



SS
SS
K
E
M
O

ELLE KNOX
J.H. WOLFE

ONE KISS

ELLE KNOX
J.H. WOLFE

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Elle Knox](#)

CHAPTER ONE

BELLE

Maisie flips her hair over her shoulder. If I had hair like that I'd be flipping it at every opportunity, but she does it with such grace and class that no one in the world would doubt that the flipping is a necessity.

The strip club is loud and hot and she's the bride. I, as maid of honor, lean in and fan myself as the crotch of a very well endowed or sock-stuffing stripper gyrates near our faces. "Do you need another drink?"

She stuffs a dollar bill into the side of this guy's G-string and waits a quick second then slides another into the fabric. And the crotch lingers, waiting. Apparently for me because as soon as I slip what I think is a one into his britches, he moves on. When I look down, I see I have a dollar bill left, and the twenty I was holding is gyrating its way across the stage and out the back curtain as the song ends.

I wonder for just a second if I should go after it, but I have a debit card and a bride to keep happy so I stay with Maisie instead of running, shrieking after my money.

I'm the only one not drinking and the girls are in party hardy mode. My MOH—AKA Maid of Honor—function for the evening is to make sure we all get home safe and sound after Maisie has a celebration second only to her wedding reception.

A new song has started and a need crotch walks onto the stage. Maisie raises her hands in the air like she's riding a roller coaster and does the excited scream/shoulder wiggle-lean back/boob shimmy for effect combo she uses when someone she hasn't seen in years has somehow managed to find her in a crowd. She doesn't know this stripper, but despite her *I'm the Bride* sash and her fistful of dollars, he goes to other side of the stage first.

She sits back and fans herself, gives another hair flip and sips an empty appletini. Maisie is in her twenties, the mid ones, a year or so

less than my late twenties, and she has hair that is the envy of every person she's ever met. Or maybe it's just me, but it's golden and long and does whatever she wants it to do with nothing more than a whispered command from her straightener or curling iron or whatever implement that makes the beachy waves she's wearing tonight. My red hair is wiry and out of control with more curl than it can handle. It's long and shiny, but that's about all it has going for it.

She has eyes the color of a brilliant midday sky while mine aren't the good green color of shamrocks and grass. Mine are the color of pea soup on the second or third day. She's social and fun. I'm reserved and trying. For her, I'd do anything. And she would return the favor. It's how our friendship has lasted.

She huffs out a breath and turns to look for a waiter. When she spots one, she waves her glass. He walks over, tray in one hand, package at Maisie's eye level. "Holy shit! Is that thing real?" She reaches out like she's going in for a grab, but I pull her arm back. Partly because I don't want to have to bail the bride out of jail on her bachelorette party night, and partly because I don't want her to be disappointed when she gets only a handful of knee-high Hanes.

"What's your name?" Her drunken slur is accompanied by a drunken smile and a bit of a leer.

"My name is Dirk." And he has a voice that would melt steel, abs that are slick and shiny—probably drowning in baby oil—and the package.

Maisie looks over her shoulder at me. "His name is Dirk." Her mouth falls open then she falls back so her head is on my shoulder. "Dirk has a big..."

"She'll have an appletini and a glass of water."

He gives me a look up that could burn the paint off a wall and smiles. "And for you?"

"I'm driving. I'll just have a coke."

He winks. "You got it."

Maisie turns her body to face mine now. “He was *to...tally* flirting with you.” She reaches to grab Jen who is sitting on the other side of her. “Dirk with the big dick was flirting with”--she jerks a thumb over her shoulder-- “Belle.”

Jen kneels on her seat and looks at me. “You should totally shove your tip down his leather pants.” She giggles. “Maybe you’ll get to touch his tip.”

“Thanks, but I’m good. You go ahead.” I hand her the money for the drinks and tip. She giggles again and sticks it between her boobs with the edges poking out just enough he can grab it.

We’re going to have to come back tomorrow and apologize to old Dirk. I shake my head.

Maisie yanks the money from Jen’s cleavage and hands it back to me. “Dirk with the big dick, Big Dick Dirk belongs to Belle.” She hands the cash back to me just as Dirk brings the drinks back.

He hands Maisie hers while Jen ogles him, and when he smiles at her, she slides her tongue around her mouth. It’s slow and sloppy, leaves the skin around her mouth shiny with saliva, and Dirk smiles. Winks. I can’t imagine the things he puts up with in a night. Probably, if I was as drunk as my friends, I wouldn’t care enough to be embarrassed but their behavior is a little over the top, even for them.

When he reaches out, my coke in hand, he holds onto it and my hand is now laying on his. He smiles. “You must be Belle.”

“Mm.” I nod and forcibly take the drink for a sip because my mouth is dry.

“You heard your friend. Dirk with the big dick belongs to Belle.” His grin is adorable, but practiced, and I’m not falling for that again. I’ve had enough of players--well, one--and guys who treat women as if they’re disposable--again, the same one. But he was a lesson learned.

As resolute as I am to stay away from Dirk, Maisie has so many other ideas. “Is it really big?” Maisie grins up at him, her hand once

again poised, and I slap it away.

And Dirk is as practiced as I thought. “You can ask your friend in the morning.”

I chuckle, and he chuckles and Maisie drops her mouth open again. “I’m the DD. I have to make sure these ladies get home safe. I can’t abandon my duties.”

He nods. “Okay, well, if you drop them off at home and you think you might want to get your world rocked, I get off at four. And you, pretty girl, would be getting off right around four fifteen.”

“Fifteen minutes?” Something about his delivery gave me confidence. He was hitting on me, which didn’t happen that often. “That’s fast.”

“That’s just the warm up I do with my tongue. The second time will take a lot longer.” If I was the kind of girl who blushed, I would, but I’m just not. Possibly that’s a result of night of truth or dare where I can’t choose truth without drinking a shot, and I can’t do shots or anything else because of my anxiety medication.

And like she can read my mind, Maisie leans in, shouts anyway.. “I dare you to get Big Dick Dirk’s number.”

I look up at Dirk. “She just dared me to get your number.”

He grinned and there’s something so charming about it. “Only if you promise to use it.”

Maisie and Jen start a chant, “Promise! Promise!” Over and over while Dirk is still wearing the adorable grin and heat, as women in the club watch, rolls up from my knees to my girl-gina. I push my hair behind my ears.

“Don’t make me look thirsty.” His voice is a soft purr as he leans in and brushes his mouth against my ear, like I pushed my hair back for just that purpose. “Please.”

I look up. “I promise.”

He takes my hand, turns it palm up and all the girls cheer like I've won the next item up for bids.

For a second, I think he's going to go for the obvious move and write his number on my palm, but he writes it on the inside of my wrist, brings it up so he can blow on the ink then turns my hand to press a kiss—a soft kiss—on my knuckles before he lets go. He uses his index finger to rub my palm. This guy has all the moves. “Don't forget I get off at four.”

Maisie grins up at him. “I won't let her forget, *Dirk*.”

I laugh and look at my wrist. *BD Dirk* and his phone number are written in black, thin-lined marker. Maybe felt tipped. Probably indelible.

“She's gonna be back at four and she's going to let you make her forget what's his name.” She looks at me. “What's his name?”

I glance up at Dirk. “Run.”

But Maisie grabs his arm. “I'm starving. Do you have food here?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry. Kitchen closed half-hour ago.” That must've meant it was midnight-thirty. I'd read the sign when we walked in. A woman across the stage waves him over and he looks down at me. “I've gotta go. If you don't call, I understand. But I hope you do.” His smile and wink are quick before he rushes off.

I don't watch to see if he repeats this whole conversation with another woman. Instead, I look at Maisie. She's drunk. Needs food.

“Come on, Maise. We can go to Taco Bell, get a crunch wrap.” They're her favorite. Many a night since we were old enough to drive, we've made midnight runs to Taco Bell for Nachos Bell Grande and crunch wraps.

Jen Leaned over. “Or we could go to the Pit Stop and get a Jeff Gordon smothered in barbecue sauce.”

“I want a Jeff Gordon.” A chorus of “me, too” walked its way across the line of our girls—there were four besides me and Maisie.

As we were leaving, I passed Dirk and he lifted his arm waved his wrist and winked. I smiled and waved back.

It took a lot longer than it should have to get everyone into the SUV, possibly because behind was only one set of doors and two rows of seating and no one could figure out how to walk between the two center seats to the bench row in back. Finally, they figured it out and we were on our way.

When we finally made it to the bar, the games resumed. So far tonight, I’ve slow danced on a table to a 1980s Bon Jovi ballad, and now Jen looked at me. “Truth or dare...” She pretended to look around until her gaze settled on me. “Belle!”

To Jen and the other girls who weren’t Maisie, I looked like the bravest broad on the bus, but little did they know... “Dare.”

Despite the fact we’re standing on a sidewalk in fifty degree temperatures and not a one of us had thought to wear a skirt that landed below mid-thigh, she takes her time deciding. Or at least pretending to decide, but I suspect she notices the smokers outside and decides right then. “Flash a stranger!”

“Flash him! Flash Him!” Maisie was in the mood to start any number of chants.

I sigh, walk over to the group standing outside the front door as the girls huddle watching like I haven’t done every other dare tonight without welching.

As I approach, I consider my options for doing this without looking ridiculous, but it turns out, there isn’t a way.

Instead, I lift my shirt and bra and go for it.

The smoking section is dully unimpressed because I am without much to flash, but one of the guys applauds and another laughs while the girls, still huddled behind me, cheer even after I pull my

shirt down. I've gone skinny dipping before, so this isn't much different. Although that hadn't been under the harsh fluorescent lighting provided by the street lamp. And we'd all been naked so no one much cared about my tiny tits.

I strut back to my friends because this is the game I started to get Maisie to loosen up and now I'm going to see it through come hell or high water. It's what maids of honor do. And I'm nothing if not the best damned maid of honor in the history of them.

CHAPTER TWO

Getting this guy to go out is like pulling teeth. I have been at it for ten minutes now, but Hunter is sitting at a desk/table with a bunch of paperwork spread in front of him, a pencil tucked behind each ear and a cup of coffee cooling in front of him. Hell, for all I know, it's the same cup of coffee he's had since breakfast.

He's like that. Focused. Centered. So honed that he could forget to eat or drink or that he's poured himself a cup even though he's one yawn away from joining the walking dead. He's one of those workaholic architects who doesn't take a break unless it's forced on him. Or unless the right person is asking.

I, apparently, am not that person. "Come on, man. I had a shitty"--he gives me a look because his kid is here somewhere-- "bad day at work. Smashed my hand." I hold it up like he's going to be sympathetic enough over a bruise that he'll immediately put down his pen and come out with me. Maybe honesty would do it. "I need a wingman to help me sort through the rabble and find someone worthy." *Unworthy* might not be so bad, either.

"Worthy of what?" The kid--ten or eleven year old Hadley--must have snuck in because kids are pet ninja, and now she's standing beside me.

Hunter sits back, crosses his arms and watches me squirm like the real friend he is. "Um, worthy of my..." I clear my throat. She doesn't

need to know. “Don’t you have homework?”

She crosses her arms and stares up at me, the least intimidated person who ever walked the earth. I have a look. Tattoos. Grimace. She should be scared.

“It’s Saturday night. I did it all last night.” Clearly, she is not.

“Nerd.”

She laughs. “Right? Nerds get scholarships.” She moves to stand behind her father, and the resemblance is staggering. So much perfect bloneness and white toothiness does not belong in one gene pool. “My dream school is UCLA.”

Hunter groans and puts his head down. “Now, do you see why I can’t take a night off?”

“Hadley, tell your old man you have seven years before you graduate highschool. He can take a night off.” I shoot a look down at her. I’m 6’3, she’s about...short. But she’s old enough to take cues, to run with a hint here and there.

She shakes her head. “Can’t do it. He didn’t finish his homework.”

“You got her in Karen-training already?” I cock a brow at Hunter, and he shrugs and smiles. Not using it the bad way. Her grandmother’s name is Karen and she’s a stickler for... everything.

He winks at her and smiles a beam of pride so bright I almost need a pair of shades. “She’s more of a Becky.” That one is all on him.

Thank God, for the fiance. I flash her my best good guy grin as she moves to stand on the other side of Hunter. She’s dark-haired and dark-eyed, the compliment to the Kincaid lack of pigment.

She smiles at me. “How’s it going, Walker?”

“It would be better if Bob the Builder would take a break and enjoy life for a minute.” He shoots me a grimace, but I smile at Molly. If anyone can help me, it’s the woman who moved in with him and cleaned up his house, his attitude, and his life.

Hunter looks up. "Enjoying life does not mean watching you pick up women at the Pit Stop." He slides his arm around her. "And FYI, Bob the Builder was the construction worker."

I grin. "Enjoying life does mean picking up women at the Pit Stop." For me anyway. "Fine, we can make tonight a bros before"--he slants a side-eye and I roll mine--"we can make tonight about getting you out of the house." When they all laugh like I'm Bob Freaking Hope, I shake my head. They don't believe me. "I don't have to pick up a woman." Although I wouldn't mind getting laid. Not that I can say that aloud without sounding like pure swine. "Fine. I pinky swear, I will not pick up on or be picked up by a woman at the Pit Stop tonight. You have my word." And like some desperate for a friend highschool chick, I hold up one solemn pinky. Or maybe I'm solemn as I hold it up. Doesn't matter. The point is, I'm cementing the promise with a time-honored means of swearing.

"Oh, go on, sweetie. You haven't been out on a boy's night in... do you go out?"

She calls him *sweetie* and something in my gut tugs. I've never been the kind of guy who wants to be called sweetie, but damn. They make it look good. And whether or not I hold up my end of the pinkie swear, he's got a guarantee of getting some action once I bring him home. Lucky bastard.

He laughs and pulls her onto his lap. Me and the kid look at each other. "Bleck."

I nod to the kitchen. "Ice cream sandwiches in the fridge?" It's a weakness.

"Yeah. Come on." The kid takes my hand and leads me around the table where her father is currently mid kiss with her soon to be step-mother.

When we're in the kitchen, she pushes me toward one of the bar stools at the kitchen island, and she goes to the fridge to retrieve our snacks.

This place has gone through a transformation since Molly moved in. It's so clean it sparkles. Not that Hunter is messy or that he lives in filth or leaves clutter, but this is *Mom* clean. This is pine scented clean. And decorated. No longer does Hunter live in a bachelor pad with just his kid. Now he has dish towels and coffee mugs hanging from a shelf near the coffee maker which is convenient, I guess, but definitely not Hunter's idea. He designs the outside of buildings. Not the inside.

She hung curtains, too, over his mini blinds. Black and white checkered curtains to match the black and white checkered tablecloth on the kitchenette table and black and white checkered bow on the welcome sign on the wall. Hunter might've thought of the curtain matching the tablecloth, but the bow was the thing that made this place as much hers as his.

Hadley handed me an ice cream, and I opened the wrapper as she sat on the stool beside mine. "How's school, kid?"

"It's school." She shrugged and silence loomed large. "How's work? You really hurt your hand?" She reaches across the front of me and grabs it. Shakes it, and I don't wince when the pain shoots up my wrist because no way am I looking weak in front of this kid. I'd never hear the end of it. "Looks like it hurt. Did you cuss?"

I smile. This kid knows stuff. Has insight. Probably believes I'm a swear word away from ending up on Santa's naughty list. "Yeah."

"That's okay. As long as you didn't say GD. My mom says that the F-word isn't the big bad swear word. She says it's GD." Her mom never liked me. Feeling's mutual, but I'll keep that to myself. Hunter has a new woman now and we're friends because she makes him happy. That's enough for me.

This kid has a way with saying things that I find amusing. "Well, if anyone..." I'm about to say *would know*, but I catch myself because some things kids don't need to hear from guys they hardly know when they're figuring things out. "Has a good head on herself for things like cussing and knowing the right ones to use, it's your mom."

“Yeah.” She nods like she knows I’m putting a brighter spin on what she is smart enough to also know is true. “Right.” But she continues to eat her ice cream like she doesn’t have a care in the world.

I remember being eleven. I played basketball on the school team. Then came home and shot hoops outside until dark. Then I came in, ate supper, pretended to do my homework. By the time we finished dinner, it was bath and bedtime so I could start all over again.

“You play sports?” I’m not great at sitting in silence.

She nods. “I cheer.”

“I meant a real sport. Like basketball.” I let her fume for a minute, open mouthed and narrow eyed. “Don’t get twisty. I know it’s a sport. I have had the benefit of many a cheerleader leg...”

From the doorway, Hunter stops me with, “Walker!”

I look up. I probably had a whole different way to go with that story. “Anyway, I know cheering is a sport.”

Hunter laughs. “Careful, Walker. My girl isn’t just a cheerleader, she’s a bad ass.” He slings an arm around her neck and kisses the top of her blonde head. “And I think she can take you.”

I laugh like it’s hilarious until I see her glare. “I said cheerleaders are athletes.”

She shakes her head, and my mind flashes on my mother when I’ve disappointed her. This kid is a prodigy. She’s going to make some man learn to grovel some day. “Sorry, Hadley.”

As she slides off her barstool and stomps away, Hunter laughs. “You’re right, Walker. You *need* a wingman. You just got dusted by an eleven year old.”

I shoot him a half-ass glare because he’s right. I’m much smoother with half-drunk women who exhibit semi-flexible standards.

“Molly says I should have a boys’ night because I’m...” He blows out a breath. “I need to get out. She says it’ll help with my sexual...” He

shakes his head. “She’s says I should go.” When I grin, he narrows his eyes. “What are you smiling about?”

He knows damned well what I’m smiling about, and I’d better be getting brownie points for not laughing out loud.

He shakes his head. “She said she needs *the break*.”

I chuckle. “Sure. Sure.” I nod like I’m in full agreement with whatever his excuse. “It’s your story. You tell it that way you want to.”

“Asshole.” He laughs and we walk out the kitchen door into the garage.

It’s a nice night, warmer than last year at this time, so we’re riding bikes to the Pit Stop. His Harley is an antique we reworked into a rideable machine that when he was single made panties drop at the first roar of the engine. In his player days, Hunter only needed the bike and all his white teeth to get women into bed. He didn’t fall hard until he found Molly—a woman unimpressed with the bike or the smile. She likes his “substance.”

We pull into the lot beside the building and shut off the bikes. A drink with a friend, even if I’m not allowed to troll the merchandise on display inside the bar, is better than no drink at all. And so it begins.

CHAPTER THREE

BELLE

Okay. I've watched my friends eat about a thousand pounds in combined total weight of ground beef smothered in Gordon sauce, and they've had a few more beers, appletinis and margaritas than anyone should've ever consumed, and it's after one-thirty. Hopefully, we can head out soon and I can put Maisie into her bed and go home.

But she's whipping the crowd into a frenzy with her slowed down karaoke rendition of Bad Medicine complete with hip thrusting, boob shaking, and pole grinding because of course pole position at the Pit Stop isn't quite the Nascar version.

I wait until she starts a naughty striptease before I try to pull her off stage. But for being the weight of an actual feather, she's freakishly strong and digs in her heels—five-hundred dollar Louboutins she splurged on with her first paycheck out of college and has kept in a glass display case until now— and hands me the mic.

We have an audience when she speaks into the mic. "I dare you."

And now I have to. Because she's said the three most horrible bachelorette party words in the history of the English language. I huff a breath into the microphone and wrap my hand around the pole, execute a twirl that makes the world spin a little faster than it should, then belt out the chorus like I'm Marilyn Monroe because I can.

I have that voice when I'm nervous—breathy, high-pitched, like I'm ready for sex. I can't help it. Most of the time I hate it. For example, this voice was not useful during the speech I had to give in my public speaking class—a required course that almost made me drop out of college altogether.

By morning, I'm going to be a YouTube joke, because there are at least ten cell cameras recording, so I have to own it. Make it seem like the voice is a choice not something forced on me that I can't control. I'm a machine. That country guy with the twang has nothing

on me. I thrust and do a slow twerk that brings the crowd to its feet. I've never been so in the spotlight and never felt it so much. It's okay. I can deal. Would've been easier if I was dealing with tequila instead of anxiety medicine, but I can cope.

After the song, of which I could've crowd surfed from the stage, I walk back to the table of bachelorettes and stand at the edge. People walk by and pat my back, and a guy at the bar—tall, dark, and tattooed with a smile like Brad Pitt and a darker, stubble of a beard that I'm willing to bet would burn in all the best ways— lifts his glass and drinks while I smile and watch.

Sweet sweating Jesus. This guy is... wow. Possibly holy wow. Actually, unholy. But still... wow.

Maisie, who's already dared me to flash a guy and be a singing pole dancer, has that look again. Because she's watching the guy at the bar, too. And she saw the smile. The toast. The smile again.

I'm not the only one replaying it in my head.

She nods at me. "Oh yeah, baby. I double dog dare you to go get hot tattooed guy's phone number."

I should've never looked. Should've never thought about how nice his eyes are. Not that I can see the color, but when he smiles so do they. And it's adorable. Seriously. It's fold up on his lap to cuddle and make out until he wants to bang my head against the headboard adorable.

But he's sitting with a friend—one I recognize—who I'd also have to interact with. It isn't the exhibitionism of dancing slow and sultry on a stage, or flashing a stranger, it's personal interaction that kicks off my oh-fuck-o-meter and makes the anxiety medicine a necessity. Dealing with more than one person at a time is a lot for me to handle.

I sigh. "If you weren't the bride and you weren't marrying a very good friend of ours and it would ruin the pictures you're paying thousands

of dollars for, I'd punch you in the face. Right now." It's honest. *I'm honest.*

"Go ahead, but you still have to get his number." And a second later, she's back to chanting. "Get his number! Get his number!"

People are watching now. The Pit Stop isn't an empty on Saturday kind of place. We're at a table in the middle of the space with tables all around us, the bar just behind.

I should probably have a plan of some sort. But I don't. And the closer I get to him, the faster my heart works and the slower my thoughts. He's gorgeous. More so up close.

His reflection in the mirror behind the bar smiles at me, holds my gaze. This guy has moves. But of course, he does. A guy who looks like him probably has a playbook, moves, and intuition to know when to call an audible or run an option. My football background is showing through and I'm of half a mind to try my luck at a tackle.

The girls who were chanting and cheering have gone silent, watching now.

I move to stand between him and the friend he has with him and they both look at me. "Hi. I'm Belle. Isabelle to be exact, but Belle is okay, too." And once again, I sound like the love child of Pamela Anderson and Anna Nicole Smith. And again, I can't do one damned thing about it.

"Hello, Belle." I like that he didn't make it creepy by doing the whole *Hi, Isabelle to be exact, but Belle is okay, too* thing.

I point to the table of staring bachelorette party attendees, and turn to meet his eyes in the mirror before I look at him head on. And that's when I know that I'm a weak willed woman. I have no strength. If this guy asks me to follow him to a dark corner and do the nasty with him with people not ten feet away, I'm going to say okay. I'm going to do whatever he asks me.

It's also this moment that I know that everything from coming out with Maisie this weekend to standing here and talking to this guy is

the kind of mistake that I'm going to have to make so I feel the regret deep in my soul. Remarkably, I don't care, either. He looks like a worthy mistake.

CHAPTER FOUR

WALKER

She standing beside me, smelling like flowers and sunshine, wearing a skirt that shows off the miles of leg attached to a pair of fuck-me shoes that make my mouth water and my dick hard.

I look around her at Hunter and he holds up his pinky like this fuck is going to try to hold me to the promise I made under duress. I shake my head and wiggle my eyes. “What can I do for you, sweetheart?” I’m giving the voice everything I have, maybe because she is, too. Or maybe because it’s been said—many, many times—that my voice is a panty melter. It’s deep, smooth. Can also be stern, but that’s a third date choice, or a first date if the chick’s into spanking.

She leans in close enough I get a nice big whiff of her perfume, and if it wasn’t before, my dick is now hard enough to mine for diamonds. And when her tits rub against my arm, I suck in a breath because there isn’t enough air in this room.

Hunter chuckles behind me, and I rein it all in. It takes a second, but I pull myself together, will my dick soft, and stare at her. Although she’s smiling now, like she knows I’m struggling with self-control. And the smile isn’t helping my predicament at all.

“I never caught your name.” And along with the smile, her eyes sparkle. The effect could be the overhead lights, the ones strobing in time to the beat of the karaoke machine, or maybe it’s just her.

I’ve been horny before. Wanted to get laid by a pretty girl. But this is more than that. I’m sitting on this barstool picturing her face in the morning light. Usually, I’m ready with cab fare or a ride home ten minutes after we’ve finished.

“Walker.” I nod and slide her a half wink.

“Like the Texas Ranger?” That fucking smile is going to be the end of me.

“Chuck Norris or the new guy?” Not that it matters. I’m not the TV type. Or the Texas Ranger type.

“Norris?” Her brow cocks and she tilts her head. The light catches her just right, and it’s like she has a halo. I’m so backed up, I’m cockeyed. Literally.

“Nah.” I can’t even manage a word that’s more than a single syllable.

“New guy?”

“No.” And now I grin. She is the kind of woman who can make a man *want* to grin. Hell, she’s the kind of woman who makes a man want to buy her a car. And I would bet if she tries, it’s a grin that won’t wipe away with a squeegee and a bottle of Windex.

“Okay.” She looks over her shoulder and this time I glance back with her and one of her friends waves. Belle spins around and I get another whiff of her as I wave back at her friend.

“Can I buy you a drink, Belle?” I’m usually a lot smoother with women, but this one has me off center.

“Actually, no. But I have to kiss you.” She frowns for a second then looks at me again, almost like she’s playing it this dilemma inside her head. It probably has something to do with her friends telling her to get my number and her asking for a kiss, instead. And thank fuck for it.

“Kiss me.” I don’t know for sure if this is my lame way of questioning her or if I’m doling out an order.

“It’s a double dog dare.”

“Uh-huh.” I nod. “Well, a double dog dare. That’s serious business.”

“Oh yeah.” She nods, and if she asked me to jump off a bridge with her right now, I’m kicking off my shoes and going all in.

But if I’m going to do this, this kiss is going to be double dog dare worthy. It’s going to be enough to talk her out of that skinny little skirt and keep her in the fuck-me shoes. It’s going to be—

She pulls me to my feet and her lips crash against mine all in one move. And it's the best move I've ever benefited from. Her body presses against mine and her fingers curl in and out against my scalp. Then her tongue swirls around mine and my entire body catches fire.

"Holy hell." It isn't my voice and it isn't hers and I don't fucking care about whoever has dared speak. I. Don't. Give. A. Fuck. About anything other than this woman and this kiss.

Her cheek is soft and smooth under my thumb, her hair like satin in my fingers. My free hand is at the small of her back and I press her closer. This is the kind of kiss that a man thinks of when he's kissing someone who can't kiss. This is what he imagines. And my imagination has never done it justice.

And it's over too soon. Not soon enough that if she steps back I won't be sporting a very noticeable boner. And remarkably, I don't care. All I care about is touching her. Holding her. Lowering my head and kissing her again. Over and over. All night long.

When she steps back, I feel like I've been gut punched and my only satisfaction in that second is the glaze over her eyes. But then it clears and the haze over my mind fades to nothing, and I miss the days when I smoked. I could use a smooth, Marlboro menthol right about now. Fuck. That was a kiss.

"I need your number." I say the words softly because I'm afraid of exactly how much I need her number. When I look down, her hand is in mine and I don't want to let go, don't want to break the touch.

She nods at me. "Give me your phone."

And now I have to let go or use my free hand to reach across to pull my hand from my opposite pocket. Shit.

But I release my grip because I'm not about to full fool in front of her, but I'm going to be damned disappointed if I can't figure out how to hold her hand again.

I lay my phone in her extended palm, and she calls hers with it. "Now you have mine, and I have yours." She's holding my phone out facing me, and I take it, add her name to my contacts with the number I've already got memorized.

I'm sure my staring is creepy. I'm equally sure I can't help it. I like looking at her. Would like to do a lot more of it.

"What's the bride's name and when's the wedding?" It's going to sound like a line, but I'm not kidding.

"Maisie. And a few weeks. Why?"

And I shoot her *the girl-getter*. It's my signature, half-lidded, just the tip of my tongue poking between my teeth smile and it works better than booze. And that's no exaggeration. This thing doesn't fail. Mom says it's because of the money she paid for braces and I'd better settle down and find a woman before the smile doesn't work anymore or before the women who fall for my charms are too old for baby making. "I'm going to need to send her a gift."

I'm not a love at first sight believer, but if I was....

Sap.

Oh, the laugh. My jeans are so tight right now and my dick is so hard that if the bar caught fire and there was an immediate evacuation, they would find 185 lbs of burned Walker in the rubble.

I want to rake my fingers through her hair, pull her close until we're chest to chest, and mouth to mouth, but she's already backing off. "You get bored, call me."

And she shoots the sexiest pair of finger guns at me I've ever seen. Might be the only pair I've ever seen. I can't say I remember, but if that kind of thing has the power to make a guy want more than I already do, it does.

All the way back to her table, I watch her. There's some satisfaction in knowing she only needed to get my number but asked for a kiss instead, but the little guy inside of me that is jumping up and down

screaming right now for me to go get her and take her back to my place isn't impressed with *some* satisfaction. He wants her eyes rolling back and my name on her lips while her legs tighten around my hips and I'm pounding into her. Nothing else is gonna make him happy.

When she wrangles her friends out of the bar about ten minutes later with nothing more than a glance in my direction, I'm crushed. Only a glimmer of hope survives. She still has my number. And I have hers. There's always a chance.

And then, as I'm driving one way, and Hunter is heading the other, I'm not more than a few blocks from home but pull off the road because my phone has pinged in my pocket and the vibration against my thigh is compelling enough for me to stop and have a look. Plus, my little guy is hopeful. So fucking hopeful.

BELLE: Your body is the kind of hot women like to lick all night long.

Everything goes tight. Every muscle. Every cell. Every thought.

For about ten or fifteen seconds. And all I can do is imagine. I have a killer imagination. This keeps up, my dick is going to be able to apply the hand brake.

BELLE: Sorry. Friend got my phone. Have to kill her now.

My body deflates. Nothing like an explanation to ruin a visual good enough I was gonna need to jerk off *and* take a cold shower before this thing had a chance of going down.

ME: Damn

Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete.

I'm sitting on the side of the road with the bike idling while I stare at a white screen and have no idea what to say. Any other chick, I would offer to be her lollipop anyway, tell her that her friend has the right idea and we should give it a try. Something tells me this one isn't going to buy my lines.

This woman is different and I want her with an intensity that could cause a Walker-implosion on the curb where Main Street and Shore Break Avenue meet on the way to the lake.

ME:

The screen mocks me. Pokes fun. I hear actual laughing. And it's killing my vibe.

ME: Sweet dreams.

I'm lame as fuck, but I hit send and drive home. Nothing more to be done here tonight. Not that involves anything I can do in public.

CHAPTER FIVE

BELLE

Seven AM the next morning my phone dings and I turn over to grab it off the table because hope springs eternal when a girl doesn't have a chance. And I can't help it.

I glanced at the screen and my head starts a steady tap dance against my sternum.

Walker: Good morning, beautiful.

I could fall in love with a man who punctuates. But I don't know how to reply. I sit up in bed, rub my eyes, glance out the window wishing for inspiration. All I see is blinding light. I have a second story apartment, and the sun is eye level.

Instead of grumbling, I turn away, thumbs poised for a reply. Brain not quite there yet.

I leave the phone on the bed and place for a second, wishing I could channel some of Maisie's charm. She would know exactly what to say.

I, on the other hand, am clueless because I want this too much. I even dreamed of it, but damned if I can remember what dream me would've or maybe even did reply.

Shit. I'm waiting too long. Am way too slow.

ME: Hi.

And I can't be more lame. He's godly. And worldly. A girl can just tell about a guy like that. Won't be impressed with *hi*.

I toss the phone back to the bed. But almost before it's down, the alert goes off again, and I dive like I've got an opponent trying also to get to it.

WALKER: Get the girls all home safely?

It's an easy question. And I have choices. Easy answer. Flirt.

ME: It was hard, but I managed. You?

Obviously, I don't go either way. That would be too easy. And now, I'm not sure what I'm asking. Maybe he'll know.

WALKER: Little bit, but I managed.

I laugh and it's the first time in a long time I didn't wake up and go straight for the anti anxiety breathing exercises, or the anti anxiety squeeze ball, or the meds.

ME: Sexy and funny. Anything else I should know?

It's just short of asking if he has a woman waiting at home for him. But that's what I want to know.

WALKER: No serial killers in the family tree. No baby mamas. Or babies. Squeaky clean except for a speeding ticket I would've contested but no time.

There's something so charming about him—or maybe I'm reading charm into the text where none exists, but I don't care—and I don't have the kind of defenses resisting him is going to take.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, all prove that. I haven't lost sight of my phone because in case a text comes in, I don't want to miss it. The anticipation is astounding. We text during work, during dinner, after dinner, in bed.

By Friday, I have a text waiting for me when I roll out of bed.

WALKER: Good morning. I have to go to Covington to pick up a load of parts for the shop. Won't be back until Sunday night.

It's okay because I have a super busy weekend and today is the only day I have to get everything ready. I have signs to put out and balloons to order, cookies to bake. The staging on Saturday's house has been done, but I still need to check on Sunday's.

Still, I would've found a way to squeeze him in if he asked. Since he didn't, I don't offer either. I will not be the eager girl throwing myself at him.

ME: Safe trip.

WALKER: Thanks. Can I text later?

I ignore the shiver of excitement. The blast of happiness. The electric shock of longing.

ME: Sure.

Playing it cool is way better.

Over the week, I've learned that he owns a business where he employs a couple other guys. His best friend is engaged, so we have that in common. And his dad died, but his mom and sister live nearby.

I've told him not so much. It isn't that I don't want to tell him about myself, I just very much like discovering things about him. In the beginning, I thought he was a player, just a guy using all that beauty and all that charm to talk a girl out of her pants and her panties. I'm also not as ashamed as I should be that I was considering how to make that happen even before I knew more than his name.

Instead of just asking for what he wants or me asking him to bend me over and do me, I spend all the next week just chatting. Asking how his day is, how things are going at work, what he's having for dinner. I hope for an invite every time I ask. but one never comes.

ME: Is it weird how we met?

I know what I mean. I mean is it weird for him that we met at a bar even though I'm not allowed to drink, and that I only came over because it was a dare I didn't have a choice but to take. Especially since it was my game to begin with.

WALKER: No. Think of the story we can tell our grandkids.

It's like the words are typed in neon on my screen. I swallow. Grandkids? *Our* grandkids. If I was the kind of girl who made a ruckus, there would be some serious ruckusing going on right now.

Someday, of course, I want kids. I want the guy, the house, the kids, even the damned dog. It's the dream I sell at least once a week to some bright-eyed soon to be married couple and I want a little piece of it for myself.

But to see it color on my phone, spelled out, with a guy as the faceless husband I sometimes imagine is a wholly different occasion. And my heart is going like a freight train.

I stare at the screen for a minute.

And then the phone rings. And I'm so startled I don't just drop the phone, I toss it—straight up. It does a triple axel in the air then comes down on the screen and falls to the floor, skids a couple feet in front of me. My life, my job, his number are all stored in this phone. And if something happens to it, I don't know that I'll survive it.

I pick it up and look at the undamaged screen. Thank goodness.

And it's still ringing which is also a good sign. I slide my finger across the screen. "Hello?" It's tentative, like I might want to take it back in a minute, but I won't. Nobody takes back a hello.

"Girl!" Oh, I know the voice, the word said in such a way no one else in the world says it, the woman at the other end of the line.

"Molly!" Relief surges through me. I don't love talking on the phone. I don't like the immediacy of it. With a text, there's forethought, then a moment for afterthought, and then the conscious decision made by my brain to send. With a spoken conversation, except for clients, there's no telling what might come out of my mouth.

"Where have you been hiding?" I've seen a couple missed calls from her, but by the end of the day, I'm too tired to make coherent conversation.

“I’ve been so busy with new clients and open houses. I feel like I’ve been running into myself coming and going.” It’s true. I don’t mention the texting with Walker.

And like a friend who’s happy for my success, she laughs. “That’s great, Belle.” She has the kind of voice that is always sunny. Personality, too. “I knew when you bailed on our weekly lunch, you had to be busy.”

Weekly lunch. Dang. I’m a horrible friend. “Oh, Mols, I’m so sorry.” How did I forget lunch? It’s our thing. We get together to complain about all the things that have happened this week. And I forgot. Maybe I didn’t have enough to complain about.

“Don’t worry about it. I know you’re busy.” Her forgiveness makes me feel worse. But she isn’t the kind of friend who gets mad. She’s the most understanding person I know.

“I’m worried about it. Friends don’t...” I shake my head at myself. “Friends don’t flake. And I did. I’m really sorry.”

She laughed. “I just want to make sure you aren’t pining over Caleb still or crying into your fake spritzers over some other guy I haven’t met because we didn’t get together this week.”

I should tell her about Walker. Right here. I’ve managed to find time to text him all week, but not her and for that alone, I suck, but I don’t mention it aloud. And I don’t have a reason why.

“Nope. I’m good.”

Molly laughs. “Great.” There’s a slight pause before she starts again. “I thought maybe the reason you didn’t make it for lunch is because you and Walker were hot and heavy and getting hotter.”

“What?” She mentioned Walker.

“Hunter said Walker’s been talking to a woman named Belle. He mentioned that you and Walker had a moment.” She laughed again. “I told him it couldn’t be you. This is information you would’ve called one of your very best besties to share. But then he said it was

definitely you. And that he wasn't telling me, but that you might have a story to tell about Maisie Klein's bachelorette party?"

Oh, crap. She knows stuff.

"It's just a few text messages. Nothing big." Even though I want it to be.

"The kiss at the bar sounded kind of like a big thing."

"Damn that Hunter for sharing my secrets." I try to sound nonchalant and playful, but I purse my lips because I'm a mad failure at nonchalant.

To be completely honest, I forgot all about Hunter being there. I know him, of course, recognized him right away, didn't for one minute think this would be a thing so, beyond my first glance at him, my brain removed him and made the entire memory of that night about Walker.

"I hope that's because you wanted to be the one who tells me all the dirty details."

"Of course it is." And there's a knock on the door I don't want to answer. Because no one knocks on my door. But I stand to answer, fully prepared to decline company. Brad Pitt could be at the door right now and I wouldn't care. Not interested. "Hang on."

I yank the door open and there she is, Molly, smiling, holding a four pack of juice breezers and a bottle of 7-up and a pizza. This is a woman who knows the key to my heart.

She breezes in past me. "I don't wait for Mohammed to go to the mountain." She gestures to the pizza. "Mountain." Then to me. "Mohammed."

I laugh. She's a showman, clever and witty, the right personality to be a friend to someone like me. Not that I have an impenetrable shell or anything that deters people from me. I couldn't be a realtor if I did, but I'm selective about who I let into my life. Molly makes my head

lighter. I need that. And I keep her more centered where she used to be unfocused.

When we both have our fake wine spritzers and our plates of deep dish supreme minus black olives in front of us, she nods. "All right. Tell me."

I give her the scant details of the party, the full details of the double dog dare—right down to the song being sung at the exact moment I walked over to Walker—and I smile thinking of the moment I first heard his voice. Smooth. Deep. Sexiest sound I've ever heard.

"You just walked over. To Eye of the Tiger." Her disbelief is comical—wide open mouth, narrow eyes, chin almost touching her chest.

"It was karaoke night. What can I say?" I picture myself doing the runway model strut to him, because that makes for good story. Him holding my gaze while my hips punctuated the drum beats with every step. While his eyes smoldered, but the truth is, I couldn't see his face at all because he'd been facing the other way.

"And you just kissed him?" Of course she doesn't believe me. She sees me as frail, because I've only just broken up with Caleb.

"Oh yeah. And it was..." I shake my head because there isn't a word to describe it. Instead, I huff out a quick, short breath where a word should be. I take a bite of pizza while she stares at me. "What?"

Her smile spreads across her face. "I'm just happy for you. Caleb is a tool. And so is Mark. And Jeremy. But Walker is a great guy. Your luck is changing." She grinned. "Tide's turning. Gray skies are looking sunny." She's about to burst into song.

"How well do you know him?" I'd be remiss in doing my due diligence if I don't ask. She's *got* insider information. I *want* insider information. No harm in doing some innocent, friend based recon.

"I know he's kind. Smart. Funny. Kind of dry sense of humor. And girl, he gives an oil change like the guys on TV. Fast and friendly." She chuckles. "If he wasn't Hunter's best friend and I wasn't with Hunter and I'd met him back in the day..." She shakes her head.

“I thought you liked the blonde surfer boy vibe.” I know everything about Molly. And her taste is as specific as any other woman who knows exactly what she wants and goes after it no matter what. She saw Hunter, fantasized for one day, ran into him again—she says by accident—and now they’re a few months from marital bliss.

“I do. But Walker looks like he knows how to make a girl thankful for her vagina.” Molly also has a way with words. “Are you thankful yet?”

I laugh. “Smooth, Mol.” It’s been two weeks almost since we met and I haven’t even touched this guy. Instead, I side-step the question.

Not that she’s letting it go. “Well, are you?”

“Am I...?” Toying with her? Absolutely.

“Are you grateful that Walker has working man parts? And if you have to give a number to those man parts...”

I sigh, shake my head, paint on a frown as much because I don’t know the answer as because I want to screw with her a little for asking. “His man parts are...” I shake my head some more. “It’s sad really.”

“Sad?” The delight of only a moment ago is gone. Her expression twists into a look of disappointment—frown of her own and then her lower lip puffs out—before she wipes it away and looks up at me. “Okay, so Walker is...”

I laugh because her mind is visibly spinning and it looks painful. “I don’t know how Walker is. I haven’t even seen him since that night. We’ve both been busy.”

“Oh, thank God.” She downed the rest of her fake breezer, poured herself another from the pitcher, then shook her head at me. “So let’s fix that, shall we?”

Cheddar, my orange tabby, comes trotting in from my bedroom, slows to his perfect princely prance, then leaps onto my lap, his motor purring before I’ve even raised a hand to stroke his fur.

I saved him from the shelter a few years ago, and since then he's has become the lord of the manor and he allows me to live with him.

"What's that?" I lean down as if I'm listening to my cat. "Oh." I glance at Molly. "Sorry, but Cheddar thinks you're holding back some Walker information. He thinks it's not a very good show of friendship to withhold. He says you should tell it."

Molly shakes her head. "You and that cat." She's a dog person. "I heard the kiss was a paint peeler."

When I think back on it—every single time since it's happened—my body flushes with heat and my pulse goes into overdrive. Like now, but I nod at Molly, let her think the color in my cheeks is from embarrassment not need and longing and wanting.

"It was nice." If there were ever awards for understatements, this one is a gold medal winner. "What can I say, he's a good kisser."

Part of me, the part I often keep silent with a few hundred layers of duct tape over her big mouth—thinks that it's more than the fact he knows how to kiss. It's about who he is. How much I wanted the kiss once I spoke to him. About the man himself now that I know him a bit better.

"*I'm* a good kisser." She's shaking her head. "Doesn't mean you'd light up like Rockefeller Center at Christmas if I locked lips with you. And I know exactly what makes a girl light up like that. I felt the same way for a month after my first kiss with Hunter. I still feel that way when he kisses me." She pauses for a minute, goes dreamy-eyed then blinks and shakes it off. "The point is, whatever you're feeling about him isn't just about that kiss."

I know that. It's why I've been toying with the idea of seeing him more. Well, seeing him, anyway. A quick glance across a crowded room would be seeing him *more*. I would like to see him. Have a conversation where I could see his face. Although the anonymity of being able to tell him things isn't something I undervalue. Not that I've told him much.

“He’ll ask eventually I hope, and if not, it just isn’t meant to be.” Won’t stop me from lusting.

“Or you could ask him. Take charge. Pull up the big girl panties. Get your man, Belle.” She shakes my shoulder for a quick second then pulls her hand back. “He isn’t Caleb. I promise you that.”

I already know. Caleb would’ve already been here demanding I see him, demanding I drop my panties and take it like a woman. Not that he forced me. He was just *forceful*. Demanding. Always in charge because he always needed to be in charge.

“I know. I can already tell that.” And it’s true. Walker has a good heart. I don’t know it for sure, but I’d bet money on it.

And I do want to see him again. Cheddar looks up at me and I can almost swear he’s smiling. “All right. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna ask him out.” It’s not that it’s such a big step, but Caleb scarred me in ways I can only now feel showing themselves. But I’m taking my life back. And the first step is asking for what I want. Right now, I want Walker.

CHAPTER SIX

WALKER

Belle hasn't answered my last text and I don't want to be the guy who sits by and obsessively waits for a woman to reply to his phone message—even though I'm doing exactly that—so I grab the parts file from the shop and flip open the folder. The receipts are organized by date already so entering them into the spreadsheet is quick, almost mindless work, but I focus because one month I entered a carburetor purchase at eleven thousand dollars. The accountant I use—a guy who takes his numbers very seriously—wasn't amused.

Pop used to hate this part of the business. That's why he hired Louis Cartwright to manage the office. Louis was a schemer, always up to try the latest get-rich quick scheme. And when those inevitably failed as they always do, he started stealing from Pop. When Pop died nine years ago and I took over the business, it was on the brink of disaster thanks to Louis. Well, Louis and the fact that Pop trusted him so he didn't pay attention.

I worked my ass off to get this place back on its feet so Pop's dream would stay alive. I bled and sacrificed, ate more bags of Ramen noodles than any man should in his lifetime, paid back creditors, restocked all the parts we needed to keep on hand, earned back Pop's reputation one car at a time, and now, I'm on my feet, busy, working like a fool to make sure Pop's Automobile Repair thrives.

Unfortunately, there is a mound of paperwork I can't get to when I'm working on the cars. And lately, I've been overrun with broken down engines, worn brakes, even faulty wiper blades. So, I've been ignoring paperwork, but it's the end of the month now and the new accountant needs me to catch up.

By the time I glance up again, it's nine, and I've been at work for thirteen hours now. I'm dirty. I'm tired. And I'm hungry. I glance at my phone—not because I'm expecting a text, but because I'm so pathetic I hope one's there.

I smile because I can't help myself.

BELLE: Sorry for leaving you on read. My friend stopped by.

At least I don't have to worry that she's been awaiting a reply from me.

WALKER: It's fine. I've been working. Are you hungry?

It's an impulse. I don't want to eat alone. And I want to see her. Asking her to dinner is a win-win.

As I wait for a reply, I think back to that night at the bar, to the kiss that knocked my socks off and made my head spin. It should also be said that the kiss was potent enough that I, a grown man, just used the phrase *knocked my socks off*. It was a hell of a kiss and I can't stop thinking about it.

I'm about to give up and order a pizza—her reply is slow—when my phone pings again.

BELLE: I could eat.

She's a woman who makes me smile no matter what she does and that's rare in my life.

I don't need to pick the place. I just need to extract some very specific details from her. We can decide on the food together.

WALKER: I could pick you up and we could go out for a bite.

I don't mean to be staring at my phone screen while I wait, watching the three little dots do the wave, but I am watching and waiting like her answer is the most important thing in my life. Right now, aside from the promise of dinner it's going to bring, one way or the other, her answer might actually be the most important thing I've ever waited for.

BELLE: 141 Camelot Drive

An address. *Her* address. And I'm in.

WALKER: 45 minutes.

I need to shower off all the grime, just so she knows the grease under my nails washes out and that I clean up. I'm not one of those guys who puts a whole lot of thought into clothes because I don't really need to. I have picked up women in my work clothes. But I want her to see I'm making an effort. I want Belle to know that I'm not taking for granted that she deserves a guy who gives a shit what he looks like.

BELLE: Ok.

I shove my ledger into the drawer, put the purchase orders into a file folder and the invoices that go along with them into another. It takes a couple minutes for to lockup, ten more to drive home and twenty to shower and get dressed. Tonight, it's jeans and a t-shirt with a light jacket.

And then it's out the door. I drive to the address she sent. Her house is a cute cottage style with a swoop on the front, a dormer window in the roof, and a cute little porch with white trim and blue siding. More admirable than the cozy style or upscale looks of the house is its location in an affluent part of town. People our age don't generally live in this neighborhood.

I park the bike in front of her place and hang my helmet on the handlebars, make the walk to the front door. Hell, even the front walk, lined with purple and pink flowers on one side and red and white on the other, is cute, and goes well with the homey feel of the rest of the house. I can even picture her out here planting the flowers and the image makes me like her more even though it's only my imagination. For all I know, she has a gardener doing the work for her, creating the ambiance.

The doorbell is one of those old style ding-dong bells, and I smile. This place is a lot bigger than it looks.

But nothing matters as much as she does when she swings the door open and smiles. Her hair is pulled back on top but hanging long down her back and her eyes are bright and big, greenish gray and smiling. She's in jeans with rips at the knee and a low-cut t-shirt that

makes my eyes glad they work. Makes my body glad, too. She's a vision.

"You look... amazing." I don't even have words. Not real ones that aren't generic and she deserves better, but there isn't enough blood left in my brain to make a thought. I've pictured her in my mind a thousand times and my mind hasn't done her justice.. She's... more.

"You look pretty great, too." She gives me a once over that doesn't cool the flames under my skin. It starts at my throat and works its way down and back up, so technically, a twice over and I try to stand still for it, but I shift from one leg to the other and she smiles.

Before I can speak again or think to speak, a cat—orange striped—comes walking out, weaves between her legs, brushing his fur against her legs. For a second, all I can think is *lucky cat*, but then she reaches down to pick him up.

"Walker, allow me to introduce you to my son. This is Cheddar." Her lips purse as she kisses his head and strokes his back with her long, elegant fingers.

It's that moment I know for certain that I'm a lost cause. Somehow all this attraction has multiplied so now I'm thinking of her fingers as *elegant*. Like I said, *lost cause*. Probably ruined for other women. But time will tell.

I reach out to pet the cat and she smiles. "What's his name?"

"Cheddar." She's like a proud parent.

"Like the cheese?" I might sound like an idiot, but I don't care. She likes her cat. I like her.

"I adopted him from a shelter and they'd already named him, and I love cheese."

I love her smile.

"So everybody wins." Especially me, but I don't say it aloud. Not yet anyway.

“I double won. Cheese is my favorite food group.” Another smile. One more and I might swoon like some Gone with the Wind damsel. But she’s worth it.

“Not really a food group, but I get your meaning.” I don’t know if I’m ever going to be able to stop grinning at her.

When she puts the cat down, he runs toward the inside of the house, and we both watch him for a couple seconds. Then, she looks up at me and I’m toast. Her smile is better, eyes brighter, giggle softer, but it’s everything. In that moment, *she’s* everything.

“I’ll just get my bag and we can go.” She gestures over her shoulder, but our gazes are locked, loaded, and I want to haul her against me and try for another of those kisses, like the one at the bar, but without the audience of her friends cheering her on.

Finally, she chuckles and turns, shaking her head as she walks to a table and slides her purse off the hook hanging above it. She slings it across her body, pulls some keys out of a bowl on the table and then comes back to me. I should move to let her out. My brain is aware of the social constructs of what needs to be done so we can leave, but my body isn’t cooperating. I’m like a fucking statue.

She pulls the corner of her lower lip between her teeth and all I can think is how lucky that lip is, but thank God, I don’t say it out loud. And I move back a step, then another so she can come out and lock the door behind her.

I glance at the bike and realize I should’ve driven over in my car so we could talk, but she looks at the bike and lights up like I’ve given her a prize. I hand her the helmet I keep strapped to the rear seat and smile when she smacks it on her head then lifts her chin so I can fasten the strap.

My fingers brush the soft, silky skin of her throat, and I suck in a breath. It’s almost like I’ve never touched a woman before, like I don’t know what the heat of her body will do to me.

I climb on the bike first then twist to hold out my hand to steady her as she climbs on behind me. As she wraps her arms around my waist I'm suddenly very glad I didn't bring a car. Also I know exactly where we're going.

There's a fondue place called the Melting Pot. She loves cheese. It makes perfect sense. And I'm going for the big first date points.

When I start the bike, she hangs on a little tighter, hands clasped just under my sternum, and I wish this ride could go on forever. Her body presses closer, and I am snug between her legs. There isn't much about this day that could get better.

Except the ride is too short, and we arrive in what feels like seconds. I park the bike in front of the bakery which is a few buildings down from the restaurant and climb off, after her, then lace our fingers together. We've already had some serious lip action, so holding her hand doesn't seem especially forward. Although my body is reacting like I've stripped her naked and pushed her back against the brick wall so I can kiss the hell out of her.

I breathe in slow, let it out slower so maybe I can hang onto a bit of dignity before I embarrass myself.

As we walk, I try not to focus on more than getting to the restaurant without falling on my face, but then the silence stretches, and I look down at her.

Jesus, she's pretty.

I clear my throat in the hopes of not sounding like some horndog teenager, but I come out somewhere in the middle of where I usually am and the horny kid I didn't want to sound like. "So, how did you end up kissing me at the bar?" I've been wondering how I got so lucky.

She smiles. "Truth or dare." There's a happiness in her tone that pulls me in, makes my stomach flutter. And I'm not a big flutter kind of guy. "I'm on some medication so I can't drink which meant I couldn't do the shot required for a truth, so I had to take all the

dares.” Her cheeks color to an adorable pink. “I was only supposed to get your number.”

Warmth spreads through me. “I know. I heard them chanting when we were talking.” I grin because I can’t stop grinning. “I’m glad you went for the kiss.”

She nods and looks down. “Me, too.”

When we walk in, she turns to me. “Did you bring me here because of my mad love for cheese?” I nod, and she moves to stand almost in front of me, and I’m thinking I’m the luckiest bastard who’s ever walked the earth because I can see every fleck of gray and green in her eyes, and I can smell her perfume, and I can feel the heat her body is throwing off. “Thank you.”

I don’t do a lot of first dates because I don’t really date. I have sex. But I have a good feeling about this one.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BELLE

I don't know how I got so lucky, but this is either one really thoughtful guy or he's really good at pretending he is which has worked out pretty well for me so far.

My body is still vibrating from the motorcycle ride, and I'm struggling to keep my hands off him. He's like a prince charming who understands a girl's love for cheese. I am having trouble believing he's real. Caleb more than convinced me that men don't generally care what a woman wants. So it's hard to believe this guy might.

The restaurant is classy and decorated in deep browns and vibrant rust colors. The booths are fabric covered and the tables look to be granite. A couple candles sit in the middle and add to the quiet ambiance of the place. There are a few couples spread throughout the dining room, and the hostess leads us to a wall booth that is halfway between the kitchen and the bar.

He sits across from me, and again, I'm struck by how good looking this guy is. I mean, not average good looking. He's Brad Pitt in Legends of the Fall good looking. He's the guy in the men's cologne commercial good looking. He's the kind that women like me don't get to sit across from in cheese restaurants with him dipping his pretzel in our vat. He's dark haired, dark-eyed, and the sleeve of tattoos is the kind of bonus I didn't know I like. But now I'm hyper aware of it. I like it a lot. I like it so much I'm staring, thinking I'd like to trace the thick black lines.

With.

My.

Tongue.

I've devolved.

Am fully prepared to be the caveman in our relationship.

And we don't have a relationship. It's one date. And if I don't quit staring there won't be a second. I've taken staring to the level of creepy that is probably enough to make him want to run screaming from the restaurant.

Of course he can't because the waitress is standing close to his side of the table. Her knees are probably poking him in his hip.

I can't even be mad. Yes, we're on a date, but this guy is like no one I've ever seen before. Magnetic. Beautiful on a level that men aren't generally. Not the ones who bring me out anyway. And he's rugged handsome. Lumberjack handsome.

"Can I start you off with a drink?"

He smiles at me when I order a sweet tea and he orders one too. "The sweeter the better."

The waitress is about to gush all over him, and all I can think is, *Girl, I know the feeling.*

When she goes away, he opens his menu and stares for a second while I wait like we're playing peek-a-boo. When he looks around the menu at me, I smile.

I see you.

"What do you think? Maybe an app platter and then we can see how we feel after?"

I don't know that I'll be able to eat anything right now, but I nod. "Sounds good."

He turns his menu toward me like he's reading me a book and then points to the Alpine Fondue. It's Gruyere, Raclette, Fontina, white wine, garlic and nutmeg. It's served with bread and croutons and an assortment of vegetables and pretzels.

"That sounds amazing."

When he orders, I watch him. His confidence—the smile says he's not cocky but has a way with women—is intoxicating. Who needs

alcohol? I'm drunk on this guy.

He glances at me, smiles again and this time bites his lower lip and in my head, I'm moaning. Fortunately, I keep the sound blockaded in my throat. But dear God. He's too much to resist. I'm not even going to try.

"I have to tell you... this is already one of my top ten all time dates. And it's kind of surprising." There's no limit to the number of dumb ways I'll start a conversation. Case in point.

"Surprising?" The head tilt and half smile don't detract from his overall hotness and it's distracting.

"Uh-huh." And I know he's waiting for me to expand, but the words are tangled in my head right now. I breathe in slow, huff out the exhale and smile, trying again. "I have a history of choosing guys who... they're jerks. But you're not." I click my tongue against my cheek. "I'm kind of good at handling jerks. So, I'm a little out of my depth."

"Well, if you ask my little sister, she'll tell you I am quite the jerk." And something about his having a little sister—I think it's because I imagine him as quite the amazing big brother—makes me like him a little more than I already—unreasonably—do.

"You have a big family?"

But he shakes his head. "My dad died a while back. Mom's a pediatric intensive care nurse and my sister is a labor and delivery nurse."

"And what do you do?" I don't care if he robs banks. But I want to know everything about him.

"I'm a mechanic in the shop my dad started." His voice is softer now and I lay my hand over his.

It's endearing. Even his sadness is hot, but more, it's real. And I don't take for granted that he's let me see it.

Instead, I give his hand a squeeze, and he looks up at me. "I'm sorry, Walker."

"He saw his dream come true. Saw that I'd keep it going."

I should probably pull my hand back, but I don't want to stop touching him. "I'm sure he's proud of you."

"We used to work on cars together when I was young and this is my way of keeping that tradition alive. His memory." He shakes his head and chuckles. "I'm sorry. This..."

"It's beautiful, Walker, the way you honor him."

And this time, he turns his hand palm up and squeezes my fingers. "What about you? You have ten big brothers I should be worried about?"

"Just two, but you don't have to worry about Brax or Chandler." Braxton and Chandler aren't the kind who would interfere. Not unless I asked. And I'd never. "They're pretty focused on their own stuff. They're roommates who live about twenty minutes away." And like he's asked, which he hasn't, I continue. "My folks live in Minneapolis."

"And how do you spend your days?"

His thumb is stroking my hand, and it's a miracle that I can think at all. "I, um, I sell real estate."

"Must keep you busy."

Oh, yeah. I should probably explain a few things. "It's why I've been so weird about the times I text." At all hours of the day. But he's always a quick reply.

"I'm just glad a busy girl like you has time for me."

Oh Lord. Have time? Of course I have time. I'd make time if I didn't. Talking to him has become a part of the day I enjoy.

But my stomach is unsettled. I've been out with men before who seemed good and kind. Not to this extent, and that worries me. He's too good to be true. And me and my churning stomach are waiting for the other shoe to drop.

How is a guy like Walker single? I can't wrap my brain around it.

I did the responsible thing and Googled him before I ever considered dating him. Of course, I didn't know much about him then except his name but I used it to check his social media. I was prepared for pictures of him with any number of women. With a wife or a couple kids. But there was enough of a presence for the sites to be real, but nothing that threw up any red flags.

His Insta was pictures of cars and landscapes. His Twitter was decidedly unpolitical, undramatic, uncontroversial in any way. His Facebook showed him single. Although he had his fair share of female friends, there wasn't anything anywhere I'd searched that I could use against him.

For dessert, we had chocolate fondue with berries, marshmallows, cheesecake bites and macaroons. And even though we hadn't gone full entree, I was happily full when the waitress brought the check.

Like he'd had it waiting for her, he handed her a credit card and then signed when she brought the receipt back.

"Thank you." It isn't often a guy pays on a first date paid anymore. Women's lib and all.

He rewards me with a smile and a wink. "You have to promise me something."

He isn't smarmy when he asks, so I nod. "Okay." He stands and holds out his hand. I slide out of the booth but he doesn't move back, and suddenly we're close enough I can smell the light scent of his cologne and I'm looking into his darker than darkness eyes.

"You have to promise that you won't argue with me about who pays for anything. I will pay now and every time we go out." His voice isn't

forceful but stern, and heat flares in my belly. He can take *that* tone with me anytime he wants.

“Okay.” And then it occurs to me that I sound easy. “But what makes you think you’re getting a next time?” I’m almost proud of my ability to flirt, if that’s what it is, when his tongue slips along the smooth edge of his lower lip, and I can’t help but watch the moisture glisten in its wake.

But when he curls his finger under my chin and uses the gentlest of pressure to draw me in, I know he’s getting another date. Probably breakfast afterward.

The kiss is slow and deliberate, soft. It’s a promise, a lead-in to something greater. I don’t have to be a psychic or even a good guesser to know it.

And that is answer enough.

When he pulls back, I smile. It’s been a long time since anyone kissed me like that. Honestly, I don’t know if anyone ever has.

As he drives us back to my place and the bike is doing its thing, my hands are flat against his stomach this time. I can feel the ripple of muscles, the slow breaths as he controls the bike, shifts his weight for a turn, puts his leg down to steady the bike at a stop sign. And maybe I can control it or maybe I can’t, but my fingers rub a small, slow circle over his shirt and his muscles clench under my hand. So I don’t stop. Not even when he takes off again, with a jolt this time.

The bike slows in front of my house, and he turns into the driveway, shuts the bike off then sits for a second. Breathing.

Instead of climbing off the bike right away, he twists and smiles at me, flips the visor of my helmet up and undoes the chin strap. I slide the helmet off and hold it on my leg as I shake my hair out.

“Do you want to come in?” I want him to come in. And I want him to want to.

He nods and I slide off the bike. My legs are wobbly and he steadies me with his body against mine, his hands at my hips.

We make it to the porch and as I'm unlocking the door, his body presses into mine from behind and his lips find the curve of my throat where it meets my shoulder. His mouth is hot, hands hotter as he pulls my ass against his erection. I might shimmy a bit more than necessary, but his lips are doing things to me that I can't explain.

I want him. On one hand, it's our first date. But on the other, we've been talking for a couple weeks... so pulling him into my bedroom seems reasonable, pushing his shirt up so that he takes the collar in one hand and yanks it over his head is completely natural.

He smiles and takes my face in his hands and kisses me again. This time deep, passionate, while my hands glide over his skin. When my palm skims his nipple he moans, and it's all the encouragement I need. I repeat the motion and he tears out of the kiss and thrusts his hips against mine. I smile. Powerful all the sudden when I lower my head for a nibble of his nipple.

"Fuck, Belle."

And then he tilts my head up again, captures my mouth as he unbuttons the front of my tank top then pushes it off my shoulders so that I'm not quite bare to his burning gaze, but in a lace bra that matches the panties I'm wearing that he hasn't quite gotten to yet.

"You're beautiful, Belle." And then, like he's some kind of clothing Copperfield, he makes my bra disappear so we're skin to skin. "Lay down." He nods to the bed and speaks as if he's asking. I want the guy who spoke so sternly in the restaurant.

I cock my head and stay upright. "And if I don't?"

His lips twitch but he narrows his eyes. "Then I will make you wait a very long time before I let you come."

I flick open the button to my jeans, drift my hand down my belly to the waistband. "And if I take matters into my own hands?"

Instead of answering, he grabs my wrist and spins me so my back is against his chest. He traps my hands between us, low so I can feel exactly how hard he is, as he pushes his hand into my jeans and rubs his finger back and forth over my clit. He's only actually touching my panties, but I'm on fire. Brave enough to squeeze his cock through his pants.

His mouth is hot against my ear. "You only do what I say, do you understand?"

Oh yeah. I get it. I nod. "Yes."

He pushes his hand further so he's cupping me and his finger pressures the entrance to my pussy through my panties. "What do you want to happen if you disobey, Belle?"

Oh God. I've never been so hot and his fingers are toying with me so it's hard to think.

"Answer me, Belle."

He hasn't even touched my skin yet and I'm ready to come. My pulse pounds in my ears. "You could..." His finger traces the rim and my knees buckle but he holds me up.

"Say it, Belle."

"You could spank me." Oh God. Just the words, the image they produce is enough to make me want to disobey.

"Oh yeah." It's the answer he wanted. That's what his tone says a second before he clears his throat. "All right then." Now he's stern once more. He withdraws his hand. "Take your pants off, but not your panties."

I hold his gaze feeling every bit as sexy as his gaze says he thinks I am. God help me. I want that spanking but more I want to be naked with him. It takes me one second—literally—to step out of the pants.

"Now stand still so I can look at you."

My body is trembling with need and it's hard to not move, so I don't try. I shift from one foot to the other as he circles me. "Did you just move?" His grin flashes and then disappears.

I nod. "Yes."

A slow smile spreads across his face. "Bend over the bed."

Anticipation bubbles through me as I press my chest into the mattress and he, with agonizing slowness, tugs my panties down so I can step out. The first swat is soft, not a swat at all but more of a pat. "Harder." I want to think of him every time I sit tomorrow. But the second swat is not much more than the first. "Please, Walker."

The third slap stings, and I moan. "Again."

When he complies, the force pushes me roughly against the bed, and my clit is throbbing with need.

And then he turns me so I'm half on the bed and half off and he's over me, pushing me further onto the mattress before he lowers his head and swirls his tongue around one nipple then the other. I breathe deep and exhale on a moan that I feel in my soul as he drags his body down mine. The friction is delicious and I arch off the bed. But nothing has ever felt so good as when he swipes his tongue over my clit and down to push inside me.

A girl could die from pleasure so intense. I'm sure of it and hope I don't because I never want to stop.

He replaces his tongue inside me with one finger then another while his tongue flicks and strokes and teases me until my entire body is coiled. I rake my fingers into his hair and hold on.

His mouth closes around my clit and he sucks it into his mouth. My eyes cross and I see beams of white light flying toward me.

The pressure splits, and I shatter into a thousand pieces, muscles tense, hands clenched, hips arched against his mouth as he laps and my pussy tightens in spasm around his fingers.

When I can breathe again, he's over me smiling and I want him inside me. I want to feel his weight and I want to ride his cock. But more, I want to taste him.

I push him onto his back and then cover his body with mine. "My turn." And then I slide down his body, to his zipper and unfasten his pants. His cock is straining against his boxers and I want so badly to touch it, but I want to do all this in the right order. I want to draw it out, make him a desperate and needy as I am. And so I tug his jeans down slow, kissing my way down his thighs, and then free his cock from the confines of his underwear.

After a few long seconds of looking at it, I curl my fingers around the shaft of his dick and give a couple strong strokes so that he's the one moaning now. But it's when I take him into my mouth and use my tongue to circle the head, tease the vein on the shaft, he moans louder. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He fists a handful of my hair and holds on tight, so I give him a reason. My mouth slides up and down the length of his cock a couple times before I give the base a semi-gentle squeeze and then pump in rhythm to the time my mouth has set.

"Belle!"

I like that he's more than a grunt and moan guy. He's vocal, and it's hot as fuck.

"Oh God, Belle." His fingers curl in and out against my scalp until he lets go altogether and his hips thrust, and I taste him on my tongue. When he's finished, I stand and pull his jeans the rest of the way off.

He laughs and kicks his feet, trying to help, and I smile. Being with him is easy. Even being naked with him. When he's finally undressed, he grabs me by the waist and pulls me onto the bed, flips us so he's the one on top and I'm flat on my back.

Then his smile fades and he smooths the hair off my forehead. "Belle." The whisper is one of the most sensuous sounds I've ever heard. "I don't have a condom. I didn't plan..."

I chew my lip and move so I can reach over him—it forces him onto his back—to the drawer in the bed table. I’m laid half across him and he takes my face in his hands again and kisses me as I continue fumbling, blindly now, in the drawer.

When I pull out a strip of three condoms that were left over from my Caleb days, he grins and reaches to take them, but I pull them back.

“Let me.”

His cock is bobbing against his belly now and I’m so ready I’m almost panting as I roll the condom down and move to straddle his hips.

I hold his cock and slide down until he’s balls deep inside me. I move slow at first, swirling my hips and he holds them, fingertips with a tight grip on my skin.

“Jesus, Belle.” His eyes rake my skin, and he watches me bounce up and down with a half smile on his face. “You’re so fucking good.” His voice is husky and deep. “Fuck, baby.”

I grind against him, twist my hips in an achingly slow, deliberate circle, and his head presses harder into the pillow. “Belle.”

When I repeat the move a couple more times because I love the way he says my name—part moan, part gasp, part sigh—he turns us and now he’s pounding into me and my legs clench around him as I meet every thrust of his hips in my pussy and his tongue in my mouth.

The pressure inside me builds again, bigger this time, heavier until I explode and cry out, claw his back with one hand, hold onto his kiss until the world stops spinning and I can open my eyes and see Walker.

His body is tense as he thrusts again then stiffens and presses as deep as he can go.

I breathe out in huffs of air because I can’t catch a breath, but if I die right now, I will die knowing I’ve had some amazing, intense—did I

mention amazing—sex with a guy who ate cheese for dinner because I like cheese.

Damn.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WALKER

I knew it would be like this with her. And after the second time when my dick gets hard watching her walk back to bed from the bathroom, I know she's an addiction, and it's going to take more strength than I have to kick.

Instead, I wait for her to slide in beside me, pull her close and plant a soft kiss on her forehead. "Sweet dreams."

I don't want to be more than she's ready for and I was going to leave, but she asked me what I like for breakfast and it seemed like an invite to stay, so I am.

She snuggles closer, her naked body warm against mine and I hold her until she turns away then I slip into sleep until my cell rings and I reach down for my jeans and the phone in the front pocket.

I don't bother looking at the screen, because my eyes are still closed. "Hello?" I'm careful with answering, first so I don't wake Belle, and second because it could be my Ma and I don't want to bark at her, even though I don't like middle of the night calls. They never mean good news.

"Hey, big brother. It's me." Maggie.

"I got that when you called me big brother." She isn't a middle of the night drunk dialer, plus she doesn't have any sign of a tell-tale slur. "What's wrong?"

"Flat tire. I'm sitting on the side of the 409."

It's the middle of the night and this is the kind of thing that will make her lose her shit fast. "Share your location on your phone, and I'll be there in twenty minutes." It's only twenty minutes between here and the hospital. She has to be somewhere between.

"Okay, hang on." I don't really need to hang on, but there a note in her voice, a worry, and she needs me for a minute. My phone tings,

and I'm already looking for my boxers, using the light from my phone to shine around the floor. I hadn't really paid attention to what Belle did with them when she pulled them off. I was otherwise entertained.

And just the thought sends a fresh batch of horny straight to my dick. I look down because this thing has been acting out of my control all night, and I need to rein it in.

But right now, I'm still looking for my drawers while Maggie babbles about her tire and how lucky there aren't many cars on the road right now.

When I turn back to the bed, Belle is sitting up on her elbow, watching me, and I can see the outline of her body under the sheet. My dick bobs, a little more insistent now, and I have to turn away, start going over baseball stats to chill.

But I don't miss the look—the one that says she doesn't trust that I'm not about to blow her fucking world to bits. She's scared. And this does look bad, so I sigh into the phone and raise the volume of my voice a bit. "You might be my baby sister, but you're a pain in my ass."

A second of recognition, like she's heard my words and they registered, and then Belle smiles as I find my boxers and slide them on.

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Mags." I barely get the sentence out before she's onto another story, and I stop her. "Hey, Mags, the more you flap your jaws, the longer it's going to take for me to get there."

"Are you with a girl?" And just that fast she's gone from worried little sister to most little sister.

"Bye, Mags." I end the call and snatch up the jeans beside the bed, stuff my legs in and zip.

"Everything, okay, Walker?" Even her voice, heavy with sleep, makes me want her again.

“Sister has a flat on the highway.” I’m glad she woke up when she did and heard the conversation or this might sound like an escape line. “She just got off work and was driving home. She’s stuck so I need to go help her.”

She nods and smiles. “I could come along. Help out.” She grins. “I could hold a lug nut or something.”

I chuckle because she’s adorable and I really don’t want to leave. “And that would be one lucky lug nut.” But she’s snuggled into her bed. No need for both of us to be out on the side of the highway in the middle of the night. “But you don’t have to do that.”

She nods. “Will you message me when you get home? Just so I know you’re safe.” She adds the last part quickly. It’s like she doesn’t want me to think she’s clingy or expecting more than I want to give her.

But what she doesn’t know is that I want to give her everything. And I don’t understand it anymore than she probably will if i tell her. So I don’t. No need to overshare. This isn’t really a time for such a thing.

“You bet.” I smile down at her then yank my shirt on. I wish I wasn’t going, that Maggie had found herself some tire changing Romeo, but there’s no Romeo on the horizon and I can’t leave her stranded.

I lean down and press what I mean to be a quick kiss on Belle’s semi-parted lips. But it turns out that my intentions are always better than my actions, and my tongue slips into her mouth so what should be a short, probably chaste goodbye kiss turns into the prelude to porn.

When I finally pull away, I look down at the outline of my very hard cock in my jeans. “You do this to me.”

“Call me tomorrow and we can talk about all the other things I want to do to you.” And like she didn’t mean to say it, she bites her lower lip.

I grin. “You’re not helping my predicament.”

I *do* like playful Belle. She wags her eyebrows. “And who said I’m trying?”

This time, because my sister is sitting on the side of the highway waiting for me, probably more worried with each passing second she’s going to be abducted or kidnapped, I kiss Belle’s forehead. “Make a list and I’ll call you later.”

As I walk out, she’s giggling and it’s a sound that makes driving through the night to find my sister bearable.

When I pull up, Maggie is calmer than I expected her to be. She’s a planner, and when a plan goes awry, she’s unsettled until she’s back on track. But right now, she’s cool. Calm, even.

She already has the trunk open, so I jack up the car and she holds the flashlight. For about two minutes this system works. She holds the light where I need it and the lug nuts are coming loose with just a little bit more than brute strength.

But then she moves the light, the lug wrench slips and I smack myself in the knee. But she’s not interested in the tire anymore. “Walker David Winslow! You have a hickey.”

“What?” I turn, adjust the light and try to finish loosening the tire, but she moves the flashlight again. “Maggie!”

“It’s a hickey, Walker.” She is all but squealing at this round of new information. “*You* have a hickey.”

And now she’s shouting it at the side of the road. The highway doesn’t have a lot of traffic at this time of night, thankfully. I certainly don’t need all the passersby hearing the random gossip that her shrieking is broadcasting into the night. Though I’m certain she’ll have half the town talking later, so I need to nip this right now.

“Maggie, this isn’t your business or Mom’s or anyone else’s. Do you understand?” I’m stern which reminds me of the last few hours with Belle, and all the sudden, I’m hard again. Standing is going to be painful. “Could you just hold the damned light, Maggie?” I don’t mean

to sound short or snipey, but I crawled out of a warm bed with a woman who lights my fire like she's made of propane.

And because I'm all over the place about it and it's too new for me to have feelings so strong, I won't be discussing Belle with Maggie.

Not that Maggie is about to take a *mind your own fucking business* for an answer. "Who is she?" Her voice is shrill and every day, she sounds more like my mother. One of these days she's going to find a guy and I'm going to be so happy for her, but more for me. So she can turn that tone on him.

But I laugh because I can't tell her things about how I feel about Belle, and if I so much as speak about her, Maggie is going to pounce because she can read me. Has been able since she was a very little girl. "You sound more like a jealous girlfriend than a sister." This might put her off for a few minutes.

"Just tell me about her." She's been wheeling information out of me since she was born. In fifth grade, I told her about the tooth fairy because she threatened to tell our mom about the magazine I had hidden under my bed. Although, I had no idea how she knew about it since I'd only put it under there that day. In high school, I told her about Katie Hanley. No doubt she wants more honesty. No doubt she isn't getting any.

Well, I'll have to give her something or we'll end up standing out here all night because she'll refuse to go and Mom would kill me if I leave her. Her fault or not. "Met her at a bar. Had a nice date." As a tidbit she can hang onto that makes me look like I'm sharing, I add, "She loves cheese."

"And?" Her tone involves a cocked eyebrow and another none of her business question mark at the end.

But I considered it. There are things I could tell her that won't matter, that don't make me sound like a tool. But of course, I go with the things that do. "She's gorgeous. And smart." Gorgeous makes me sound shallow, but calling her smart isn't so bad.

“Gorgeous. Figures.” She says it like *smart* doesn’t figure into what I usually prize in women. And she’s right. Usually, I prize bra size, whether or not she has easy access panties, and most important, the desire to move on from a single night of getting laid. I don’t have that desire with Belle. I *want* to see her again. I *want* to hold her hand, touch her hair, hear what she has to say, be with her.

The thoughts make me nervous, make me want to run as far and as fast as I can.

“You deserve to be happy, Walker.” Her smile is genuine. And that’s the thing I love about Maggie. She doesn’t judge me as much as she supports me. Not that she never judges, she just leans further to the side of understanding, even protective. I love her for it. “Why don’t you bring her by the 4th of July barbecue? It’s casual. No pressure for either of you.”

Easy for her to say.

I never take a date to the barbecue Maggie and Mom put on every year for the 4th. It’s a family thing, and I don’t have relationships with women that bleed into my time with Mom and Mags, especially. And Mom makes sure the 4th of July barbecue is all about how much she loves her *entire* family. She invites cousins and aunts and uncles. It’s her day to shine and she enjoys it so much. I don’t want to do anything to take away from it.

But I have an urge to call Belle right now and invite her.

Following my urges has never led me anywhere good. But this one is powerful and strong. Even if I don’t know exactly what I want, chances are that no matter what happens, I’m asking Belle to the barbecue.

CHAPTER NINE

BELLE

WALKER: Made it home.

WALKER: I had a great time last night.

The text makes me smile because I had a good time, too. A really good time. A probably should've shut the windows so the neighbors didn't hear kind of good time.

Butterflies flutter in my stomach, and heat flares with the memory of last night. I'm not worried about my body's reaction to him. It's chemical. Physical. I'm worried about this tug in my stomach, the one thinking about him, about his eyes, about the softness of his voice, about the way he loves his mom and his sister, about the way he honors his dad with the shop that have me worried.

I'm excited that I've found a guy like him, but I'm scared to death. Shaky hands kind of scared. Short panting breaths kind of scared. Never felt like this before kind of scared. I don't open up to people and there's going to come a time when he wants to know things about me. The real me. The girl with the real feeling and emotions.

I need a minute and a cup of coffee. It's way too early in the morning for an epiphany. I can't face *feelings* without some Folgers in my cup.

The sun is shining through the curtains in my room, and dust swirls in the thin stream of light, put in motion by a ceiling fan over my bed and the air conditioner vent in the floor. My skin is cool and bare under the blanket and sheets, and just for a second, I think of how I got this way.

Walker.

I haven't moved from "my side" since he left, and I turn to where he would've been lying had his sister not called. The pillow is one of those goose down kinds and the imprint of his head is still pushed into the linen pillow case. Like I'm some sort of crazy sap, I lay my

hand in the spot. The fabric is cold and it's nothing like seeing him beside me, so I stop, climb out of bed, and head to the coffee maker.

I'm a solid and sensible girl. I don't go around feeling pillow indents. Wishing for the guy who made said indent to appear at my door with flowers and requests for more dates.

While I wait for my one cup maker to brew—it takes almost as long to brew one cup as it does to use a regular coffee maker to make an entire pot—I stare out the window wishing Walker would show up. When he doesn't appear, I glance at my phone again and consider how I can answer his texts. Of course I'll tell him I had a good time, too.

He said great time.

Okay. I'll tell him I had a *great* time.

And I want to see him again.

Can't tell him that.

Although, I don't know why. This is the twenty-first century. The twenty-twenties. No reason I can't just tell him I want to spend more time together. *I* can ask *him* out. If I find some courage. Probably it would be easier to ask if he hadn't seen me naked.

And the thought reminds me that I, also, have seen him naked. And I'd very much like to see him naked again. Although, my mind has a pretty vivid recollection of all things naked Walker.

Don't tell him that either.

Of course not. I can't imagine how to bring up such a thing, anyway.

When the brewer is finished, I pour in some flavored creamer and sit at the table with my phone on one side of me and a few open house fliers on the other side. There's some work to be done this week, but I've already arranged for the stagers and the landscaper for one house and a hostess and fresh cookies to be picked up on Sunday morning for the other.

So, I don't have any pressing reason I need to go into work this early. I have a couple extra hours I can sit and think about Walker. After I answer his text anyway.

ME: I had a great time, too. Maybe we could get together this weekend.

It's as close to flat out asking as I can get because my doubts have started creeping in. So many *what ifs* and *what was I thinking* kinds of things that make me cringe when I analyze last night.

I was forward. Maybe he didn't like it. Or maybe I'm not forward enough. Walker is the kind of guy who has his choice of women. Probably *a lot* of them. And he certainly knows his way around a clitoris. That's a skill that comes with practice.

Of course he's experienced. Look at him.

He probably has a woman in every city, a lover in every port.

Port? Drink the coffee. There are no ports.

Even the voice in my head mocks me. I sip my drink.

WALKER: I'd love to go out with you again. My sister is having a barbecue for the 4th. Be my date?

As if I didn't like him enough already, he has added an emoji. It's the little guy who's chewing his fingers like he's nervous.

ME: I'd love to be your date.

I send back the smiley face emoji. And now I can spend the next couple hours shopping online for an outfit. Not much I like more in the world than online shopping. But, I can admit that Walker certainly is moving up the list.

When an hour passes and I haven't found anything to fall in love with at any of my favorite online boutiques, I shut the computer. I could use a day of shopping that isn't for work clothes. And while I'm not the kind of girl who will use any excuse to hit the mall or the women's

shops downtown, I think a party with a new guy at his sister's house requires a new outfit, something that will spark confidence.

I have other friends I could call for shopping, but Maisie is my go-to for all things fashion. She has a good eye and a good sense of what looks good. I always tell her that she should be one of those professional stylists, but she says she's happy just picking out stuff for me and her other friends. If not for her, I wouldn't have near the assortment of options in my closet.

She picks up after the first ring. "Hey, girl."

She's outgoing and funny, never just says *hello* when I call. "Hey. I have a date for a Fourth of July party, and I need something to wear that is fabulous. Wanna head out to the mall?"

It was dumb to tell her about the date. Now there's going to be questions. Things I might not want to answer. Feelings things. But the fact is, I need her help and if the price of her help is being forced to tell her about Walker then maybe she can help me sort it all out.

She squeals like I didn't just have a boyfriend and before Walker I was about to become a crazy cat lady. "Belle, that's great!" And when I think she's going to press me for answers, she says, "What's the dress code? Are we looking for casual or dressy or pool side appropriate?"

I shrug like she can see me then chuckle because she can't. "I don't know. He just said barbecue."

"Mm-hmm." And her mind is already at work. "Let's try Diva Diane's in the mall. And Rouge, and..." She's snapping her fingers. "What's that place where we found the dress for Shell Caruthers's baby shower?"

"Mixon's."

"Oh yeah." And she draws it out. "I'll meet you there." AND she hangs up. It's part of what I love about Maisie. She's determined and when she has a project—today I'm her project—she goes in at a hundred percent and amps up to one-ten in no time.

So I'm not surprised when she beats me to the store and has an armful of clothes and a dressing room reserved for me. By the tenth dress that looks better on the hanger, she smiles. "You've got long, so sexy legs." I'd flush, but after all this trying on and not working out, I'm frustrated.

"Your point?" "Because I don't get it.

"My point is, maybe we should go with shorts." She puts the last dress on the return rack and links her arm with mine.

It's two stores later that she looks at me because I've snapped something about this being useless. I mean the trip and my body style and the fact that shorts these days are all either too dressy or too distressed for a backyard barbecue. At least, I'm assuming backyard and not public park, but again, I should've asked.

"Belle, is there something you need to discuss?" She's holding a ruffled strap tank top in soft blue cotton with tiny red flowers on it. "Because you snap at me one more time, I might have to put you in the corner."

"Nobody puts baby in the corner." But I smile. There's no limit to the number of times we've had this conversation in some form or other. Sometimes it's her threatening me, others it's me threatening her. But it's always good-natured enough to snap the other out of her funk.

Plus, she's right. I do need to tell her, to tell someone, anyway. I blow out a loud breath and look everywhere but at her—ceiling, floor, ceiling again, far wall, at the couple who've just passed by the dressing rooms probably looking for a spot to get frisky. "I slept with Walker."

I speak softly, but her head jerks up like I've just shouted the words at a volume guaranteed to turn heads. "Hot bar guy?"

Yeah. And it isn't that we haven't talked about him before. It's that I haven't expressed this kind of interest in him to her. But I nod and chew the corner of my lower lip.

“You slept with hot bar guy. Huh. I’ll be damned.” She shakes her head and leans in. “Was he... good?”

I might as well tell her all of it or we’ll never get past it. I nod. “So good.”

She nods her smile wide and smug. “I knew he would be.” I take the shirt she thrusts into my hand and she follows me into the dressing room.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ve seen your tits before. Just tell me about the night with hot bar guy.” She sits on the bench and takes my t-shirt when I strip it off. “Is he... proportionate?”

No way in hell I’m answering that. “I’m surprised with as drunk as you were that you remember anything at all about that night.” I slip the top over my head and adjust my bra straps so they can’t be seen under the wide ruffled straps. I hate visible bra straps. I do without one if the shirt demands it.

Maisie laughs. “How could I forget a kiss I wasn’t a part of that was so hot it made *my* panties wet.” She shakes her head.

“It was a pretty great kiss.” And the sex was evenly matched.

“And you like him?” She cocked a brow at me as she pulled the hem of my shirt down from behind me.

I huff it a long breath. This is a question I’ve thrown around with a bit. Of course I like him. The question is actually *how much*. “Yeah.” Off nothing else he’s a good distraction from my recent dating misery. And as soon as I finish the thought I regret it. He’s more than a distraction. Much better than that.

Also, he’s quite the distraction. This is the first time I’ve thought about the issues with the men I’ve dated.

“Yeah. I like him.” Might as well admit it.

And Maisie smiled broadly. “Well, just so you know, I’m taking credit for this relationship of yours.” She waves her finger in my face. “And this good mood you’re in.” That part is sarcastic.

She can have all the credit she wants for my meeting Walker. Without her, not only would I have succumbed to the sadness of my recent break up, I wouldn’t know all the great things about him, either. Wouldn’t know how he looked when he came—lips parted, eyelids half mast. How his kiss tasted—usually like lip balm and sometimes whisky. How his entire body stiffened, and he held me almost too tight.

I’m probably in that honeymoon stage that happens after the first time a couple has sex. Certainly, no guy is so perfect.

“I’m scared, Maisie.” And I don’t mind telling her. She’s one of the few people I tell my secrets to. “I don’t pick great guys. I mean they come out of the gate like Secretariat, but by the time they’re round the first turn, it’s all glue factory and flavored dog food.”

“Eww, Belle.”

“Right?”

She hands me my T-shirt as I change out of the top. When I’m all changed, she raises her eyebrows and I nod. “You’re a style guru.”

“Yeah. Relationships too, and I have some advice.” Usually, her advice is good even if I don’t always take it. “Don’t let your past relationships ruin this one.”

I don’t even know if it’s a relationship. It’s more a holy hell I want him again situation, but I don’t know if he feels the same. How could I know? *I had a great time*, he’d texted, but he didn’t add, “Let’s do it again.” She’d been the one who said that part. Although, he did suggest the party.

“I can see you thinking about it, and doubting yourself because of what happened with Danette and Paul.” My childhood best friend slept with the guy I thought I was going to marry. It was a very sore subject for me. Clouds every relationship I’ve had ever since.

I should probably warn Walker that I come with baggage. And a lot of it.

But that's not a second date talk. Of course, until Walker sex wasn't a first date activity either. This relationship is breaking all the rules.

CHAPTER TEN

WALKER

I don't get nervous. I'm not that kind of guy. I don't freak out because I have a date with a woman. Of course, I also don't invite women to my mother's Fourth of July party. Never before.

And I'm a little nervous. Driving to her place, I probably check my hair five times, wish I would've shaved once, and once more wish I would've brought the bike instead of the truck. It's an old pickup with a rusted fender and a hole in the muffler. But the engine is tuned and this thing would start in the middle of a tornado.

By the time I pull onto her street, the rearview is turned so I can no longer see behind me. My view now is of my hair. And I wish I'd taken a few more minutes, use a little more gel. But it's all too late now. The jeans and t-shirt also have to do. Although I wonder if I should've gone with shorts. It's going to be almost a hundred degrees today.

And when she opens the door to her place and stands in the rounded top frame, she is everything a man could want. Long legs. Sweet smile. Curves that make my mouth water.

I want to kiss her, pull her against me, blow off the barbecue, and spend the day in bed worshipping her.

Instead I hold out my hand for her, walk beside her to the truck and open the door. As soon as she climbs in, long legs shiny in the sun, smooth, soft, making my mouth water.

She slides over. This is one of those trucks with a bench seat and when I slide behind the wheel, her thigh brushes against mine. And it's more than I'm strong enough to resist. I turn to her and put my arm around her shoulders, use the other hand to tilt her chin up and then kiss her like there isn't anyone else in the world.

Her body shifts without Belle ever breaking the kiss. She has her hand on my chest and she makes one of those sexy slight moaning

sounds in her throat. And again, I think about taking her inside. I can explain to Mom later on. And Maggie would understand.

The kiss deepens again, more. And there are acres of her skin showing. Her legs stick out from the gray and white striped shorts with the gold buttons equally spaced in lines down from her waistband to the top of each thigh. And the tie only shows off how thin she is. The shirt leaves her shoulders bare and from her throat to her cleavage. I want to lick and taste and touch all of it, but she's looking up at me with those big green eyes and I can't move. I don't want to move.

"Should we go so we aren't late?" Her voice is soft, on the sexy side of breathless. "I don't want to... be late."

Oh, I do. I want to be *very* late, but I also don't want her to think that since she gave me sex once—technically, it was a few times—that I think I need it every single time we're together. Even if I want it every single time we're together. Although, I'm a little disappointed that she's so able to pull away, to have clear thoughts, to decide so quickly that she doesn't want to say screw the party and take it inside the house instead.

I call on all the self-control I can muster and I smile at her. "Yeah." I turn toward the wheel, twist the key and wrap my arm around her again. Well, technically, I lay it across the back of the seat, but my thumb is making little circles on her skin and every time she moves her hair I can smell the sweet floral scent of her shampoo. And Belle drops her hand to my lap, her fingertips stroking the inside of my lower thigh. I wouldn't mind if she moves that hand upward, but I want the decision to be hers.

It's a good thing my sister doesn't live farther away than she does or I might not have survived this trip without imploding. I pull into the driveway behind my Mom's SUV.

"This is your place?" She looks from the house to me. And I smile. My sister has done well for herself. She has a modest two story that's been remodeled from its old fashioned farmhouse look to a

more modern, more state of the art house where she lives with her husband and their dog Kokomo. Kokomo is a Great Dane with a wiry tail and pointed ears.

And he comes out to greet us from where he lays on the front porch, tail wagging, tongue read to swipe. She climbs out of the car and reaches down, bends to pet him, although not far because this dog is tall, lean, lean and fast. When she scratches between his ears, he lies down and rolls over.

“I know the feeling, buddy.” I grin and help her up. “Not much I wouldn’t do for a belly rub, too.”

She laughs and the sound is musical, like it has its own melody. My body tightens and I take a second to get my head straight before I let her go. Just the thought of her touching my skin, rubbing me... anywhere she wants, is enough to make me hard and this is the last place I want to be walking around with my dick at attention.

I lace our fingers together and smile. I haven’t done this before. Haven’t brought a woman to meet my family. Haven’t really gotten to know many women better than their inventory of sexual skill.

“This is actually my sister’s place.” I pull open the back gate and she’s trying to pry her hand out of mine. “Belle... what are you doing?”

“I don’t know. I’m dressed all wrong. My shorts are too short and there isn’t enough of my shirt.” She’s halfway between frantic and panic.

I pull her back to the outside of the gate and take her face in my hands. “Belle, you’re beautiful and you look fabulous. No one is going to judge you here. I promise.” I grin. “I’ve already told them you’re perfect.”

“So no pressure.” She lays the back of her hand on her forehead then uses it to fan herself. “I should’ve stayed home.” More to herself than to me, she adds, “What was I thinking?”

I hug her. “You were thinking you would like to spend the day with a guy who thinks the sun rises in your eyes.” All of a sudden I’m a poet. Or a guy writing song lyrics not even a bad singer would sing.

“Does he, now?” Her tension seems to be flowing away. Her shoulders relax, her lips twitch like she’s denying me the smile I’m working so hard for.

I kiss one corner of her mouth. “Oh, yeah he does.” Then the other corner.

She grins. “You say sweet things.” She bites the lip I just kissed. “I’m nervous.”

I nod. “I know. But you don’t have anything to be nervous about.” I brush the hair off her face and smile. There’s not much I like doing more than looking at her. Not that I can do in public anyway. Even the semi-public of my sister’s yard.

It takes her a second before she nods, glances up at me, and smiles. “I’m ready.” But when I turn away from her, she pulls me back and lays a kiss on me that’s so hot, it’s a good thing I didn’t go with the basketball shorts I was going to wear. My dick is straining against my jeans and I want her for deeply sexy things we can’t do here.

“Woman.” I’ve been reduced to caveman. Single words. Exclamations of gender only because I’m afraid to say more. Something oddly exciting is going on inside of me and until I figure out what this rogue feeling is, I’m probably best off to stick to the solitary word answers. Less chance I’ll blurt out something stupid.

I shake my head and grin down at her when she smiles. “Should we...?” She nods to the gate and I just want one more minute to look at her before my sister hauls out the photo albums and the stories of my wild and rebellious youth.

We aren’t inside the fence twenty-five seconds before Mom’s eyes widen and her mouth falls open. I don’t bring women here and I certainly don’t bring women who hold my hand. As we pass one of

the open beer coolers, I stop and offer Belle one. She shakes her head. "A soda would be good."

I put the beers back and remember a second too late that she doesn't drink. "Sorry. I'll get us sodas."

"You can have a drink if you want."

No. I don't need to drink. Not yet anyway, but I haven't had to have an actual conversation with Aunt Sal who sells sex toys in her spare time and randomly says things like, "You haven't had an orgasm until you've had one with the multipurpose Purple Pussy Pleaser." On occasion, she's been known to whip one out for show and tell. It's variable speed, has attachments. She's quite proud of it.

Then there's Uncle Rafe who used to be a Chipendale dancer and at some point will do the requisite groin thrust into Aunt Lydia—his wife, at least. My cousin Paul loves to talk about his job. He travels farm to farm and helps impregnate cows with bull semen. He'll spend hours standing at the grill beside my sister's husband musing if every steak on the grill is one of his.

Now that I think on it, a lot my family is involved in some sort of sexual occupation. I should prepare Belle, but now my Cousin Winelda—the one who's recently decided she's in love with TomCruise and is going to try to meet up with him on an upcoming trip to Los Angeles—has ascended and is hugging Belle like they're best friends.

"I'm Winelda, but everyone calls me Winnie—like the Pooh." She laughs. "You're not a bimbo are you? Usually he dates bimbos, but he never brings them around. Has many a bimbo story, though." She glances up at me. "Like the one who stole every single pair of his boxers and sold them on Ebay." This is what I'm talking about.

"Win, Belle probably doesn't want to hear about all that."

Belle smiles at me over her shoulder and flips a wink my way. "It's okay. I don't mind."

I chuckle. “You’re gonna like me less by the end of the day.” I don’t know if I’m warning her or trying to prepare myself. But I look at Winnie. “This is why I don’t bring women here.”

She widens her eyes then shakes her head. “You don’t bring women here because you can’t find any who want to put up with your ugly mug or your collection of Superman figurines.” She looks at Belle. “He used to wear a Superman cape and begged for the tights. Was devastated when Uncle Joe refused to let his son run around in red tights with his underpants on the outside.”

Belle grins at me. “I think you’d look great in a pair of tights.”

It’s the kind of grin I can’t resist and I wink at her. “I’ll show you mine...”

“Don’t get excited.” Winnie isn’t through with me yet and I suspect this is revenge for when she brought her boyfriend Cam last year and I told him about the YouTube channel she had when she was in high school—A Nerd’s Guide to High School. She’d had braces and acne and wild, untamed hair. And then I showed him the videos. It was revenge for her hauling out the picture of my seventh grade mullet to show my Hunter and Molly at the prior year’s Christmas party. “Used to call him Tiny when he was little.”

Belle looks at my crotch then cocks an eyebrow, so I play along, hold my thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. Her laugh bubbles out of her and it only makes me want her more.

Finally, Mom waves me over to the table where she’s arranging side dishes in some sense of order. I can’t decide if I should bring Belle along and introduce her or if Mom’s going to pull a Winnie right off the bat.

“Hey, Win, we’re going to go chat with Mom. I want to introduce Belle.”

Instead of walking away, Winnie walks with us, past Aunt Sal who already has “Big Grape” out. She’s showing it to conservative Aunt

Jean who has the good grace not to look appalled. “I call it Sean Connery and turn on Scottish bagpipe music...”

I don't need to hear more of that conversation. “So, Win, how's Cam?”

She shakes her head. “Rat bastard left me for some checkout girl at the Shop and Sack.” She gives a shoulder shimmy and glances at Belle. “You know how men are. First big boob he sees, he's hooked until the next one comes along.”

Belle smiles up at me. All that hotness and she's playing along, too. Fuck. I'm screwed.

“Mom, hey.” I kiss her cheek because she's turned it up, and I always do when I see her. She's my mom.

“Hi, baby.” And then she looks at Belle, and her face lights up. She glances at Belle quickly then back at me. Mouths, “Cute,” then extends her hand. “Hi. I'm Walker's momma, but you can call me, Claire.”

“Hello. I'm Belle. It's nice to meet you.” Her smile at my Mom is everything I didn't know would make me feel warm inside. I don't even know for sure if it's the smile or the way she's aiming at Mom.

And like she's been summoned from whatever part of the yard from whence she came, Maggie sidles up to the near end of the table and hands Mom another dish and serving spoon. “This is Aunt Jean's Macaroni salad.”

She turns to Belle. “I'm Maggie. You must be Belle.” It isn't that I'm embarrassed that I talked to my sister about Belle, it's that I don't want Belle to know that I talked to my sister about her. “Walker hasn't stopped talking about you, which as I'm sure you know, makes you... significant.”

Belle looks up at me and she's sparkling. Or maybe I'm imagining it. It could even be the sunlight reflecting off the pool's surface. But the effect makes my gut tighten in a way that makes me want her even more.

“Walker, what kind of date are you?” Oh, Lord. Maggie is staring at me like I’ve ruined the whole day. “She doesn’t have a drink.” Then she glances at Belle. “We have 9 kinds of beer, because this is a beer drinking family. My friend Alice is inside making frozen daiquiris and margaritas because she is a woman who likes her booze with little umbrellas. And we have wine, soda, the sweetest iced tea in all the land, and rootbeer floats.”

“Rootbeer floats?” Belle’s excitement makes her voice squeak. “I haven’t had one of those since...” She shakes her head. “I think since carbs became a thing.”

When we’re all seated at the backyard tables, Maggie brings her plate over and sits across from Belle. Oh God. This is why I don’t bring women to meet them. I shoot her a glare.

“So, Belle, tell me how you met my big brother.” Maggie stares at me like she’s waiting to hear how I kidnapped Belle and she’s suffering from Stockholm syndrome.

“Saw him at a bar. Walked over and kissed him.” Belle’s answer is straightforward. I like it. Kind of makes me sound like a stud.

I shoot my sister a glare. “Mags, stop.”

But my sister is not one who is easily deterred. “You were alone at a bar?” She nods at her mom. “I told you she had to be drunk.”

“No. I was at a bachelorette party for a friend, and I don’t drink.” She looks at me. “I *can’t* drink, actually. I’m on some anxiety medication that reacts badly with alcohol.” It isn’t a bombshell or a reason for the uncertainty in her eyes. “I had a boyfriend who I found in bed with one of my friends.”

Oh shit. I had no idea. I kind of want to kill my sister right now. I don’t ask Belle about this new information that she so casually mentioned because the mention was casual but the words were anything but. This is a conversation for another time.

“I’m so sorry, Belle.” At least Maggie has the good sense to look remorseful. It deflates some of my need to sew her lips together.

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.” Belle pats Maggie’s hand then pulls her hand back to my side of the table, drops her hand to her lap and it’s a few seconds before I curl my finger under her chin and tilt her head up and to the side so I can drop a quick kiss on her mouth. Just one because more would make us a spectacle and I don’t want to embarrass her.

But by the end of dinner when she’s licked sauce from her fingers more times than I can count—not because I can’t count that high but because I don’t have blood left in my brain to operate it enough to form thoughts—I’m on fire for her.

I just need to kiss her. Once. Twice. Ten times out of the sight of my nosy family.

When I come back from tossing our plates, I wait until my sister is distracted and hold out my hand. “Come with me.”

The beautiful thing about Maggie’s remodeled house is that the basement has about ten new nooks and crannies built in and I know how to get to each and every single one. I take her hand and lead her inside, through the kitchen and a couple wayward aunts who barely look at me as we pass, across the living room where Uncle Ray and Uncle Dover are watching baseball, to the basement door.

When we’re alone, inside with the door shut, I push her against the wall and kiss her like a dying man who’s getting his last kiss. “Belle...” And when she kisses me back, grinds against my leg, moans and drags her hands down my chest to squeeze my dick through my pants, I need her.

“Can we...” She pulls back, panting, her hand already pulling my zipper down. “Please?”

Oh my God. “Yeah.” I pull the front of her shirt down and the skimpy lace bra with it, then tongue her nipple while she works on pushing my pants down, stroking my cock with her long, strong fingers.

“Walker.” She shoves her linen shorts down and steps out then jumps to wrap her legs around me, slides down my cock then uses

her own weight as leverage to ride me.

It's fast and frenzied, and I don't get time to do more than grunt before my balls get tight, my body tenses and I come as her legs squeeze my hips, and I swallow her cries with a kiss that lengthens the orgasm. Mine anyway.

When she slides down to her feet again, I smile and lay my forehead against hers. "You are..."

She shrugs when I can't find a word. "A big old ho to drag you into your sister's basement, but I'm hoping you realize that I have been listening to your aunt talk about vibrators and how the clitoris stimulating panties will change my religion while I'm sitting next to you knowing what... I know about you and I couldn't take it anymore." She kisses me again like what she said isn't just probably one of the best sentences of my life, and a compliment.

I fasten the button on my jeans and tug my shirt down. "I could get you a pair of the panties if you want."

She moves in close, kisses me hard and then looks into my eyes. "Or you could take me home and stimulate me yourself."

I don't need any other encouragement. We're out of here.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BELLE

It's been a few days since I've seen or talked to Molly and with her wedding coming up, I want to make sure her jitters aren't getting the best of her. She's a tough, spunky kind of gal, but wedding prep is hard on the biggest, baddest bridezilla, which Molly isn't.

I stop at Smoothie, Smoothie, Smooth and buy her a peach mango freeze then drive the eleven blocks to her place. When I climb out of the car, she has the front door open already and comes out, tiptoe running to throw her arms around me. "I thought you died."

In fairness, it's been three days since we talked and we never usually go so long, but I had so many houses to show since the Fourth, I didn't have a spare minute after my morning shower.

I hug her back then hand off her smoothie. "How are things?" She links our arms and we walk to the porch and inside. "Are you buried in wedding details?"

Hunter chuckles. "She is. And it's got something to do with her BFF doing a slow fade on a day when the caterer called to say they don't have a cook available on our wedding day."

"Ooh. Bad news." But I have tricks for this kind of thing. I smile and pull out my cell, dial and wink at Molly until the voice on the other end answers. "Crawford! It's Belle." We're old friends and he owns a fancy restaurant in the city. We small talk for a second and then I nod at Molly. "Do you remember when we were in Cancun and you wanted to date that chick from the reality show? Who got you that date?" I don't give him time to answer. "I did."

"Uh, she smashed my name all over her show when we broke up."

"But the fact is, I did my part." I grin and wink again. "And now I need a favor." I lay it out for him with the date and time and menu. "What do you say, pal?"

"That's the return favor. All of it?"

“Her smashing your name on TV made your restaurant a go-to destination and a household name.” I’ve called in this favor a time or two.

“This is the last time, Bananabelle.” But he chuckles. “Until next time I guess?”

“I’m going to let you talk to Molly now so you guys can get the details and you can send her one of your fancy contracts.” And he will because Billy Crawford is a stand-up guy.

When Molly hangs up she hugs me again and Hunter smiles, puts his arms around both of us. “I haven’t been able to make her smile in days. You think maybe you could move in with us?”

He’s dressed in gym clothes and there’s a bag by the front door, but apparently he stuck around when the wedding food fell apart.

I laugh and watch him kiss her, reassure her, love her the way I’ve always known love could be, even though I don’t have a whole lot of examples in my life to go by.

“I’m heading for the gym.” But he stops to drop a kiss on the top of my head. “Thank you, Belle. You’re amazing.”

When he’s gone, Molly turns to me. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

My skin flushes with heat at her praise. “Billy made a boatload of money off of dating that chick. I can go to that well a few more times before it dries up, so you want him at the shower or at the present opening, just let me know.”

She grins and hugs me again. “Did you date him?”

“Billy?” I shake my head.

“No. He’s just a friend. We grew up really awkwardly together.” I laugh, remembering Billy at the ripe old age of fourteen telling me that he needed me to tell Juliet Preston he wanted to kiss her. I passed her a note. They locked lips and braces and it took an

emergency room visit and a pair of needle-nose pliers to get them apart.

In eleventh grade, when my boobs still hadn't shown up, and I went to school with them stuffed with Kleenex so they looked like I had been to Dolly Parton's doctor, he punched Kyle Lockhorn for following me around and pretending to sneeze all day. Kyle beat his ass afterward, but Billy tried to defend me and that made him one of my very best friends. Since then, we talked a few times a year, ended up on the same vacation once, and sometimes we plus-one each other at events we can't get out of and don't really want to face alone.

"How are things with Walker?" She cocks her head and stares like I might hide a detail from her.

"They're things with Walker." I'll tell her everything, but I want her to work for it a little. When she got with Hunter, she made me drag the details out of her. I thought I was going to have to rent a wench.

"Belle?"

"He's good. Great." And yet there's something bothering me. "I just keep... waiting for the other shoe to fall."

"Why?" Molly doesn't understand because she has Hunter and he's amazing. He's gorgeous and he would never look at another woman.

"I think I'm conditioned to expect the worst." And I usually do. It's a trait I can't help. I don't want to be this way. I just can't help it.

But Molly, good, kind, sweet Molly, doesn't understand. She wouldn't. A man wouldn't leave Molly. Ever. Wouldn't choose some blonde party girl with eyelashes as fake as her boobs. Molly is the antithesis of a blonde airhead. She's beautiful with dark eyes and coal black hair she wears straight and silky, and she's smart. So damned smart she always knows the final Jeopardy answer.

She pulls me to the kitchen. It's a pretty open floor plan so we've only moved a few feet, but she has a basket of muffins on her counter. "Sit. Have a blueberry." She knows my guilty pleasures

revolve around all things blueberry. And I have never turned down one of Molly's blueberry muffins in my life. Not looking to start now.

I pull off the wrapper and she sits beside me. "Let me just sniff it." She leans in.

"Just have one."

"No. No. The dress is altered already and I'm not risking it." She takes another sniff.

"Then why did you make them?"

"Hadley." She shakes her head. "I have zero will to say no when it comes to her and she wanted to learn to bake."

I fake shock. "I've been asking for this recipe for... years. Since baking club in high school."

She laughs. "Maybe Hadley will share it with you."

I look around. This place was Hunter's before he met Molly but her personal touches are all over it. There are the plaids in the curtains, and a pair of bright yellow throw pillows on his gray sofa. A throw rug in front of the sink and another under the coffee table with a lot of yellow in it. Molly has imprinted all over Hunter's life. Just like Maisie said.

"Walker's one of the good ones, Belle. And just because you got hurt by that last jerkface"--Molly almost never swears-- "doesn't mean every guy is. Walker's honest. He dates a lot but he doesn't string women along."

I nod because unless a person has been through it, and there are a number of support groups out there for this kind of thing, there's no explaining it. So I just agree. A lot. "I know."

"And just because what's his name was bad, it doesn't make all guys bad. Look at Hunter. He's amazing." I couldn't deny it. But I couldn't base my decisions on her good fortune when my continued to be no so good. "Not all guys are bad is all I'm saying."

“They aren’t all good either.” It would be easier if I didn’t see the image of Ethan with Shana in my head everytime I think of him. Which I do a lot more when people bring him up. I want to be angry about it, but this is Molly.

“I think you might have some PTSD or some other deep-rooted trauma from what happened with that... that... asshole.” She looks down at the table for a second like she can’t believe she said it. “But I know Walker. Be patient with him. Don’t overthink it.”

That is easier said than done. I have a tendency to think things to death.

She chuckles. “Does he make you happy?” I shoot her a glare. I’ve already told her he does. “Okay, so he does. Do you have a compelling urge to make him happy?”

I think for a quick second about the phrasing. *Compelling urge*. Yeah. I want to be the one who is responsible for the smiles on his face and the deep, rich laugh that makes my body tingle. “I don’t know that I’d call it compelling.” It’s as close to a denial as I can get without lying. And she cocks her head, shoots me the doubt eyes. “Okay, fine. It’s compelling. An urge. Well... more of an impulse. Maybe. Possibly could be called a compulsion.” I shrug. “That’s not my word, though.”

She laughs. “When you admit something, you go full on. I like it. Makes it easier to tell you that you would be a fool to let this one get away.”

I shake my head. “They don’t get away from me, Mol. They run screaming in the opposite direction into the arms of slutty fake best friends.”

“I’m your best friend now.” She grins and wags her eyebrows. “You lucky girl, and I don’t want Walker. I’m kind of happy shacking up with his bestie. So no worries there.” She grins. “And you’re both going to be at the wedding. You should go together.”

I know she's trying to help. That she's in love with Hunter so she's convinced the rest of the world should find and be in love, too, but I'm not ready for the L-word. Not unless that word is *lust*. And then I'm all over that one.

"A wedding? With a guy I'm dating? Isn't that a big red flag no-no in the dating world?" I can't imagine how Walker will react when I mention such a taboo thing to him.

"You know what Belle? This is your relationship." Another strong word, but I don't protest because she isn't finished. "Not *Cosmo* or *Teen Beat* or whatever magazine you get your dating information from. Don't treat it like it's a big deal and it won't be."

Easy for her to say. Her plus one for the wedding is the guy who already *wants* to spend his life with her.

"Belle, *you're* going to be there, and *he's* going to be there. Call it a carpool, and then spend the night dancing with this hot guy who wants you." She grins. "And then carpool back to his place and ring his bell a few times. Maybe we can get you a white dress and something blue."

Oh Lord. Here it is. The suggestion I need to be married. She's made it before, but this time she's actually picked out the guy whose little figurine will be standing next to mine on the imaginary cake in her mind.

And before I can dissuade her, my phone pings and Walker's face flashes onto the screen. He's sent an *I want to see you later* text, and that's all the proof Molly needs. "See? It's a sign."

And I want to believe her. But time will tell.

CHAPTER TWELVE

WALKER

It's been a couple days since I saw Belle. Not because I don't want to see her, but because I just took a contract to work on the city's fleet of cars and she's been showing houses day and evening. We haven't found a single minute to be together.

I don't know when this happened to me, or how, but not only have I not seen her, I haven't seen anyone else, either. I'm not even tempted. And after hearing what happened to her, how she was hurt in the past, I'd never think of seeing anyone, whether we're in a committed relationship—we haven't talked about it—or not.

I think of her at the damndest times. Morning. Noon. Night. Almost every minute in between. And I like it. Although I don't know what to do with it. I don't know how to take it.

Belle: What do you have in mind?

I'm sitting in the office at work, feet on the desk, dick semi-hard. It's been too long since I've seen her, since I touched her face or kissed her lips. I want to wake up with her in the morning. Badly want it.

ME: Seeing you. Kissing you. Carrying you up to my bedroom. Stripping you out of your clothes, Kissing you anywhere you'll let me and then all the places you won't.

If my dick wasn't hard before, it is now. And I don't want her to think I'm just horny. I am horny, but I want to see her as much with clothes as without. Kind of. Anyway.

ME: Or dinner.

When it takes her a while to answer, I tap my foot, tap my phone and start typing.

ME: I just want to see you. Are you free now?

The dots blink at the bottom of my screen. She's typing. Typing. Typing.

BELLE: Yes. I'm with a friend but...

ME: I'll be there in ten.

ME: Where?

I picture her smile, her laugh. Hell, I'm the fool, and even I'm smiling.

The address comes through, and I smile. Thank God.

I'm a cocky bastard by nature, because I have benefited from my genetics, but this woman has me off center. I don't have the foggiest idea how to make her want me past wanting me in the bedroom. It's a strange phenomenon.

For a second, I consider using my dick in the bedroom to make her want me. It's a dick move—literally and figuratively—and I shake it off.

I want to be a better man than the one I've been and I want to be better for her. Better than who she's been with before and who I've been.

By the time I get in the truck to drive over, I've talked myself into being the kind of man who deserves a woman like Belle, then told myself I have too long a road to travel and she'll never wait for me.

I know the street because it's the one Hunter lives on, and I chuckle because wouldn't it be a coincidence if his house is close to where her friend lives. The kind of coincidence that landed us at one of their block parties, invited separately but going together. A couple surprising our friends by being together.

As I drive, I check the house numbers. It looks like... yeah. Her friend is Molly. And they're standing outside when I pull up, park and get out of the truck.

I glance at Molly quick then move toward Belle. She's all dressed in white and I have an urge to dirty her up. But I won't because urges aside, she deserves to be worshiped, and I'm just the guy to do it.

“You look beautiful.” I kiss her, instead, soft, short, sweet. Then I stand between the two of them and look down at Molly.

“Where’s Hunter today?”

She shrugs. “Working. He’s got some big project.” She beams with pride even if she’s disappointed to be home alone. And her disappointment is evident, especially when she looks at my arm around Belle’s shoulder. I’d move it, but I *need* to be touching Belle.

Molly walked around me, hugged Belle and then looked up at me. “Have fun.” And she winked.

As we walk to the truck, Belle’s long red hair catches the sun and hangs onto it and I almost wish I would’ve brought the bike. I love the way the wind blows it, the way it curls into complicated swirls of flaming color. I love the way her arms wrap around me. But I also love the way she sits beside me in the truck, so close I can feel the heat from her body, smell her shampoo. Everything about this woman intoxicates me.

I know, from the ribs at the barbecue, that she eats meat, that she isn’t afraid to satisfy her appetite. Even the one for food.

The drive to the steakhouse is short, almost too short, because we won’t be sitting this close in the restaurant, and I like being so near her.

Instead of waiting for me to come around the truck and open the door for her, she slides out behind me and then smooths the skirt. I hold out my hand so she can slip her fingers through mine and then we walk inside.

“Hungry?”

We’re waiting to be seated and she’s holding my hand with one of hers and clutching the attached arm with the other. I don’t know what it looks like to people in the restaurant, but it feels real to me. Feels like she’s mine and I’m hers and we’ve claimed each other. And maybe I shouldn’t watch so many Tuesday night rom-coms with Mom.

I look down at Belle and smile when she looks up at me, then the waitress leads us to a table. I hold Belle's chair and wait for her to sit then take the chair across from her. If I can't sit right beside her, then I'll sit opposite and be happy to stare at her.

She peruses the menu, orders a sweet tea and a giant ribeye medium with a baked potato smothered in butter and grilled asparagus. I give the waitress my order—an *I'll take the same thing*—and then sit back in my chair and smile at Belle.

Not for the first time, I marvel at how beautiful she is.

“How was your day?” She tilts her head and stares at me as if she's really interested in what I have to say. I hope she is, but if she's just asking to be polite, that's okay.

“It was good. I started on the city's vehicles.” I tell her about brake jobs and oil changes that have to be done this week. I'm boring myself.

“It sounds like a full day.” She's toying with her napkin, rolling it between her fingers. And she's smiling.

“I didn't realize you know Molly and Hunter.” If this thing works out with me and Belle—and I hope it does—I see double dates in our future.

“For years.” She laughs and the sound is like that christmas song with the bells. It tinkles. “I met Hunter when I was working with his company to help them find some lots. But I've known Molly for a long time.”

She doesn't elaborate. It's her story to tell or not. I suppose I can ask Molly, but I want Belle to tell me. And if it's a story, I can wait. Even if it isn't.

When our dinners come, we chit chat as we eat, but then she throws in the towel, napkin actually, when her plate's clean. I smile and her skin flushes to red. “What?”

I shake my head. Embarrassing her wasn't my plan. "I like that you like to eat. That you aren't shy about it."

She shrugs and tilts her head side to side. "If there's food, I'm down."

I nod, and for just a second the smooth guy inside of me smiles. "Well, tomorrow morning around 6am, I'm planning on coffee and donuts from the bakery. You in?"

"Am I in? At 6am? The bakery is about ten minutes from my house. And there's hair and makeup to be done. I'd have to get up at 4 just to be ready to leave in time." For a minute, she stares like she doesn't get what I'm saying. Then she smiles. "Oh. That's not what you mean, is it?"

I shake my head. "I mean, you can stay at my place, and I'll go pick up the coffee and donuts and bring them to you in bed." It's a risk. A chance for her to crush my hopes, and I wait for a smile.

When it comes, my heart thumps. "Are you asking me to spend the night, Walker Winslow?" When I nod and look down, feigning shyness, she waits for me to look up then smiles brighter. "I'd like that."

And since dinner's over, I don't see much of a reason to linger here. I pay the check, take dessert to go, and walk beside Belle to the truck, even though I want to run, to race through the streets of town and get to the house where I can be with her again, hold her, love... love being alone with her. But I walk beside her, matching her stride, resisting the urge to swing her into my arms and run to the truck, toss her in and break land speed laws on the way home. Instead, I count the steps. So intent am I that I miss when she asks me a question.

"Walker?"

"Huh? Did you say something?" Women like attentive. I know it, and I've failed because I want to be so tuned in, she doesn't have any reason to doubt that I'm focused on her a hundred percent. I don't like failure. "I'm sorry."

She laughs. “I asked if we could just go a little bit faster. I’ve missed you.” She says the word in a whisper, but it’s loud enough for me to feel it in my bones. And she breaks into a jog, pulls me along with her. When we get to the truck, we’re both laughing, but then she blocks the door so I can’t pull it open for her to slide in. “Hang on.” I have one hand on the door handle and the other is holding the bag of our desserts when she pulls me down, kisses me, sliding her tongue along the seam of my lips.

When we move apart, I know I need to see where this is all going and she’s looking up at me, smiling, so I take the chance. “Belle, do you want to make this shit official? Put a label on it so when people ask, I can say, *this is Belle, my girlfriend*. And you can say, *this is my boyfriend, Walker*.”

Every second or part of a second or hour—I can’t tell how much time is passing but it feels like the world is spinning with deliberate and punishing slowness—makes my gut ache until a slow smile spreads across her face. And then I breathe out, lower my head and claim her mouth. It’s a hot kiss, tongues swirling, mouths mating. It’s a kiss I feel in my gut, in my dick. I want more but she ends the kiss on a panting breath then lays her head against the passenger window and shifts to one foot. “I don’t know who taught you to kiss like that, but I’m thinking whoever it was needs a thank you card. Maybe some flowers. A bottle of wine.”

I chuckle. “I love...” Shit. “The way you think.” Fuck. I’d been about to say something I’d never be able to take back.

She grins. “You think that’s good, when we get to your place, I’ll tell you what’s really on my mind.” Her wink is sweet. Sexy. “And what I want to do to you.” Then she turns and climbs in the truck, slides to the middle as I shut the door and run around the front, dick harder than granite could ever hope to be. I climb in behind the wheel.

And then it takes every muscle I have to restrain myself so I don’t press the gas pedal to the floor. She makes it more difficult because she keeps her hand in my lap, pinkie stroking close to my balls and my jeans are suddenly too tight. I need to shift, move, do something

to lessen the strain, but short of whipping my dick out and jerking off, there's not much I can do, plus I don't want to waste it. I want to be buried inside her when I come. And this can't happen soon enough.

Finally, I pull into my driveway, into the garage, and shove the shifter into park. She turns me toward her. "I want you, Walker."

I want her, too. So much. And then she's fumbling with my zipper, freeing my dick, taking off her panties, and moving to straddle my lap. In that order.

"I am the kind of woman who gets what she wants." She hikes up the skirt part of her dress and uses my dick to tease her clit. We're both looking down until I lift my head and stare at her face. Her eyes are closed and she throws her head back then raises up on her knees and slides down my dick so I'm buried inside her while she rocks, bounces, swirls her hips.

My eyes close because the pleasure is so stark, raw, so fucking amazing I don't know how to deal with it. I can't stop reeling. My fingers dig into her hip on one side, her ass on the other. I pull the dress open at the top and first my fingers then my tongue finds her nipple. She cries out when I take the nipple into my mouth. I love that she's sensitive to every touch, every kiss.

I'm thrusting up now and she bouncing to meet every push of my hips. And she kisses me. Hard. There's nothing timid or soft in this one. It's desperate and hot. My fingers tangle in her hair, twist. She gasps then squeals with delight.

"I like that." Her voice is broken with panting breaths and nothing in my life has ever sounded sexier. Although, I doubt I'll find anything about unsexy. She has a half smile on her face. "Squeeze my ass."

I suck her nipple again, my head bobbing with each bounce while I squeeze her ass cheeks, and my fingers caress her ass crack. She cries out, grinds while I'm deep inside her. So fucking deep.

The pleasure coils inside me. I'm ready to bust but I'm hanging on because I want her to come. I roll my finger down, pressure her

asshole and she clenches so I pull away. "No. Don't stop!"

She holds my head against her breast and I flick her nipple with my tongue, suck her into my mouth. I thrust upward and move her hips with the pressure of my hands. And she cries out, arches her back. "Walker! Oh God, Walker."

Her body thrashes and all I can do is hang onto her while she rides out the passion and eventually collapses against me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BELLE

Morning comes in like a lion after a long night of making love with Walker. In the kitchen. The living room, the bedroom, the shower, the hallway. Finally we fell asleep in his bed, laid facing one another, kissing when one of us woke, touching when we were both awake.

But now, he's sleeping. I roll away and grab my phone from the table. I text Molly and Maisie in a group text.

ME: Me and Walker are official! Anyone want to celebrate with me tonight?

It takes a second but Molly texts first.

MOLMOL: Count me in. How about 7 at The PitStop?

MAISIE: Oh! Scene of the crime! I'm there.

ME: I'll be there at 7.

Walker takes my phone and puts it on the table because he's awake now and again, he's ready, dick hard, hands caressing my face. "I believe I promised you breakfast in bed."

But I'm wired. I don't want breakfast in bed. I want Walker in bed and breakfast at one of the bar tables inside the bakery. I've been looking forward to the donuts since he mentioned them last night.

"Why don't we do *me* in bed and then we can go to breakfast after?" I smile, and this time, I want him on top of me. I want sweet, slow morning sex.

"I like the way you think, baby." And then he's on me, kissing, touching, moving his cock in and out. We've done so many things I can't keep track, but now he's looking at me in the morning light, and I don't cover myself because his gaze is all appreciation. And then he sits back on his knees, dick still inside me. "Play with your nipples."

Oh God. He likes to watch. I love that. Love it more when he moves my hand down and I'm touching his cock as it pushes in and pulls out of me. Then I circle my clit and my back arches. It's involuntary. Happens again when I do it a second time.

He's watching, desire flaring in his eyes and heat washes my body. His cock twitches when I grip it as he slides out, use the moisture to lubricate my fingers and tease my clit.

"Oh God, Belle. You're so fucking incredible."

And then I can't stop. I want to come. I want him to come. And I don't care in which order it happens.

He thrusts hard and fast, deep. "Oh, Walker!" I cry out and clench my knees at his hips. I want him deep and then he is. He throws his head back and his back bows so his hands are bracing him on the bed behind his back.

When we finish and he moves back to his side of his bed which is opposite to the side he sleeps on in my bed, I smile at him. "A shower then breakfast?"

He nods. "Race ya!" And off he goes to the shower. I admire his stamina. But he'll wait for me and it's that kind of feminine power that slows my step as he starts the water and puts the temperature to mostly warm.

The shower is shorter and faster than the one we took earlier, but he washes my hair and I wash his back and this time, it isn't about sex. This time it's more intimate than sex. It's still chock full of his kisses, and he still holds me from behind and kisses the side of my throat when I let the water beat down on me.

When we step out and dress, we walk out of his bedroom together. I'm still in last night's white dress, but he's in jeans that hug his ass like I want to, and they make his legs look longer. His T-shirt is black and tight enough I can see every single one of his ab muscles. Could count them.

He drives us to the bakery where we eat a dozen donuts between us. “I love the way you love food.” His smile makes my heart all flutter.

“I do love food.” I cock an eyebrow. “Are all your other women salad eaters?”

He cocks an eyebrow. “All my other women?” His chuckle is short. Almost sharp and I regret the question. “It isn’t like I have a harem, Belle.” And just like that, I’ve ruined it.

“I’m sorry. I was only kidding.” My voice is soft and my coffee is sitting wrong in my belly. It’s starting a kerfuffle with the donuts and I don’t know which one is winning, but I can tell who isn’t and that’s me.

Immediately, he looked guilty, face drawn, lower lip pulled between his teeth and slipping slowing to its place as if he’s letting it slowly go.

There are about a thousand thoughts in my head. Mostly pointing out my stupidity. Calling me names. *Amateur. Idiot.*

And then he’s moved to the chair closest to me, has his finger under my chin. I can’t look at him. I don’t want to see goodbye where passion used to live in his eyes.

“Belle...”

I finally flip my gaze to meet his. And he smiled. Smiled. My guts unclenched.

“Belle, there is no harem. No other women. Not since I met you. Not since that night in the bar when you kissed me.” And I don’t care if it makes me a fool. I believe him. I smile and he kisses me. It’s one of those public appropriate kisses, one that won’t make the six-forty five breakfast crowd stare.

Anyway, we’re done so, he drives me home—to my place this time and walks me to the door. I want to ask him in, but he’s ready for work. Halfway out the door before he ever walked in. But that’s okay

because if I invite him in, I'm going to want him to stay, and I have appointments to show two houses today.

"I'll text you later." And he leans in, gives me another kiss that isn't public appropriate, and I rethink my reasons for letting him leave. If he has to go, I'm sending him off with something to think about today. Because I'm going to be thinking of him rather than walk-in closets and bathrooms with whirlpool tubs and bidets.

I nod. "Okay." And then I watch him walk away because that man has a walk that is worthy of being watched. When he climbs into his truck and waves then speeds off, I go into the house and shut the door. Cheddar is miffed, doesn't come out until I shake his food bag—well, it's the bag of food that he won't eat because he is a soft-food kitty.

He slides between my ankles and wraps his tail around my calf. "I know. I'm a bad kitty mommy." I pick him up and go to the cabinet where I keep his food and his treats. He gets a treat first then I open his food can and scoop it onto his special plate. It's a hello kitty plate I've had since college didn't work out and I came home and got a real estate license.

I take a ride on my exercise bike, not because I'm worried about last night's baked potato and today's donuts, but because I still have so much excess energy. Sex doesn't always revitalize me, but today, I could power a city.

When the ride ends at five miles, I rinse off the sweat in a cool shower and change into work clothes—a pant suit with black slacks and a white silk blouse with a black jacket.

The houses I have to show today practically sell themselves. Great value for the price. And my business is all about location, location, location. These two places are on the right side of town and the buyers have the credit and the loan approvals for them. It's an easy day, but the paperwork takes me the rest of the afternoon and it's six-thirty before I can run out of the office.

I meet the girls at the PitStop. I'm having a good day. Boyfriend and multi-sale. For me, that's unheard of. Before I walk inside, I fire off a text to Walker.

ME: Sold two houses today and I'm celebrating my new relationship status with my galpals. Phone sex around midnight?

I don't wait for an answer and stuff my cell into my bag. I'll check for an answer later. Tonight is about the girls and they're waiting for me outside the front door. I get there with a couple minutes to spare.

But when we get inside, the place is crowded. There's an evening race on the screen. A NASCAR makeup race. The screens are all tuned in and there's a hum of engine coming from a few of the TV speakers, though they aren't all on for once. Apparently, it isn't as necessary to have the sound of the game for ambiance of a weeknight as it is on Saturday and Sunday.

Maisie heads to the bar and comes back with three virgin daiquiris—frozen juice garnished with fruit and umbrellas in tall, shaped glasses with short stems. “You guys can drink. Just because I can't doesn't mean you should abstain.”

“I'm still suffering bachelorette party recovery symptoms,” Maisie says, her smile wry and quirked.

“And I'm driving.” Molly dangles her keys over the center of the table.

Molly looks at the corner of the bar. “Oh shnitkers.” She turns back quickly. I turn to see where she was looking and she slaps my hand.

“Ow!” She slaps hard for such a tiny chick. “Damn, Mol. What's the problem?”

Maisie looks. “What do we do?”

“About what?”

“Shit. He saw her.” Maisie turns me toward her. “Don't look. Don't talk. Don't act. Just ignore. Promise me.”

“Ignore what?”

“Hey, Belle.” I know the voice and my stomach flops like it’s a fish ripped from the safety of the water.

Ignore. It’s an idea, but he’s standing at the edge of the table now. “Caleb.”

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

“Can we talk, Belle?” His voice is thinner than I remembered. Not as deep or sexy as Walker. Probably not the only place he won’t measure up to Walker.

“What you can do”—God love Maisie—is go suck a dick. No one here wants to talk to you.”

I smile at her for the answer I’m not sure I would’ve said.

Caleb looks at her, his blondish hair—he gets highlights every three weeks—perfectly coiffed, his tie slightly crooked, the only imperfection visible to the naked eye.

“Why don’t you mind your business, Maisie. This is between me and Belle.”

Maisie chuckles, but it isn’t a laugh. She’s making fun of him. “If you don’t think that everything you did to her, you cheating piece of crap, isn’t my business, you’re dumber than you look.” She gives him an up and down that almost makes me feel bad for him. He’s always been super-confident despite the fact he wears loafers with no socks and cardigans with bowties. “And that is quite a feat.”

I don’t laugh, but she’s right. How the hell was I ever convinced I loved him? It’s a question I’ll never be able to answer without looking like a fool. So I ignore it.

“I never liked you, Maisie.”

Molly and Maisie both laugh. Because they can. If I’d known there were men in the world like Walker when I started dating Caleb, I

would've waited for Walker and never given Caleb a moment of my life to screw with.

"Let's just talk, Belle." And there he is. The demanding bastard who cheated on me with my friend.

"We don't have anything to talk about, Caleb." I lift my chin a notch higher and smile. "I'm over it. I hope you and what's her name are happy because I'm in a new relationship." Molly nodded across from me. "I've moved on."

Caleb nods once. "Another time, then."

"I don't think so." I shake my head and he turns and stalks back to the bar.

I look at Maisie and Maisie looks at Molly. They high five, then look at me, hands up, waiting for me to join in. I give them each a smack and smile like Caleb being across the bar from me is no big deal. But it's a big deal. And I don't know why.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WALKER

HUNTER: Molly said that Belle ran into her ex at the Pitstop.

ME: The fuck?

HUNTER: Molly said he's slimy, but he's still there. Staring at Belle.

ME: GTG.

That's all I need to know. Don't need more info. I know where she is. That she needs me. That's enough.

Oh yeah. I know that piece of crap is ogling her. No way is that piece of crap who treated her like she's expendable worthy to be in the same country as she is, much less the same bar. He sure as hell doesn't deserve to look at her. Or see her. He hurt her. Made her doubt herself.

My thoughts are all over the place as I navigate the streets between my place and the Pitstop. I can't go storming in there like a fool to claim my property because she isn't that. But she's my woman. She chose me. And this fool is going to know that she's been claimed and rescued from the pain he put inside her.

I don't have a plan. Not more than going in there and reminding this fool that he had a good thing with Belle and he blew it and now she and I are together. I don't want to say she belongs to me, because I don't want to go all chauvinist pig in front of her, but it's an idea I'll keep in reserve. Just in case I need to go caveman on this guy.

Fact is, he isn't getting her back. Not tonight. Not ever.

I whip into the parking lot, pull into the spot next to her car in the back, under a street lamp. I make inside and scope out the place. There is a crowd. Teachers from the college. Some of the regulars I see everytime I'm here. Some diehard fans who probably have a full day of work tomorrow and are here cheering on drivers racing laps

on the TV. But in the back side of the room, I see Belle. She's tucked on the inside of the booth beside the bachelorette who'd "introduced" us and across from Molly.

She's dressed in a silk shirt and jacket, probably the matching slacks because she knows how to dress to impress. And I'm impressed.

I stride over through the crowd like I own the place, like I'm not worried about any man here, although I think I know which one is the problem. He's the one staring at her. The pipsqueak at the bar with the bowtie untied around his neck.

I hope the asshole is getting an eyefull because in about three seconds, he's going to shit himself. I get to the table and crook my finger at Belle. Sometimes she likes when I tell her what to do, but right now, I can't read her. Right now, she's stuck somewhere between a frown and a moment and if she doesn't slide out of the booth behind her friend, I'm going to look like a fool. But this is a risk I'm willing to take to make sure the asshole who hurt her knows she's taken. Knows she's found someone else who treats her like a goddess.

It takes her a second that almost kills me because I want her to be sure of us and she isn't, but she steps out of the booth and stands in front of me. My hands find her cheeks and I pull her in, lay a kiss on her that is searing and hot and right on the border between dark and sexy, between desperate and passionate.

Her hands climb up my chest and one lays at the back of my head, little finger stroking my neck as she tilts her head and takes the kiss deeper.

I hear the girls hooting and calling out, chanting my name like they're at a rock concert and I'm the headliner.

When we pull back, the friend who isn't Molly laughs. "Is that an audition for your porn career?"

I shoot her a look that is pure fire. "I'm not letting anybody but me see what's mine." I soften the words with a smile, but the message is

out there and that's all I need. "I just heard that a beautiful girl was here and I couldn't wait to see her another minute."

It isn't true. But bros don't rat out bros. And telling Molly that Hunter shot me a text isn't my place.

"Her ex"--the friend nods to the bar-- "is here."

I take a quick glance and nod. "Hmm." Caleb Gray. I know him. Asshole from days of old. Uses those chain mechanics with the TV commercials. Prick. "That's him?"

Molly and Maisie nod, Belle looks down at her shoes. I smile. And what lovely shoes they are.

But I can't lose focus right now. "That guy knocked my sister up in high school. Left her to deal with everything herself. Even a miscarriage. He's a piece of shit." God. I've never said this shit out loud and now it's an ache in my gut, a stab inside of me. Damned if this fuck is going to get away with anything on my watch. I tilt her chin up, reigning in the rage enough I can smile and kiss the tip of her nose. "I'll be right back."

"Walker...?" Her voice is soft and I turn, wink because it's all I can do. Blood is pounding in my ears and red tinges the edges of everything I can see.

It's about ten steps from me to the prick who hurt my sister and then Belle. And he looks up at me. "Hey, Walker. Long time, buddy."

I'm not violent by nature. I'll use my fist only when necessary, but I don't go looking for it. Until right now.

My fist shoots out, catches him in the nose and blood explodes, he falls to the ground.

"Hey buddy, you gotta get out of here. We don't go for that shit here." But the bartender stays behind the bar.

I nod, walk back to the table where Belle is standing and take her hand. Her mouth is gaping open, but she follows me to the door. As

soon as we're outside, she stops and pulls me around to look at her. Then she shoves me against the wall and kisses me. It's more intense than the one inside, and I want her.

"I'm not going to make it home. I want you now." The words are hot against my throat.

Oh, fuck. If my dick wasn't already hard, those words would've turned it. "Truck's right there." I nod to the truck sitting at the back of the lot. "Come on." I take her hand and weave us through the cars to the truck. Kiss her again as I open the back door.

She slides back, shrugs out of her jacket and starts unfastening her top. When it's open, she goes for the skinny black belt around her waist. I'm still dressed because I like watching her *undress*. I love the way her long, slender fingers move against the fabric, slip the buttons through. Then she pulls me into the truck on top of her.

After a kiss that's hot enough to peel the paint off my truck, but I need to get the door shut.

I lift off of her and reach behind me, pull the door closed then turn back to her. But she's up now, her hands pulling my shirt over my head and I chuckle. "No one has ever fought for me before, Walker."

"I didn't do it for this."

She shakes her head. "I don't care if you did." And then she's on me. Her body on mine, her skin hot under my hands. "Fuck me, Walker. Now."

I'm not the kind of guy who has to be told twice. She sighs, loud and long when I push inside of her. And I swallow another cry with a kiss. Her fingers rake down my back and her mouth attacks my throat.

"Oh God, Belle." It's more of a bite than a kiss and I hold her there with a hand in her hair.

"Walker!" She cries out and her mouth latches onto my skin while her hips buck and her hands curl into my biceps.

When I come, I thrust upward, and her pussy clenches my dick, the walls tight enough I groan. “Belle.”

She gives me a last kiss before she moves off my dick and falls onto the seat beside me. “We just had sex in the Pitstop parking lot.” She nods. “I guess I can scratch that off the bucket list.” Her smile tailends on a chuckle and I’m still trying to catch my breath. This woman is more than I deserve, more than I dreamed I’d ever have in my life.

“What else is on that bucket list?” I’m busy yanking my jeans up when I look over at her.

She’s staring at me with her eyes half-closed. “It’s a work in progress.”

I nod. “Like me.” I tilt her head toward me. “I want to be better than a guy who punches out another guy in a bar because I’m jealous. And I want to be better than a guy who has sex with you in a parking lot. But I’m not better. I am who I am.” God help me. I want her to want me this way as much as I want to be better than I am.

“I want who you are. I want the fighter. I want the guy who will walk me out to his truck and not be able to wait out a ten minute drive to have me.” She smiles. “But I’m not property, Walker.”

And this is where it all goes left.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BELLE

Being with Walker has been an experience like no other I've had with a man. He cares about me, and he isn't afraid to show it. I can see it. I can also see that he's all alpha. All man. I love that about him, but like I told him, and I meant it, I don't like being property. I refuse to stand for a man thinking he has that kind of power over me.

"What did you say?" His voice is hard now. Darker than I've ever heard it. And the stare is even darker. I should back off, take a minute and think this through, but I'm going on feeling right now. And I can't stop what I've already started.

"I said I'm not your property." *I don't want anyone seeing what's mine.* It's what he said and there's no way I misheard it or read the sentence wrong. He said it. He meant it.

I've barely got my clothes on, much less arranged when he opens the door and steps out. He turns and looks at me. "You said no one's ever fought for you before." There's such disbelief in his voice, I don't know for certain that what I'm doing is right, that I'm not making the biggest mistake of my life.

But I shrug because I'm not going to let him take the fight out of me. I have to be strong enough to take the time to figure everything out. How I feel. What I want.

It starts right now. "They haven't. This isn't about *that*. This is about the kiss and about what you said to Maisie." Not that I didn't like it. I love all of his kisses. But this was loaded with things a kiss shouldn't be. This was him staking a claim, marking me as his, without me agreeing or even being asked. And he needs to know it. And I don't like what he said to Maisie at all. "That wasn't fighting for me. That was showing off. That was the first strike of a pissing contest."

I don't like saying the description any more than I like that it's the memory I will always have of tonight.

“What?” He pauses and his eyes go wide then narrow. In the dark depth, they flare with hurt, maybe even anger. “Seriously. What?”

I hear what I’m saying to him and I understand why he’s confused. I even hear how ridiculous it is to be angry at him when I was so happy that he fought for me—although I could’ve done without the violence of it—when only a few seconds ago, I was straddling his lap in the truck, when I barely have my bra pulled down.

I sigh. This is ridiculous. Every urge I have is screaming for me to give this up and throw myself into his arms, to beg him to forgive me for bringing it up and my mind is telling me to ignore the urges and stand my ground. I don’t know which part of me to listen to. I need to think about this.

But how can I when my head is full of him all the time? Of little things. Like the way he cradles my face when he kisses me. The way he gives my fingers a little squeeze every few minutes when we’re holding hands. The way he holds my chair for me. It’s a thousand little things. And I have to decide whether they add up to more than how unhappy I am about this one very big thing he did that tarnished how I feel about him.

I’ve never been in this kind of situation. I wasn’t lying about no one ever fighting for me. Part of that is because I don’t date this kind of guy. Part of it is because no one has ever claimed to have a right and there’s certainly been no real need to have a fight. I’m so far out of my element, I need time to think.

“I think I want to stay at my place tonight.” I have to get my head straight. Think it all through. And I can’t do that lying beside him in his bed. Or with him lying beside me in mine.

“Okay.” He shrugs, and for one heart stopping second, it doesn’t occur that he’s stepping back because it’s what I’ve told him I want. Instead, the irrational part of my brain thinks he doesn’t care about me, and maybe this whole thing isn’t about anything more than sex. It thinks it’s easy for him to walk away. Too easy.

But then he moves in like he's going to kiss me, and whatever is going on inside of me makes me hold up a hand.

"Alone." I hear the word come out of my mouth, and I'm sure it's me, but I'm breaking my own heart, and I don't do that kind of thing. None of this makes sense. Not from the minute I saw Caleb until Walker kissed me, and then the sex and now this fight.

Everything since then has been my body and brain acting in contradiction of one another. My body is aching for more of him, more of his touch, his kiss, his body on mine, sorting out the confusion.

He crosses his arms and stares at me for a second. "Is this because of him?" He jabs a finger toward the bar, and I don't have to ask about which *him* we're talking about. He's pointed to Caleb and anger burns inside me. How dare he?

My mouth falls open because I can't believe he's implying—no, flat-out stating—that he thinks I'm the kind of woman who would have sex with him while I want Caleb. More unbelievable is that seeing Caleb has triggered emotion I don't know what to do with. Seeing him in all his cardigan splendor makes me feel unworthy, like I'm less than what I really am. I don't know how to undo that. And right now, I can't think about it. I have to deal with a very angry Walker who seems hellbent on saying the exact wrong things. Not that there are necessarily right things to say.

I shake my head and sigh. "No. This is about you." My heart is breaking. "And about me." I'm not a person who takes all the blame and the guilt for myself, but I didn't really go out of my way to assert myself in this relationship. Not enough for him to know that I'd be insulted with vague accusations that question my feelings for him. I look at him and shake my head. "I need time, Walker."

"What does *time* mean?"

I don't really know. I know that I love being with him. I love the sex. Really love the sex.

“It means I need to sort some things out in my head, and I need some space while I do it.” I move closer, stand on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. Everything is coming at me at once. His cologne, the gravity of the situation, the idea that this might be the last time I ever look into his eyes or kiss him. I almost falter. Almost ask him to forget it all and stay with me, at least to hop back into the truck with me, but then I think of what happened inside and why and the things he’s said since then. “It means I’ll call you tomorrow.” The finality of it, of the tone more than the words, causes an ache inside of me.

He nods and turns. I watch him walk around to the driver side of his truck and start it. I stay in the lot until I can’t see his tail lights anymore before I walk back inside and sit at the table with Maisie and Molly.

And here it is. Not even twenty four hours after we make dating official, we’re on the rocks. And it’s breaking my heart.

CHAPTER 16

WALKER

I don't know what the fuck just happened. One minute we were in the truck, the next she "needs space." I turn onto Market street, toward Big Bill's sports bar. It's one of those twelve TV places that has waitresses in skimpy shorts and half shirts, TVs that play every sporting event televised from around the world, and twenty nine kinds of craft beer.

But when I pull into the lot, I don't get out of the truck. Big Bill doesn't have anything I want inside there. What I want—or more *who* I want—is sitting in a bar across town probably kissing her ex's black eyes better.

No. That's not fair. She didn't even glance at him. Jealousy is stupid and I know that, but knowing it didn't stop me from acting like a barbarian, from punching the cheating bastard in his face.

When I pull out of the parking lot, the radio's playing some sappy love song—some modern day crooner singing about getting his girl back—and now that I've noticed this isn't my usual Aerosmith/AC-DC playing station—I can't imagine how it got changed to elevator music. But of course I know already. It had to be Belle. She's the only other person who's been in the truck besides me.

I click it off. As frustrating as this last half hour has been—and it's been like having my guts ripped out through my throat—I also know that seeing Caleb did something to Belle, something between us was different. And instead of asking her about it, I went full neanderthal. And then I accused her of still wanting him. Asshole and neanderthal is not a good combination. Especially where women are concerned.

And the kiss that she seemed to like while it was happening then objected to after was possibly a bad move. I can admit that. But that prick who cheated on her needed to know she's moved on, that she isn't pinning for him, that she has someone who cares about her and

her happiness, someone who wouldn't dream of cheating on her because all I can see is her.

I think about her when I shouldn't. All the time, if I'm honest. I can't stop. I want her in my life. And even if I don't deserve her, she deserves more than that prick. Period. Even if she decides she would rather it be someone beside me.

But dammit. It better be me. It's *going to be* me.

I just hope I didn't blow it with her. The urge to call her is steering this runaway train I'm on, but I ignore it. She has to cool off, and we both have things to figure out, things we have to figure out about ourselves and each other and things we have to figure out about being together. I don't know what she wants this to be. Hell, I don't know what *I* want this to be, either. All I know is that I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about her.

After a few minutes, I drive out toward the lake. Belle and I haven't been here together so there are no memories of her here, but I can see her in the reflection of the moonlight on the water. I close my eyes and lean my head back against the seat. See her then, too.

There isn't much I wouldn't do to have her here with me right now. I want to hear her voice and feel those soft, light touches against my skin. Sometimes, when she touches me, I don't even think she realizes she's doing it. It's natural. Like an instinct. Like Mom used to touch Pop. Nothing sexual. It's the affection that comes after a relationship is... *relationship?*

Woah. I don't know if I'm ready enough for a fully committed relationship. It's a lot of responsibility. A lot of someone needing more from me than just my dick. No one has ever really needed me before. I don't know if I'm up to it. I don't know a lot of shit. And it's fucking with my head more than I want to admit. What if I fuck it all up? I could lose her. If I haven't already.

Outside the window an owl hoots. Could be saying, "who-who" or it could be, "fool-fool." I can't tell.

She's definitely right about what I did in the bar. It was immature. Some serious high school bullshit. And I don't need any kind of special sign to tell me I'm an idiot either. Not neon or any other other kind.

Although, I wouldn't be surprised if I turned and one is flashing over my head because she's right. I was showing off and I don't like what that says about me. But I don't know any guy who wouldn't be beating his chest with pride over having a woman like Belle.

The ex being there to see it was a bonus—planned, and truthfully, the only reason I went to the bar in the first place. But that fact doesn't do anything to strengthen my case, so I'm not going to admit it out loud. Ever.

I can't just sit at the lake all night. Not alone.

This lake is a place we used to come to when we were young to make out. It was our version of Lover's Lane and I'm here alone, which makes me the creepy old guy. I have to get out of here, too.

When I drive through town, I cruise past the high school. See the football field. The new gym. The parking lot and the spot where I used to park my very first Harley. It was a rebuild I spent an entire summer putting together with Pop. God, that was a long time ago.

Come to think of it, it's the last time I had a real relationship, too. If it can be called that. Her name was Robin Colter and we'd both been in twelfth grade. She was a cheerleader. I was the bad boy with the motorcycle and cigarettes.

I haven't seen Robin since then, when she dumped me for Billy Sims. But I was convinced in my immature teenager mind that she loved me. And then *she* told me she needed some space. Space to see Billy, apparently. If not the reason, certainly it was the result. And that is when I lost my first love.

I pull into the shop parking lot because I've already driven every street in this town to avoid going back to my place and smelling her perfume on my pillow, remembering the way she stood at the

counter, moonlight shining in the window on her face when she got a glass of water from the tap.

If this is going to work between me and Belle, I have to get my head screwed on straight. Be more of the kind of man I know I can be. Honestly though, I can't change into the man she wants anymore than I'd expect her to change to be the woman I want her to be. For this to work, we have to accept each other as we are. We have to decide whether the faults and the mistakes are more than we can deal with. I already know the answer. Belle apparently needs space to figure it out.

Plain and simple, Belle is exactly the woman I want. Her fire. Her passion. Her desire. She's intelligent and driven. So fucking beautiful I can't even believe she's real. I probably don't deserve her. But I have to try to show her I can be what she wants, the man she needs. I want to be the guy she relies on. The one who comes through when she needs me.

And right now, she needs me to give her some space. And I will because I want her to come back to me on her own. But if she doesn't, I'll go to her. I'll tell her how I feel and then walk away if that's what she wants.

I don't necessarily want to wait to reach out to her. I *really* don't want to, but I will. If she needs a minute, I can give her that. But just the one.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BELLE

This Saturday isn't a Pitstop kind of night. This is a *drinks with friends at a dance club* kind of Saturday. If things with Walker were good, it would be a sex with Walker kind of night, but since we're still figuring things out—and by we, I mean me—I'm at Club Indulgence ready to get forget everything and have fun with the girls.

I want music with synthesized melodies and big bass that vibrates through my body. I don't want to think about the fact that Walker hasn't called me in three days. Hasn't so much as sent a text. I don't want to wonder if he's moved on and decided I'm too much work. There's been enough time for doubt these last couple days. And I don't want to look at my phone every five minutes. I do it, but I *don't want to*.

Instead, I sip my iced tea at the table while Maisie and Molly, Jen from the bachelorette party, Dina, one of my work friends, and Kristen, a friend of Molly's, all have fruity alcoholic drinks in front of them. I don't mind being the designated driver. I'm happy for the company. But tonight we all Ubered in, so there isn't a car to drive.

I haven't told any of the girls that I haven't heard from Walker since that night at the Pitstop. I don't need the pity. Don't want it either. And I don't want them to slam him for it out of loyalty to me. I'm the one who asked for time and space. I can't really fault him for it, and I sure as heck don't want the girls to do it, either. I just want him to... No. That's it. I just want him.

Between the dreams I've had the last couple nights and the memories that keep coming at me during all my waking hours, I can't escape Walker Winslow. My mind won't let me.

I check my phone again. I know it's working. I have messages from work. I've taken calls from the girls organizing tonight. It isn't faulty cell service. And at some point, I'm going to have to face it. I told him

to give me space. I can't very well be pissy about how much space he's giving me.

Maybe part of me hoped he would ignore my *I need time* edict. I hope I'm not so manipulative, but maybe I want him to *prove* it. God, I hope not. What kind of woman does it make me that I don't know? Am I a bad person? I don't know. I can't tell.

When the waitress comes back, I glance at my tea. It's been a few days since I've taken the anxiety meds. My therapist said I'd know when I didn't need them anymore. Truth is, I haven't felt like I need them in a while. "Can I get a rum and tea?"

The waitress nods. And then the drinks are sliding like water on glass. Two, three, four drinks, and I'm on the dance floor with the girls, dropping it like it's hot, cupid shuffling. I do the Dougie with Maisie, the moonwalk with Molly. We all do the floss then slip right into the single lady dance. It's like my childhood has come to life in this place and the party has just started.

I go back to the table with Molly and because I'm only tipsy and not hammered, I check my phone. "Put that thing away, Belle. It's girls night!" She drags out *girls* like she's one of the guys in the old beer commercials. It takes three entire seconds to finish the word. But she reaches for my phone.

"You can call Wonder Boy Walker later. But there will no phone sex in the club." She thinks she's hilarious, but she's right. I've been drinking and it probably isn't a great time to make relationship altering phone calls. Sexual or not.

I push Walker Winslow and all his sexiness to the back of my mind, toss the phone into my purse and link arms with Molly as we head back to the dancefloor.

And midnight comes and goes, then one, then two and we close the bar down which I haven't done since I was young. Not that I'm old, but I have real-life responsibilities, bills to pay, houses to sell, so I can't be out all night drinking anymore. Hangovers don't go away like they used to, but neither do broken hearts.

It's while I'm home, lying in bed, wishing Walker would walk through the door, strip me naked and pull me against him that I pick up the phone, check it again for a text that means he wants to be with me the way I want to be with him. No text. No sentiment. No word from Walker. And it breaks my heart. Makes me sad.

ME: I miss you.

I stare at the words for a few minutes, or what feels like minutes anyway, with my finger hovering over the send arrow.

Sending it doesn't make me weak. It doesn't mean anything other than what it says. A truth I feel in my soul. I do miss him. So much. These have been three long days. Terrible lonely. And I miss him more and more every day.

I know what he did was immature. But I like this guy. I like who he is, the way he treats me. I've been on dates before with guys from around here. They don't hold doors, or chairs, or stand when I leave the table. They don't listen when I talk or care about what I say. With every other guy I've dated it's been about the end game, about getting me into bed.

While I did go to bed with Walker—and it was divine every single time—it didn't feel like sex was all he was after. And he stuck around when the sun came up. That means something. It has to. I've thought this over a hundred different ways the last couple of days. And every single time, the man he is makes those couple minutes and the one stupid thing he said in the bar not matter.

I look around my room and see him. It's nothing new. I see him in all kinds of places, but it's easy to picture him here walking out of the bathroom wearing a towel around his waist, droplets of water sliding down his chest, or sitting on the couch with one of those panty melting smiles on his face, or lying in my bed, grinning with smug self-confidence because he's just made me glad I'm a woman.

My house is my haven. I've loved this place since the first moment I saw it when I was showing it to a client. I knew I had to buy it right

then. But if this doesn't work out with Walker, I'm going to have to move so I don't see him everywhere I look.

I can't lie. The reason I'm not asleep yet even though I can't stop yawning is because I'm waiting for a text back. I know it's late, but a girl can hope. And I don't want to miss it when it happens, so instead of plugging it into the charger beside my bed, I hold it in my hand and shut off the light.

It's a small compromise but I'll never forgive myself if I sleep through a text he sends. Even if he tells me that he never wants to talk to me again and I've blown my chance with him, I want to know it as soon as he sends it.

I roll toward the pillow he laid on, and I'm sad when I can't smell his cologne. I've changed the sheets since he slept here, but I hoped the scent of him would be on the pillow. And it's gone now. I fall hoping he texts back because I want my bed to smell like him and I want it to smell like him because he's sleeping in it. And I want him to text me so I can tell him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WALKER

I slam the phone down. Like I'm not having a shitty enough week, now the fucking city is screwing with me. I've had eleven cars in and out of here this week along with my regular oil changes and brake jobs, and now the mayor herself has called to say that the city needs to adjust the amount they're contracted to pay me because they forgot to add vehicle maintenance to the new budget and the money just isn't there.

I sigh and rake my fingers through my hair. There are three mechanics working on city cars right now. They need paid. *I* need paid. Not only because if I don't there are going to be money problems for me—hmm, I wonder if this is what *shit rolls downhill* means—and not because I've turned down other work so I could make room for the city contract, but because the city has signed a contract *with me*. They gave me their word. It has to mean something, and I will hold them accountable.

“Hey, boss.” Jake Copeland is standing in the doorway to the office, holding the keys to the car he's spent the last couple hours working on—tune-up, brakes, and oil change—and a work order. “We're all finished with the cars and heading out for the night.”

I nod. “All right. Thanks. See you Tuesday.” We don't generally work on Sundays, but the same city who wants to lower my pay—probably to nothing but advertising space on the city website—demanded that the police cruisers not in use during the weekend be worked on and road ready by Monday morning. So I called in the guys and we each took a car to work on. Because I can't afford the overtime pay, now my guys are off tomorrow. But it's just as well. Right now, I can make their payroll, but if this city thing goes to hell, I don't want to be in the position of owing them.

“Later.” Jake is a cocky young kid who's always in the shop talking about whatever woman he slept with the night before. I can't judge because I used to be that guy. Until I met Belle anyway.

Yeah. It's the same Belle I can't get out of my mind. She's been on my mind since I opened my phone this morning and saw her message. I didn't answer because I didn't have time. Also because I didn't know what to say. I still don't. She misses me. Well, I miss her, too, but I've had a couple days to think. A couple long, lonely days where missing her was powerful and I almost called a couple times, even though she'd asked me not to. It took everything I had not to dial.

And now that she's sent me a text, I don't know what to say. I mean, I want to tell her I miss her. And I want her. And I am dying being without her. I don't know if that means that I... like her a lot or what it means, but I don't want to scare her off. Missing me doesn't mean that she wants me or that she is done needing space. It only means she had an itchy text finger.

Maybe you should stop over analyzing it.

Maybe, but knowing for sure what she wants would make this whole to text or not to text—who am I kidding? I'm going to text back. But knowing how she feels and what she wants would help me decide *what* to text to her.

I glance at the cell phone on my desk, sitting ignored, screen black. It looks ordinary enough for a piece of tech that is holding my life at the moment hostage. Fucking crazy, right? But true.

I shove the damned thing in my pocket and lock up for the night. I'm tired. I just want to take my ass home, get a shower and some left over beef stew, and decide what to text Belle. A greasy shop that smells like oil and gasoline isn't as inspiring as one might think.

When I get out to the truck, shove the key in the ignition and turn the key, nothing happens. Literally. Silence.

There's no manly roar of an engine. Not even a whimper.

I pull the lever to pop the hood, get out, and slam the door because I just want to go home and now I have to fix my own damned truck. When I lift the hood, I spy the culprit right away—one of the battery

cables is off and there's a tiny ball of fur—white with black spots on its ear and nose and at random spots on its fur—under the hood.

I can't tell how old it is. Looks like a girl, but could be a boy, maybe. I don't know enough about cats, particularly cat genitalia, to know if they have innies or outies. I don't know what to feed this thing either, whether or not it's old enough to eat bagged food or if I should get it a bowl of milk, maybe a can of that soft stuff that makes the cats on TV so happy.

I don't know a damned thing about cats, but I know someone who does. And this, along with her message is my excuse. Maybe the cat will help fix the things I broke with her.

The cat purrs like we're best friends then climbs up to my shoulder and hangs on like a baby, head next to my neck and I hold her so she doesn't fall. I pull out my phone, look at the screen and consider shooting a text back, asking for her help with the cat, but more than anything, I want to hear her voice.

When her phone rings, I suck in a breath. I've made important phone calls before but none that feel so big as this one. Her voice is one of the things I miss most. It's husky for a woman, sexy as hell, but then when she's nervous, it gets higher pitched and breathy like that hot chick from Baywatch that was married to the drummer.

She answers and her voice says she should be wearing a bright red swimsuit. "Walker." It's one word, and one I've heard a zillion times in my life, but relief swims through me.

"Hey." I should've at least thought about what I need to say to her. "Can you come to the shop? I have something..." I can't finish because the answer matters too much.

She sucks in a breath and I can't breathe at all. I'm weak for her.

"Yeah. Give me ten minutes?" It's like she's asking my permission.

That gives me time to hook the battery back up and get a charger out here.

Hell, I'd give her as long as she needs so long as she says she's coming here. And I want it to be a sign that she hasn't made me spell out why I want her to come. But I'm not some kid who's going to get my hopes up. I'm a grown man who knows heartbreak, who knows not to count on favors from the universe. But this time, I want...

Her. And I want her to want me back.

I sit in the truck and wait for her to come to me. I don't know what I can say to make sure she knows how sorry I am, but I have to figure it out because I can't lose her. I have to get her back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BELLE

I'm nervous. Driving with my hands at ten and two. Watching the speed limit. Being careful because it gives me something to concentrate on other than how much I want to see him and how excited I am that he called.

I have something. I don't know what that means. I don't know if he has something like a medical condition, but it didn't sound like it. It sounded like he was about to say it was something for me. A gift maybe.

And he certainly didn't sound like he was about to tell me that he's waited long enough and he's dumping me. And while he's not at all the kind of guy who seems like he would dump me over text but would definitely ask to see me in person, my gut says he isn't going to end this.

I'd know for sure if I hadn't waited three days to talk to him. And that's my fault. A hundred percent on me.

When I pull into the lot of his shop, he's sitting in his truck and the hood's up. For one horrible second, I wonder if I've remembered to brush my hair, to put on deodorant, to make myself presentable, and immediately I think that maybe hungover and without the benefit of anxiety medicine isn't the way I should see him.

But I park near—not next to—his truck and take a quick deep breath because I need a second to pull it together and find my courage. He opens the door to his truck and climbs out, holding something in his arms and all I can think is that whatever it is, it's the luckiest thing in the world. That's how smitten I am with this guy. Too much for my own good.

"I think you called the wrong person for help with your truck." I glance up and it's like looking into the sunlight. Everything hurts because I don't want to see him if I can't be with him and if I can't be with him, it's at least fifty percent my own fault.

But he chuckles and the sound knocks the wind out of me. “I need help with this.” And he holds out a cat that is white with black patches on its face and body.

She’s shivering and she he holds her close to his chest so that when I reach to take her, my hand brushes against his chest. It’s covered by a work shirt and another underneath, but I imagine the warmth I know firsthand is there. My body flushes with heat.

“I found it under the hood of my car.”

I nod. “*She’s* scared.” But her purr-o-meter is going at about a thousand miles an hour, and I find the sensation soothing. This is why cats are good therapy. For mme anyway.

“I need to take her to the vet. She might be sick. It’s warm outside and she’d crawled under a hood—possibly for heat, possibly because she’s scared—and I need to make sure she gets care. It’s what any good cat owner would do. “There’s an all night vet in Montgomery.” It’s an hour away. “It’s a twenty-four hour clinic.” Since no vet’s office would be open this late, anyway, and on a Sunday.

He nods and pulls out his wallet. “I’ll pay.”

But that isn’t the favor I need. “No. But if you could ride along to hold her while I drive.”

He cocks an eyebrow and nods to his truck. “Or I could drive and you could hold her.” We both look at his truck. He shrugs and smiles his boyish smile—another one of my favorites. “I’m sure it’ll start right up.”

“I’m driving.” Not that he can’t drive my car. It’s a secondhand Chevy. But it’s clean, without dents or scratches. Has a radio and GPS, but nothing so extraordinary a sixteen year-old novice couldn’t get in and drive it, and he’s a mechanic, for goodness sake.

There’s something to be said for the way he gives in, takes the cat back—this time his skin touches mine just above my heart and a flutter ensues. I’ve learned to ignore things like this, but this one’s persistent, continuous, and strong. It’s more of a throb than a flutter

and because this isn't my first rodeo with Walker, I know exactly the reason my heart is misbehaving. It's Walker. All the little things about him. All the nearness. All the heat from his gaze.

He saved a cat, for goodness sake. I'd let him do just about anything he wants to me right now because even though my head is fogged with lust, I know enough about the way he acts on my lust to know it's going to be hard to keep my hands off him even holding the steering wheel. If all I was doing was holding the cat, no telling what kind of bad behavior I'd indulge in as he drove.

"Okay." He nods and smiles, walks around to my side of the car, holding the cat and opens my door, stands beside it until I slide behind the wheel, then he pushes it closed. I watch him come around the car to the passenger door. He has the grace of a panther, the swift languid movements of a lion.

It's intoxicating and I cut off the moan at just the moment he opens his door and slides into the passenger seat.

The cat is against his chest, inside his work shirt and I am jealous of the cat.

We're only a few blocks from his shop when he looks over at me. And I can feel his gaze like a caress against my cheek. "Belle..."

I can't hear everything I want to or don't want to hear while I'm concentrating on getting the cat to the vet. It isn't a conversation I can have while I'm navigating through town then the highway.

"There's time, Walker. But I don't want to be distracted by semi-trucks and motorcycle riders when we have this conversation." He nods and sits back against the seat, all the sudden singing along to Air Supply.

For sixty three miles, he sings along with the radio and at about mile fourteen, I croon along with him even as I make a mental list of all the things I love about him. His smile. His voice, the assortment of smiles, those hands and the way he uses them, and now his singing voice. I also like his intelligence and the fact he can hold his own

during any number of conversational topics, but right now, in a car while he's holding a kitten with all the gentleness he would use to hold a baby, I don't give two damns about anything other than the way being so close makes me throb with need and want.

And when he belts out the chorus to an old obscure Bon Jovi, it's clearer than ever that this is not a decision. It's a foregone conclusion. It's destiny or fate or whatever natural force decides the future and what should or shouldn't happen.

But before I'm courageous enough to tell him that I might be feeling the L-word, I pull the car into the vet's parking lot. It's dark out now and I can't see much but his silhouette because the moon is behind him, but even that is more than my pathetic heart knows what to do with.

But when we walk inside under the bright fluorescent lights of the entry, I'm struck again—like the thousandth time since I've been in the car with him—by how handsome he is. It's not just one thing either. Like it isn't just that he has good hair or eyes I could lose myself in. Or his chiseled jaw. The lashes that frame his eyes. The cheekbones. The body. It's everything about him.

Everything.

I have an account here for Cheddar because once he went full kamikaze banzai off the roof when he got stuck in a tree at three a.m. when an ex—hmm, it was Caleb. Figures.

Cheddar ran straight up the tree like he's Jackie Chan, then zigged and zagged higher and higher from the fireman who'd tried to save him. In an unfortunate feline turn of events, Cheddar misjudged the space between the roof and the branch, leaped, and hit the roof, then slid down, bounced off the guttering, and ended up falling onto his back. He meowed at full volume then went so still I couldn't see his breath. We'd gotten a fire rescue escort to the vet.

I'd thought Cheddar had died, but as soon as we walked into the vet's office, he cashed in for a second life and immediately started a

brawl with a Pomeranian who tried to swing Cheddar around by his tail.

Walker still held the cat who is purring loud enough I can hear her. Just another woman who's under his spell. I'm not surprised. I don't know of any woman who could resist Walker if he puts his mind into convincing her. And obviously this kitty is convinced.

When the vet calls us back, we stand and walk back together. The cat hangs onto Walker, although I stroke her fur and she licks my hand. I guess we're all friends now.

The vet, Dr. John Maclane—like Bruce Willis's character in Die Hard—smiles at me then at the cat he takes from Walker and moves to the examination table. "Hi, Belle. How's Cheddar?"

"On his fifth or sixth life now, but he's settling in." Aside from the roof, Cheddar has gone for a swim in the kitchen sink and tried to pull the toaster in with him. He's run and jumped through a plate glass window. Or rather tried and knocked himself out cold. He ate—or I thought he did—a dishwasher pod, but it was only the plastic covering to a whistle that was inside one of his toys. He did eat the whistle and for two days every time my flatulent feline farther his ass played a C-sharp. Me and Molly joke that Cheddar is either daredevil or manic-depressive.

It's been a few months since I've had to take him to see this vet or any other, but there's something to be said for being on a first name basis with all the vets in a hundred mile radius.

Dr. Maclane looks at the kitten and pets her, stroking a hand down her back as he looks at me. "We found her. Just want to make sure she's not chipped and some ten year old is home crying her eyes out missing her kitten, and that said kitten is healthy and doesn't need medicine."

Maclane nods. "Give me twenty minutes." And he takes the kitten to another room where he'll do the normal tests and scan her for a chip.

We wait in the exam room and I glance at Walker. “Thank you for coming along.”

He nods. “Least I can do.”

“When you woke up this morning, did you think this is how the day would end? You’d be sitting in a veterinarian’s office after hours an hour from home with a cat that may or may not be yours be when we walk out.” I smile at him. There’s literally no way not to smile at him when he smiles first. And no reason not to.

He looks down at his hands in his lap like he’s ashamed of the admission he’s about to make. “I don’t know anything about cats.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a dog person.” I let my face fall, although I don’t think the answer is going to matter very much to me. I’m an all around pet person—dogs, cats, horses, gerbils—but cats are independent enough that when I’m spending an entire day away to run a series of open houses, Cheddar can handle himself.

Walker chuckles and the sound is my cocaine. Suddenly, I’m almost euphoric.

“I am. But I could learn about cats.” His voice is as smooth as butter, and when he grins after, it’s enough to make me swoon. I don’t, but it wouldn’t be out of line. “If I have someone to tutor me. Show me their ways.”

And no matter what happens between us, we’re in this together. Especially when Dr. Maclane comes back and says, “No chip and she’s perfectly healthy.” He hands the cat to Walker. “She’s a couple months old, so make an appointment with your regular vet. She’s going to need some shots and a collar in case she pulls a Cheddar.” He smiles at me, and I shrug at Walker.

“Sometimes Cheddar likes to exercise his getaway skills.” Sounds way worse than it is since I’ve stopped calling fire/rescue to save him. Now I let him come home on his own. But I’m convinced if he ever got stuck in a place like Alcatraz, he would be able to find his way out and beat me back home.

“Perfectly healthy.” Walker smiles at me as he says the words. The tone of his voice, rich and deep, sends warmth spiraling through me. If this is going to work out between us, and I really hope it does, I’m going to have figure out how to build some sort of resistance to all the different parts of him that I find too attractive to combat. “What shall we name her?”

I try not go giddy at the fact that he’s said “we,” because I don’t want to embarrass myself. And this is a serious matter. Something “we” will have to explain and justify any time someone meets the cat. It’s like naming a kid. Everyone has opinions, and not too many people are shy about sharing them.

I look at the kitten. There are probably a thousand names that will work—Spot, Oreo, One-thousand and Two since she looks like a dalmatian—but there’s only one that works. “What do you think about naming her Swiss?”

“Like the cheese.” He grins and holds the cat over his heart, stroking her with his index finger, back and forth and I watch his finger almost mesmerized by what I know it feels like. I’m so enamored, I almost miss his slow smile when it slides across his face. “Swiss and Cheddar. I like it.” And then because I’m not quite weak enough for him yet, he kisses the top of Swiss’s head and puts her back inside his shirt.

Before we leave, he goes hands free with the kitten, and she climbs out of the shirt (it makes me question her judgment) and moves up his chest to rest on his shoulder while he pays the bill. I’ve never seen anything so adorable before in my life. There’s something to be said for a man and his cat.

When we walk back to the car, my body is quivering with need to straighten this all out. Well, that and need to be with him on more than this friendly level we’ve established through the bond over the cat.

Instead of letting him open my door, I pull him in by the front of his shirt and kiss him, melding my mouth to his while my hands roam

and his cradle my face. The cat is on his shoulder and she's ignoring us like cats do.

When I pull back he smiles and leans his forehead against mine. "Belle, I'm so sorry."

"We can talk on the way back." I'm not nervous anymore. It's like the kiss took all the stress away and gave me back the contentment I've been missing the last couple days.

I move to the side so he can open the door then slip behind the wheel. It's only a second later when he's sitting in the seat beside me. "I've missed you, Walker." It doesn't explain why he hasn't sent back a text in answer to mine, but this is better. Talking in person—to him anyway—is always better.

"I have missed you so much, Belle, but I didn't know how much space you needed." He pauses. "I was an asshole that night at the bar. I wanted him to know you and I are together. I wanted him to see that you're..." He sigh. "That you're loved by someone who worships you. I should've just said the words to you and not gone all psycho caveman on you."

I smile. I don't need the words. Don't even need the apology since I've already forgiven him, but it's nice to hear that he's sorry. And that's enough to get me through the ride back home.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WALKER

I wasn't sure whether or not we would ever be this close to each other again. Most of it is proximity, but about twenty percent is emotion. She's holding my hand while she drives which is an immense improvement over the way she drove on the way here. On the way to the vet, she drove like she was afraid of her car or that she thought it might try to break free of the death grip she had on the steering wheel.

Now, she has her wrist dangling at the top of the wheel, and she's sitting back in the seat, grooving to that kid Bieber and singing along to her playlist. The kid asks if it's too late to say sorry and she looks at me as she fills in the next line.

"Missing more than my body?" I grin because sweet fuck, I hope it's true. But I also hope she's missing my body. I sure as fuck miss hers.

At least seventy or eighty times an hour I think about her soft, supple skin and her full, lush lips, the expressive eyes, the hands. Dear God, the fucking hands. And as much as I want her, I have to make sure that we're on the same page with all of this. And I can't do it while we're riding back from the vet in her car. I need to do it while I'm holding more than just her hand.

Belle gives me a quick sideways glance then turns back to the road. We're almost back to her place, and the kitten is lying in my lap now, purring like she's got a little motor in there and it's fired up and ready to power a city.

When she pulls into the driveway of her place and then around to the garage, the door lifts and but she shuts the car off. I can only assume it's so she can take me home later. But I'm hopeful that there isn't a need. As a matter of fact, I'm going to do whatever I have to do to make sure.

Once we're inside, she takes the kitten and holds her while Cheddar comes in for a sniff. He takes a couple then looks up at Belle. She

doesn't speak, but she's communicating with the cat. I'd bet my life on it. More so when she puts the kitten down beside him and he looks up, narrows his eyes and then paws the kitten, sending her rolling and he gives chase when she takes off.

We watch them together for a second, like we're watching our kids play.

"Belle, I know that you said it's okay, and you forgive, but I'm still sorry for the way I acted. It was a dick move, and I should've respected you." There's no excuse. "I don't want to be away from you again." I don't know exactly what that means, and I can't visualize it, but I know it's true. I don't want to spend any days without her. "The past few days have been miserable. There was something missing. A part of me."

She glances up at me then turns her body toward me. "What was missing?"

I don't know if she's only asking to force me to say the words, and I don't care. I'll shout them from the rooftops. Just because I didn't realize how I felt about her until I almost lost her and then saw her again, doesn't mean the feelings are any less true.

"You were missing." She pulls my head down for a kiss, and I can't hold any of this inside any longer. "I haven't been in a lot of relationships, so I'm probably going to screw this up. A lot. And often." If history is indicative, anyway. "But it won't be because I don't love you. Because I do." I need to make sure she understand. "Love you, I mean." And then I add, "So much." Just so we're clear.

She smiles again and the weight of what I've just said is heavy on my chest. Not because I expect her to say it back or because I *need* her to say it back. I don't. It's enough that she knows how I feel so long as it doesn't send her running screaming away.

And every second that ticks away, my insecurity about her response grows.

Her voice is soft, silky and breathless when she answers. "I love you, too."

"I'm going to make mistakes." I repeat it again, because it's so very true.

"Me, too." She smiles and somehow, she's in my arms now, hands on my chest, fingers curled into my shirt. "I want to be with you, Walker."

"Oh, thank God." Relief is almost as powerful as desire. And right now, I'm full of both. I want to kiss her, hold her, just absorb all the goodness that is her. But I also want to sweep her up and carry her to the bedroom, put her in the middle of the bed and look at her for a few seconds before I cover her body with mine.

"So what do we do now?" She pulls her lower lip between her teeth and smiles as it slides out to be full and puffy and lusciously red.

I am never going to get tired of looking at her or seeing the emotions change the expressions on her face. "We've got time to figure it out."

She nods. "Let's just always figure it out together, okay?" I nod and lower my head to seal it with a kiss.

EPILOGUE

BELLE

One year later

“The new house is like the daddy house to the one you just sold.” It’s bigger but with the same swoops and iron adornments, the rounded doorways and hardwoods, although this one is more modern with all the conveniences of a professional kitchen—we’re learning to cook together by taking a class his mom teaches at the college—and a pool in back. There’s a balcony on the backside of the master that overlooks the yard that stretches to a treeline that surrounds the entire back yard.

I nod at Molly. “Yeah.” She and Hunter have come to help us move in. He carries a box in from the truck and stops to drop a kiss on her cheek.

“How are things with Walker?” We haven’t had a lot of time to talk lately because she’s been busy trying to make a baby with Hunter and I’ve been busy with buying a house and selling mine.

I glance out the window to where he’s pulled the truck into the yard in front of the house and he’s unloading boxes. For a second, I lose myself watching him. Forget that she’s asked me a question.

“Belle? You in there? Or did I lose you?”

I grin and wave at Walker who looks up at me and smiles. “I’m here.” After a few more seconds of staring at him, I turn back to her. “He’s great. We’re great.” Living with him has been better than I thought sharing a place with a boy would be. “And this house ticks all the boxes. Huge kitchen. Privacy. Close enough to town that neither one of us are driving for hours to get to work.”

“Extra bedrooms for when you want to start a family.”

My cheeks flush with heat. “We aren’t there yet. We haven’t even talked about marriage.”

She cocks an eyebrow. “I thought you don’t believe in marriage.” And she’s smug because once upon a time, I told her that marriage is for fools and that I didn’t think there was enough ink in the world to make a piece of paper more important than my feelings.

“I mean...” I shrug. “I think I might be able to get my head around being Mrs. Walker Winslow.” The thought brings a smile I feel all the way to my toes. “Eventually.”

And like saying his name summoned him, he wraps his arms around me from behind and turns me for a kiss.

When we part, he leans his forehead against mine. “I love you, Belle.”

When Caleb cheated on me, I thought I’d never be able to get past that hurt enough to let someone else in. But now that I have Walker, I know that what I had with Caleb wasn’t real love. It was attraction, maybe some infatuation, but what I felt back then is nothing like this. This is intense and weightless. It’s deep and powerful. It’s the most perfect thing I’ve ever felt before in my life and I can see us growing old together.

“I love you, too.”

And then he lets go, drops to one knee and holds a black velvet ring box open in front of me. I don’t look at the ring yet because I can’t stop looking at him through the happy tears in my eyes.

“I was going to wait for the perfect moment to do this, but I can’t. I can’t wait another minute.” He’s looking up at me and I can see all the love, all the emotion that’s supposed to be there. All the years stretching out in front of us.

This *is* the perfect moment and I’d tell him except I can’t. I don’t want to ruin it by interrupting.

“I never thought that I could ever love a person as much as I love you. I just didn’t think it’s possible to have such feeling inside of me.” His voice wavers, and it’s the most perfect sound I’ve ever heard. “I can’t stand the thought of living even one day without you. I know I’m not perfect, but being with you makes me want to be better. I want us to build our lives together. And our family. Please, marry me, Belle.”

I nod because my throat is thick with emotion. He’s talking about our future and making a life together. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted to hear, and I can’t speak, but I want him to know the answer is yes. A thousand times I’d say yes.

He pulls the ring from the box and drops the box on the plush carpet, then slides the ring on my finger—it’s emerald cut and surrounded by smaller diamonds and I’d stare it all night, but he stands, pulls me close to him and kisses me.

I hold out my hand and stare at the brilliance of not only the diamond, but what the diamond means. I’m going to be Mrs. Walker Winslow, and I can’t wait.

Molly and Hunter are holding each other, watching the best moment of my entire life unfold as Cheddar prances through the living room with Swiss trailing close behind. Cheddar winds through Walker’s legs and Swiss follows.

We’ve already started our family and our future. The rest will come in time. And so long as Walker’s beside me, I can’t wait.

Coming this Summer by Elle Knox & J.H. Wolfe

One Summer