay.

## Chapter Fifteen

---

FARAH

“THIS WEATHER IS INSANE,” I STATED, PULLING THE LIGHT cardigan I’d worn tighter around me to ward off the chill in the air. As soon as September hit, the temperatures dropped. It went from summer to fall almost overnight, and I hadn’t been prepared.

Shane looked up from where she’d been bent over, picking up all the food Brantley had tossed onto the ground and laughed. “Give it a day or two.”

“Yep.” Poppy nodded her head in agreement. “We’ll bounce around for a few weeks, then *boom!* Hello winter.”

Lifting my coffee to my lips, I took a big gulp, letting the liquid warm me from the inside out. The three of us—with Brantley in tow—had met at a coffee shop in town, and not realizing the weather turned so fast, I’d suggested sitting outside. The little outdoor area faced the main street and was great for people watching, something I’d always enjoyed doing.

Poppy and Shane started chatting with each other while I spaced out, staring at all the people passing by. Several of them recognized me from the bar and smiled or waved whenever they spotted me. Some even called out greetings.

It took a few minutes for me to fully comprehend, but this was the first time in my life something like that had happened. I’d been in Redemption for a few months now, and the townsfolk had officially embraced me as one of their own. It had taken twenty-six years, but I was finally a part of the

community. I belonged here with these people. And as I sat in the small coffee shop, enjoying a coffee with my two friends, that knowledge sank in and warmed me more than anything could.

“So, I heard something at the bar last night,” Shane stated, her voice loud enough to pull me out of my daze. “Apparently Cannon’s supposed to be back in the next couple of days.”

Mentally shaking out the tension that crept into my shoulders at the mention of his name, I blew out the breath I’d been holding and slowly turned from my view of the street to regard them as they stared over at me with open curiosity, like they were eagerly waiting to see my reaction. Shane knew something was going on because she was the one I’d confided in about Cannon in the first place. When she’d asked how it went, all I’d told her was that it didn’t work out. After several days of watching me mope—her words, not mine—she’d gone to Poppy to tell her what went down. Both of them were concerned and had pestered me for answers relentlessly, but I didn’t want to say anything that would make them look at Cannon in a negative light. He hadn’t done anything wrong. He hadn’t strung me along or played games. Sure, the truths he’d given me hurt like hell, but he was just being honest. He wasn’t interested, and that was that. No reason for hard feelings. But that didn’t mean my heart didn’t feel like one big, throbbing bruise. I did my best over the past two weeks to fake it, pasting on a cheerful disposition, but I guess I hadn’t done a good enough job.

I kept my expression impassive. “Well I hope he had a good time. I bet a cross-country trip on a motorcycle is a lot of fun.”

Shane smacked her hand on the table. “All right, that’s it. You’ve been different ever since you went to see Cannon. Yeah, you’ve been trying to pretend you’re good, but it’s obvious you’re not. You’ve barely said anything about what happened between you guys, but every time someone mentions his name, you get all stiff and hold your breath.” She circled her finger in my face when my eyes went big. “Yeah. Don’t think we haven’t noticed that little tell. Now what the

hel”—she peeked Brantley’s way to confirm he was too lost in watching some cartoon on Shane’s phone to pay attention to us —“heck is going on?”

My head jerked back at her unexpected fierceness. I wasn’t used to having someone so upset on my account. Besides Jase, no one had ever cared enough to be openly mad before. I had to admit, even while I was incredibly sad, having these two amazing women care so much felt pretty damn awesome.

“Nothing happened. I went to talk to him, he told me he wasn’t interested, and then he left. That’s it.” I lowered my head, watching my fingers as they pulled at a loose string on the sleeve of my cardigan. “He was the first guy I’ve liked in a long time. That’s all. I’m bummed, but I’ll get over it.” That was an understatement if there ever was one. I was a hell of a lot more than *bummed*. For some reason, this man I didn’t even know all that well had gotten under my skin in a very big way.

“Oh, honey.” My head came up at the softness in Poppy’s tone, and when I looked at her, sorrow was written all over her face, clear as day. She got it, more than Shane because she knew everything. She understood how hard it was for me to put myself out there, and it broke her heart that the first time I found the courage, it had blown up in my face.

“I’ll get over it,” I said quietly, shrugging one shoulder. “He’s not the first guy to shoot me down, and he probably won’t be the last.”

“I call bull.” Poppy and I whipped around at Shane’s vehement declaration. “That guy’s spent *weeks* watching your every move at the bar. And I wasn’t imagining the heat I saw between you two when he was pressed against you in that damn stock room.”

Poppy shot back around to me, her eyes bugging out. “He was pressed against you in the stock room?”

“Man looked like he was seconds away from kissing her face off,” Shane declared. “So I think it’s crap he’s suddenly not interested. There has to be more to it.”

There was, and I'd been trying to keep that to myself, but these two women were like a dog with a bone. They weren't going to stop digging until they got answers.

Heaving a sigh, I leaned forward and rested my elbows on the table. "It's because I come from money."

Poppy's eyebrows went up. "Huh?"

"It's not like I've been trying to keep it a secret or anything. My family's rich. Apparently, that's a problem for him. According to him, it makes us too different. I'm rich, and he's just a mechanic. His words, not mine."

"That's crap," Shane declared. "Farah, he owns half that garage."

That was a surprised to me. I didn't know he was part owner, but that knowledge wouldn't have changed how I felt. "None of that matters to me. I don't care what he does, but I guess I was the only one who was able to look past it."

Poppy's face scrunched up in indignation as she flopped back in her chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well now I'm just pissed."

"*I'm pissed too!*" Brantley shouted, throwing his arms up over his head.

Shane glared.

I smothered my laugh.

Poppy winced. "Sorry about that. Not used to having little ears around."

"Eh, it's fine." Shane waved off her concern. "He's heard *way* worse just by riding in the car with me while we're in traffic."

In response to that, Brantley yelled, "*Get off the woad, jackass!*"

Shane pointed to him. "See? And that's one of the cleaner versions."

We all laughed and I lifted my coffee, taking the last gulp to finish it off. With Brantley's little diversion out of the way,

my friends turned back to me, and Poppy continued. “It’s his loss, Farah. If he’s gonna let something so stupid get between you guys, then he’s not worth your time.”

Shane leaned closer, placing her hand on top of mine. “She’s right. You’re one of the nicest, most generous and thoughtful people I’ve ever met. You deserve someone who doesn’t let his pride and stupidity get in the way of something amazing.”

“I second that,” Poppy added.

My sinuses began to burn at the same time that warmth I’d felt the moment I stepped into town spread through my chest like wildfire. These were my people. This was my town. I belonged. *I was home*. And I wasn’t going to let anything dampen that.

“I love you guys, I hope you know that, but I need to get outta here before you make me cry.” I scooted my chair back and stood up, hooking my purse over my shoulder. “I’ve got a date with a can of paint and a roller.”

Shane smiled up at me. “You know, you’re paying Clay and his guys to do that for you, right?”

The second Clay told me all the walls were up, I’d been filled with excitement. They could paint the rest of the house, but I wanted to be the one to paint the master bedroom, the place that would soon be my sanctuary. I wanted to put my stamp on it. “I know, but I want to give it a try. I’ve never painted anything before, and I think it’ll be fun.”

Poppy let out a snort and rolled her eyes. “Call me tomorrow and tell me if you still feel that way.”

I gave my girls hugs and leaned down to kiss Brantley on the cheek and tickle his ribs, earning myself a loud peel of laughter. Then I headed for my car, a brand new Jeep Compass I’d gotten all on my own after hours and hours of diligent research, and I climbed in with the biggest smile on my face.

New Farah might have a sore heart, but she was pushing forward.



IT WAS midday by the time I rolled into town. I was in desperate need of a shower after hours on the road, but instead of going home, I headed straight for Redbud Inn.

The Benz wasn't in the parking lot when I pulled up, but I went and knocked on Farah's door anyway. When she didn't answer, I made the short trek to Poppy's. The moment she opened the door, I knew something was up. "Hey, Pop."

"Cannon," she returned, her tone flat and her arms crossed over her chest.

"Any chance you know where I could find Farah? She's not in her room."

Her stance was almost defiant as she leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb and replied, "Yeah, I know where she is."

"You mind tellin' me?" I asked after several seconds where she didn't elaborate any further.

Her eyelids narrowed into angry slits. I knew she meant the look to be menacing, but the glare was just too damn adorable on her china doll face. "Why? So you can make her feel like shit all over again because of something she has no control over? I don't *think* so."

*Damn it all to hell.* It looked like Farah's new posse was closing ranks, and the goal was to keep me away. "Look," I started on a sigh, reaching back to massage the stiff muscles in my neck, "I know I fucked up—"

"Yeah. You sure as hell did, Cannon Banks," she clipped aggressively, pushing off the doorframe and standing tall. "That woman's already had more shitty people come into her life than most of us could experience in a lifetime. She's been neglected and mistreated by everyone who was supposed to love her. She didn't have a single person show her kindness,

yet she still somehow found it in her heart to be kind to others.”

“I know, Poppy.”

“I don’t think you do,” she snapped. “You already know she gives every penny she earns at Bad Alibi to Shane, but did you know she’s started going over to her house every day to watch Brantley, just so Shane can clean or do the laundry or, hell, take a freaking *nap*? All she saw was that Shane was tired. That was all it took for her to step up. While you were off on your little trip for the last two weeks, she noticed there were several days where Fletch hadn’t come to the bar. When she asked, Danno told her he’d come down with the flu, and the very next day she was at his house with soup. *Soup*, Cannon. I mean, who does that?”

Christ, I’d had no idea. “Pop—”

“And did you know she doesn’t even like cats?”

She lost me on that one. “What?”

“She’s a dog person. But those horrible parents of hers never allowed her to have a pet, so when that damn cat decided she was his person after making her wreck her car, she didn’t even blink at the idea of taking him in. She just wanted a pet, for Christ’s sake!” she cried, throwing her arms out. “She didn’t care what it was, she just wanted *something* to give all that love she’s got stored up in that huge heart of hers.”

Every fucking word out of her mouth was a knife to the heart. “I know—”

“No you don’t. You *don’t* know, Cannon, because if you did, you never would’ve thrown her wealth in her face like that. She didn’t ask to be born into that family. Believe me, she would’ve been better off being penniless and living on the streets! The last thing she needs is another person making her feel bad about herself, so give me one good reason why I should tell you where she is.”

“Because I can’t apologize if I can’t find her,” I answered instantly. That seemed to do the trick. Poppy’s mouth slammed

shut in complete surprise. “I know I screwed up. Hell, Pop, it’s all I’ve been able to think about for two weeks. I want to make it right. I *need* to make it right, so I’m askin’, please, just tell me where she is.”

She hesitated, and I got the distinct impression she was examining me to try and gage my level of sincerity. She must have seen I meant what I said, because she finally responded. “She’s at her house. The walls went up a couple days ago, so she’s painting.”

My eyebrows climbed higher on my forehead. “She’s painting?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes rolled skyward. “Don’t ask, it’s a whole other thing, but that’s where she is.”

“Thanks, Poppy.”

I turned so I could get back to my bike when she called out, “Don’t make me regret telling you, Cannon!”

I lifted my hand in a salute over my shoulder as I picked up the pace. I wouldn’t make her regret telling me, but I didn’t have time to stick around and put her at ease.

I had to get to Farah.

## Chapter Sixteen

---

FARAH

DROPPING MY ARM HOLDING THE ROLLER, I TOOK A STEP back from the wall I'd just finished while wiping at the sweat on my forehead with the back of my free hand.

In the couple hours I'd been at it, I'd discovered two things about painting. The first was that I didn't like it. My arms felt like they were on fire from the workout they'd been given, there was more paint in my hair and on my clothes than was on the walls, and the fumes were giving me a crazy bad headache.

The second thing I discovered as I moved farther back to get a better look at my handiwork was that I sucked at it. I couldn't figure out why the wall before me looked so freaking patchy. There were streaks everywhere, no matter how many times I went over it. There were some spots where you could still see the white through the soft dove gray paint I'd chosen for the room and others where there were noticeable globs and drips. *And how in the hell did people manage to do this without getting paint all over the ceiling?*

"You know you hired a whole crew of people to do this for you, right, Hummingbird?"

Cannon's unexpected voice caused me to jump and whip around. My heart turned over in my chest the moment I saw him, casual as could be, with his shoulder leaning against the doorway to my soon-to-be bedroom.

I cleared my face of its initial shock and schooled my features. I was good at giving a blank face, after all, I'd been

doing it all my life. Turning back to the wall, I mumbled, “So I’ve been told. I just wanted to give it a shot, see what all the fuss was about.”

“And the verdict?”

My eyes narrowed into a glare like the wall had somehow personally offended me. “It’s not for me.”

His chuckle came from closer in the room. He was only a few feet away from me now, and as he looked at me, the hardness that had been carved into his face that day at the garage was gone. That soft, sexy grin of his was firmly back in place.

My body reacted like it always did, my skin tingled and my pulse picked up, but after our last encounter, it was the voice in my head I chose to listen to. Pushing down those flutters in my belly, I kept my tone even and my eyes flat as I stated the obvious. “You’re back.”

He came one step closer, and it took everything in me to hold my ground. “I am. Hit town less than an hour ago.”

“People at the bar were talking. I didn’t think you’d be home for a couple more days.”

Another step. “Cut my trip short to get home.”

My heart started beating a staccato against my ribs. “Well, I hope you had a good time.”

And another step. “It could’ve been better. I wasn’t feelin’ it this year.”

The scent of cotton and motor oil snuffed out the acrid paint fumes. *Damn him.* “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Are you, really?”

My forehead creased and my lips drooped in a frown. What kind of question was that? “Of course I am. Two weeks is a long time, especially if you aren’t enjoying yourself. Is that why you cut it short?”

“Nope.” He ate up more of the space between us, coming so close I felt my composure start to slip.

“Oh, well ... uh, welcome home, all the same.”

“Don’t you wanna know why I cut my trip short, Hummingbird?”

So in the past two weeks, I’d somehow earned Hummingbird back. I told myself I didn’t care, but I was a liar. Even still, at the very least, I could *act* like I didn’t care. “Not particularly. I’m sure your reason is interesting enough, but I’m kind of in the middle of something.” I lifted the paint roller in my hand and gave it a little shake for emphasis.

“I can see that.” His hand came up to tug on a lock of my hair that had fallen from the knot at the top of my head. When he brought it back into view, there was a streak of gray on his fingers. “It’s a good color on you, baby.”

I got *baby* back too, and damn if hearing that didn’t make me feel like a million bucks. “Thanks,” I deadpanned. “I’m trying out a new look. It’s called painter chic.”

“Well, it works,” he chuckled. “Then again, you’d look fuckin’ beautiful in anything.”

At that, his closeness became too much. I couldn’t take it anymore, so I moved across the room under the guise of putting the roller back into the paint tray as I asked, “What brings you by? After two weeks, I figured your first stop would’ve been your place. Or your parents’.”

“You know, Farah, the ice princess disguise you got on doesn’t really work for you. We both know you’re nothin’ but warm and sweet to your very core.”

I didn’t want that to affect me; I didn’t want my breath to stutter or my heart to race, but I couldn’t seem to help it.

I let go of my carefully crafted façade and got right to the point. “Why are you here, Cannon? You made it pretty clear the last time we spoke that we had nothing left to say to each other.”

He followed me across the room, stopping less than a foot away. “I was an asshole.” He said it so quickly and with such determination, it took me by surprise. “The things I said to you, the way I acted ... I was a prick, Farah.”

It took me a while before I was finally able to find my voice. “Are you expecting me to disagree? Because I’m not gonna do that. You were an *epic* asshole.”

For some reason, that made him grin. He closed the rest of the distance between us, taking my face in his hands. “Wouldn’t expect anything less.” I felt those work-rough fingers of his press against my pulse, and I knew he could feel how hard my heart was beating. “I might make you nervous, but that doesn’t mean you won’t call me on my shit.”

I suddenly found it difficult to breathe, every inhale was filled with his smell, clouding my head and making it hard to think. His touch was like an electric shock to my skin.

“Never should’ve left you the way I did,” he said, his rumbling voice like a velvet caress. “Should’ve stayed and fixed things between us.”

His eyes went to my mouth when my tongue peeked out and swiped over my bottom lip, the swirling golden green and brown growing darker. “But, um, I ...” I swallowed to wet my suddenly dry throat. “I th-thought that we ... that we were too different.”

Cannon’s thumb slid across my jaw. “I shouldn’t have said that, baby. It wasn’t true. That was just me talkin’ outta my ass ’cause of my own stupid issues.”

“Stupid issues like being *just* a mechanic?” I bit back. “When really you own half that garage?”

His brows went up and his lips quirked. “I see people in town been talkin’.”

I lifted my shoulder in a shrug. “This is a small town, right? Isn’t that one of the stereotypes? Everyone talks and there are no secrets.”

His grin turned teasing. “I guess you’re right.”

“Why the change of heart, Cannon? What happened?”

“Nothin’ happened. I just realized I’d been an idiot and let something incredible slip through my fingers.”

“So, just like that, huh? All of a sudden you, what? Want me?”

“Nothin’ sudden about it, Hummingbird. I’ve wanted you since the first moment I saw you, and the more I get to know you, the more there is of you to want.” My brain couldn’t wrap itself around what he’d just said. I couldn’t think of a single thing to say, not that it mattered, because he wasn’t done. “You ramble without takin’ a breath when you get excited or nervous. You take soup to crotchety old bastards when they get the flu. You babysit Brantley so Shane can get a few moments’ peace. And you swerve for cats.” His chuckle moved through me, making my knees weak. “Baby, I don’t know if I’ve ever met anyone like you.”

“Anyone else here would’ve done the same thing,” I insisted. “Shane’s a friend. You help your friends whenever you can, and I can, so I do. And Fletch isn’t crotchety. He’s sweet as pie.”

“He’s sweet to *you*, Farah. Hell, those men are a bunch of hard, foul-mouthed sons of bitches on a good day. But if they’re sweet to you, they know they’ll earn themselves a smile. And I’m comin’ to realize there’s not a damn thing a man in this town wouldn’t do to see you smile.”

“Wh-what—uh ...” I had to clear my throat in the hopes that would help me form words. They still came out as barely more than a whisper as I asked, “What’s happening right now? What are we doing here?”

“Well, if it won’t freak you out too much, I was plannin’ on kissin’ you.”

“You—” My mouth snapped shut. I wanted him to kiss me. *God*, I wanted that. But ... “I can’t be like all those other women to you. I just can’t, Cannon. And this isn’t me judging you. I want you too, but I’m not capable—”

He silenced me by pressing his thumb against my lips. “You aren’t like the others.” He paused to let that sink in before continuing to rock my world. “I’m not gonna make you any promises about where this is goin’, Hummingbird. We don’t know each other well enough for that. But I got a feelin’

there's somethin' good here, and I wanna see where that leads."

My lips parted and I pulled in a breath that made my chest rattle. "Cannon."

"You want that too, Farah?"

I felt like I was coming out of my skin. A desire I'd only ever read about in romance novels coursed through my blood, a desire I thought I'd never be able to feel after what that man took from me. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before.

All I could do was nod, unable to find my voice. Thankfully that was enough.

Cannon's hands moved instantly, one sliding around to the back of my neck while his other arm lowered to wrap around my waist, pulling me flush against him. His mouth came down on mine, and the instant our lips touched, a current of electricity shot through my whole body. My mouth opened on a gasp at the sensation, and Cannon took full advantage.

His tongue drove inside, brushing against mine in the most intoxicating caress I'd ever felt. My hands trembled as I lifted them to his shoulders. Any hesitation I might have felt disappeared from one blink to the next the moment my palms rested on those wide, strong shoulders. Just like that I melted into the kiss. My arms looped around his neck, and I lifted up on my toes to get closer. The soft, gentle touch of our tongues changed into something so much more. It was primal as we fed from each other. It was as if we'd been starving for each other for so long that we lost complete control. I couldn't think. All I could do was *feel*. Feel the way my breasts grew heavy, the way my nipples tightened into stiff peaks. Feel the way my core clenched with need.

I'd never had a kiss like that before, and I never wanted it to end. Unfortunately, the need for oxygen won out, forcing Cannon and me to pull apart minutes later.

My chest was heaving, my lips felt bruised, but I felt more alive than I ever had in my whole life.

“Wow,” I said on a sigh once I was able to breathe again.

“You said it, baby,” he grunted, resting his forehead against mine. “Jesus, you can kiss.”

A laugh worked its way up my throat for the first time in two weeks as I dragged my nails across his scalp, lifting them higher to tangle in the longer strands near the top of his head. “I can say the same about you.” I closed my eyes and inhaled his heady scent. “So what do we do now?”

His hold on me tightened, and I couldn’t help but notice just how good it felt being pressed against him. He was just so big and powerful that he made me feel petite. “Well, I don’t have a rule book for this, but I figure the next logical step would be dinner.”

I pulled back just enough to look around the room I’d been in the process of painting. “But I still have a lot of work to do here.”

He followed my gaze, taking the room in slowly before turning those heated hazel eyes to me. “No offense, baby, but you’re shit at painting.”

I let out a snort before dropping my head back with a full-on belly laugh. When I looked back at him several seconds later, Cannon’s eyes were smiling down at me. “It doesn’t look that bad, does it?”

“Cut your losses. Maybe if you stop now, Clay’s men can salvage this.”

That was fine with me. Clay and his guys could have at it for all I cared. I lowered my gaze to my paint-splattered overalls and tank. “I should probably go to the inn and shower first.”

“Nah.” He reached up and tucked a loose lock of hair behind my ear. “You look perfect just as you are.”

And just like that, I swooned.

## Chapter Seventeen

---

FARAH

CANNON HELD MY HAND THE WHOLE WAY DOWN THE STAIRS and through the house to the front door. When I glanced into the parlor where Clay and some of his guys were working to wave, he was already looking in our direction with a knowing smirk on his face.

“Have a good night, guys!” I called out as I skip-walked to keep up with Cannon’s long strides. “See you later!”

“Later, sweetheart,” Clay returned with a chuckle.

“So where are we going?” I asked Cannon once we were out of the house and moving toward the driveway. “Should I just follow or meet you there?”

“We’ll ride together.”

I planted my heels in the gravel and pulled us both to a stop. “But ... what about my car?”

Cannon looked in the direction I was pointing, and all of a sudden his square jaw locked tight and began to tick. “That your new ride?” he asked, his eyes glued to my pretty forest green SUV.

“Um, yeah.”

Those hazels flashed with something I couldn’t quite put my finger on as they turned to me. “You get Dad or one of the other guys at the shop to help you pick it out?”

Then it hit me. That look on his face was remorse. I’d asked for his help, and he’d shot me down. “No,” I answered

carefully. “I did a lot of research online, and all the reviews said it was a nice, dependable car. The salesman said it would handle the winter months well and is good for off-roading, if I ever want to drive up into the mountains.”

“Should’ve been there,” he grumbled, more to himself than to me. “I fucked up. I’m sorry, Farah.”

Seeing the contrition twisted into his handsome features made my insides ache. “Hey.” Moving into him, I reached up with my free hand and dragged my nails softly across the stubble covering his jaw and cheeks. “I think it’s safe to assume, after that kiss, that you’re forgiven. Now, I’m starving, and if I remember correctly you promised me dinner, didn’t you?”

The harshness left his face, and his expression grew soft and tender. “I did.”

“So feed me. Destroying the brand new walls of my bedroom really worked up an appetite.”

His chest shook against mine with a chuckle as he pressed his lips against mine in another kiss that was far too brief. “Then I better get my blue collar worker fed. But we’re takin’ my bike. I’ll bring you back for your car later.”

With that, he pulled me over to that matte black motorcycle—and yes, at some point over the past two weeks, I’d googled motorcycles so I could tell the difference between a Triumph and a Harley Davidson.

“Come here, baby.” I took a step closer at his order, and as soon as he could reach, he grabbed my arm and pulled me right in front of him. He grabbed the helmet from the seat and put it on my head, adjusting the strap beneath my chin so it would stay in place. “There,” he muttered once it was secure. “Now you’re good to go.”

My eyes bugged out as I looked all around for a second helmet. “But what are you gonna wear if I’m wearing yours?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m good.”

*Like hell!* “That’s dangerous!” I yelled. “You can’t ride a motorcycle without a helmet! What if you crash? Maybe we

should just take my car. It has side-curtain airbags. If we crash in that, we probably wouldn't even feel it. And there's the added bonus of helmets not being a required. Sure, you'll have to wear a seatbelt, but—"

His hand came up and covered my mouth. "You're ramblin' again, sweetheart. You got nothin' to be nervous about."

I pursed my lips and blew out a loud raspberry. "I strongly disagree."

With a laugh, he leaned back against the bike and kicked his long legs out, spreading them wide so there was enough room for him to position me between them, then he circled my hips with his arms. "I promise, there's nothin' to be scared of. I've been ridin' for years, and I'd never let anything happen to you. You're safe with me."

I pulled in a big breath and held it for three counts before letting it out.

"You trust me?"

I didn't hesitate to nod. "Yeah."

"All right." He shifted me back so he could stand and throw one leg over the bike. "Then hop on so I can get you fed."

I looked down at the motorcycle like it was an algebra problem I was trying to solve in my head. "Um, *how*."

"See that foothold right there?" He pointed at a metal peg extending outward. "Put your right foot on that, push up, then kick your left leg over. Easy as that." I managed to do as he'd instructed without falling on my face, and as soon as my ass hit the seat, Cannon reached back, grabbed behind my knees, and pulled me so close, every inch of my front was pressed against every inch of his back. "Now put your arms around my waist."

I placed my hands on his sides, but apparently, that wasn't good enough. Taking my wrists, he wrapped them all the way around his middle before ordering, "Okay, hold on tight."

A second later, the bike roared to life so loud I jumped and clutched the front of Cannon's tee in a death grip. I thought I heard him laugh, but it was hard to tell over the rumble of the engine.

My eyes remained clenched shut, and I was squeezing Cannon so tight, it was a wonder he could breathe, but he didn't indicate he was in distress, so I stayed glued to his back with my head burrowed down like I was trying to fuse myself with him.

We hit the end of my drive and made a left when I felt a tap on my hand. I lifted my head and brought it closer to his so I could hear over the engine as he called out, "You gotta loosen up, or you won't enjoy this."

I inhaled deeply and willed my body to unlock one muscle at a time, starting from my toes all the way to my head—another technique to stave off panic—and once I made it to my neck, my death grip had unclenched and my palms were resting flat against the ripples of Cannon's abdominals.

The first thing I noticed was that Cannon was *cut*. Lance had gone to the gym religiously, always so concerned about his outward appearance. But he'd never had muscles like this. He was too lean. He could never accomplish the bulk and definition Cannon had.

The second thing I noticed once I'd loosened up was that the wind felt *incredible* on my face. Cannon was in complete control. He knew exactly what he was doing. My hair whipping all around as the landscape whizzed by in a blur was the most exhilarating feeling. It was almost like flying.

Loosening my arms just a bit, I leaned back and turned my face up to the sky and closed my eyes, breathing it all in.

By the time Cannon turned into a driveway, there was so much adrenaline coursing through me I felt high on it.

"So, what did you think?" he asked once he killed the engine and pushed the kickstand down.

My legs were somewhat shaky as I climbed off and moved to see his face "That was *amazing*," I exclaimed with wide

eyes. “Oh my God! Can we go again?”

His body shook with silent laughter as he reached over to remove my helmet, and his grin hit me in the pit of my stomach. “Any time you want, Hummingbird, but right now, I need to feed you.”

I looked across the tiny, postage-stamp-sized yard to what looked like a small two-story townhouse. Buildings that looked exactly like the one Cannon had parked in front of lined the street on both sides as far as I could see.

My feet shifted until I face him again. “Is this your place?”

“Yep.”

The complex was nice enough: freshly painted siding on all the townhouses, clean, well-maintained yard, but it was cookie cutter, and not even close to where I expected Cannon to live. “I thought we were having dinner.”

“We are,” he answered casually, dismounting and taking my hand. He pulled me across the yard to the front door. “I’m gonna cook for you.”

I glanced over at him in obvious bewilderment. “You cook?”

“I do, and before you ask, yes, I’m good at it, so you’re not at risk of starving or getting food poisoning’.”

He unlocked the door and led me in, flipping on the lights as we moved through the space. I took in as much as I could, noticing nice wood floors, white walls and crown molding, curved arches leading from room to room. When we got to the kitchen, I saw contractor-grade cabinets stained to look like cherry and granite countertops. Across the bar was an open concept living room with a big brown suede sectional and matching ottoman. On the wall in front of it was a console that held a huge flat screen TV.

And that was it.

There were no knickknacks, no art or pictures. The walls were all completely bare, and there wasn’t a hint of personality to be seen.

The house was nice, don't get me wrong, but it lacked the personality a man like Cannon Banks should have been surrounded by. His personality was big and wild, and this was the kind of home you'd expect a young couple just starting out to live in.

Cannon sat me on one of the barstools across the counter from him and got to work on dinner, moving around the kitchen like he spent a ton of time there, while I contemplated what surprised me more, Cannon's house, or the fact that he could cook.

"You want a beer or somethin'? I don't have wine, but if that's what you drink, I'll get some to keep on hand.

"Water's just fine. I don't really drink."

He grabbed a glass and filled it before passing it to me and heading for the fridge. "You eat tacos?" he asked while pulling out a packet of ground beef, some tomatoes, an onion, and two avocados.

I lifted an eyebrow on a smile and returned, "You *make* tacos?"

One corner of his mouth hooked up as he glanced back at me over his shoulder. "You'd be surprised. I make a lotta different stuff."

"I *am* surprised. Tattooed biker, Cannon Banks showing a hint of domesticity." I sucked in a dramatic gasp. "But to answer your question, yes, I eat tacos."

"Smartass." He chuckled again.

I watched with rapt fascination as he browned the meat in a large skillet and began chopping the vegetables like a pro. "Did Bev teach you to cook?"

The knife in his hand paused so he could let out a large bark of laughter. "Christ, no. My mom has many talents, but cooking isn't one of them. I learned from my dad. He even tried teachin' her, but the lessons didn't take."

The shock of that registered across my face. "Banks can cook?"

“Yep. My biker pop passed it down to his biker kid.” He shot me a wink. “It’s one of the things that drew her to my old man in the first place, and it’s what keeps her from killin’ him or puttin’ his ass out on the street when he does somethin’ stupid that pisses her off.”

A giggled burst past my lips. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He smiled over at me and resumed chopping. “To hear Ma tell it, only reason she’s stuck around this long was so she wouldn’t starve.”

He knew as well as I did that Bev was full of it. I’d seen the two of them together, how they acted and looked at each other. I’d never seen a love like that between two people before.

“My parents were never like that with each other.” At my words, Cannon’s head came up and he lowered the knife to the counter, giving me his undivided attention. “I’m not sure they ever loved each other. They were a good match. Dad had money and Mom came from a good family. That was the extent of the romance between them.”

He rested his hands on the counter and leaned closer. “Tell me more.”

I hated talking about my past, about the cold, loveless life I’d led, but I wanted to know him and I wanted him to know me in return, so I kept going. “I was engaged before coming here. It was a relationship just like my parents’. The second-best thing I ever did was leave him.”

“And what was the first?” I’d expected him to ask more about Lance or my parents, but he didn’t. He didn’t push or ask me to delve deeper into that pain.

I smiled, looking up from the water glass. “The first was coming here.”

He went back to cooking, throwing spices into the meat. “You know, I’ve been wonderin’, why’d you choose this place? Why Redemption?”

“Our driver, Bennett Montgomery, I came here because of him. He’s been working for my family since before I was born.

Everyone else thought of him as just another employee, but my brother, Jase, and I have been closer to him than our own parents all our lives. He's family to us. He's from here, and I grew up with him telling me stories. When I left Connecticut, I came straight here. I'm trying to get him to retire and come back."

He looked at me with such tenderness it made my chest ache. "I'm glad you have someone like him, baby. And if it's what you want, I hope it happens."

He finished cooking dinner, surprising me by going so far as to fry up corn tortillas into shells.

We ate on his couch in front of the TV while watching some true crime show, and when we finished, Cannon pulled me into his side and held me close.

It was, hands down, the best date I'd ever been on, and I couldn't wait to see what came next.

## Chapter Eighteen

---

FARAH

“OKAY, I KNOW I SAID I WAS HAPPY FOR YOU THAT Cannon got his head out of his ass, but this is getting ridiculous.”

At the disgruntled comment, I turned from Buck to an agitated-looking Shane and lifted my brows. “Huh?”

“It’s been a week, babe!” she cried, and when the befuddlement didn’t clear from my face, she blew out a breath and crossed her eyes dramatically. “We get it. The two of you are in the middle of riding that high that comes at the beginning of all new relationships, but he’s been in here almost every night since you got together, and having to watch you two makin’ googly eyes at each other is just a glaring reminder that I haven’t had sex in *way* too long.”

“And on that note, I’m out,” Buck declared. He tucked the white towel he’d used to wipe the bar down into the waistband of his jeans, then he spun on one boot and bailed to the other end of the bar, waving over his head when I called out, “Coward!” on a laugh.

I turned back to my friend and caught her staring over at the pool tables with a frown on her face. “Oh, come on. We aren’t that bad.”

She blew out a huff and rolled her eyes dramatically. “Please,” she scoffed. “He’s looking at you right now like he’s undressing you with his mind.”

Sure enough, when I peeked in the direction his direction, Cannon was staring at me—or more to the point, my ass—just like Shane said. I felt that look through my entire body before it centered deep in my core.

As if sensing my gaze on him, Cannon's eyes traveled up, and when they landed on mine, he gave me a wink that made my nipples tighten.

“Dear Lord. If you two don't stop eye fucking each other, I'm gonna spray you both with a hose.”

I threw my head back on a laugh. I couldn't remember a time before moving to Redemption where I'd ever laughed so hard or so long that the poor, unused muscles in my stomach ached from being over-exerted.

“I'm sorry, honey,” I said once I was able to speak past the lingering giggles. “I promise I'll try and do better.”

She scowled, but there was no fire in her eyes. “Uh huh. You've officially succumbed to the Cannon Effect. Hate to break it to you, sweetie, but you're a lost cause.”

We broke apart after that. She went to her section, and I went to mine. Once my tables were taken care of, I moved over to the pool tables.

“Hey guys, how's everything going up here? You need anything?”

“I need somethin',” Cannon rumbled, just before grabbing hold of my hips and yanking me onto his lap. He leaned in to kiss me, and in spite of how much I wanted that, for Shane's sake, I forced myself to pull back before our lips had a chance to connect.

After all, she kind of had a point. For the past week, we'd made out and fooled around like a couple of horny teenagers every chance we got. If one touch from him wasn't enough to make my brain malfunction, I might have been embarrassed by how we were acting, but damn if I could find it in me to care.

The only bad thing casting a shadow on the past week was the fact that I still hadn't found the nerve to take things further.

However, every time things started to get too intense, before I had a chance to panic or freak out, Cannon would stop us. I couldn't be certain, but it almost seemed like he sensed I needed to take things slow.

"Ah, ah. None of that here," I chided. "Shane threatened to hose us down if we didn't knock it off, and I think she's serious."

His fingers pressed into my hips on a soft chuckle. "Fine. Then how about you let me teach you to play pool? That way I can press up against you all I want, and she can't say shit about it 'cause I'll have the perfect excuse."

I gave him a teasing smile as I rose from his lap. "Aw, it's sweet you think you can teach me anything I don't already know when it comes to pool."

"Oh hell, son," Banks hooted, along with the rest of the guys at their tables. "Do my ears deceive me, or did your girl here just issue you a challenge?"

Cannon's eyes didn't move from me. His mouth drew up in a smirk so sinful I felt the promise of it in my bones as he pushed to his feet and braced his palms on the table. "Is that what you did, baby? You just challenge me?"

I rested my hands on my hips and squared off with my man. "If that's how you want to take it."

He didn't take his gaze off of mine as he called out loud enough for most everyone in the bar to hear, "Darla! Farah's on a break!"

"She's still got ten minutes!" my boss returned just as loudly.

"She did, until she challenged my skills at pool. Now I gotta teach her a lesson!"

Darla's only response was to laugh long and loud.

When Cannon addressed me again, he lowered his voice in that smooth, silky way that drove me crazy. "All right, my little hummingbird. Let's see what you've got."

This was going to be fun.



I WENT to the wall and chose a cue while Cannon racked the balls, doing my best to hold my smile in. I loved how confident Cannon could be, but it was going to be so much fun, kicking his ass.

I'd never played before I started working at the bar back in college, but it was just one of those things. You heard stories of people sitting down at pianos for the first time and they just *knew* how to play. Well, it was kind of like that with me and pool. I picked up a cue and discovered I was good. I was *damn* good. And I was about to teach my boyfriend a thing or two.

Moving back to the table, I noticed that we'd drawn a crowd. Not only were all the guys gathered around, but a lot of the customers had joined them, including Jeb Franklin and a handful of other regulars.

Cannon shot me a cocky smile and grabbed his own cue. "You ready?"

"Yep."

"Good. I'll try to take it easy on you, and since I'm a gentleman, I'll even let you break."

I tsked and shook my head. "You're gonna regret that, honey."

"I got fifty on the beautiful Farah," Banks called out a second later, then started taking bets from the people around him.

"Really, old man?" Cannon shot to his dad. Banks just shrugged his shoulders and kept collecting money.

He watched me from across the table, and I had to admit, the heated look in his eyes made me a little unsteady, but somehow I managed to shake it off and line up my shot. A second later, I pocketed two balls. Standing tall, I looked across at Cannon, enjoying the shock that registered on his handsome face. "Oh look. I got two of those stripey ones in the holes. That's good, right?"

His smile fell as the people all around hooted and laughed. “All right, smartass. Just take your shot.”

I did just that, and the next three after. I missed the fifth shot, and I watched Cannon pocket three. He was pretty good, I’d give him that. But I was better.

The table was nearly clear less than ten minutes later. Cannon still had one solid on the table, all I had was the eight ball.

I was studying the table when Cannon came up behind me, and I felt his breath tickle my neck as he spoke quietly. “Tough play, Hummingbird. Think you can make it?”

He wasn’t wrong. There was no good shot to take. Pocketing the eight ball was going to be tricky.

Looking at him over my shoulder, I trailed my eyes from his lips to his eyes, feeling that zing I felt every time I looked at him. “I’m not worried.”

“Then how about we make this more interestin’?”

His eyes darkened and my chest shook on an inhale. “Yeah? What did you have in mind?”

He leaned even closer, placing his lips right against my ear and making me shiver as he spoke. “If I win, you’re comin’ home with me tonight.”

My skin suddenly felt too tight. The noise in the bar muted to a dull murmur as Cannon became the only thing I could focus on. “And if I win?”

“Whatever you want, Farah. All you gotta do is name it.”

Having issued his challenge, he backed up and gave me room to move. I had to clear my throat in order to speak. Pointing to the corner pocket closest to me, I called my final shot. “Eight ball, left corner pocket.”

“Ah hell!” Scooter shouted. “That shot’s impossible. Girl’s gonna lose me a hundred bucks!”

“Shut your goddamn mouth and let her focus,” Banks boomed, smacking his buddy upside the back of his head,

before turning to me with a nod. “Take your time, sweetheart.”

I gave him a smile, then bent to the table. My cue hit its target perfectly. The cue ball slammed into the eight, sending it flying down the table, it bounced off the edge just as I’d hoped, and came sailing back toward me. Then it fell right into the pocket I called.

“Fuck yeah!” Banks crowed. “That’s my girl!”

The people who bet on me cheered as they collected their money while the ones who bet on Cannon grumbled at the loss of cash. But while all that happened, I only had eyes for a certain tall, tattooed blond.

He shook his head and chuckled, reaching out and snagging me by my wrist to pull me into an embrace. “Well, aren’t you just full of surprises? Who knew my girl could hustle like that?.”

“I didn’t hustle you,” I said on a grin as I leaned deeper into him. “I gave you fair warning. You just chose not to listen.”

Cannon lowered his head, causing his lips to brush against mine as he said, “Well, you won fair and square then. So name your prize, Hummingbird.”

I smiled huge and told him exactly what I wanted, even though it scared the hell out of me. “To go home with you tonight.”

I felt the vibrations of his growl rattle through my chest, and I’d have given anything in that moment for my shift to be over.

I was just about to kiss him when Buck’s loud voice carried through the bar. “Farah girl! Gotta man over here askin’ for you!”

My brow furrowed as I mumbled, “But all the men I know are here.”

Cannon’s muscles locked tight, his head turning in the direction of the bar before he grabbed my hand and started

pulling me in that direction. The moment we cleared the crowd I jerked to a stop, sucking in a shocked gasp.

“You know that guy?”

“That’s my ex.” I could feel Cannon’s eyes drilling into the side of my face, but I couldn’t pull my attention off the man at the bar. Looking like he’d just come from a country club dinner, in a pair of chinos and a pale blue polo, his perfectly coifed light brown hair gelled into place, and his face shaved baby smooth, Lance stuck out from the rest of the crowd at Bad Alibi like a sore thumb. For once in all the time I had known him, *he* was the one who didn’t fit. And seeing him here, in *my* bar in *my* town, a surge of anger unlike anything I’d ever felt before crashed into me like a rogue wave.

“That son of a bitch,” I gritted, ripping my hand out of Cannon’s and stomping down the stairs. I was within feet of him when he turned and spotted me, his eyes growing wide with surprise.

“Wow. Farah, you look—”

“You have *got* to be kidding me,” I spat, fire building in my veins.

“Farah, sweetheart. I’ve been looking all over this godforsaken town for you. It’s so good to see you.”

“Well, the feeling isn’t mutual, Lance. What the hell are you doing here?” I barked, drilling my finger into his chest.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” he replied, his eyes traveling over my face, hair, and body like he’d never seen me before.

“*I don’t know*. For the life of me, I can’t *imagine* why you’d try and track me down now. Especially since I made it perfectly clear when I gave you back your ring that I didn’t want to see you again. And if that didn’t deliver the message, there’s the fact I haven’t returned a single one of your calls or messages in *weeks*. So I’m at a loss, Lance.” I jabbed him in the chest again, my voice growing louder with every word. “Why ... the hell ... are you *here*?”

Cannon came up behind me, wrapping his fingers around my wrist and pulling me back against his chest. “Calm, baby.”

“*Baby?*” Lance’s gaze bounced from me to Cannon and back again. “Farah, who the hell is this man?”

“None of your business who I am,” Cannon rumbled in reply. “Now, my woman asked you a question. I suggest you answer.”

Lance’s eyes went so round I thought they might pop right out of his skull. “Your *woman?*”

“Didn’t stutter, brother.”

“I’m not *your brother*,” he said with a look of disgust etched into his stony face. “And I’d appreciate you taking your hands off my fiancée.”

At that, I snapped. Pulling from Cannon’s hold, I got in Lance’s face again. “Please, tell me you did not just say that. Because I know you aren’t actually stupid enough to call me your fiancée, not after I caught you screwing the woman who was supposed to be my maid of honor in *my* bed! Or did you shoot out the rest of your braincells when you blew your load into Felicity?”

“Oh *dayum!*” I heard Shane cry from somewhere behind me.

Lance looked around nervously, ever mindful of making a public scene. “Farah, maybe we could take this somewhere private?”

“She’s not goin’ anywhere with you.”

“I wasn’t *talking to you*,” Lance shot back at Cannon like this was a freaking grade school fight.

“The answer won’t change whether it’s coming from him or me,” I reiterated. “I’m not going anywhere with you. In fact, you know what? I don’t even care why you’re here. I don’t want to hear what you have to say, so you can leave now.”

“Farah, it’s time for you to come home,” he rushed out when I began to turn away.

“Wow. You’re just spouting all kinds of stupid shit tonight, aren’t you? I *am* home, Lance. This has been more of a home to me in the past few months than Connecticut was my entire life, and there’s no way in hell I’m leaving.”

“Look at you!” Lance barked, waving his hand at me. I was in another pair of jeans, these a lighter wash, giving them a worn-in look, and a T-shirt with a Triumph motorcycle on the front of it that I’d gotten with Cannon in mind. The moment he walked into the bar and saw me in it, the smile he’d given me was worth a thousand times more than I’d spent on it. I had on very little makeup, my hair—that had grown a lot longer since I came to town—was hanging loose around my shoulders in its natural waves, and I was wearing the awesome, distressed brown leather cowboy boots I’d gotten on an impulse during a shopping trip with Poppy. I thought I looked damn good, and so did Cannon, and that was all that mattered to me.

“You don’t even look like yourself,” he continued. “I don’t know who this woman is, but it’s certainly not the one who wore my ring.”

“Good! Because I couldn’t stand that girl!” I shouted. “She was beaten down and weak enough to accept the proposal of a pathetic excuse of a man just to get her parents off her back! I’m *thrilled* I’m not that woman anymore, because I like who I am now a hell of a lot more.”

He lifted his chin in indignation, looking down his nose at me. “If you come home and follow through with the wedding, your parents have agreed to give you back your inheritance. Be smart, Farah. You don’t belong here.”

“*Seriously?*” A bark of laughter burst past my lips. “Are you really that dense? What aren’t you getting, here? I’m. Not. Leaving. There’s no amount of money on the planet that could get me to go back with you. I barely liked you when we were dating, and I liked you even less with each passing year I was stuck attached to you. As far as I’m concerned you can take the inheritance and the wedding and stuff them right up your hairy ass.”

“Well,” he said on a scoff, “I see the influence the people in this town have had on you. Hang around white trash long enough and you start speaking, dressing, and acting like trash yourself.”

“Motherfucker.” Cannon attempted to shoot around me just as Banks and Scooter got there, stepping in to hold him back. He fought against them, trying to get to Lance while growling, “You talk about her like that one more goddamn time—”

“Take your own advice and calm down, son,” Banks ordered. “Your woman is handlin’ this just fine on her own.”

“You’re choosing *that*?” Lance asked in bewilderment, stabbing his finger in Cannon’s direction. “A loud, violent, tattooed thug? You’re dumpster diving for companionship now?”

My palm connected with his face so hard the crack reverberated through the entire bar, bringing everything around us to a standstill.

“Don’t you *ever* talk about him like that,” I hissed. “You hear me? *Ever*. You’re a piece of shit who’s not worthy of spit-shining his goddamn shoes. You say I don’t belong here? You couldn’t be more wrong. *You* don’t belong here. Now get the hell out of my town, and don’t come back. I’m done with you and my parents and that whole toxic world up there.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Lance exclaimed as I turned back to Cannon. “You’re going to regret this, Farah! I’m giving you until Sunday, that’s it. When you come to your senses, I’ll be at the Four Season in Nashville.”

I didn’t bother reacting. I was done giving that asshole my time. He didn’t deserve another second of it. I moved into Cannon, standing on my toes and taking his face in my hands. “You all right?”

That seemed to be all it took to calm him down. “As long as you’re good, baby, I am too.”

I let out a sigh of relief and lowered back down. “Then we’re both good.” Looking around the large crowd that had

gathered, I raised my voice so they could all hear. “Now whoever wants a drink better get back to their tables. Shane and I have a job to do.”

They parted like the Red Sea, hustling back to where they'd come from so they didn't miss their chance at getting a refill. The last thing I heard as Cannon threw his arm over my shoulders and started leading me away was Buck's angry voice telling Lance, “Believe the lady told you to get the hell out. You don't do it on your own in the next two seconds, I'll do it for you.”

## Chapter Nineteen

---

FARAH

I WAS A BUNDLE OF NERVES BY THE TIME CANNON PULLED his bike in front of the townhouse.

I'd texted Poppy earlier to ask if she wouldn't mind going to my room to check on Crash, telling her I was staying with Cannon that night, and as I'd expected, she replied with a *YES* in all caps, followed by a string of happy face emojis. So after I finished closing, with nothing else delaying the inevitable, I'd hopped on the back of his bike. And just like that, I was officially spending the night with Cannon for the first time.

I was a wreck, and it had nothing to do with the earlier showdown I'd had with Lance.

I wasn't sure how this whole thing was supposed to go. Would he initiate it, or was he expecting me to take the lead so I didn't feel like he was taking advantage? And if that was the case, how in the hell was I supposed to go about doing that?

Then there was the fact that he was going to be the first man I'd been with in nearly a year. While I couldn't imagine it happening with anyone else, I was still terrified. A million thoughts were racing through my mind. What would he think when he saw those small scars littering my chest? What if I had a nightmare?

*What if.*

*What if.*

*What if.*

Taking my hand, he guided me into the house. He didn't bother with the lights as he led me through the entryway and up the stairs. Then, seconds later I was stepping into his bedroom for the first time.

The walls were painted the same bleak white as the rest of the house. Just like in the living room, the furniture was nice, good quality, but other than that, it was completely devoid of personality.

"How long have you lived here?" I asked, moving deeper into the room. He stood with his shoulders against the wall and his arms crossed over his chest as he watched me examine everything.

"I don't know, a couple years. Why?"

I lifted a single shoulder in a shrug. "Don't get me wrong, it a nice place ... it just doesn't feel like you, I guess."

The humor in his voice matched the look on his face as he asked, "It doesn't *feel* like me?"

I shot him a playful grin over my shoulder. "You know what I mean. There are no pictures or personal items anywhere. You haven't decorated at all."

He pushed off the wall and started toward me, each step slow and measured. "Never really gave a shit about that kind of stuff. A house is a house. I'm a simple man. All I need is a place to crash, another place to chill, and a place to cook."

I felt like I was being hunted, the closer he got, the darker his eyes grew. "But ... uh, y-your couch would look cute with some toss pillows."

He stopped right in front of me, lifting a hand to trace my jawline. "Baby, you wanna get some toss pillows for my couch, go for it. Just don't expect me to notice or care."

His fingers made my skin come alive. "And, um, maybe some artwork for the walls?"

"Same rules apply as with the pillows. Just make sure it isn't fuckin' ugly."

As his head began to lower, my voice did the same as I asked, “You’d really let me decorate your house?”

His breath fanned across my face as he laughed. “Yeah, Farah. On one condition.”

I swallowed thickly. “W-what’s that?”

“You stop talkin’ about decorating my house and let me kiss you like I’ve been dyin’ to do.”

He waited for one second . . . and another. Then he took my silence as the approval it was meant to be. The instant his lips touched mine, I lit up like a firework. All my insecurities washed away in that moment. It was just him and me, and our lips pressed together. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held on and became lost in the kiss.

One of his hands tangled in my hair, gripping it and pulling my head to the side for better access, taking the kiss deeper. All I could do was hold on and follow his lead as he devoured my mouth. He bit down on my bottom lip, causing me to suck in a pleasurable gasp at the sharp sting before he laved it with his tongue.

I dropped my head back when he broke away from my mouth and started trailing warm, wet kisses down my neck.

“Christ, I want you,” he rumbled, sucking on the sensitive skin beneath my ear. “Can you feel that, baby?” He stood tall, pulling my arm from his neck and grabbing my wrist, bringing my hand down between us. “Feel how fuckin’ hard I am for you.”

My eyes went big and my lips parted in surprise when my fingers brushed against the massive bulge beneath the denim of his jeans. My palm pressed down harder on instinct, dragging a deep, masculine groan from his chest.

“Jesus.” He squeezed his eyes shut as I rubbed the heel of my hand up and down the impressive length. “Barely touched me, Hummingbird, and I’m ready to come in my pants like a goddamn teenager.” I would have given anything to see him lose control like that. All because of me. “Are you wet for me, Farah? Do I make you as crazy as you make me?”

“God, *yes.*”

There was something about knowing I had that kind of effect on him that made me feel powerful ... *invincible*. I wanted to see him, to feel more of him. Shutting off that voice of warning in the back of my head, I followed my gut. “Cannon, please,” I whimpered as my body begged for more.

His soft words were spoken against my neck. “You want me, baby?”

“Yes.” I was a panting, needy mess. “I want you so much I can’t think straight.”

That was all it took. A moment later, he had me on my back in the middle of his bed. He moved fast after that. Before I could register what was happening, I’d been stripped down to my bra and panties, and Cannon was standing over me in all his naked glory, and there was a *lot* of glory. Those incredible tattoos weren’t just on his arms. The top half of his muscular chest was also covered in ink, a labyrinth of designs from shoulder to shoulder, across his clavicles. His body was a work of art, more beautiful than any canvas.

I couldn’t stop staring. My eyes ate up every inch. My gaze traveled down, down, down. The muscles in his hips stood out in a defined V, like an arrow leading down to his perfect cock. Long and thick, it jutted out from a patch of well-trimmed, dark blond hair. There was a tattoo that spanned across his left hip, and another covering most of his right thigh.

The muscles in his legs bunched and flexed as he put a knee onto the mattress, moving closer. His fingers slipped into the waistband of my panties, and for the first time since we started, that niggling sense of panic returned as he began to drag them down my legs.

*You’re safe*, I told myself, and I struggled to keep my breathing steady. *This is Cannon. He’d never hurt you. You’re safe, Farah. Safe.*

He sucked in a hiss and began to kiss his way from my stomach to my chest. “You’re so goddamn beautiful.”

A second later, his fingers made quick work of the clasp on my bra, and my hands came up to cover my naked breasts the instant he whipped it off.

“Don’t hide yourself from me,” he ordered softly, grabbing my wrists and giving them a gentle pull.

I clenched my jaw and struggled to keep still as he lowered my arms to my sides. I saw the shock register across his face the moment he spotted the faint scars, and my face and chest heated with a furious blush. “Jesus,” he clipped, reaching up to trail his fingers across each one. “What the fuck, baby?”

“Surgery. When I was younger,” I said quickly, the lie rolling off my tongue with surprising ease. “It’s not a big deal, I’m all good now.” The concern shining in those hazel eyes was enough to temper the flame of need that had been building in my gut until now, and I was desperate to get that feeling back. “Cannon, please,” I pleaded, squirming beneath him. “Don’t stop.”

His eyes moved back down to those scars, and I held my breath, watching in fascination as he lowered his head and placed a gentle kiss on each one. He didn’t shy away, wasn’t disgusted by them, and it was enough to make me want to cry. “You’re still perfect.”

He didn’t say anything else or push for answers, and the relief I felt nearly did me in. He shifted back over me, his lips returning to mine, and the kiss was just as hungry as before. I dragged my nails down his back as one of his hands slipped between us. His fingers brushed against my folds in a feather-light touch, and a rough curse burst from deep in his chest when he felt how wet I was.

He pulled his head back and looked at my face while he continued to toy with me, keeping his touch agonizingly light. It wasn’t even close to enough, but he knew exactly what he was doing, building that need, making me desperate. “You ready for me?”

“Please,” I begged. I didn’t want this feeling to end. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do this, but mostly, I just wanted *him*.

He shifted on the bed, reaching over to the nightstand and pulling a condom from the drawer.

My breaths were ragged as I watched him rip the packet open with his straight, white teeth. He slipped the condom in place, and a second later I felt the head of his cock nudge at my entrance.

My body locked up and my lungs froze as he began to push inside. I had a fleeting moment of *oh God, I can't do this*, but before the panic could fully set in, he was kissing me again.

I wasn't in that dark, cold parking lot; I was in Cannon's warm bed. There was no stench of stale cigarette smoke, but instead, all I could smell was his clean, fresh scent. I no longer worried if I could do this, because I already *was*. He was inside me, moving, the length of him stretching me in the most delicious way, sending frissons of electricity through my entire body.

"*Fuck*," he grunted against my mouth when he bottomed out. "Christ, Farah, you feel amazing."

He did too.

"*Oh God*," I cried when he pulled out and drove back in. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt before. I'd never experienced anything this good. My walls squeezed and pulsed around him with every thrust. "Yes."

"Fuck yeah." He grunted, his hips picking up speed, snapping as he powered into me. "Your pussy's so goddamn hot."

Lifting my legs, I wrapped them around his waist, locking my ankles behind his back as I began tilting my hips to meet his. My fingers dug into his shoulders, and my head pressed back into the pillows as an unfamiliar pressure built in my core.

It had never been like this before. None of the other men I'd been with—Lance included—had made any effort in getting me there, and the few orgasms I'd had paled in comparison to what I felt already building inside me.

“*Cannon*,” I moaned, raking my nails down his back. “Don’t stop, *please*.”

“Not a fuckin’ chance.”

My breasts bounced and my body slid up the mattress with every powerful thrust, and I had to lift an arm to brace myself against the headboard as he drove into me.

Every muscle and tendon in my body rippled, clenching tighter and tighter the closer I got to what was bound to be an earth-shattering climax. “Oh shit,” I panted, my lungs sucking in oxygen. “I’m close. *Baby!*”

“That’s it,” he coaxed, those hazel eyes nearly black with lust. “Get there, Farah. Let me feel you drench my cock.”

Those fingers returned between my legs. He pressed hard against my clit, and that was it. I went off. My walls clamped down tight. My neck and back arched off the bed, and I cried out my release so loud my throat felt raw by the end.

It crashed over me in waves, one after another, relentlessly until I thought I might pass out.

Shortly after I finished, he buried himself deep and shoved his face in my neck, following me over with a low, raspy groan.

He collapsed, giving me his weight as we both struggled to get our breathing under control.

I felt a smile of accomplishment spread across my face.

Lifting up and taking in my expression, his eyes warmed on me. “I take it that was better than that preppy-fuck ex of yours?” he asked with humor laced through his words.

“I don’t have words,” I said then began to giggle because I felt like I’d just taken the biggest and hardest step toward healing.

His body shook with silent laughter, causing mine to shake with it. “Well, if that asshole shows again, be sure to throw this in his face as well.”

I nodded my head and pasted a fake serious expression on my face. "You've got it."

He planted a kiss against my lips before slowly pulling out and pushing up. "Gotta go deal with the condom, Hummingbird. Don't you dare fall asleep, 'cause when I get back, we're startin' all over again."

I was down for that.

## Chapter Twenty

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CANNON

A LOW, AGONIZED SOUND PENETRATED MY MIND AND WOKE me up. It took me a second to shake off the fog of sleep completely, but almost as suddenly as I did, the noise shot through the room again, and I realized it was coming from the woman lying with her back pressed against my front.

“Farah? You awake?”

It sounded like she was crying as she whimpered, “Please stop. Let me go.” Her body began to shake uncontrollably and a cold, clammy sweat had formed across her skin. Rising up on an elbow, I rolled to flip on the bedside lamp, bathing the room in light before returning to her. I shifted her to her back and saw her eyes were shut. She was asleep, but whatever was happening inside her head was terrifying her. “Stop it!” she cried, her voice becoming louder. “*Don’t!*”

“Farah, baby.” I gave her a gentle shake, trying to pull her out of the nightmare. “Wake up, sweetheart. You’re having a nightmare.”

The shaking turned to thrashing. “*No!*” She screamed at the top of her lungs, the ravaged sound of that one word sending shards of ice through my veins. “*Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!*”

She was fighting so hard I had to hold her down for both our safety. “Farah!” I barked, shaking her harder. “Christ, baby, wake up!”

Her eyes popped open and the look of unbridled terror made my gut twist and revolt.

“Get off me!” she shrieked, scrambling back on her hands and feet. She pressed herself into the headboard like she was trying to melt into it, her gaze positively feral.

“Calm, Farah,” I said, struggling to keep my tone easy and soothing while holding my hands up in surrender. “You’re okay, baby. It was just a nightmare. You’re all right. You’re safe.”

Her gaze darted around the room in panic, her chest heaving with each inhale. “Cannon?” she asked in confusion when she finally looked back at me. “Wh-what—?”

“You were having a bad dream.” I shifted up the bed carefully, taking her by the arm and pulling her quaking body into my lap when I got close enough. “It’s over now. You’re good, I promise.”

She clung to me like her life depended on it as I rested against the headboard, wrapping her in a tight embrace. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been so goddamn afraid for another person as I was for her. I didn’t have a fucking clue who she was fighting in that dream or what was happening, but hearing her scream like that, Christ, it took a decade off my life. It sounded like she was being killed.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” she stuttered, her teeth chattering and she burrowed deeper into me. “I-I d-didn’t mean—”

“Shh. You’ve got nothin’ to apologize for.”

We lapsed into silence that seemed to last forever. I waited for the shaking to stop and her breathing to return to normal before I chanced speaking again. “Does that happen a lot?”

Her back tensed for a beat, and when I looked down, she was chewing on her bottom lip, something she did whenever she was nervous. “Off and on.”

I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that she wasn’t telling me the truth. “Do you remember what the nightmare was about?” She shook her head. “Not any of it?”

“No,” she whispered, “not any of it.”

She was lying to me, I could feel it in my bones. I wanted to push until she gave me the truth, but something told me if I did, she'd shut down on me completely. There was something big here, something dark. My girl had scars riddled across one side of her chest, and she woke up screaming from a nightmare. Whatever she was keeping to herself wasn't good. But I had to tread carefully. Bending my neck, I pressed a kiss to the crown of her head and spoke, “All right, Hummingbird. It's over. You think you can go back to sleep?”

“I-I can try.”

Reaching out, I hit the lights and shifted us down the bed. “I'm right here, and I'm not letting go. Try and get some rest, yeah?”

Farah nuzzled her face into my chest and let out a huge exhale. I laid there, holding on to her with everything I had as the minutes ticked by. It took a while, but she eventually dozed back off.

I wasn't so lucky. After witnessing what I just had, it was going to take a good long while for me to find sleep again. Seeing her like that was an image I didn't imagine I'd get out of my head any day soon.

*FARAH*



I OPENED my eyes to the confusing sight of sunlight peeking through the blinds.

I blinked several times, thinking that I had to be dreaming. There was no way I could have fallen back to sleep last night, not after another god-awful nightmare.

“Mornin', Hummingbird.”

Holding the sheets to my naked chest, I rolled to my back to find Cannon hovering over me, his smile soft and beautiful. “Good morning,” I returned, my voice croaky with sleep.

“You look different when you sleep,” he stated as those gold and green eyes trailed over my face for a beat.

Reaching up, I wiped at the corners of my mouth nervously. “I didn’t drool, did I?”

“No,” he laughed. “Nothin’ like that. I can’t put my finger on it, it’s just ... different.”

My eyebrows lifted toward my hairline. “Good different or bad different?”

His head came down, his lips brushing against mine as he answered, “Everything about you is good, baby.” After issuing that declaration and making me melt into the mattress, he rolled to the other side and threw his legs over. I laid there, content to watch as he strolled naked over to the dresser and began rummaging through drawers. Seconds later, he covered that fine ass with a pair of flannel sleep pants. It was a shame really.

He came back to me and tossed a T-shirt in my direction. “You can wear that. I’m gonna start breakfast. You should probably use this time to call your brother.”

I sat up and slid the comfy tee over my head before giving Cannon a bewildered look. “What? Why?”

“You need to tell him what went down at the bar last night, Farah. Don’t know your brother, but I’m a man, so I can only guess how he’d take it if he heard that fuck tracked you down on your turf from someone other than you.”

He had a point there. Jase was going to lose his mind no matter what, but if I didn’t let him know as soon as possible, the fallout would be catastrophic.

“All right,” I said with a sigh, not looking forward to that conversation. “But if I’m gonna do that, I’ll need coffee.”

He smiled, and I felt a pleasurable tightness building in my belly. “Lucky for you, I can make that happen.”

THE ONLY THING that made the  conversation with my brother tolerable was that I got to watch Cannon move around

his kitchen with his naked torso still on full display while Jase ranted and raved through the line. It was a seriously mouthwatering sight.

The smell of bacon surrounded me, and I had a nice, warm cup of coffee sitting on the bar just inches away. One foot was tucked on the seat of my stool, pulled in close so I could rest my chin on my knee, while the other leg dangled, swinging back and forth.

With the exception of my brother's rage-filled voice ringing in my ears, this was the kind of morning I could *definitely* get used to.

It had been a good ten minutes since the start of the call, and Jase still hadn't calmed the hell down.

"I'm gonna fucking kill that bastard," he growled through the line for the hundredth time. "That motherfucking son of a bitch!"

I waited patiently, hoping he'd get it out of his system soon, because I'd barely been able to get a word in edgewise for the past several minutes.

"Christ, the balls on him," my brother snapped, pulling me from my perusal of the man I now knew in a very intimate way. "What the fuck was he thinking, flying to fucking Tennessee to track you down."

"Your guess is as good as mine, bub."

"You know what? I don't give a fuck what his reason for doing it is. This is the final goddamn straw. This shit ends now."

I lifted my mug to my lips and took a fortifying sip. "How exactly are you planning to make that happen from a thousand miles away?"

"Won't be a thousand miles away come tomorrow."

My foot fell from the seat as my back shot straight. "What? Does that mean ...?" I let out a squeal of excitement so loud Cannon whipped around from the stove and Jase issued a curse. "You're coming here? Seriously?"

“I’ll have to talk to Bennett first. He finds out I got on a plane to you without telling him, he’d skin me alive. But as soon as that’s done, we’ll be on the next flight out.”

“Oh my God,” I gasped, swinging my wide eyes around to Cannon. “This is so great! There’s so much I want to show you guys. A lot has changed since Bennett lived here. I can’t wait!” Then something dawned on me, and I instantly deflated. “Oh, but my house isn’t gonna be done for a few more days.” My shoulders sagged at the thought of not being able to show off my grand new home to Jase and Bennett. “I was hoping the first time you guys came here, you’d be able to stay there with me.”

“When are you supposed to move in?”

And once again, I perked up. “Wednesday.”

“That’s not too far off. Bennett’s been grumbling about retiring since you left, and I haven’t taken a vacation in three goddamn years, I’m due for one.”

“*Really?*”

His chuckle rang through the line. “Can’t help my little sis move into her new place from a thousand miles away, now can I?”

“No,” I said on a giggle. “You sure can’t. And this is actually good! This way you’ll get to stay at Redbud Inn for a couple days. It’s just the cutest little place you’ll ever see.”

“Looking forward to that, sweet pea. I’m sure it’s gonna be great. But you need to know, I’ve also got ulterior motives for this trip.” At the shift in his tone, taking him from light to serious, I went on high alert. “You just confessed to me that you’ve got a new man in your life. It’s almost been a year, Farah. I’ll give it to you straight, I’ve been worried out of my mind that you’d never come back from that night, but it seems you have. I need to meet this guy. I have to see for myself that he’s good enough for you.”

Fighting back the burn in my eyes and throat, I looked over at Cannon. “He is, Jase. I promise,” I said quietly. God, I loved my brother. “He’s incredible.”

“And I believe you, sweetheart, but I have to see for myself. I need you to give me that.”

Sensing that the conversation with Jase had taken a turn into serious, Cannon shut the burner on the stove off and started around the island in my direction. The second he was close enough, his hands landed on my knees, and he spread my legs, stepping in between them.

“I can give that to you, bub.”

“Thank you.” The sound of him clearing his throat filled my ear, and I knew he was struggling to fight back his own emotions. “He’s good to you, sweet pea?”

My eyes remained locked on Cannon’s beautiful hazel ones as I replied, “Yeah, he’s good to me.” Then I said the words that would mean the whole world to my protective big brother. “I feel safe with him, Jase.”

Cannon’s expression went tender and his hand came up to caress the side of my neck.

“Good.” Jase’s voice was craggy and raw, and when he cleared his throat again, I had a sneaking suspicion my brother was dangerously close to tears. “I’m happy you found that, Farah.”

“I am too, bub. More than you know. And now it’s just icing on the cake that you and Bennett will be here too. But just a word of warning, I’m gonna do everything in my power to try and get you to stay for good.”

“Consider me warned, sis,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. “Now I’ll let you go so you can have breakfast with your guy, and I can call Bennett.”

“Okay, Jase. See you soon. I love you.”

“Love you too, Farah. With all my heart.”

I hung up and lowered the phone from my ear, keeping my attention on Cannon as I stated the obvious. “My brother and Bennett are coming to town.”

“Kinda pieced that together on my own.” He chuckled. “Happy for you, baby.”

I was too. In fact, while things had been great since my move to Redemption, this was probably the first time in my life I could say I was well and truly *blissfully* happy. Hopefully, very soon, I'd have all the people who mattered most to me in one place.

And I couldn't think of anything better.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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FARAH

SHANE, POPPY, AND I SAT OUT ON POPPY'S PORCH, WHILE Brantley and Crash played together a few feet away.

After a great breakfast and an even better shower where we went at each other until the water ran cold, Cannon had driven me back to the inn. As soon as his bike roared off, I was on the phone, calling Poppy and Shane. I'd never done girl-talk before. Back in Connecticut, the women I was forced to associate with spent most of their time gossiping and back stabbing, so I'd never confided in any of them. But now that I had *good* girlfriends, I needed someone to talk to about everything that had gone down in the past several hours between me and Cannon. Poppy knew the whole of it, and now Shane did as well.

I'd given her everything, and as the seconds ticked by where all she did was stare in silence, I began to feel uneasy.

"Okay, I know I just laid some pretty terrible stuff on you, but can you say something? Please?"

Her expression grew hard and pinched, her low voice full of rage as she declared, "I want to hunt that fucker down and kill him. But first I want to make him *suffer* for what he did to you."

"I'm with you on that one, girl," Poppy added, just as incensed on my behalf as Shane was.

"I truly believe that I possess the necessary skills to hide a body in a way it'll never be found," Shane stated, dead

serious. “And even if I didn’t, prison time would be worth it.”

We were getting off topic, and I worried they’d trail so far off they’d get lost and never be able to get back if I didn’t rein them in.

My two best friends were now absorbed in plotting out the murder of a man they’d hopefully never cross paths with, so I did the only thing I could think of to regain their attention.

“I had sex with Cannon last night,” I blurted, mindful to keep my voice quiet enough that Brantley wouldn’t overhear.

Poppy’s mouth clamped shut and her eyes bugged out. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I had sex with Cannon last night,” I repeated, then added, “And again this morning.”

“Oh my God,” Poppy breathed out on a wheeze.

“*That’s* why I called you guys. I’m freaking out, but in a good way. I was scared I’d never be able to do that again. I worried that part of me was too broken, you know? But it’s not.” On those last three words a smile lifted my cheeks high. “I’m not broken,” I whispered, the happiness of that knowledge making my eyes sting.

“Of course you aren’t broken,” Shane stated emphatically. “You needed time, that’s all. And now ...” A grin of her own stretched across her lips. “Looks like you’ve climbed back in the saddle in a really big way.”

“You know,” Poppy started, “I’ve heard talk, but I never really knew what was real and what was exaggeration, so I’ve always been curious.”

I looked over at the adorable redhead, my head tipping to the side. “About what?”

She leaned forward and lowered her voice conspiratorially. “How is he? I mean, some of the women talk like the guy’s a legend. It’s a little hard to believe.” Her eyes bored into me. “*So?*”

Shane let out a snort, looking in Poppy’s direction in bafflement. “Well, I’ll be. Did our sweet little Poppy just ask

about what your man's packing and how good he is at using it?"

"I'm not always sweet," she argued with a scowl in Shane's direction. "And yeah, I am asking. Because I'm not blind, and that man is *fine*. I'm also not dead. I haven't gotten any in longer than I care to admit, so I'm gonna live vicariously through Farah, damn it!"

At that, Shane and I burst out laughing while Poppy sat there glaring with her arms crossed over her chest.

It took a bit, but once my laughter tapered off, I managed to speak, and I gave her what she'd been so curious about. "It was ... I don't think outstanding is a strong enough word."

Poppy's chest rose on an inhale as she sighed, "Damn."

"He's just so strong and big, *everywhere*. He knows exactly what he's doing and he's totally confident while doing it."

"So, it was good for you?" Shane asked carefully.

"It was great," I admitted. "Better than I ever imagined."

"Then we're happy for you, honey," Poppy said.

Shane nodded in agreement. "Definitely. You deserve it. And even though the last guy I slept with got winded with *me* on top, I'm not jealous of you in the slightest."

We fell into another peel of laughter. It felt amazing to have something like this with these two incredible women.

We talked a little more about my night with Cannon, then the subject shifted to my brother and Bennett coming to town. Poppy was happy to know she'd have two more guests for a couple days, but mainly, she was just happy for me that my family was coming to visit.

We hung out on the porch for a little while longer, enjoying our time together and soaking in the beautiful day. Shane eventually packed Brantley up and headed out, and I hung with Poppy for the rest of the afternoon until it was time for me to get ready for my shift at the bar.

Where I'd get to see the man who'd rocked my world the night before.

The day just kept getting better and better.

 THAT NIGHT, Cannon did something I wasn't expecting. He came in after he finished up at the garage, but instead of moving to the pool tables where he usually sat, he took up residence at the bar on the stool closest to the end where Shane and I always stopped to put in orders or pick up drinks. By doing that, he and I had more time to talk to each other, and it made it easier for him to touch me or brush up against me every time I came to the bar.

Just like he was at that very moment.

His hand traveled down to the small of my back, coming to rest just above my ass as I read out my order to Darla. When she left to fill my drinks, I turned to Cannon and gave him a look. "You know, a customer gets fresh the way you are, I'd usually have Buck boot them out."

His smirk was unrepentant as he leaned in close. "Somethin' tells me you like it when I get fresh, Hummingbird."

I narrowed my eyes in a playful glare. "Anyone ever tell you you can be a little too cocky?"

His chuckle lit my insides on fire. "Once or twice. But I like to think of it as bein' confident. Admit it, sweetheart. Your pulse is speedin' up, isn't it?"

It definitely was. But I wasn't going to make it that easy for him. "Maybe." I shrugged casually. "Maybe not. I guess you'll have to find out for yourself tonight."

His eyes darkened and flashed with fire. "Your place or mine."

I was just about to ask if he wouldn't mind staying at the inn with me—I worried Crash was starting to feel neglected—when Shane came rushing up to our little huddle.

“Sweet Jesus. I’m either dead, dreaming, or God is playing a joke, ’cause I’m pretty sure a man that good looking can’t be real.”

I turned in the direction she was staring with a laugh and jerked to a stop at the sight of the man standing just inside the door.

“No way,” I gasped. Then my body flew into action. I weaved through the tables at a full run. I was halfway across the bar when I lifted my arm and yelled, “Jace!” over all the noise. My brother’s head turned, and the instant he saw me, that smile that had gotten me through some of the hardest times growing up stretched across his handsome face.

The moment I was close enough, I launched myself at him. He caught me easily, holding me tight and lifting me off my feet.

“Christ, it’s good to see you, sweet pea. I’ve missed you like crazy.”

“I’ve missed you too,” I croaked past the lump forming in my throat. He finally put me back on my feet, and I looked up to make sure he was really there. “I can’t believe you’re here. I thought you weren’t coming until tomorrow.”

“Found a flight out today. Figured we’d surprise you.”

At the word *we*, Bennett stepped up besides Jase. “You got one of those for me, my sweet Farah?”

“You came!” I shouted, flinging myself into Bennett’s big frame. Just like they had all my life, his hug felt like the safest, warmest blanket on earth. As I held on to the only man who’d been any kind of father to me, I battled the burn in my eyes.

“Of course I came, girl,” he said while taking my arms in his hands and pushing me back so he could get a good look at me. “You didn’t think I’d let this fool make the trip on his own, did you?”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” I replied on a giggle.

“You look great, sweet girl,” Bennett said, his already rough voice getting rougher with emotion. “Happy and

healthy. I see this town agrees with you.”

“It does.” Just then I felt Cannon’s presence hit my back a moment before his hand landed there and slid around to become an arm hooked at my waist.

I turned to glance back over my shoulder and saw him giving a polite look to Bennett and my brother. “You must be Farah’s family,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m Cannon, Farah’s man. Nice to meet you.”

Jase just stood there and stared at Cannon with a look of astonishment across his face. The silence stretched on long enough for me to begin to fret. Then, because my brother was awesome, he shook Cannon’s hand while turning to me and speaking loudly, “Please tell me that fuckwit ex of yours shit his pants when he got a load of this guy. I’d have paid good money to see it, but since I can’t go back in time, I can settle for your word.”

Cannon’s head fell back with a loud, booming laugh. “Nah, man. Nothin’ like that, though it would’ve made things more entertainin’, that’s for damn sure. Farah took care of him all on her own. If I had to guess, he’s still wearin’ the handprint she laid across his face last night, though.”

Bennett’s and Jase’s eyes flashed with approval.

“You slapped him, girl?” Bennett asked, his tone liberally sprinkled with admiration.

“He deserved it,” I said with a shrug. “It wasn’t like I planned on doing it. I just kind of snapped.”

“Always knew that’d happen,” Bennett mumbled, his weathered face lighting up as he turned his grin from me to Cannon. “Knew since she was a little girl there was fire in her belly. Just glad to see it’s finally starting to come out.”

“It’s a damn treat to watch, I’ll tell you that.”

“I take it back.” Jase chuckled. “*That’s* what I’d have paid good money to see.” After a long laugh, Jase looked at me, the smile slipping from his mouth, but not his eyes, as he took me in. His voice was low and gentle as he spoke. “Look at you, sweet pea. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so happy.”

“I *am* happy, bub.”

“Good. You have no clue what a relief that is.”

I was at risk of bursting into ugly tears if my big brother didn't stop being so damn sweet. Fortunately, Buck's loud voice boomed across the bar and broke the spell. “Farah girl! You just gonna stand over at the door, or you gonna bring those folks in so we can meet 'em?”

I bounced on my toes in excitement as I grabbed Jase and Bennett's hands and began pulling them farther into the bar. “Come on,” I said eagerly. “There's a whole bunch of people I want you to meet. You're gonna love them.”

I spent the next several minutes introducing them to the newest members of my family. They met Buck and Darla first, gladly accepting the pints Buck poured for them on the house. They met and were charmed instantly by Shane. Then they spent some time laughing and cutting up with Cannon and his guys as they recounted how I'd hustled Cannon at pool.

The first two members of my family fit seamlessly with the new ones. Even Jase, in his expensive jeans and crisply ironed button-down, fit in. But then, my brother had a gift for making friends no matter where he went.

I bounced between checking my tables and squeezing in as much time with them as I could.

I still had a few more hours left on my shift, so they eventually took off to check in at Redbud Inn and get some sleep, but not before we made plans to meet up the next morning.

It was tough to watch them walk away after only having them for such a short time, but knowing I'd see them again in a handful of hours made letting them go—after nearly hugging the life out of them, of course—so much easier.

After all, I still had Cannon to keep me company. And my man was *nothing* to sneeze at.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

---

FARAH

A MOAN RIPPED ITSELF FROM DEEP WITHIN MY CHEST. MY head fell back and my eyes clamped shut as I picked up the pace, rocking my hips, riding him harder and faster.

“Eyes on me, Hummingbird.”

Cannon’s gruff voice sounded like it was coming from inside a tunnel but I was too lost in the sensation of being connected with him to listen. His length was rubbing against that sensitive spot inside me, and the faster I moved, the closer I came to getting off.

“Goddamn it, Farah,” I heard him grunt just before he knifed up. One of his arms clamped around my waist while he grabbed my hair with the other hand and forced my face back to his. I let out a gasp as our eyes locked. In this new position, I was able to take him even deeper, and the feel of all that naked skin pressed against every inch of me made everything a million times better. “Eyes on me when I’m inside you,” he ordered.

My lips parted on a ragged moan as he took control. I might have been on top, but Cannon was officially done letting me run the show. His arm pinned me in place and his hips began to snap up, driving his cock harder and deeper into me.

“Honey, I’m close,” I panted as the pressure in my belly began to intensify.

“Fuck, baby. Nothin’ feels as good as you.” I let out a whimper as my impending orgasm threatened to tear me apart.

“Most beautiful thing I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he continued, each word a shot to the heart.

As I stared down at him, connected in the most intimate way a man and woman could be, I finally saw the truth. There was no denying or ignoring it. I was falling for Cannon Banks. This incredible man had helped to heal pieces of me I thought would remain broken forever.

I’d come to this town looking for something I wasn’t sure I’d ever find. I’d fled a cold and cruel life in the hopes of finding something that would fill some of the holes left behind on my heart. Now it was so full it was sometimes hard to breathe.

“Cannon,” I whimpered as my limbs locked around him and my muscles tightened.

“Give it to me, Farah. I wanna feel it.”

And just like that, the pressure snapped and I went careening head first into the strongest release I’d ever had.

Seconds later, Cannon followed me over the edge. His head fell back. The strong column of his throat working on a gravelly groan.

The second it left him, he collapsed against the mattress, taking me with him. He rolled me to my back, maintaining our connection as he hovered over me.

I held on to him, not ready to lose the feel of his big, strong body against mine just yet, and he seemed content to give me that, keeping himself still as his lips sought out mine in a dizzying kiss.

Minutes later, he finally lifted his head, and I felt that soft, tender look in his eyes deep in my belly. The warmth it provided bloomed and spread until it overtook everything.

“You good?” he asked gently, his rough fingers skating across my face from my temple to my jaw.

I grinned up at him, leaning into his touch. “Honey, if I get any better, I’m gonna melt right into the mattress.”

His silent chuckle shook my whole body. “Then my work here is done.”

My head pushed into the pillows as I let out a long, loud belly laugh.

“Be right back,” he said softly, pressing a kiss to my lips once my hilarity tapered off. I tucked the sheet around me, watching the muscles in his back and ass flex as he moved into the bathroom to deal with the condom.

Sensing that the coast was now clear, Crash jumped up on the bed, his loud purr making his body vibrate as he rubbed the top of his head beneath my chin.

I pushed up on an elbow and gave him a scratch. “Hey, sweetheart. Are you glad Mommy’s home?” At my question, the purring grew in intensity, so I took that as a yes. “Good news for you, buddy. You get to meet your uncle and grandpa tomorrow. They’re gonna love you, but just to be safe, we probably shouldn’t mention how we found each other, yeah?”

I figured he agreed when he rolled onto his back, demanding a belly rub.

Cannon’s chuckle filled the room. I looked up just as he hit the bed, pulling the covers back and moving into me so his chest was pressed against me. “Somethin’ tells me if Jase found out about that, he’d never let you live it down.”

I snuggled into him. With his body heat at my back, and Crash now snoozing at my front, I was trapped in place. Fortunately, there wasn’t anywhere else I’d want to be, so the fact I couldn’t move worked just fine for me.

“You’d be right. First I’d get a lecture, but once he finished with that, I’d never hear the end of it. Sometimes I think he was put on this earth for the sole purpose of giving me shit.”

I could hear the smile in his voice as he said, “It’s just what brothers do, Hummingbird.” His palm came up to rest on my shoulder before he slid his hand down the length of my arm. Up and down, over and over, like the softest, most soothing massage. “You lit up tonight. Having them here really means a lot to you, huh?”

“It means everything,” I whispered. “He and Bennett were all I ever had. Before I came here, it was just the three of us.” I watched my fingers skate through Crash’s fur as I confessed, “I was surrounded by people constantly, but the only time I wasn’t truly alone was when I was with them.”

“It was really that bad?”

It took effort not to get sucked into the memories of the past, and I had to steel myself before confessing, “For the most part, I barely existed to my parents. As the oldest and the only boy, Jase is set to take over the company when my father retires, so he was required to take more of an interest in my brother. Meanwhile, I was my dad’s broodmare. He didn’t care much about me past my capability of marrying into money. And to my mom, I was a disappointment. Before I let them beat me into submission, I’d had the audacity to want to live my life on my own terms. In her eyes, that was unforgivable.”

His arm slid around my waist and squeezed as he grunted, “Jesus, baby.” It was almost as though he was trying to absorb all my pain so I didn’t have to deal with it on my own any longer.

“It takes more than DNA to be a parent,” I continued, my tone growing fierce. “Bennett might not be related to me by blood, but as far as I’m concerned, he’s my real dad.”

“Then I’m fuckin’ thrilled I got the chance to meet them, sweetheart.”

The sadness melted away, and my face lifted into a grin as I reached down and threaded my fingers through his. “I am too, honey.”

I felt his lips press against the back of my head before he let me go and rolled to turn out the light. When he came back, he resumed his hold on me.

It took no time for me to fall asleep. With Cannon and Crash surrounding me in a protective bubble, and my family close, just a few rooms down from mine, I slept soundly.

And I didn’t have a single nightmare.



FARAH WAS in the shower when a knock sounded on the door.

Pulling the shirt I wore last night over my head so I didn't open the door to my woman's family in nothing but a pair of jeans, I threw the lock, used my foot to scoot Crash out of the way, and pulled the door open to the two men. "Mornin'."

A flash of surprised registered across Jase's face for just a second before he pushed it away and lifted the tray of coffees he was holding in one hand and a white paper bag in the other. "Brought you guys a little pick-me-up."

"Appreciate it." I stepped to the side, making room for he and Bennett to come in. "Farah's in the shower, but she should be out soon. Make yourselves comfortable."

Both men moved to the small dinette table tucked against the back wall beneath the window and took a seat. I took the coffee Jase offered and sat on the end of the bed across from them.

"Wasn't sure how you took it, so I got black. There's cream and sugar in the bag if you want it."

"Black's good. Thanks."

Crash decided to make his presence known in that moment by jumping right onto Jase's lap, almost causing him to spill his coffee.

"Jesus! What the fuck?"

"Sorry about that," I said on a chuckle as I moved to relieve him of the fat feline's considerable bulk. "Farah's cat has some boundary issues."

He looked from Crash to me. "Farah has a cat? Since when?"

“Since she found him on the side of the road,” I answered around my cup.

Bennett let loose a quiet chuckle. “My sweet Farah. Always had a thing for strays.”

Jase bent low to give the cat’s head a scratch. “He’s sweet,” he noted. “Fat as hell, but sweet. What’s his name?”

“Crash.”

Both men turned inquisitive eyes to me, and Jase asked, “*Crash*? Why in the hell did she name her cat Crash?”

I chose to shrug instead of lying. “Guess you’ll have to ask her.”

I’d just finished sucking back a gulp when Bennett spoke up. “Well, enough about the cat. It’s good you’re here. We had something we wanted to discuss with Farah, and from what we saw last night, it’s clear you two are tight. Best to fill you in as well.”

I noticed then that the energy in the room had gone tense. My muscles locked tight as I went on alert and asked, “This got somethin’ to do with Farah’s ex showin’ up outta nowhere?”

“It does,” Jase answered, the carefree mask he’d pasted on for his sister’s benefit the night before gone and replaced with one a hell of a lot more serious. “But first there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask. How much has Farah shared with you?”

I felt those creases form between my eyes as I frowned. “Shared with me?”

“About our family or Lance, anything like that.”

I wasn’t sure where he was going with this line of questioning, but I answered anyway. “She’s talked about your folks and, no offense, man, I hope you know that, but your parents are fuckin’ assholes.”

A humorless smirk pulled at his face as he said, “No offense taken. Believe me, you aren’t saying anything I don’t

already know. A fucking chimpanzee is a better parent, and they're known to eat their young, for Christ's sake."

I could see that. "She's told me some stories, and I'm inclined to agree with you. Anyway. She's mentioned them and that fucker ex of hers, but I get the feeling there's a lot she isn't tellin' me."

Bennett put his coffee cup on the table and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "What do you mean?"

"It's just a feelin'," I admitted. There was a part of me that worried I was crossing a line, talking to Farah's family behind her back like this, but if there was anyone who could give me some insight into the secrets I suspected that woman was holding on to, it was these men right here. "She keeps her shit locked tight."

I'd told her yesterday morning there was something different about her when she slept, but it had taken me a while to figure out what that difference was. Then I woke up a few hours ago and saw it again as she slept next to me, and I finally realized what it was.

She was vulnerable, completely unguarded, and if I hadn't had the chance to see her sleeping, I never would have noticed that she walked around all day, every day, with a goddamn shield up around herself.

"It's like she's wearin' armor," I attempted to explain. "She's happy, but I didn't realize until very recently, that there's somethin' lurking underneath. She's wearing a mask that everything is great, but when she stayed with me the other night, she woke up in the middle of the night, screamin' bloody murder. Christ, it scared the fuck outta me. I've never heard anything like it before."

Jase's face took on an expression I couldn't read. The only thing I could tell was that he was worried. "She say anything about it?"

I shook my head. "She said she didn't remember what she was dreamin' about."

“But you don’t believe her.” It wasn’t a question. Farah’s brother was a smart man, and he knew how to read between the lines.

“She’s keeping somethin’ from me,” I told the two men sitting across from me. “And I’m hopin’ you guys can enlighten me on what it is I’m dealin’ with here.”

Bennett sat back and cut his eyes to Jase. The men shared a look that had my stomach twisting into knots.

When Jase returned his gaze to me, I could see I wasn’t going to get anywhere. “I get your frustration, but you have to understand that I can’t betray my sister’s confidence like that. I saw the way she looked at you. It doesn’t take a genius to see she cares about you. Give her time. She’ll open up.”

That twisting in my stomach grew tighter. The muscle in my jaw ticked as I stared at the man before me and declared, “And you gotta see how that might not work for me. For Christ’s sake. I got a woman whose nightmares are so goddamn bad, it sounds like she’s bein’ murdered. It took way too goddamn long for her to come fully out of it. I can’t help her if I don’t know what I’m dealin’ with.”

“Just give her time,” he repeated. “She’ll open up.”

“And if she doesn’t?” The two of us squared off. “What then?”

“She will,” he insisted.

“Fuck, man, you can’t know that for sure! And even if she does, what am I supposed to do ’til then, huh?”

“Until then, Bennett and I will take care of her,” he gritted, his own anger beginning to show through that casual, laid-back veneer he wore. “We’ve been doing it her whole life. We aren’t going to stop now.”

“And how the hell do you plan on doin’ that from fuckin’ Connecticut?”

It was Bennett who answered that one. “I won’t be in Connecticut. I’m not going back with Jase.”

The sound of someone sucking in a sharp breath shot through the room, and the three of us turned in tandem to find Farah standing in the open doorway of the bathroom.

Her hair hung down in damp golden strands, her face was completely free of makeup, and she was dressed in a pair of cotton shorts and a tank. And fuck me, she still looked beautiful enough to make my dick stir to life.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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FARAH

“YOU’RE STAYING?” I ASKED ON A WHISPER THAT SOUNDED like it had been ripped from my chest.

“Put in my notice with your folks before I got on the plane yesterday. I’m officially retired, my sweet Farah.”

“Oh my God.” I sucked in a breath so big it was a wonder there was any oxygen left in the room. Bennett barely had time to rise from his chair and brace himself before I launched across the room. “This is so amazing!” I cried, throwing myself into his arms. “This is the best news ever!” I pulled back, scanning the room and taking in the three most important men in my life. “We have to celebrate! Darla and Buck gave me the night off so I could hang with you guys. We have to do something really big. Oh!” I cried out when the idea hit me. “I’ll make dinner for everyone!”

“No!” Bennett and Jase shouted at the same time with matching looks of fear etched into their features.

“Oh come on,” I grumbled at their dramatics, rolling my eyes to the ceiling. “I’m not that bad of a cook.”

“You gotta be kidding me.” A bark of laughter burst from Cannon’s chest, and I had a sneaking suspicion he was remembering the conversation we’d had about his own mother’s lack of cooking skill. “Hummingbird, you didn’t tell me you couldn’t cook.”

“I *can* cook,” I argued, a glare pinching at my face as I pointed to Bennett and Jase. “Those two are just being big

babies.”

“Sweet pea,” my brother said in a placating tone that made me want to smack him, “remember when you got that wild hair up your ass to make Thanksgiving dinner for me and Ben all by yourself?”

“I was fifteen!” I exclaimed, slamming my hands on my hips as embarrassment made my cheeks flush with heat. “And it wasn’t that bad.”

“I was sick with food poisoning for three days! I nearly had to go to the hospital, I was so dehydrated from throwing my guts up.”

From the corner of my eye, I caught Cannon pulling his lips between his teeth, no doubt in an attempt to keep from laughing.

“Well, what about my chocolate chip cookies?” I asked, grasping at straws so Cannon didn’t think I was completely helpless. “I’ve been making them for you guys for years, and you’ve always said they’re delicious.”

Bennett’s expression twisted into a wince that did *not* say good things. “Girl, those goddamn cookies always come out hard as bricks. Don’t know how you manage that, but I almost cracked a tooth the one and only time I tried to eat them.”

My jaw dropped in affront. All these years, and these two jerks had been lying to me! “But—”

“I couldn’t even get Puppy to eat them, and he ate his own shit, so what’s that tell you?”

A sound that was a combination between a snort and a choke came from Cannon’s direction. “You named your dog Puppy?”

“Not me.” Bennett pointed a finger in my direction. “That was all her.”

When he turned to me and arched a single brow, I let out an exasperated sigh. “It wasn’t intentional. I found the little guy eating out of a dumpster and brought him home with me. Bennett raised him for me but said I could pick his name. I

was having trouble thinking up a good one so while I was trying to decide, I called him puppy. It's not my fault he thought that for his name and started answering to it."

"You have to admit, sis. You aren't the best at picking names." Jase pointed to where my cat was napping on the bed. "I mean, Crash? What's up with that?"

"That's beside the point," I clipped quickly, lifting my chin in indignation so I didn't have to answer my brother's question. He was *never* to know the truth behind Crash's name. "Before my family decided it was a good idea to point out my *one and only* flaw, we were talking about celebrating. Why don't we go back to that? If you don't want me to cook—which, FYI, I can *totally* do—then we need to think of something else."

"I'll call and make a reservation at the Cattleman," Cannon suggested. "Best steaks you'll ever have."

"That's perfect." I felt my face growing soft as I smiled up at him. "Do you think Bev and Banks would want to join us?"

"I can ask, but I'm sure they'd love to."

I clapped my hands in excitement. "Excellent."

I was just thinking that this day was already turning out to be one of the best I'd had in a very long time, and it had only just started, when my brother spoke, casting a shadow over my good mood. "Good, we've got the settled, but there's something we need to talk to you and Cannon about, sweet pea."

Cannon slid beside me, hooking me around my waist and pulling me against him as I looked to Jase. "Well that sounds ominous. Is something wrong?" I'd never seen my brother so serious before, and as he leaned to brace his forearms on the table a feeling of dread pierced my happy little bubble.

"After I got off the phone with you yesterday, I had someone look into Lance. I wanted to know why the hell he'd show up here, insisting on taking you home, when for most of your relationship, he couldn't have given a shit whether you were there or not. Somehow, the Maryweathers have managed

to keep a lid on the shit my guy dug up, but it's only a matter of time before it becomes public knowledge, and when it does, that family's fucked. But it explains why that bastard's had a sudden change of heart."

A chill moved across my skin, causing me to press deeper into Cannon. "What did you find out?"

"Maryweather Incorporated is bankrupt."

My chest expanded on an inhale so big, my lungs began to burn. "What?"

"Apparently, Lance got in way over his head when his old man stepped down and appointed him as CEO. Things have been going downhill for longer than any of us could have suspected, but it seems he's finally hit rock bottom. What he didn't gamble away on one of his countless trips to Vegas, he lost on some shitty investments that no one with even limited knowledge of the stock market would've ever put money in. There's nothing left. Every Maryweather department store will be closed down by the new year."

"Holy shit." I blinked wide, bewildered eyes at my brother. "You're kidding."

"Not even a little."

Cannon's arm clenched, pulling my attention to him, and when I looked up, I saw his jaw was hard as stone. "Figure this is just statin' the obvious, but he isn't here 'cause he wants her back, is he? He's here 'cause he wants her money."

Jase gave him a sullen nod. "Hit the nail right on the head, my man."

I looked to my brother, trying to piece together everything I'd just heard. "But ... that doesn't make any sense. Mom and Dad disinherited me."

The air in the room suddenly shifted. Everything went weird, and when I turned back to Cannon, I saw that hard expression had shifted into a full-blown rage. "Those motherfuckers *disinherited* you?"

I nodded on a thick swallow, trying to give some relief to my parched throat. “It was just a threat when I broke off my engagement with Lance, but when I told them I was moving, they actually went through with it.”

“But I thought you said you still had money.”

“She has a trust that was set up by our grandfather.” Jase answered. “Our parents couldn’t touch it, and believe me, they tried. They got pissed, viewing what she did as an act of defiance. They reached out to their lawyers to see if there was anything they could do to revoke her access to that trust.”

My head whipped around so fast, my hair went flying. “I-I didn’t know that,” I whispered. That knowledge was another cut added to the millions of others my parents had inflicted on my heart. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jase’s eyes held a sadness that squeezed at my chest. “I didn’t want to cause you any more pain, sweetheart. I knew nothing would come of it, and all it did was prove they’re as big of assholes as we already suspected. Don’t let them have that kind of power, Farah. I know it’s hard, but don’t hold onto this. Let it go.”

It was a struggle, but I managed to push the pain of their latest betrayal to the back of my mind.

Sensing I’d gotten a lock on my rioting emotions, Jase continued, “What’s in that trust is more than enough to keep his company afloat, and I’m willing to bet he’s desperate enough to come here in the hopes of winning Farah back, and in doing so, possibly getting his hands on that money.”

“Well, then he wasted what little money he has left on a plane ticket, because that’s not going to happen,” I bit back firmly.

“Goddamn right, it’s not,” Cannon snarled. Dropping his arm from around me, he moved over to the bedside table and grabbed his phone.

“Who are you calling?” I asked as he tapped at the screen.

“Buddy of mine’s a deputy with the sheriff’s department. I’m puttin’ in a call and having that asshole kicked outta my

goddamn state.”

He put the phone to his ear and moved to the door, stepping outside to make the call to his buddy. I looked back to my brother and Bennett to see Jase had a shit-eating grin stretched across his face.

“Don’t know if I made this clear already, girl,” Bennett said, breaking the silence that had enveloped the room, “but in case I didn’t, just wanted to let you know, I approve.”

“Same goes for me,” Jase said on a chuckle.

Well, there you had it. My family approved of Cannon.

And just like that, the shadow that had been cast over my morning was pushed away, and the sun came shining through.

*CANNON*



I STOOD with my arms crossed, my shoulders leaning against the side of my truck as I watched the scene unfold in front of me.

Two sheriff deputies were currently escorting Lance Maryweather out of the posh hotel where he’d been staying. His face was stained an uncomfortable shade of red under the scrutinizing attention of everyone standing around.

“This is fucking brilliant,” Jase muttered on a chuckle, lifting his phone and snapping pictures of the blustering prick as the deputies led him to his car.

I kept my eyes on the asshole, but I did it smiling at Jase. And that smile only grew bigger when Maryweather turned and spotted us watching from a few yards away. Lifting my hand, I gave him a salute as he was being stuffed into the driver seat of his expensive-as-hell Audi.

Holton broke away from the trio and headed in our direction, a smirk pulling at his mouth as he came to a stop a few feet away. “See you enjoyed the show.”

“Sure as fuck did. Appreciate you helpin’ out.” I grabbed his extended hand and pulled him in, giving him a quick slap on the back.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Want you to meet a couple people,” I said, tilting my chin at the two men standing with me. “This is Farah’s brother, Jase, and her father, Bennett.” I felt Bennett stiffen beside me as I finished the introductions. “Guys, this is Holton Clarke.”

He gave each of them a handshake. “Just call me Holt, everyone else does. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Jase returned.

“Thanks for all of this,” Bennett said.

“Not a problem. Deputy Miller will follow him to the airport and make sure he checks in for his flight,” he told Jase and Bennett before looking back at me. “If your girl has any more issues, just bring her down to the station, and we’ll set her up with a temporary restrainin’ order.”

“You got it.”

Holt headed back toward his cruiser, and Bennett stood tall, starting around the side of the truck toward the passenger door. “Guess we better get a move on. I’m sure you have to get to work, and Farah’ll have our hides if we aren’t back in time for lunch.”

Jase followed suit, climbing in after the old man as I pulled open my door and hopped behind the wheel to hightail it back to Redemption. “I guess we should count ourselves lucky she isn’t cooking for us.”

A huge smile stretched across my face as I turned the key and brought the engine to life.

So my woman couldn’t cook, I could live with that. After all, she was pretty much perfect in every other way.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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FARAH

CANNON HAD TAKEN OFF WITH MY BROTHER AND BENNETT in tow more than an hour ago, and even though I told myself there was nothing to worry about, I couldn't help but fret. I hated the idea of them being anywhere near Lance, even if it was just for a short time.

“You keep that up, you're gonna bite your lip right off.”

At Poppy's voice, I came out of the unpleasant thoughts and I quickly released my bottom lip from between my teeth, noticing it felt a bit raw. Letting out a sigh, I released the curtain and moved away from window that overlooked the parking lot.

To get my mind off what the men in my life were up to this morning, I'd offered to help my friend with her morning chores for the inn, but I'd been too distracted to be of any assistance.

“Sorry. I said I'd help and all I'm doing is getting in the way.”

“You aren't in the way,” she insisted, crouching down to tuck the sheet in at the foot of my bed. “I'm used to doing this by myself, but it's nice to have some company.”

“It's just, shouldn't they be back by now?” I asked as I grabbed the comforter and flicked it out over the mattress. “I mean, they've been gone a while.”

She caught the other side, and we moved in tandem to straighten it out. “Nashville's thirty minutes away, sweetie.

I'm sure they'll be back before you know it."

"I know," I said on an exhale. "I just worry."

"You don't have anything to worry about. Besides, I'm sure your brother's more than capable of handling himself." I looked across the mattress and noticed a flush had spread along Poppy's cheekbones, staining them an attractive pink.

At the dreamy look on my friend's face, a devilish smirk stretched across mine. "That's right. You met him and Bennett when they checked in last night."

She looked anywhere but at me while she worked meticulously to get the pillows in perfect order on the bed. "Uh, yeah. I mean, just for a moment."

"And? What did you think?"

"What did I think about what?" she asked, still refusing to make eye contact as she beat on one of the decorative pillows.

"About Jase."

Her throat bobbed on a swallow, and that pink on her cheeks grew darker. "He seems ... nice."

Oh, this was just too good. "He *is* nice," I said on a giggle. "Very nice. And single." That finally got her attention, and when she looked up at me, her blue eyes were wide, and I couldn't help but needle her a bit more. "You know, now that I think about it, you two would look super cute together."

"It's not ... that isn't ... I don't ..." she sputtered nervously.

"Oh my god!" I cried, snatching the toss pillow from her hands before she busted the stuffing out of it. "You totally have the hots for my brother!"

"Do not!" She objected far too quickly, making it obvious she was lying. "I mean, yeah, sure, he's attractive. But it isn't ..." She let out a snort and made a face. "That's ridiculous."

I rolled my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing. "I bet he thinks you're really cute too."

She was taken off guard, making it impossible to hide the hopefulness in her voice. “You think?”

“Absolutely! You’re gorgeous and sweet and funny, and Jase has always had good taste. He’d see all of that right away.”

Poppy shook her head like she was trying to dispel the thought of her and my brother together from her mind. “Whatever. I don’t even care. I’m not ... that is, he lives in Connecticut, so it’s not like anything ...” She jerked the pillow back from me and laid it in place with all the others against the headboard while blowing out a loud raspberry. “Can we just stop talking about this? I do *not* have a crush on your brother. And stop looking at me like that!”

I tried and failed to temper my smile as I mumbled. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

I let the subject drop, and worked alongside Poppy in silence, intentionally going as slow as possible in the hopes of keeping her in my room until my brother showed back up. We were nearly done when, fortunately, the door opened and Jase came sauntering through with Bennett right behind him.

“Hey,” I greeted. “How did it go?”

“Good as could be expected,” Bennett replied, dropping onto the small sofa that was pushed beneath the front window. Crash took full advantage and hopped up beside him for some pets.

Jase moved over to me and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Maryweather’s on his way back to Connecticut as we speak, so I’d say it was a successful trip.” I noticed his gaze shift across the room just before a pleased expression slid across his face. “Hey. Poppy, right?”

Poppy cast her eyes down bashfully and tucked a lock of that beautiful red hair behind her ear. “Um, y-yeah, hi.”

“So what have you two been up to while we were gone?” he asked, looking at the freshly made bed.

I spoke quickly, seizing the opportunity he’d just presented. “Poppy has this long list of things she has to get

done this morning, and I offered to help, but I'm afraid I've only slowed her down. I feel terrible. She's been so incredible to me since I've been here, but I'm just worthless with this kind of stuff."

Sure, I may have been laying it on a little thick, but I knew my brother better than anyone. Just as I suspected he would, Jase took the bait. I hadn't been lying when I said he had good taste. He was an incredibly smart man, and I knew that if I dangled this particular carrot in front of him, he wouldn't hesitate to snatch it up.

"Well, I'd be happy to help if you need," he offered, keeping his attention glued to a blushing, wide-eyed Poppy.

"Oh, no. That's sweet, but I couldn't ask you—"

"Sure you can!" I exclaimed. "After all, two sets of hands are better than one, right?"

She cut me a look that promised revenge as Jase spoke. "It's no problem at all. In fact, I insist."

"But I thought we were going to lunch?" Bennett chimed in, a confused frown on his face.

I shot him a glare that silently communicated he needed to shut the hell up before he ruined this. "You and I are still going."

Poppy's gaze shot around the room. "Oh, I wouldn't want keep you from lunch—"

"I had a big breakfast," Jase answered, moving around the bed in her direction. "Besides, it would be good for those two to have some one on one time." He extended his arm, giving her no choice but to slip hers through the crook of his elbow and semi-ordered, "Lead the way."

It took everything I had not to burst into laughter at Poppy's deer-in-the-headlights expression as Jase led her from my room, but as soon as the door closed behind them, I let out a delighted squeal, and did a little happy dance.

Bennett's voice broke through my revelry. "Girl, you're about as subtle as a bull in a china shop."

“It worked, didn’t it?” I said on a shrug before reaching down to grab his hand.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

Pulling him from the couch, I took his arm in the same manner Poppy just had Jase’s. “Yes we will,” I replied as I started for the door. “And I’ve got a really good feeling about it.”

*CANNON*



“OH NO. This just won’t do. There are spots all over this knife.”

I turned from the door to see my mom scrubbing furiously at the butter knife with her cloth napkin.

“For fuck’s sake, Bev,” my dad grumbled. “Will you just relax already? There are no spots. The silverware’s just fine.”

We’d been at our table at the Cattleman for about five minutes, waiting on Farah to arrive with Bennett and Jase, and Mom had spent the entire time working herself up into a lather.

“We should’ve gone somewhere nicer. Maybe one of those five-star restaurants in Nashville.”

“Nothin’ wrong with the Cattleman,” Dad stated as he lifted his beer to his lips and took a long, much-needed pull. “You’d be hard pressed to find a better steak anywhere in three states.”

My mother fidgeted with the silverware for the third time, making sure it was all evenly spaced and perfectly lined up. “I just want to make a good impression. I’m sure they’re used to something’ a bit classier.”

“They aren’t like that, Ma,” I informed her, hoping it would put her mind at ease. “They’re laid back. Hell, Bennett grew up here, so he knows what to expect. You’re workin’ yourself up over nothin’.”

“I’m not workin’ myself up,” she shot back before giving me and Dad each an unhappy frown. “But would it have killed you to maybe put in a little effort? Is a nice button-down shirt too much to ask for?”

I didn’t bother replying to that. I didn’t do button-downs, and neither did my old man, she was *well* aware of that. We were who we were, and that wasn’t going to change for anyone.

Looking toward the ceiling, Dad let out a curse to the heavens and muttered, “Jesus, this is gonna be a long night,” under his breath.

Farah walked through the front door with his family in tow a second later, and just the sight of her in a short, tight black dress and high heels was enough to snuff out any annoyance I felt at my parents’ bickering.

Christ, she was something else.

She scanned the restaurant, and the instant her eyes locked on mine, she smiled big and bright, the happiness on her face making my chest tighten. They hit our table, and I stood just as she reached my side. “Hi,” she said in that soft, melodic voice that made my dick stir. “Sorry we’re late. It’s my fault. I might have gone a little overboard while I was getting ready.”

Her hair was styled in fat curls and her eyes were done up in a dark, smoky look I’d never seen on her before. She was beautiful without even trying, but just then, she took my breath away.

“Not a problem, baby,” I murmured, pulling her into me and pressing my lips to hers. “Worth every minute. You look gorgeous.”

Her eyes glinted as she grinned up at me. “Thanks, honey.”

After one more kiss, she pulled from my embrace and moved around the table to give my folks a hug in greeting. Once the introductions were made, everyone sat, and Farah leaned in to whisper in my ear. “Just a heads up, I noticed some sparks flying between Jase and Poppy earlier.”

I lifted a brow on a grin. “Is that right?”

“Yep. So I’m all over making that happen if you’re interested in teaming up.”

I lowered my voice to match her whisper and leaned closer. “Think I’ll let you take the lead on that one, but I feel like I should point out the fact that your brother lives in a totally different state, Hummingbird.”

“I know!” she whisper-yelled, her eyes big and animated. “Which is all the more reason we need to make this happen soon. Then he’ll move down here for sure.”

I gave my head a lighthearted shake as Jase spoke up. “This place is great. I can’t wait to try one of these steaks I’ve been hearing about.”

“You’ll be hard pressed to find better anywhere else,” my mom said, all of a sudden in support of the restaurant she’d just been criticizing.

Dad let out a snort, earning a side-eyed scowl from her.

“Well I’m glad to hear that, Bev. I’m starving.”

This time, it was Bennett who snorted as he opened his menu and began scanning. “Maybe you wouldn’t be so hungry if you hadn’t skipped lunch to spend the afternoon hitting on that cute little redhead from the inn.”

“Oh you mean Poppy Weston?” my mom asked, visibly perking up. “Oh my goodness, she’s just the sweetest girl in the whole world! And such a looker, too.”

At that, Farah smacked me under the table and did an excited little hop in her chair as her brother rolled his eyes from across the table.

It surprised me to think it, especially considering how she’d been acting before Farah showed up, but I was suddenly happy my mom was there. She could partner up with Farah to play matchmaker, and I’d be home free.

Thank Christ for small favors.

*FARAH*



DINNER HAD GONE over just like I knew it would. Bennett and Banks had hit it off almost instantly, and when Jase wasn't making everyone at the table laugh, he was either charming Bev until the poor woman was a blushing mess, or talking with Cannon about motorcycles and classic cars—something I had no idea my brother had an interest in until tonight.

My family and Cannon's fit together perfectly, and as I sat at the table, looking around at the people I cared about, I felt a contentment settle into my bones. This was my life now. All this goodness right here in front of me was what I had to look forward to from here on out.

Bennett leaned over to me, pulling me from my musings by whispering, "What's got you so quiet over here, sweet Farah? You doing okay?"

I knew when I looked at him he saw the truth in my eyes, because his own grew glassy as he pulled in a deep breath. "I'm doing *fantastic*, Ben. I was just thinking about how much I love this. My family and Cannon's. This whole night has been so great."

I felt his hand grab mine beneath the table as his features softened. "You got no clue how much I love hearing that, girl. Took you a long time, but you finally found your happy. Warms this old man's heart."

My vision grew misty, and I had to inhale and count to three to keep the tears at bay. "I love you, Ben. I hope you know that."

His fingers tightened around mine. "Know it to my bones, my sweet Farah. And I feel the exact same way."

We'd just broken from our little huddle when I heard a feminine voice ask, "Benny? Benny Montgomery? Is that really you?"

I glanced over Bennett's shoulder at the same time he turned to look at the woman standing on the other side of his chair. If I had to guess, she was in her early seventies like Bennett, and she wore it well. Her subtle makeup was applied

perfectly, accentuating her beauty instead of trying to hide her age. Her hair was an attractive pale silver, and the sweater set and cream slacks she was wearing gave her a polished, yet comfortable look. She was a beautiful woman, no doubt about it, but it was easy to see that back in her prime, she'd been a hardcore knockout.

I could hear the astonishment in Bennett's voice as he stood tall and placed his hands on the woman's arms. "My God. Myra?"

The woman beamed up at him. "It *is* you. Oh my goodness. I can't believe it." She moved quickly, breaking his hold on her so she could lift up on the toes of her kitten heels and wrap her arms around his neck in the tightest hug. "This is so wonderful. It's been so long. I can't believe you're here."

Bennett returned her embrace just as fiercely, and when I saw the woman's eyes fall closed on a deep breath, I knew that this chance encounter was more than just two old friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time. *Much* more. She looked almost wistful, and I felt my heart jump in my chest.

"My *God*, Myra. It's so damn good to see you," Bennett said, his voice much gruffer than usual as he pulled back and took her face in his hands. "Look at you, sweetheart. Just as beautiful today as you were forty years ago."

"And you're still just as handsome."

At that, my head spun around and I glanced across the table at Jase with wide, curious eyes. He shrugged and returned my look, letting me know he was just as surprised by what was unfolding as I was. We'd never heard Bennett speak of a Myra before, but it was obvious that this woman had meant something to him back in the day, and there was still something lingering between them, even after all these years.

When I turned my attention to Cannon, I found he was already looking at me with a smirk on his face as he shook his head. "I see those wheels spinnin', baby, and I'll tell you right now, I'm not gettin' involved in this matchmakin' scheme either."

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and grumbled, “Whatever,” before catching Bev’s attention. She appeared to be just as excited as I was about what was happening, and when her gaze landed on mine, she gave me a conspiratorial grin.

And just like that, I knew I didn’t need Cannon to help me play matchmaker with either member of my family ... because Bev was totally up for the challenge.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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FARAH

MY FINGERS TIGHTENED IN CANNON'S HAIR, PULLING HARD as his mouth continued to work between my legs. "Oh God. I'm so close." I'd never felt anything like this before. Only one of my exes had ever gone down on me, and to say he didn't have any idea what he was doing would have been too polite a statement.

But Cannon was a freaking *expert*. He was devouring me like he hadn't just eaten the most delicious three course meal earlier, and I felt like I was going to split in two.

"Give it to me, Hummingbird," he spoke against my sensitive lips, causing my whole body to tremble. "Wanna feel you come all over my tongue."

I did just that, coming unraveled and crying out as he licked and sucked me through an earth-shaking climax. I barely had a chance to come up for air when I felt him shift. The sound of a drawer being opened broke through my foggy mind, followed soon after by the crinkle of a condom wrapper. Seconds later, Cannon returned, driving into me in one brutal thrust.

"God, baby, *yes!*" I moaned, my neck and back arching off the bed as he fucked me hard and fast.

"Eyes, Farah." His order came out on a grunt as he thrust in a steady rhythm, filling me so magnificently. "Eyes on me when I'm inside you."

It was a struggle, but I managed to peel my eyelids back, and when I saw that stunning gold swirling around in his gaze, I went off again. Gripping Cannon with every part of me, I cried out so loud my voice grew hoarse.

My walls gripped his cock tight as he buried his face in my hair and picked up his pace. “*Fuck me,*” he growled against my neck. “So goddamn good, baby. Always so fuckin’ *good.*” Seconds later, he drove deep and stayed there as he groaned out his release. Each twitch of his cock sent little electric shocks through me.

He collapsed on top of me, giving me his weight as we worked to steady our breathing.

A handful of minutes ticked past before he finally pushed up on his forearms and looked down at me. “So fuckin’ beautiful,” he murmured, dragging a finger across my hairline.

“So handsome,” I returned quietly, reaching up to scratch at his scruffy jaw. “I love this. It feels great when you kiss me, but a million times better when your face is between my thighs.”

He let out a moan and dropped his forehead to mine. “Just came so hard I nearly blacked out, and already, she’s turnin’ me on again.”

I let out a little giggle and gave his big body a squeeze with my arms and legs. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Not a bad thing, baby,” he returned with a grin. “Not at all. But I just spent three hours at dinner with both our families. A dinner in which you and my mom conspired to set up all the single men in town.”

“Not *all* the men,” I argued. “Just Jase and Bennett. And can you blame me? You saw Ben with that Myra woman. There’s a story there, and you know it.”

His silent laughter shook me from head to toe. “Not gonna argue with that. But did you ever stop to think that it’s *their* story, and maybe you shouldn’t go stickin’ your nose in it?”

I looked to the side on a shrug, refusing to give in completely. “I’m not gonna stick my nose in anything. Unless

I think Bennett's taking too long. Then I'm calling your mom in for reinforcements."

"You're gonna do what you feel you have to do, and I won't stop you. But I'm beat. So how about you stop bein' so damn cute so I can deal with this condom and we can get some shuteye before I wake you up and do it all over again?"

I couldn't argue whether or not I was being cute. I thought I was just being me. But if he thought that was cute, who was I to disagree? "Fine," I relented on a teasing sigh. "I'll give you a reprieve, but you better be on your game later."

He laughed as he kissed me, then slowly pulled out. "That's a promise I can keep, sweetheart."

I watched his naked form just like I always did as he moved to the bathroom to deal with the condom, and as he disappeared from sight, there was only one thought rolling around inside my head.

Each day with Cannon was even better than the last. And I couldn't wait to wake up tomorrow and discover what Fate had in store.



LIFTING the beer bottle to my lips, I took a pull as I stared around in wonder at my new house. Typically, I would have toasted something as awesome as moving into my brand new dream home with a glass of champagne, but I lived in a biker town and I was dating a biker. There was no way the people in my life now were going to drink champagne, so when Darla and Buck showed up to join in the celebration, they brought a case of beer with them.

And I was just fine with that.

The last moving truck had taken off five minutes earlier, and even though every piece of furniture was right where it was supposed to be, there was still a lot of work to be done. Unlike Cannon, I fully intended to put my stamp on this beautiful old Victorian. There were boxes to unpack, art and pictures to hang, and toss pillows to toss. It would take several

more shopping trips to fill all the space; a challenge I was more than up for.

But all of that could wait. I was finally *home*, and that was the only thing that mattered to me.

Clay and his men had done better than I could have imagined. Every room was warm and inviting and absolutely perfect. They'd even worked a miracle with my bedroom walls. You couldn't even see the crappy paint job I'd done when you looked at it now.

I thought back to that very first day, when I'd stepped through that front door into a dilapidated pit. I thought back to the warmth rooting in my chest, and I knew I'd never forget that moment, because it was the exact same warmth I felt as I looked at all my friends and family gathered in my new kitchen, drinking beer and cutting up.

Bennett and Jase were there. Cannon, Shane, Brantley, and Poppy. Banks had shown up with Bev earlier to help with the move. Scooter was there with his wife, along with Danno and Fletch. Several of my regulars at the bar had come bearing housewarming gifts. Everyone I cared about was standing in this room, and as I looked around, I discovered something that had me dangerously close to tears.

I didn't have enough chairs.

"What's on your mind, sweet pea?" Jase asked, coming over and slinging his arm around my shoulders. "This is supposed to be a happy day, and you look like you're about to start crying."

"I don't have enough chairs," I whispered, my voice scratchy with emotion.

He looked down at me like I had lost my mind. "You're about to burst into tears because you don't have enough *chairs*? That's an easy enough fix, Farah. Or have you forgotten you're loaded?"

I let out a watery laugh and smacked him in his stomach. "It's not that, you jerk. I'm not upset."

"Then what is it?"

“All my life, I’ve only had two people, Jase. You and Bennett, that’s it. And that was always enough for me. I was lucky, having the two of you. But now ... now I have this.” I waved my arm out. “Now I have so many people who mean something to me that I don’t have enough chairs for them all to sit in. So, yeah, I’m close to crying, but it’s only because I’m incredibly, *stupidly* happy.”

His eyes flashed with emotion as he pulled in a large breath. He tugged me deeper into his side and leaned down to press a kiss on my head. “I’m thrilled to hear that, sweetheart. Over the goddamn moon.”

“Only thing that could possibly make this day any better was if you told me you decided to move down here too.”

Letting out a sigh, Jase straightened his head and scanned the crowd gathered in my kitchen. His tone held a hint of melancholy as he said, “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately, little sis.”

“About what?”

“Happiness,” he answered. “After what happened to you ...” His throat bobbed on a heavy swallow. “It’s a miracle you came back from that. Hell, you almost didn’t. I almost lost you, but you made it through, and you found the strength to go after your own happiness.” His gaze returned to mine, and it was swimming with a whole riot of emotions. “I’ve never told you this, but I envy your courage. If my little sister could come back from something like that and still find the strength to build this incredible life for herself ... well, I don’t really have a reason not to go after my own happiness, now do I?”

I held my breath for so long my lungs began to burn like fire. “Are you saying—?”

“I’m not saying anything. At least not yet. But I will tell you, I’m going to start looking at the big picture. Who knows where that will lead me?”

I hoped like hell it would lead him right to this perfect little town, but if it didn’t, as long as he was happy wherever he ended, I would be okay with that.

But that didn't mean I wasn't above fighting dirty. "I think there's a certain redhead that would like it very much if you decided to put down roots here."

I caught his gaze flash in Poppy's direction before he returned it to me. "Don't push your luck, sweet pea. I said I'd think about it, so let it go, yeah?"

I blew out a breath, but let the subject drop. At least for the time being. "You know I love you, right?"

"I do. And you have that right back from me, little sis."

With that heaviness out of the way, my brother and I sucked back more beer. And we did it surrounded by the loving embrace of incredible people.



IT HAD BEEN four days since I'd officially moved from the inn into the Victorian, and it was Jase's last night in town.

Darla had offered to give me the night off so I could spend it with him and Bennett before he flew back to Connecticut in the morning, but I'd already taken a handful of days off since they'd come into town, and the fewer days I worked meant the fewer tips I could "sneak" to Shane. The holidays were only a couple months away, and I was going to do everything in my power to make sure she had enough to give Brantley a great Christmas.

So with that, Jase had chosen to hang at the bar with Bennett, Cannon, and the rest of the guys while I worked.

Usually I would have had plenty of time to visit with them during breaks or when my section was quiet, but tonight, the bar was a madhouse.

According to Shane, there was a big motorcycle rally that took place around Memphis every year, and during those four days, Bad Alibi was overrun.

I was used to bikers by now, but these guys were even louder and wilder than the regulars I'd gotten to know, and several of them were already drunk out of their minds.

“Jeez,” Shane grumbled as she joined me at the bar. “I swear, if tips weren’t so good, I’d put in for vacation this time every damn year.”

I gave her a sympathetic grin and looked back out to the floor. “This is insane. I’ve never seen anything like it.” With such a huge crush of people, it was hard to make out any of the tables or chairs. To accommodate the larger crowd, the two other waitresses who worked the day shift were also on the floor with us, and there was a third bartender slinging drinks with Buck and Darla. Still, I felt like I’d been run off my feet, and I still had half my shift left to go. The later it got, the drunker they became, and I was counting down the minutes until Buck announced last call.

“Yeah. Welcome to what I like to refer to as Hell Week. Sure, it’s only four days, but Hell Four Days didn’t have quite the same ring to it.”

I gave her a tired laugh and bumped her shoulder with mine as Darla sat two pitchers of beer on the bar in front of me. Grabbing them up, I started for the pool tables.

Cannon spotted me the second I hit the section, and as soon as I placed the pitchers on the table, he grabbed me by the belt loop and pulled me into his lap. “Hey, Hummingbird, how you doin’?”

I turned back to him and smiled through my exhaustion. “Beat, but okay. Just ready for this night to end.”

“Just a few more hours, then we can get outta here.”

I let out a deep breath and sank into him, pressing my lips to his as I muttered, “Can’t wait.”

I pushed off his lap and took a step to Jase, placing a smacking kiss on the top of his head before I started back to the floor.

I was moving through my section when I felt a hand wrap around my forearm and pull me to a stop. “Hey there, sweetness. How about a dance, huh?”

I looked down at the big, burly biker who had my arm in an uncomfortably tight grip. His pot belly hung over his jeans,

his hair was at least a month past needing a cut, he reeked of booze, and his eyes were red and glassy, indicating he was already well past drunk and firmly into shitfaced.

I did my best to smile through the swell of panic gripping my chest as I replied, “Sorry, but I can’t.” I gave my arm a subtle tug, but he didn’t take the hint and let go. “It’s really busy, but if you’d like another drink or something to eat—”

“Don’t want somethin’ to fuckin’ eat,” he said, his words coming out slurred. “What I want is for the pretty waitress to dance with me.”

I pulled harder on my arm which only made his grip tighten, taking it past uncomfortable and right into painful. My panic swelled bigger and began to take up the room my lungs needed to pull in oxygen. I felt my skin start to grow clammy but did my best to push the fear down. “And I said I can’t. Now please, let go of my arm.”

“What, you think you’re too good to spend time with me?” the drunk biker hissed, gnashing his teeth. “You an uppity bitch or somethin’?”

Darkness crept in along the edges of my vision, and my heartrate kicked up. “Let. *Go*,” I repeated, struggling against the dizziness in my head as I gave my arm a hard yank.

The biker jerked back, and I cried out at the sharp pain that caused in my shoulder. The instant he had me in his lap, his thick arms circled around me, pinning me in place. I began to struggle, fighting to get away from him, but his hold was unrelenting. “Let me go!” I shouted, thrashing wildly.

“You won’t dance with me, then how ’bout a kiss?”

His head started to lower, his face coming closer to mine. And all of a sudden, I was back in that dark parking lot.

“*Let me go!*” I screamed at the top of my lungs, the words so loud and ravaged they felt like they were slicing my throat on the way up. “*Let me go! Let me go! Let me go!*”

The sounds of the bar grew dim and muffled, like I’d suddenly been submerged under water. I couldn’t breathe. *God*, I couldn’t *breathe*. I was going to suffocate to death.

I fought and screamed and clawed until the steel bands holding me in place let go, and I fell to the ground.

“*What the fuck!*” I heard shouted from feet away, and I thought the furious roar might have come from Cannon, but it was hard to be sure over the blood roaring through my ears.

I heard what I thought was flesh hitting flesh, quickly followed by the sound of furniture breaking. I got the sense that pandemonium had broken out all around me, but I couldn’t move. All I could do was curl into a ball with my arms covering my head as I fought against my body’s refusal to pull in oxygen.

I felt a pair of hands came down on me, and my brain screamed at me to run, but the panic attack had taken over completely. I was frozen in fear, unable to move. I couldn’t fight, all I could do was whimper as the hands grabbed hold of my arms and pulled me from the floor. A second later, I was wrapped in a familiar embrace.

“Shh, I got you, girl,” Bennett said as he picked me up in his strong arms and began carrying me away. “It’s all right. You’re okay, my sweet Farah. I have you. You’re going to be okay.”

Then his voice faded away.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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CANNON

I PACED THE LENGTH OF THE HALLWAY OUTSIDE FARAH'S bedroom door, feeling like I was about to come out of my skin.

What had happened earlier was nothing short of pure chaos. I'd seen it just as it began, when that fucker grabbed Farah's arm, but before I could push through the crowd to get to her, the shit hit the fan.

I heard her scream and I swear to Christ, the blood in my veins turned to ice. The moment I cleared the circle and saw my woman curled up on the floor with her arms over her head like she was trying to protect herself, I lost it. All I saw was red.

I acted without thought, throwing myself at the son of a bitch who'd put his hands on her. My fist connected with his face, followed by the gratifying sound of bones breaking. But that wasn't enough.

I was out for blood, and I couldn't stop. That was the start of a full-on bar brawl, and everything that came after that was pure, unadulterated *shit*.

By the time Holt and a few other deputies got there to break up the fight and get shit sorted, Bennett and Shane had already gotten Farah out of there.

The bar was a goddamn wreck. The asshole who'd manhandled Farah had been hauled out in cuffs after several witnesses stated seeing him getting physical with her. And for our part in it, Jase, Dad, several of the guys, and myself had

walked away riddled in bruises. The cut over my left eye had only stopped bleeding a few minutes ago, and my eye was swollen nearly shut.

But I didn't care about any of that. The only thing I cared about had been behind a closed bedroom door since I arrived at her house twenty minutes ago. A door that no one besides Poppy and Shane had been allowed to pass through.

I continued to pace, my worry and my anger boiling to the surface, damn near about to bubble over. Cutting my eyes over to where Jase was sitting, I took him in, seeing the desolation carved into every inch of him. His back was pressed against the wall, his wrists dangling over his cocked knees, looking as destroyed as a man could possibly look.

"I wanna know what the hell is goin' on, and I wanna know right *fuckin'* now," I clipped, that haze of red still painting my vision.

"Cannon"—he let out a sigh, pressing his head back against the wall—"it's not my story to tell, brother. Please, give her time—"

"Fuck time!" I barked.

My father moved from his place where he'd been holding up the opposite wall, coming close and pressing his hand to my chest. "Calm, son. You two fightin' now isn't gonna do that girl in there a damn lick of good."

"Time for calm is long fuckin' over," I growled, throwing my arm out and pointing at the door. "You heard her. You fuckin' *heard* her scream! Tell me you didn't."

"I heard it, son," Dad grunted.

"Then you know." I looked back at Jase. "My woman was lyin' in a ball on the goddamn floor, nearly catatonic. So don't tell me it's not your fuckin' place. For fuck's sake, I can't fight somethin' if I don't know what the hell it is!"

Jase shot off the ground and came within an inch of me, his face laced with agony. "You can't fight it at all!" he bellowed, losing hold on his control. "Christ! You think I haven't tried? I've been going out of my goddamn mind for

nearly a year! All I want to do is make it better for her, but this isn't something either of us can fix for her!"

"What the hell is going on up here?" At my mother's stern voice, we all turned in time to see her climb the last step to the second level. Her face was mottled with red splotches, telling me she'd been crying, but her eyes were burning with an angry fire as she took Jase and me in. "That's enough. Do you hear me?" she clipped. "The both of you, step back *right now*."

"Bev, honey," my dad spoke in a soft, placating gesture. "What are you doin' here?"

"Shane called me. Told me what happened. Told me I was needed and why, so I'm here."

"Why would you need—" My father's voice trailed off at the same time his face blanched white as flour. "Ah, fuck. No, baby. Not that."

I didn't know what was going on, but whatever my dad had just realized, it was bad. My mouth opened, ready to ask what the hell was going on, when the bedroom door swung open.

I whipped around as Farah stepped out into the hall with Shane and Poppy standing close behind her. Her whole face was unnaturally white, with the exception of the deep purple smudges beneath her eyes.

Her gaze was glassy, like she's just woken from a drug induced sleep, and when she saw my mom standing among the fray, her forehead pinched in confusion. "Bev? What are you doing here?"

My mom moved to her, taking Farah's face in her hands and giving her a tender smile. "You and I have some things to talk about, so we're gonna go back in there and get comfortable. I'm gonna take care of you sweetheart. Then we're gonna get you the help you need. Got it?"

I knew the fight had been drained completely out of her when all Farah did was nod before turning and disappearing back inside her room.

Shane and Poppy followed after her like they couldn't stand the thought of not having her in their sights. And as hard as it was for me, I fought against my need to rush after her and pull her into my arms, and stayed rooted in place, all the while, feeling like my heart was being torn in half.

Mom took a step toward the room, but before she entered, she turned back to us and looked right at Jase. "I'm gonna take care of your sister, honey. You can trust me on that. But while I'm doin' that, you need to tell him everything." Jase started to argue but went silent when Mom raised her hand. "The secrets end tonight. The truth was gonna come out one way or another. Only way that girl in there has any chance of healin' is if everyone in her life has the tools they need to help her along the way."

With that, she stepped through the door, closing it firmly behind her.

*FARAH*



I SAT with my back pressed against the headboard, running my fingers through Crash's fur nervously as Bev moved to the side of the bed and sat down a foot away from me.

I was just about to ask her what was going on when she spoke, beating me to the punch and saying something I never in a million years expected to hear.

"When I was twenty, a man broke into my apartment in the middle of the night and raped me." My lungs froze and my hand stopped moving. Sensing that his momma was having a moment, Crash hopped out of my lap and moved to the end of the bed to curl up and take a nap. "I'd grown up with him, gone to school with him, and we even went out on a few dates. It wasn't a love connection, so I ended it. What I didn't know was that he'd developed an unhealthy infatuation with me. I was a young woman, living on my own for the first time, and he made the decision to break in and take something from me that wasn't his to have."

“Oh my God,” I said, my chest rattling on a shaky inhale. “Bev, I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

“I appreciate that, sweetheart, but I didn’t tell you for sympathy. I told you because you need to know that I get it. I understand exactly what you’re struggling with, darlin’. Shane called me and told me what happened. She gave me the whole story, and before you get mad at her, you have to know that the only reason she confided in me was because she knew I could help.”

“I-I ...” A lump formed in my throat as another wave of tears filled my eyes. I glanced across the room at the small loveseat situated in front of the fireplace where Shane and Poppy were sitting. “I’m not mad,” I whispered, locking eyes with Shane so she’d know I meant it. She gave me a small, tremulous smile and nodded her head as a tear slid down her cheek.

Bev reached out and placed her hand on mine, giving it a squeeze. “I’m glad to hear that. She’s a good friend, and at a time like this you need people like that in your corner, because you can’t do this on your own, sweetie. You *can’t*. I understand how hard it is to talk about it. I understand that the more people you tell, the harder it is to pretend it didn’t happen, but this isn’t something you can ignore. It won’t just go away with time. No matter how hard you try, no matter if you think you’re healed and have moved past it, if you keep this bottled up, it’s only a matter of time before something triggers it and causes an explosion.”

I sniffled as I lifted a hand and swiped at the tears that had fallen from my eyes. “I-is that what happened with you?”

She nodded. “I was so worried that everyone would look at me differently if they knew. I didn’t want to be the girl who was raped; I just wanted to be Bev, and I was scared that if people found out, I’d lose the rest of my identity. The man who attacked me had already taken so much already, and I was terrified of losing the rest of myself.”

A sob burst from deep within my chest, because that was *exactly* how I felt. The relief at finally knowing I had someone

in my life who understood that was almost too much to bear. It felt like she'd reached right into my soul and plucked out my biggest insecurity. I was no longer alone in this. There was someone else who got it.

“When I met Banks, I thought I'd moved past it. I thought it was behind me, but then something happened; it came out of nowhere. He touched me a certain way, and it was like I was catapulted back to that night. I lost it, and after, I was so embarrassed. I was sure I'd scared him off. But I didn't. He loved me. Not in spite of what happened and not because I was a survivor. He just loved *me*. Bev. I asked him once what he saw when he looked at me, and do you know what he said?”

I shook my head, unable to speak.

“He said he just saw his Bev. I wasn't a scared, broken woman. I wasn't a rape victim. To him, I was just his Bev. The woman he loved, who couldn't cook for shit, and who was quick to anger when he missed the laundry hamper. To him, that answer wasn't anything special. He was just telling the truth, but to me, it meant *everything*.”

“You're still you, honey,” she whispered, moving closer and taking my face in her hands as her own tears broke free. “You're still Farah. You're funny and smart and beautiful and so, *so* kind. You still have a big heart. You still have the capacity to love and to feel compassion more than anyone I've ever met. You're still all of the things you were before that man took something that wasn't his to take. He can't take that from you, because it's etched on your very soul.”

She pulled me into her arms as I sobbed so hard my whole body ached with the force of it.

“There's no shame in leanin' on the people who love you, Farah,” she continued, her voice a whisper across my hair. “You've got nothin' to be ashamed of or embarrassed by. You don't need to hide anymore, and you aren't in this alone. *You did nothing wrong*. You have a family, and we love you.”

“I-I ... I l-love you guys t-too.”

“Then let us help, sweetie. Let us be there for you. You’re just Farah to us, and we love all that’s you. And, honey, there’s so much to love. You have my word on that.”

I wanted to say something. I wanted to thank her for confiding in me. I wanted to tell her how much everything she’d just said meant to me.

But I couldn’t stop crying long enough to get the words out. But those tears were different. They weren’t tears of fear or sadness. They were cathartic. Each one felt like a release, like the poison that had been trapped inside me for so long was working its way out through my tear ducts.

By the time they began to taper off, I’d begun to fade. With the release of the poison came an exhaustion that weighted down my limbs and my eyelids.

And after several long minutes, I drifted to sleep in the arms of the best mother I’d ever known.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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FARAH

MY EYES FELT GRITTY AS I SLOWLY BLINKED THEM OPEN. The lamp on my nightstand was the only light on, bathing the room in a soft, golden glow.

It felt like I'd been asleep for days, but judging from the darkness outside my bedroom windows, it had only been a few hours at most.

My brain was slow on the uptake, but the events of the night finally came back to me, and I let out a slow, measured breath.

There was a weight settled across my waist that I hadn't noticed until just then when it wrapped tighter. A moment later, Cannon's heat hit my back and his breath whispered across my ear as he spoke. "You're awake."

I inhaled the scent of clean cotton with a hint of motor oil, letting the smell invade my senses and wrap me up like a safety blanket. "I'm awake."

His hand pressed against my belly and his weight shifted on the mattress, making room so he could roll me to my back.

"Oh my God!" I pulled in a startled gasp at the state of his face. There was a cut sliced through his eyebrow that was being held together with a butterfly bandage, and one swollen eye was painted with ugly mottled purple and blue bruises. Reaching up, I trailed my fingers along his forehead, caressing his skin while avoiding the cut. "What happened to you?"

“I punched the prick who touched you at the bar. Knocked him out, but it set off a chain reaction with a bunch of his buddies.”

My eyes went big and my mouth dropped open before I squeaked, “You got in a bar fight?”

“Don’t worry about that, Hummingbird. These’ll all heal up just fine. What I wanna know is how you’re doin’. You had one hell of a night.”

My chest compressed and my body sank deeper into the bed. “You know, don’t you?”

The look that spread across his face was one I’d never seen from him before. It wasn’t bad, it was tender, but it was something else as well, something I couldn’t put my finger on. “I know, baby. Jase told me all of it.”

I couldn’t be mad at my brother. He hadn’t done anything wrong. With what had happened at the bar earlier, there was no more hiding it. And after my talk with Bev, I didn’t want to. I wanted everything to be out in the open. There had been a cinderblock tied to my feet as I struggled to keep my head above water for far too long, and it was as if it had finally been cut, freeing me of its impossible weight. If anything, I was relieved he knew the truth, and that I wasn’t the one who had to recount the story. I would have done it, but my brother spared me from having to add more bad onto an already terribly night.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, my voice so quiet I wasn’t sure he’d heard until he answered.

He placed his palm against my chest, right over the faint scars. “I’m thinking about how much I hate that you had to suffer through that. I hate that you ever had to experience that kind of pain. But I’m also thinkin’ about how fuckin’ grateful I am that you’re a fighter. That man almost took you away from this world, and if he’d succeeded, I never would’ve had you.”

“Cannon.” My chin started to quiver and his face blurred as my eyes filled with even more tears.

“I wouldn’t have had the chance to hold you in my arms or to listen to you ramble when you get nervous. I wouldn’t have been able to tease you about swerving for little gray and white cats or get hustled at pool. And I wouldn’t have had the chance to fall in love with you. So right about now, I’m thinkin’ about how goddamn lucky I am that you survived, and that I have the chance to do all of that.”

“Y-you ... you love me?”

The golden green of his eyes burned with an intensity that made my skin tingle as he said, “Farah, you’ve been through more shit in twenty-six years than most people have to go through in their lifetime, and still, you’re the most fiercely loyal, loving person I’ve ever had the privilege of knowing. Your ability to open your heart amazes me, baby. So let me ask you, how could I *not* love you?”

It took me a minute to regain the ability to form words after that heart-stopping declaration. “I-I don’t know. To hear you tell it, I sound pretty awesome.”

My body shook with his as he chuckled, and when he brushed the hair from my forehead, trailing those rough fingers from my temple to my jaw and down my neck, I let out the most contented sigh. “You’re more than just awesome, Hummingbird. You’re everything.”

I felt those words in my stomach, in my chest, in every fiber in my body. It was as if they infused my muscles with a strength I hadn’t realized I needed. But there was one thing I had to know. I had to be certain, because if I was going to heal, if I was going to lean on Cannon for support, I needed to know what he was thinking.

“What do you see when you look at me?”

The question seemed to catch him off guard, and it took him a second to answer, but when he did, the answer was *everything*.

“I see my future. When I look at you, I see what my life is gonna be like from here on out, and it’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

Now *that* was the perfect answer.

“You know,” I whispered, running my fingers through the mess of long, dark blond hair near the top of his head, “that’s exactly what I see when I look at you.”

He lowered his head, bringing his face so close he was all I could see. “That’s good to know, Hummingbird. But I’d also really like to hear the words.”

I could give him that. “Cannon, I think my life started the moment I looked across a crowded bar and locked eyes with you. I love you, honey.”

He exhaled through his nose as he closed his eyes and lowered his forehead onto mine. “I’m gonna give you everything, Farah. All the things you always wanted but never had, I’m gonna give them to you. Starting with a goddamn puppy.”

My mouth fell open with a surprised laugh, and when his head came up, his smile was positively glorious. “But I’m pickin’ the name this time.”

My laughter tapered off into a giggle as I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. “I’ll let you have that. On one condition.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“We get a rescue. No fancy breeders or anything like that. I want a dog in need of a safe, loving home.”

“Deal.”

I didn’t need a dog. I already had everything by having his love, but if he was determined to get me a puppy, who was I to argue?

Like he said, I had a lot of love to give. And, fortunately, I had a lot of space too.



WHEN CANNON and I came down the stairs hours later, Jase was already in the kitchen. His hair was disheveled, like he’d been running his hands through it all night, and he was

still in his clothes from the night before, only now they were a rumpled mess. The big purple bruise on his cheek stood out in stark contrast to his lightly tanned skin, and it was clear he'd been a part of the same bar brawl Cannon had the night before.

He was sitting at the breakfast table with a coffee mug cupped between both hands, and when he lifted his gaze to mine, I saw the worry swimming in his eyes.

Moving from beneath Cannon's arm, I headed for my big brother, stopping at his chair so I could lean down and wrap him in a hug. The moment my arms closed around him, his whole body sagged in relief. He returned the hug, squeezing so tight my ribs creaked, but that was okay. A little discomfort was more than worth it if it put him at ease.

After a minute, we broke apart, and I headed for the coffee maker. I made Cannon and me each a cup, then we moved back to the table to join Jase. "What time is your flight?" I asked after taking that first fortifying sip.

"I'm canceling my flight," he said in a gruff, exhausted voice. "After what happened last night, there's no way in hell I'm leaving."

Placing my mug on the table, I leaned closer to my brother, forcing him to meet my eyes as I stated, "If you want to stay, you know I'm more than happy to have you here. But I'm okay, bub." I felt Cannon's hand come down on the small of my back, offering a gentle show of support. "I'll *be* okay," I quickly amended. "Last night was an eye-opener. I'm not in this alone. I know that now. It's not just you and Ben anymore. I have *people* now, and ... I'm gonna start seeing someone. A therapist. Bev gave me some recommendations."

He studied my expression carefully, his tone a barely-there whisper as he admitted, "I just want to protect you, sweet pea. All I've ever wanted was to keep you safe."

"You've been protecting me my whole life, Jase. It's just one of the million reasons I love you so much. But I've got it from here, I promise. It's time for you to start living for yourself." My mouth hooked up in a tiny smirk as I added,

“Besides, if I have my way—which I fully intend to—you’ll be back soon. And hopefully next time, it’ll be for good.”

The trepidation melted from his features, and he smiled for the first time since I walked into the kitchen. “You really aren’t gonna let up about this, are you?”

“Nope,” I answered honestly. “This place has a way of leading people to their happiness. And I know for a fact that my big brother is searching for his. Something tells me this might just be the place where he finds it.”

Leaning back against the chair, he lifted his mug and took a sip, watching me over the rim. “Who knows,” he said a moment later. “Maybe you’re right.”

I was. I knew that to my very bones. And if it was the last thing I did, I was going to convince him of that.

Because after years of neglect and loneliness, it was time for *both* the Hyland kids to get their happy.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

---

FARAH

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK SINCE MY PANIC ATTACK AT BAD Alibi, and even though he'd believed me when I told him I was fine, Jase had insisted on extending his stay.

Cannon and I were just driving back from dropping him at the airport, and while I was sad to see him go, I was grateful that he'd be back for Thanksgiving.

I felt Cannon's hand come down on my thigh as his whiskey-smooth voice filled the cab of my SUV. "You doin' okay, Hummingbird?"

I turned from the landscape whizzing by the passenger window and offered him a small grin. "Yeah, I'm all right. Just a little sad."

His fingers pressed in, offering comfort. "Figured you would be. That's why I decided to do somethin' I hoped would take your mind off of it."

I instantly perked up. "Are you taking me out on your bike?" The weather hadn't turned cold enough yet to prevent us from riding, and in a very short amount of time, I'd become addicted to being on the back of Cannon's bike with him. There wasn't a more freeing feeling in all the world.

"Maybe later," he said with a smile in his voice. "But you'll still like what I have planned."

A few minutes later, Cannon made a left into a large asphalt parking lot, and as I looked out the windshield at the building in front of us, I knew he was right. "Redemption

Animal Shelter and Adoption Center?” I asked in a high pitched squeak, bouncing in my seat as he pulled into a parking spot.

“You said you wanted a rescue dog, right? Well, this is the place.”

I waited for him to put the car in park, and as soon as he did, I launched myself over the console, wrapping my arms around his neck. “Oh my God! This is the best surprise ever, honey.”

“Glad you’re happy, baby,” he returned on a rumble, pulling me in for a kiss.

“So happy,” I replied dreamily as I shifted back just enough to look at his handsome face. “Have I told you yet today that I love you?”

The gold in his eyes began to swirl as he stared at me. “Maybe once or twice, but feel free to say it as much as you want. I’ll never get tired of hearin’ it.”

And I’d never get tired of saying it.



“HE’S A SWEET DOG, REALLY,” the volunteer at the shelter said as I crouched down low to pet the dog in front of me. “It’s a shame he hasn’t been adopted yet, but people get nervous. His breed is known for being aggressive, and he can look a bit intimidating. He’s half Pit Bull, half Boxer, only about six months old, so he’s gonna get even bigger.”

“He good with other animals?” Cannon asked the volunteer.

“Oh, yeah. He’s a playful little guy. Loves all the other animals here, so even if you already have a pet, that’s not gonna be a problem.”

For the life of me, I couldn’t imagine why no one had fallen in love with the beautiful pup, because I was positively smitten.

“Their loss is my gain, huh boy?” I cooed, giving him a rub behind his ears. “What do you say, fella? You want to

come home with me?"

He licked along my jaw, giving me a slobbery kiss I took as a definitive yes.

With a laugh, I turned to look up at Cannon. "So, what do you think?" I asked as I hugged the pup close. "Isn't he just the most gorgeous thing you've ever seen?"

He lowered down on his haunches beside me and rubbed the dog's head. "Yeah, baby, he's a beauty, that's for sure. You sure this is the one you want?"

"Positive," I answered with determinedly.

"Then he's the one we'll get." The dog turned his big, square head and gave Cannon a lick of appreciation.

"So what are you gonna name him?"

He studied the dog closely for several seconds before answering. "What do you think of Triumph?"

The grin that stretched across my face was so big it made my cheeks ache. "Triumph," I said quietly, trying the name on for size. "I think it's absolutely perfect."

Triumph let out a playful woof and started wagging his tail, and that was all the confirmation I needed to know he agreed wholeheartedly.

 SHANE CAME SKIPPING up to the bar, slapping her tray down and giving me a big smile. "So, I've been meaning to ask, is there anything you want me to bring for Thanksgiving dinner?"

A lot had changed over the past month, and while it hadn't all been smooth sailing, it was still the happiest I'd ever been.

With Bev's help, I found a therapist I liked, and she'd gone a long way in helping me. The nightmares were still there, but they weren't nearly as frequent and a whole hell of a lot less powerful, and I was looking forward to the day when they were gone for good.

One of the biggest bright spots over the past month was the fact that, just a few days earlier, Cannon had moved into the Victorian with me. Turned out, he'd been renting the townhouse, and after sharing those three big words, we both felt like it was time. My gut was telling me it was the right call, and if I'd learned anything over these past months, it was to trust my gut. What some people might consider rushed felt like the next logical step for us.

When I'd told Jase and Bennett, neither of them batted an eye. If I were being honest, I was pretty sure both of them were relieved I was going to have a man they both trusted in the house.

Another blessing was that I felt I was really close to wearing Jase down. He hadn't come right out and said he was moving to Redemption, but my instincts were telling me it was only a matter of time.

I'd spent twenty-six years wishing I had a different life, but I'd never imagined it could be this damn good.

And the thick, swirly buttercream icing on the amazing cake that was my life was the fact that Cannon and I were hosting a huge, traditional Thanksgiving dinner in just a couple weeks. Jase was flying down, and Bennett—who was staying in my renovated carriage house for the time being—would also be in attendance with his new *girlfriend*, Myra, although they'd both told me numerous times that people their age didn't use the term girlfriend or boyfriend. I didn't care. I was just happy for them. Turned out, before Bennett had moved away, the two of them had love affair that rivaled even the one that went with the history of my new house, and now that they'd finally found each other again after all these years, they weren't going to waste another second.

Poppy was also going to be in attendance. Shane would be there with Brantley. Banks and Bev, Darla and Buck, Scooter and his wife, Caroline, Danno, Fletch, Clay, and a few of Cannon's friends who lived in a place called Hope Valley—a name almost as cool as Redemption—were all going to be there.

It was going to be a full house, and I couldn't freaking *wait*.

"I've got dinner covered, but I'm telling everyone if they want to bring a dessert, it's more than welcome."

"Sounds good. Brantley's really excited. It's usually just us and Uncle Scoot and Aunt Caroline. He's looking forward to celebrating with a whole bunch of people."

I let out a giggle. "Well, it's a toss-up who's more excited, him or me."

She shot me a wink over her shoulder as she started toward her section, calling out, "Guess we'll see how you're feeling after cooking dinner for all those people."

It didn't matter. Dinner could be a disaster, and I'd *still* feel like a kid on Christmas morning.

I checked on my section before heading to the pool tables where my man was camped out with his dad and their whole crew. "Hey guys. Everything good over here?"

Like he did every time I was within reach, Cannon grabbed me and pulled me into his lap, planting a kiss on my lips.

"We're good," Scoot answered. "But we'd be better if your man here'd agree to playin' you in another game of pool. I could use another hundred bucks."

I threw my head back on a laugh while Cannon gave me a squeeze with his own chuckle. "How about I make you guys a deal," I managed to say once my laughter tapered off. "Take it easy on my man and find me another player, and I'll be happy to help pad your pockets."

Scooter quickly agreed, and I just started to pull from Cannon's lap when the mood in the entire bar suddenly shifted.

"You gotta be fuckin' shitting me," Scooter growled, his cheerful demeanor long gone, pure rage taking its place.

I looked across the bar to where he was staring just as the doors closed behind a man I'd never seen before.

“Holy fuck,” Cannon clipped, his voice just as angry as Scooters.

“This isn’t happenin’,” Banks bit out.

I looked around the tables and saw that every guy had their attention on the newcomer, and not a single one of them looked happy to see him. Turning my focus on Cannon, I asked, “Who is that?”

“Jensen Rose,” he answered through gritted teeth. “Bad fuckin’ news, Hummingbird.”

My skin began to prickle as I looked back to the man in question. “Why’s he bad news?”

“That’s Shane’s ex, baby. Brantley’s dad.”

My head whipped back around. The guy was still standing in the doorway, gazing toward the bar with a look of stark longing on his face, and when I followed his line of sight, I saw he was staring right at a pale, stricken Shane. “Oh shit.”

I watched with my heart in my throat as Shane spun around on her heels and flat-out ran for the hall.

“Dad, you and Scoot get him the fuck outta here,” Cannon ordered. “I’ll put in a call to Stone.”

“Who’s Stone?” I asked, shooting panicked eyes to Cannon.

“Shane’s brother. Lives in San Francisco. He needs to know Jensen’s back.”

There were so many questions floating around in my head, but I couldn’t focus on anything but what Shane’s face looked like before she disappeared down the hall.

“We’ll get this shit sorted, baby,” Cannon told me while pushing to his feet. “You go take care of your girl, yeah?”

I nodded and jumped into action, hightailing it down the hall to the office. The door was closed, so I knocked pressing my ear against the wooden surface. “Shane?” I called out, knocking again. “It’s Farah, sweetie. I’m coming in.”

I hesitated for two beats before twisting the knob and pushing the door open. I peeked my head through the small opening, wondering if it wasn't best to give her some space, but the moment I saw Shane sitting at the desk with her head in her hands, her back shaking as she cried silently, I knew space was out of the question.

"Oh, honey." I shot across the office and crouched down at her side, pulling her into a hug.

"I-I can't b-believe he's here."

"What can I do?" I asked, stroking her hair as her tears left damp spots on my shoulder. "What do you need? Just tell me and I'll make it happen."

She pulled back and sniffled, batting at her cheeks. "I don't want to see him, Farah. I can't ... I—"

"You don't have to, Shane. Cannon and the guys are already on it. They're getting him out now. It'll just be a few more minutes."

"I just can't believe this!" she cried, flopping back in the chair. "All these years, and he's suddenly back? What the hell is that?"

I stood and rested back against the edge of the desk. "I don't know, honey."

"God," she snapped, rising to her feet and raking a hand through her hair. "He looked really good, didn't he? The fucking bastard. I *hate* that he still looks so good."

I was just about to tell her he didn't look *that* good—a lie, considering that, with only a brief glance, it was impossible *not* to notice how attractive he was—when the door to the office slammed shut.

Shane and I both jumped, and I spun around to find Lance standing just inside the office. His eyes were manic, his clothes and hair were a mess. The skin on his face was sallow and sunken. It looked like he hadn't eaten or slept for weeks, but what was most disturbing about his sudden appearance was the energy rolling off him and filling the tiny room to a suffocating level. He looked positively wired. My gut and my

brain were screaming at me to get the hell away from him, but he was blocking the only means of escape.

“Lance? What the hell? You can’t be he—”

Before I could finish my sentence, he moved, bringing his arm from behind his back and revealing the gun in his hand. His whole body shook as he raised the gun to eye level and pointed it right at me. “This is all your fault,” he hissed, his tone so full of hatred it made my skin crawl. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this, but you ruined *everything*.”

Shane sucked in a gasp, and fear coated my skin as I moved to put her behind me. I tried to keep my voice level and hide the tremble in my words as I spoke. “Lance, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Please, just put the gun down before you hurt someone, okay?”

“*Shut up*,” he snarled, gnashing his teeth. “I’m in this fucking mess because of you!”

“Look,” I started in a placating tone. “Why don’t you just let Shane out of here? Then you and I can talk. We’ll get all of this figured out, okay? Just let Shane leave.” I reached back to grab my friend’s hand. Her fingers wrapped around mine in a painful grip, but as I started to shift from behind the desk, Lance shot closer.

“Don’t you fucking move!” he yelled.

I instantly froze, lifting my free hand. “Okay, no one’s moving. Please, just calm down.”

He began pacing, his agitation growing with each passing second, and all that I could think was that I needed to get Shane out of there. She had a son, for God’s sake. I couldn’t let anything happen to her. If she was hurt I’d never forgive myself.

“This whole thing would’ve been taken care of months ago if that asshole I paid hadn’t fucked everything up.”

The blood in my veins turned to ice. “What are you talking about?” I whispered.

“He was only supposed to take you!” he barked, rounding the desk so fast Shane and I both jerked back. “That’s all he had to do! Your parents would’ve paid the ransom. Fuck knows they could afford it, and they wouldn’t have risked it getting out that their only daughter had been kidnapped, and they didn’t do everything to get her back. They would have paid. We would have split the money, and everything would go back to normal, but that son of a bitch played me!”

My whole body broke out in goosebumps. Bile crawled up my throat, scorching a path on its way up. “Th-that was ...” My vision blurred with tears, and I felt like I was going to be sick. “That was because of you? *You* did that to me?”

“It wasn’t supposed to go down like that!” he shouted, waving the gun around dangerously. “All he was supposed to do was take you. I didn’t know he was going to ...” He was such a coward, he couldn’t even bring himself to say the words.

“You didn’t know what?” I spit, venom coating each of my words. I no longer gave a shit about that gun. In fact, the rage boiling inside of me was so strong, I’d forgotten about it all together. “That he was going to rape me?” I snapped, stepping away from Shane and moving closer to him. I could only pray that she got the hint and started toward the door while I kept him focused on me. “Beat me? Stab me in the chest over and over and leave me for *dead*?”

“Stop it!” Lance shouted, covering his ears like he could keep the words from penetrating his brain.

But I wasn’t going to let him off that easy. The worst moments of my life had been orchestrated by *him*. I’d nearly died because of *him*, and he was going to damn well absorb every word I had to say. “You paid a man to kidnap me! That piece of shit took cash from you to commit a felony, and you’re surprised he changed the rules of the game? *What is wrong with you?*”

He shook his head and opened his eyes, turning the gun back on me. “It doesn’t matter now. It happened, and there’s nothing I can do to change it. All I can do is move forward.”

He took another step toward me. “This is what’s going to happen. You’re gonna keep your goddamn mouth shut and come with me. We’re going to walk quietly out the back door, get in my car, then I’m going to drive until I think the coast is clear. Then you’ll call your parents and get me my *fucking* money.”

My lips parted in shock as I shook my head. “You’re out of your fucking mind, Lance. I’m not going anywhere with you.”

He waved the gun in my face, giving me a smile that made my skin crawl. “Yes, you will. Because I’m the one with the goddamn gun!”

“Look around you, asshole! You’re in the middle of a crowded bar. How the hell do you think this is gonna play out, huh?”

He moved so fast it made me jump. One second he was a foot away, and the next, he was inches from my face. “I think it’s going to play out exactly how I said it would. You’re going to follow my instructions, because if you don’t ...” he turned the gun back on Shane. “I’ll shoot your little friend here in the head.”

Everything that happened after that felt like it moved at warp speed and slow motion all at the same time.

Grabbing his arm, I shoved it up just as the sound of it going off ricocheted through the office. “Shane, *run!*” I shouted, struggling to keep the gun pointed toward the ceiling. “Go! *Now!*”

I vaguely heard the sound of the door being thrown open, but I was too busy fighting with Lance to look. The gun went off again, and the sound was so loud it made my ears ring.

There was no way I could overpower him, so I did the only thing I could think to do. Baring my teeth, I sank them into his wrist.

He let out a shout and dropped the gun onto the floor. When I released his arm and bent to go for it, he grabbed me by the hair, yanking so hard I cried out in pain.

“You fucking bitch!” he yelled as I fought against his hold on my hair. My scalp felt like it was on fire, but I didn’t stop. He cocked his arm, his hand balled into a fist, but before he could attempt to land the punch, I dropped to the ground. The move threw him off balance, and he came down with me, releasing my hair. My heart was threatening to beat out of my chest as I scrambled across the floor for the gun, but before I could get to it, Lance’s hand wrapped around my ankle, grappling at my kicking feet, he attempted to pull me back as I tried to claw my way across the floor.

I screamed at the top of my lungs as Lance crawled over me, and when his hand came down over my mouth, I bit as hard as I could, tasting blood while he howled in pain.

I kicked and clawed with everything I had. I fought tooth and nail. I wasn’t going to let this happen. I’d been through too much, I’d survived *too goddamn much*. This wasn’t going to be the end of my story. Especially not now, when I’d finally gotten to the good part I deserved.

Digging my nails into his forehead, I raked them down his face, carving four thick, blood-red scratches from his hairline to his chin. I barely had a chance to pull my arm back, prepared to throw a punch when Lance’s body was suddenly hauled off me.

In the blink of an eye, he was pinned to the wall in front of me. Cannon stood in front of him, his forearm to Lance’s throat, pushing in so hard his face turned an unnatural shade of red.

“You motherfucker,” he hissed, nose to nose with Lance as he put all his weight into that arm at his throat.

Shane and Buck were suddenly at my side, helping me to my feet, and it was then that I noticed several people crowding into the office. “It’s okay,” Shane said in my ear, holding on to me. “You’re okay. The cops are on their way. You’re all right.”

Her soothing words barely penetrated as I watched an enraged Cannon pull Lance away from the wall, only to slam him back against it with a sickening thud. He did it again and again, until the plaster cracked beneath his skull.

Pulling from Shane's hold, I moved to his side, pushing through Banks and Scooter, who were at his back. "Cannon, stop."

But it was as if he couldn't hear me. Holding Lance by the throat with one hand, he landed a bone-crunching blow to his ribs with the other. "I'm gonna enjoy beating the fuckin' life right out of you."

I grabbed his arm as he reared back for another punch and shouted, "Cannon, *stop!*"

That seemed to snap him out of his murderous haze, and he turned his head to look at me for the first time.

"I'm okay," I whispered, reaching up to trail my fingers across his jaw. "I'm right here, and I'm okay."

"Hummingbird."

I gave him a wobbly smile. "That's right. I'm right here. You need to let him go. The cops are on the way, and he's not worth it, baby. Please, just let him go."

It took several agonizing seconds, but Cannon finally let go of Lance's throat and moved to me. He wrapped a protective arm around my waist as he turned to the elder Banks and ordered, "Get him the fuck outta here. He tries to run, you shoot him, understand?"

My eyes whipped to Banks, and it was then that I noticed he had Lance's gun in his hand. "You got it, son." Grabbing Lance by his collar, he twisted until it tightened around his neck and started dragging him toward the door. "We got this. You just take care of your girl."

With that, he moved out of the office, taking with him the last of my nightmare.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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CANNON

I'D SAT IN THAT CURTAINED-OFF BAY, UNABLE TO TAKE MY eyes off Farah as the nurses looked her over. We'd been stuck in the emergency room of the hospital for an hour, and the whole time we were there, I couldn't bring myself to look away from her, not even for a second, scared to death she'd somehow disappear if I did.

I'd watched as she was poked and prodded. I'd watched as Holt and another deputy came in to get her official statement. For an hour, all I'd done was watch and listen, and the more I heard, the more I wished I hadn't let her stop me from killing that son of a bitch.

Bennett had been beside Farah's tiny hospital cot, holding on to her hand, looking like he'd aged forty years in a matter of one evening. The only time he'd left her side was when he stepped out to call to Jase. Even now, we'd been home for two hours, and instead of going back to the carriage house, he'd chosen to sleep across the hall from us.

Our bedroom was bathed in darkness, the only light coming from the moon shining through the windows.

Crash was curled in a ball against Farah's stomach, purring in his sleep; Triumph was snoring away at the end of the bed; and I was at her back, holding her like my life depended on it. Because Lord knew it did.

We'd lapsed into silence several minutes ago, and I thought Farah had finally fallen asleep. That was, until the soft, beautiful cadence of her voice filled the room.

“You didn’t lose me,” she said quietly, her hand sliding over the one I had resting on her stomach so she could tangle our fingers together. “I’m right here, Cannon. Flesh and blood. Alive and well.”

I squeezed her tighter, burying my face in her soft, silky hair.

“All I can think is that you could’ve been taken from me tonight.”

Letting go of my hand, she moved, rolling to her other side so we were face to face. “That was never gonna happen,” she said, reaching up to brush the hair from my forehead.

“You don’t know that, baby—”

“Yes I do,” she stated firmly. “I know it for a fact because that was the decision I made tonight. I finally found my happy, Cannon, and there was no way in hell I was letting him take that away from me. I know it because I wasn’t going to stop fighting, not for a second. Whether you showed up when you did or not, I was coming out of that fight a winner. Do you understand me?” Pressing her hand against my cheek, she shifted closer so I could see her eyes clearly. “I was going to *win*, Cannon.”

There wasn’t a single ounce of doubt in her voice as she spoke. She was so certain I couldn’t help but believe it too. My woman was the strongest, bravest, fiercest person I’d ever met. If she said she was going to win, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind.

Bending my neck, I pressed my forehead against hers and breathed her in. “Christ, I love you. You know that? From the first moment I walked into that bar and saw you standing across the room.”

“And I love you,” she returned, slipping her arm around my waist and snuggling closer. “Never in a million years did I think applying for that waitressing job would have led to something like this, but I’m so glad it did.”

“And never in a million years did I think I’d be so fuckin’ happy that a cat darted out into the middle of the road.”

Her laughter was like music to my ears. “You’re never gonna let me live that one down, are you?”

Pressing a kiss against her sweet lips, I gave her my truth. “Not on your life, Hummingbird.”

*FARAH*



DISCONNECTING THE CALL, I dropped my arm and held my phone at my side as I stared out the window into my backyard.

It was over. *Finally*, it was all over. I was so overwhelmed by the relief I felt in that moment, that all I could do was stand there, glued to the spot on the floor as I took in the incredible view of trees and mountains that butted up to a clear blue sky.

I was so lost in thought that I didn’t realize Cannon had come into the kitchen until I felt his heat at my back. His arms wrapped around my waist and his chin rested on my shoulder as he asked, “That the police on the phone?”

“Yeah,” I whispered at the beauty in front of me.

“What’d they say?”

“They got him.” The moment the last word left my mouth, tears spilled from my eyes.

After Lance had been arrested, he proved just how big a coward he was by confessing *everything*. He gave them the name of the man he’d hired, and the cops up north didn’t hesitate in tracking the man down.

When they finally had him in custody, they took a DNA sample and ran it against the rape kit. It was a match.

“They’re charging him with rape and attempted murder. Lance is being charged as an accessory to both. It’s finally over.”

Cannon stood to his full height, grabbing my hips and turning me to face him. That beautiful golden green was

shining with concern as he asked, “What’s goin’ through your mind, right now, Hummingbird?”

“I finally have it,” I answered softly, reaching up to place my hands on the sides of his neck. “Everything I ever wanted but never thought I’d get. I have it all. You gave it to me, honey.”

Cannon squeezed his eyes closed and inhaled deeply as he rested his forehead against mine. “Christ, baby. You have no idea how happy you make me. Never thought I could ever love someone the way I love you. Not in a million years.”

“I told you once that moving here was the best decision I ever made. But I was wrong.”

He lifted his head and looked down at me in confusion. “What?”

“Moving here was only the second best. The best decision I ever made was falling for the guy I spotted across a crowded bar who made my pulse race.” Standing on my tiptoes, I pressed my lips against his and declared, “I love you with everything I am, Cannon. You’re my future, my everything. *You’re* the best decision I ever made.”

## Epilogue

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CANNON

“GOD, CANNON. THIS PLACE IS AMAZING.” I TURNED FROM watching Triumph run around the backyard to Sage’s grinning face. “Never imagined you as the type of guy to live in an old, restored Victorian, but it works. You just ... you fit here.”

“Not the house, darlin’,” I replied, bringing the beer bottle to my lips and taking a pull. “It’s the woman in it.”

“She’s pretty amazing too,” Sage quickly added. “Beautiful and sweet. And she still doesn’t put up with your shit. I like her honey. In general, but for you especially.”

“Means the world to me, Chestnut,” I mumbled, hooking an arm around my oldest friend’s shoulders and pulling her into a sideways hug.

“You really love her, don’t you?”

That answer was as easy as breathing. “With everything I am. She rambles when she’s nervous or excited, doesn’t know the difference between a Harley and a Triumph, she’d take in every stray she found on the street if she had her way, and she can’t cook for shit, but I can’t imagine spending a single day without her.”

Her eyes grew watery as she looked up at me with a wobbly grin. “That makes me happy, honey.”

“Thanks, darlin’.”

We turned back out to the amazing view that surrounded the old house my woman had poured her love into until it was

restored back to its former glory. I was content to stand with my friend in silence, but apparently Sage had other plans. “Just one question.”

“Yeah?”

“If she’s such a terrible cook, why the hell are you letting her make Thanksgiving dinner for all of us?”

At the fear laced in her expression, I threw my head back on a deep laugh. Before I had a chance to answer, I heard a knock coming from behind me, and turned to see Farah’s panicked face through the kitchen window.

“*Help,*” she mouthed, looking like she was only seconds away from a heart attack. Then she clasped her hands together in front of her chest. “*Please.*”

“Don’t worry about it, Chestnut,” I said as I let Sage go and started for the back door. “I got a backup dinner stashed in one of the spare rooms.”

With that, I closed the door on the sounds of my friends laughter and headed to the kitchen to save my woman from what was sure to be an epic disaster.

*FARAH*



I LOOKED at the congealed blob of goo in the pot, feeling the first wave of panic crash into me. I had a houseful of people, all waiting for an incredible Thanksgiving dinner. And I had *goo*. Turning my gaze to Cannon, I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth and bit down. “I think something’s wrong with the gravy.”

“I knew it!” Jase cried, throwing his hands up in frustration while Bennett laughed uncontrollably. “Told you letting her cook was a mistake. You think that Chinese place in town is open?”

I shot him a killing look that made Bennett laugh even harder. “Keep talking and you won’t eat a damn thing,” I

threatened.

“It’s all right, baby,” Cannon said, that smokey voice of his doing wonders to calm my frayed nerves. “We’ll get it squared away.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I cried as I looked around the disaster before me. “I followed the recipe you gave me. Something must be wrong with the ingredients. Maybe they were past their expiration.”

Cannon’s deep chuckle hit my ear as he scooted over to me, pushing me out of the way. “Hate to break it to you, Hummingbird, but that’s got nothin’ to do with expiration.”

“That’s it.” Jase pushed up from his chair, pulling his cellphone from his pocket. “I’m calling for Chinese.”

Before I could cuss my brother out, Brantley’s voice sounded through the kitchen right before he plowed into me, wrapping his arms around my legs. “Pwetty Fawah!”

“Hey sweetie.” I grinned gorn at him and reached to ruffle his hair.

“I’m hungwy. Let’s eat!”

“What the kid said,” Jase deadpanned.

My head was seconds away from exploding when Cannon jumped into action. Bending down, he scooped the rambunctious four-year-old up and carried him over to Jase. “Dinner’ll be ready in just a bit, buddy. Why don’t you and Uncle Jase here go watch some football, yeah?”

“*Yeah!*” Brantley yelled, squirming around until my brother finally put him on his feet, then he bolted out of the kitchen.

“I’m afraid to leave her unsupervised,” Jase mumbled, looking to the stove with trepidation.

“Out,” Cannon ordered. “We got this under control. Don’t need you in here makin’ things worse.”

With Cannon’s tone leaving no room for argument, Jase and Bennett headed into the living room where the rest of my

new family had congregated in front of our giant TV, leaving me and Cannon alone.

He patted the counter beside the stove while adjusting the dials on all of the burners. “Have a seat. You can relax and keep me company while I finish this up. How’s that sound?”

That sounded like the best offer I’d had in a long time, and I didn’t hesitate to take him up on it, hopping up on the counter so I could watch my man work.

“Think any of it’s salvageable?”

He gave me a reassuring wink. “I can make it work, don’t worry. And just because I love you, I’ll even give you all the credit.”

My lips tipped up in a teasing smirk as I replied, “And just because *I* love *you*, I’ll allow that.”

I hadn’t thought it possible for my man to get any hotter than he already was, but watching him move around the kitchen, saving the Thanksgiving feast we were about to feed to all our friends and family, had to have been one of the sexiest things I’d ever seen. And while I was excited to have everyone I loved under one roof, there was a part of me that couldn’t wait for them to leave so I could have Cannon all to myself.

Shifting from the stove, he put his hands on my knees and pushed my legs apart to step between them. His expression warmed as he leaned in and brushed his lips against mine. “You happy, Hummingbird?” he asked as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

My house was full of laughter and love, I was surrounded by friends and family, and I was currently holding my future in my arms. There was nothing but good on the horizon for me.

And it was all because of this man and this incredible town.

“Not happy, honey. I’m *blissful*,” I answered. “But then, every day with you is better than the last, so I guess I’ll need to think of an even bigger word for tomorrow.”

His grin made my belly flip. “Lookin’ forward to hearin’ what you come up with.”

I leaned in to give him a kiss, only to be interrupted when Jase came waltzing back into the kitchen with my snoozing cat in his arms.

“You know, I’ve been meaning to ask. Why’d you name your cat Crash?”

My head whipped back to Cannon, my eyes narrowing as I snapped, “Not a word out of you!”

With that, my man burst into laughter and the sound moved right through me, making that now ever-present warmth in my chest bloom brighter.

*Oh yeah*, I thought as I held him even tighter. *This is definitely bliss.*

The End

*Thank you so much for reading, and don't forget to leave a review.*

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# About Jessica

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Born and raised around Houston, Jessica is a self proclaimed caffeine addict, connoisseur of inexpensive wine, and the worst driver in the state of Texas. In addition to being all of these things, she's first and foremost a wife and mom.

Growing up, she shared her mom and grandmother's love of reading. But where they leaned toward murder mysteries, Jessica was obsessed with all things romance.

When she's not nose deep in her next manuscript, you can usually find her with her kindle in hand.

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