



JUNKYARD
bijou hunter **DOG**

JUNKYARD DOG

Bijou Hunter

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Dedication

Freckles, Tigger, Pooh, and Roo for owning my heart
Mustang Sally for the millions of pep talks
Candy Girl Miranda for keeping me sane and helping me grow
Saucy Sarah and Jazzy Jaimie for being beta reading babes
Naughty Nicole for her kind heart and endless energy
Jim Croce for the inspiration of "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown"

Book Summary

Angus Hayes is as mean as a junkyard dog. Well, that's the rumor Candy Wilburn hears before taking the job as his assistant. Hayes doesn't disappoint. He's a giant man with a big mouth and a bigger ego. In the town of White Horse, what the gorgeous and dangerous Hayes wants, he gets. Now he wants his sassy assistant.

Candy has no doubt Hayes will make a great lover, but she doesn't want to be her boss's booty call. *At first anyway.* Once he shifts from boss to friend and lover, Candy falls hard. Now she can only hope the filthy-mouthed outsider she loves can open his heart and learn to trust.

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ABOUT BIJOU

ONE - CANDY

I've only heard horrible things about Angus Hayes. He's a ruthless man and all-around terrible person. He's often compared to a junkyard dog. The asshole apparently rules the small industrial town of White Horse with an iron fist. After hearing so many bad things about him, I'm not surprised the bastard can't keep an assistant. Lack of social skills aside, Hayes offers a solid salary and full medical for the position, and I'm lured to give the job a try.

His office is a concrete mass likely capable of withstanding a natural disaster or zombie apocalypse. The front door weighs, at least, fifty pounds, and I struggle to open the damn thing. Inside, I find a large front office filled with stacked boxes and discarded furniture. Before I wonder if I've stumbled into a storage unit, a woman pops her head up and stares shocked at me.

"Are you Candy Wilburn?"

"Yes."

"You came," the frazzled blonde says, gesturing me closer. "A lot of people chicken out when they have interviews with him."

I check my simple black blouse for fuzzies and then ask, "And you are?"

"Oh, I'm just the temp. A few girls at the agency and I trade off days here. No one can deal with him for..." The woman's eyes widen. "I'm not sure if I should warn you or if warning you will make you run."

"I don't run especially not in these shoes," I say, glancing at my slightly scuffed black heels.

The woman follows my gaze down to my shoes and then she focuses on my face long enough to lie. "He's not so bad."

I slide off my jacket and shake out my long, blonde hair. "I'm ready whenever he is."

The woman hurries to the back room and mumbles something. Hayes yells that he can't hear a fucking thing she's saying. I jump at the sound of his booming voice and wonder if he's hard of hearing.

After a minute, the woman returns looking extra rattled. "He's ready for you."

"He isn't naked, is he? I'd like to prepare for whatever weird behavior this guy might pull."

"No, he's not weird. Just..." She pauses and considers her words. "He's high maintenance."

"Aren't all men?" I ask, but she only stares at me. "Can I go back now?"

Nodding, she says nothing. Her fear doesn't bode well for me, but unless the guy is handsy, I'm taking the job. Hell, I'll put up with handsy if he adds vision to my benefits package.

When I enter, Angus Hayes is standing with his back to me. The guy is huge at over six and a half feet. No wonder the ceilings are tall in his bunker office. His hair is nearly black with a few stray grays. Going for a lumberjack look, he's wearing a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and hiker boots. I suspect he shops at a special store for giants. Will part of my job involve picking up his oversized clothes?

Hayes turns to me and frowns like I'm annoying him. His people skills are stellar right off the bat.

"Wilburn?" he asks, sitting in a monster-sized chair behind a messy as hell desk. I've never seen so many post-it notes in my life.

"I prefer Candy."

"What's that short for?"

“Candy.”

“Your mother didn’t love you much, did she?”

“My mother adored me,” I say, sitting across from him. “She just loved sweets more.”

Hayes doesn’t react. “You don’t have any experience running an office.”

“That’s not the most important fact about me.”

“What is it then?”

My brown eyes find his nearly black ones, and I hold his gaze. “I’m excellent at tolerating assholes.”

The corners of Hayes’s mouth curves upward. “You suck at interviews.”

“You suck at keeping employees.”

Hayes looks at my resume. “Did you hear about that all the way from Cincinnati?”

“My sister lives in White Horse.”

“What’s her name?” he asks before throwing up his hand. “Let me fucking guess. Your sister is Honey Mayer.”

“Mom loved her sugar.”

Hayes finally smiles. “I know everyone in my town.”

“And they all know you. Honey said you haven’t kept an assistant for more than a few weeks. Why do you think that is?”

Still smiling, he leans forward. “I don’t suffer fools.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Where are you living now? Can’t imagine there’s much space at the Mayer house.”

“We stayed there for a few days, but her husband kicked us out.”

“How fucking come?”

Shrugging, I consider my sister's bad taste in men. "I mentioned he was an asshole, and he didn't take it as well as you did."

"No, I suspect he wouldn't. Andrew Mayer is a thin skinned fucker."

"Among other things."

Hayes studies me for a minute, and I can see him figuring things out. He knows I've worked as a filing clerk and data entry. I've never managed anything in my entire life unless he considers my kids as employees and my house as a business.

"Where are you staying now?" he finally asks.

"We're at the Hilltop Inn. You know, the place that's nowhere near a hill, let alone on top of it."

"Who the fuck is we?"

"Me and my twins."

"They're not babies, are they?" he asks full of disgust. "I hate babies."

"They're nine."

Still irritated, he asks, "Girls or boys?"

"One of each."

"Do they get sick a lot?"

"No, but I won't pretend I won't ditch work if they need me."

"Fair enough, but I won't baby you just because you forgot to take the fucking pill. Understand?"

"Do your medical benefits include vision?" I ask, standing up. "The woman on the phone didn't know."

"Sit the fuck down!" he hollers.

"No," I casually respond while sliding on my jacket. "I need to get back to my kids before the thin-skinned asshole returns from work."

Crossing his arms, he glares at me. “So you’re walking away from the job then?”

“No, you’re giving me the job. I’ll start tomorrow. See you then.”

Hayes jumps up from his desk and lunges to stop me from walking out of the door.

“There’s one fucking boss in this fucking office,” he growls at me.

Noticing his shirt collar is crooked, I reach up and fix it. “I appreciate height in my bosses. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hayes glares hard at me, but he’s all bluster. I know he won’t hurt me except for possibly blowing out my eardrums from all of his hollering.

“Be here at eight,” he says, relenting when I refuse to.

Once Hayes steps aside, I walk past him. “That’ll work until the kids start school. Then I’ll come in at nine.”

I hear Hayes grunt behind me. The woman at the front flinches when he slams the door, but I only keep walking. Based on the mess of boxes, I have a lot of work waiting for me here. That’ll wait for tomorrow. For tonight, I’m taking the kids out to dinner to celebrate my new job.

TWO - CANDY

I've never been to an A&W restaurant before. Spotting one down the road from the hotel, the twins want to try something new. The menu is split between A&W and Kentucky Fried Chicken. I end up with a burger and coleslaw.

"How was spending time with your aunt?" I ask them as we sit at a small table in the nearly empty fast food restaurant.

Cricket shrugs, causing her light brown hair to fall on her face. She wraps the strands behind her ear. "It's loud there."

I glance at Chipper sitting to my side. He has my blond hair. Both kids have my dark brown eyes. I don't see much of their father in them, which is fine. He isn't much of a looker. What he lacks in appearance and personality, he made up for with his family's wealth.

Toby Eddison isn't ugly, just plain. Everything about him exudes ordinary. Toby is the complete opposite of a man like Angus Hayes. One disappears into the crowd while the other looms over it before sending everyone screaming in terror.

"What about you?" I ask Chipper.

"Aunt Honey cried today."

"She has too many kids," Cricket announces.

"Four isn't too many," I say. "I planned on having more."

"Then why didn't you?" Cricket asks, challenging me.

My daughter is full of bluster, just like me. Chipper is more laidback. Both of them are handling the move well, but starting school will likely put them in bad moods.

"Twins are a lot of work," I say, stealing one of her fries.

Cricket smiles. "Double the dirty diapers."

“Double the barf,” Chipper adds.

“Double the hugs,” I say, cuddling my boy and winking at my girl.
“I’ll get you later.”

Cricket smiles wider. “Is your boss mean like Aunt Honey said?”

“He’s a jerk, but I’m not scared.”

“Me either,” Cricket says, thinking fear is the worst thing a person can feel.

“Do we have to stay at Aunt Honey’s again tomorrow?” Chipper asks.

“Yeah. I need to be at the office by eight.”

“We’re old enough to stay at the hotel alone,” Cricket offers and then adds when I roll my eyes. “Add our ages together and we’re eighteen. We could even vote.”

Chipper laughs with a mouth full of burger. “I’m voting for the guy with the best hair.”

I kiss his head. “The law doesn’t add your ages. If I leave you alone, the po-po might get involved.”

Cricket narrows her eyes. I think she’s catching onto how I always use the law as an excuse. I’m never the bad guy! It’s the coppers!

“Soon you’ll be in school, and we’ll get a house. Things will be ironed out in a few weeks.”

Nodding, Cricket returns to eating. I know she’s nervous about school. They’ve gone to the same private school all of their lives. We’d also lived in the same place. Everything was the same for so long, and now nothing is anymore.

“You’ll like it here soon,” I say, more to reassure myself than them.

Chipper nods. Cricket doesn't. They're tense after spending time in my sister's tension-filled house. Life for Honey is very different than my life. Her husband crushes her more every day. Her kids act out, and she's clearly overwhelmed. Throughout all of the bullshit, she smiles and claims to be happy.

We were never close growing up. She was too passive and played life too safe. As the middle child, I had to be loud to be noticed. I took what I needed, or I wouldn't get anything. Most of all, I've faced my family's crappy genetics the way Honey never could.

For generations, we've been duped. Used and discarded. My family gravitates toward bad people. Every relationship in my family is the same. One is an asshole; the other is their victim. My family members are always the victims. We can't help wanting toxic people. This behavior killed my little brother Peat. It also drove my mom to an early grave. Now, the need to love the unlovable looks ready to destroy Honey.

Acceptance was the key to overcoming. I know I want bad men. I'm also drawn to friends who use and neglect me. Unlike Honey, I never married an asshole. I refuse to stay with anyone I can myself into thinking I love. I choose to be the asshole, rather than the victim. I take what I need and then leave before the tables turn.

Toby Eddison gave me twins even though he didn't want kids. His wealthy parents will ensure Chipper and Cricket can afford any college they want. When the Eddison grandparents die one day, the twins will receive a nice chunk of their estate.

These days, a new grandchild rules the estate. Sensing the tides turning, I decided to bail on the train wreck waiting to happen. I

hadn't allowed myself to be shit on by Toby's recent bride. No need to beg for crumbs when I can take my kids and start fresh.

Angus Hayes is an asshole, but I know how to deal with them. I don't fear bad tempers or big mouths. When Honey's douche husband tried to put me in my place, I told him where to go. The kids might hate the hotel, but they like it better than remaining in that house. They already know the difference between being the asshole and victim. Honey will always be the latter.

I plan to raise my children to take what they want from life. The Wilburn family has known only misery, but the twins will put an end to that history.

THREE - CANDY

I arrive for my first work day with a queasy stomach from eating too many crappy hotel scrambled eggs. I sip weak coffee from my “Best Mom” coffee mug and wait for Angus Hayes to arrive at the office.

I managed to get the kids up at six. After we finish eating breakfast, I drop them off at Honey’s house. My sister looks like absolute crap and the purple lump on her forehead doesn't help. Honey really isn’t a morning person.

Even cold and nauseous, I feel great while sitting in my car in the Hayes, Inc. parking lot. A new start always invigorates me. Once I get my first paycheck, I’ll put down a deposit on an apartment and get the twins settled. Life will be great. No worries. Anyone who says differently needs a swift kick in the ass.

Hayes nearly crashes his ugly, black monster truck into my gold Hyundai Tucson. I suspect he’s trying to intimidate me. As a mother of a boy, I’d never want to stigmatize an entire gender, yet men are stupid.

I climb out of the car and wave at him as if he hadn’t behaved like an asshole a minute earlier.

“Morning, boss,” I say, carrying my bag lunch and coffee mug.

Hayes isn’t a morning person either. He glares at me, and I wonder if he’s forgotten who I am. A moment passes before he walks to the front door.

“If you work out, I’ll give you a key.”

“Okay.”

His dark eyes narrow menacingly, and I suspect he isn't a fan of my morning peppiness. I smile at his irritation as he opens the door.

"I didn't know if there was a dress code," I say, following him inside. "I figured since I'll be moving around all these dusty boxes and organizing things that jeans would be fine."

"You're not moving shit."

Hayes stomps to a small room connected to the front office. I follow him because I don't know what else to do. Leaning around his wide shoulder to see what he's doing, I realize we're in a break room. He hits the button on the coffee pot.

"I like my fucking coffee black."

I study Hayes and find him quite attractive. His sleepy eyes even make him appear soft and a little bit vulnerable. His jaw remains tight, and I realize he wants me to respond to his coffee detail.

"Most men do," I say, stepping back. "Do you want some now?"

"Yes. Make it fucking strong."

"Then what do I do?"

"Answer the fucking phone."

"What about the office mess?" I ask, washing out the pot in a small sink.

"Don't fucking touch anything."

"Why?"

Hayes walks away but hollers from his office door. "Because I fucking said so."

His voice is so loud it rattles my bones. I assume the big sound is a result of his giant lungs, and he can't really be blamed for his weird anatomy.

"Was your father a giant man?" I ask when bringing him coffee.

“Don’t fucking talk to me right now,” he says without looking up from his paperwork.

“When is my lunch period? Do I get thirty minutes or an hour? Also what about breaks?”

Hayes lifts his head and glares at me. I know he’s accustomed to people running in terror from this devil mean expression. I’ve seen worse from the twins.

“Leave. Me. The. Fuck. Alone,” he growls when I don’t back down.

“Okay, but I’m taking your non-answers as meaning I can choose my lunch and break times.”

Before he can complain, I walk out of the room. The front desk is nearly as bad as Hayes’s office in regards to post-it notes. On the computer monitor, I find a password for logging in. I take the post-it and crumble it up. Once I log into the account, I change the password. I don’t plan on going anywhere soon.

By the time my first break comes along, I’ve organized the front desk, brought Hayes five cups of coffee, and brewed a second pot.

After eating a snack and calling Honey to check on the kids, I decide to explore the office.

One door opens to a closet filled with weapons. I look over the shotguns and semi-automatic rifles. Glancing at Hayes’s office, I hear him bitching at someone for being a brain dead fuck-twat.

Leaving the closet, I find another room with a door labeled “meeting room.” There are no chairs inside, and the folding table is against the wall. I assume Hayes doesn’t schedule many meetings.

Outside, I spot a few bullet holes in the building’s front wall. Running my fingers over them, I can’t imagine anyone taking a shot

at Hayes's place. Then again, suicidal tendencies happen to everyone occasionally.

The office sits between a Waffle House and an old Victorian house. I laugh at the thought of Hayes living in the house. Back in the office, I hear him still bitching at someone, but I sense it's a different person.

Behind the building is a large, muddy yard. At some point long ago, this office was a house. Hayes turned the house into a bunker-style office, and the front yard into a wide gravel covered parking lot. He left the backyard to turn to mush. Not a single blade of grass remains.

I'm bored out of my mind by the time Hayes appears from his office.

"I'm going to lunch. Come with me and bring something to write on."

Eager to do something, I grab my purse and a pad of paper. Hayes doesn't wait for me, and his long strides put a lot of distance between us as we walk next door to the Waffle House. He's already sitting at the counter when I enter.

"Get what you want on my dime but don't annoy me with how you feel about food."

"What about how the food feels about me?"

Hayes refuses to acknowledge my comment. He stares at our middle-aged waitress wearing a lot of experience on her worn face.

"This is Candy," Hayes says to Donna.

The waitress sizes me up. "I knew a Candy when I was growing up. She was a diseased whore."

“You know what’s funny?” I say, taking the menu. “I knew a Donna growing up, and she collected used panties to sniff while masturbating.”

“How is that funny?” she asks.

“Well, your name is Donna.”

Frowning at me, she turns away to get me a cup of coffee.

“Don’t piss off Donna,” Hayes says without looking at me. “She will spit in your fucking food.”

“Does she own a car?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I’ll slash her tires. I think that’s worse than a loogie in my food.”

Hayes grins. “You sure have a fucking mouth on you.”

“Said the guy who referred to someone an ‘asshole stuffed with twat peanuts’ today.”

“Well, he is.”

“Is there anyone you do like?”

“Donna brings me coffee and knows how I like my hash browns,” Hayes says to the returning waitress.

“Wants them almost burned just like he did the first time he came in here fifteen years ago.”

“Ugh, get a room you two,” I mutter.

Donna glares at me, but I ignore her and order a chicken sandwich.

“Don’t burn my hash browns. I like mine normal like normal people.”

After Donna walks away, Hayes studies me. “You seem to forget how I’m your employer and so acting like a mouthy bitch isn’t a smart way to keep your job.”

“Your threat would be more convincing if you weren’t stuck with temps who left post-it notes declaring you’re the devil and she hopes you get sucked back into hell.”

Hayes rolls his eyes. “Those temps were fucking twats.”

“But were they twat peanuts?” I ask, grinning.

“No, they weren’t that bad.”

Enjoying when Hayes acts human-like, I try to keep the conversation going. “Do you have any family that’ll drop by unannounced?”

“Are you planning on doing inappropriate shit at the office?”

“No, I’m just curious, and this seemed a casual way to ask that wouldn’t imply I want to be your friend.”

“Well done then.”

“So are you married? Dating anyone serious? Have a few baby mamas around town?”

“I don’t believe women are my equals so I will never be in a serious relationship with one of them.”

I nearly laugh at the sincerity behind his bullshit comment especially after how respectful he was to his precious waitress.

“They can’t be your equals because they’re women? I ask. “Or because you’re such a huge asshole that no one else can compete?”

“Don’t be offended,” he says, clearly wanting me to be offended. “Women can do whatever the fuck they want. Just not with me.”

“I’m not offended. What do I care what you think about women? Now if I were your mother, I’d be very disappointed, young man.”

“My mother is dead.”

Hayes’s tone tells me he wants me to shut up, and I immediately know I must keep the conversation going. “I’m sorry. My mother is

dead too. Is your dad dead?"

"No."

"Mine is. I guess that means I win the saddest child contest. Do you have any siblings?"

"No. I was a miracle child born when my parents were in their late forties."

"Ah, miracle child. Explains a lot."

Hayes smirks. "Don't be jealous."

"I was the middle child, so that makes me the one my parents planned and yet they paid the least to. I have two, attention-hog siblings. They bitched and moaned all fucking day and night. Honey had chronic headaches that made her whine more than any human has ever whined ever. My brother Peat was super clumsy and always injuring his balls. He also masturbated constantly, causing him to bang around his injured balls. Let's just say that led to more self-pity than even ten teenage boys should accomplish. I think knowing my family history should help you understand why your crap doesn't faze me."

"Your family sounds horrible."

"My family could kick your ass, dickface, so watch yourself."

"Your parents are dead. I doubt they'll be much help in a fight."

"My brother's dead too, but Honey can take a punch clearly," I say and then stare really mean at him. Hayes nearly burst into giggles, but I don't relent. "I'm the one you need to watch out for. I'm one reason my brother's balls were always sore. I kicked him in the crotch weekly. I always go ball-shot. *Every time*. Even if the guy gets ready and covers his balls, I'll run behind him and nail them that way. You should really consider wearing a giant cup to work."

Hayes lets out a loud, ruckus laugh that makes me feel like I've tamed a beast. As exhilarating as it is to get him to loosen up, I'm more concerned by how appealing I find his smile. The last thing I need is to fall for my boss and fuck up the best job I've had.

FOUR - HAYES

The meth dealer isn't from White Horse. He works out of the town next door. Even though Common Bend isn't usually my problem, lately it's suffered from revolving sheriffs and turf wars. Though the Bend's issues have settled down recently, I have a punk fuck selling his shit in *my* territory.

Unlike the Common Bend sheriff, I don't have a biker gang pushing my buttons. Another motorcycle club calls the shots in neighboring Hickory Creek Township. My muscle is purely freelance. White Horse thugs do what I say, not because of an alliance to a crew, but because I pay well and spill blood easily.

The White Horse sheriff is an extension of my power. He handles the small crimes, but I'm the one who really keeps the town safe.

"Found this asshole selling his shit by the White Horse Mall," Sheriff Briggs tells me.

Despite having the cops on my payroll, I don't rely on them for muscle. The two guys holding the dealer are losers, but they're my loyal losers. They've lived on the harsh streets of Nashville and know the deadly pressure the police and competition can cause. Here in White Horse, life is orderly. *Do what I say and no one suffers.* This dealer will soon learn I tolerate no disobedience.

"Hey, man," he says to me immediately.

I reach into the back of my truck and find a crowbar. The dealer's fake smile fades.

"Now wait."

"You're in White Horse," I explain while walking to him and swinging the crowbar.

The metal hits his kneecap, and he drops to the ground.

“Pick him back up,” I tell Joe and Greg.

They grin at my instructions. These losers love beating on people. While I don't particularly enjoy hurting people, I relish instilling fear in my enemies. This guy will cry to his sheriff boss about what a scary fuck I am. He'll also share his horror story at all of the Common Bend shitholes. The locals will claim I'm crazy or evil. Whatever they say, their fear translates into staying the fuck out of my territory. If people in White Horse want their drugs, they can drive ten minutes to Common Bend and buy it there.

The crowbar makes quick work of the wailing fuck. He begs first before having a delusional moment where he threatens me with payback. I nail him in the ass for that bullshit and likely break his tailbone. Ass injuries are surprisingly bothersome, and I smile at the thought of him limping around Common Bend. Whenever people ask what happened, he'll share my evil deeds. I look forward to my legend growing.

Joe and Greg dump the dealer back in Common Bend while I drive home. On the way, I pick up fast food for Nightmare and me. I also call the new sheriff in Common Bend.

Sheriff Carter is a whipped monkey. He takes his orders from a motorcycle club out of Kentucky. The last sheriff pushed back against the Reapers and their leader, Cooper Johansson, and he's a dead man walking now. The better-behaved Carter plans to remain alive and well.

“You need to keep your people on tighter leashes,” I bark as soon as Carter answers.

“I don't...”

“You will. If I find your people peddling their shit on my streets again, I’ll have a conversation with Johansson. I don’t mind if he sends his guys down here to look around. How about you, asshole? Are you okay with your boss checking up on you?”

I don’t wait for Carter to answer. Hanging up, I order my burgers and fries before heading home.

My house is my sanctuary. Sounds like a pussy thing to say, but I love my damn house. No one is allowed to visit. Even my dad doesn’t come over. Not when he’s always covered in cat hair, and Nightmare eats cats. Well, I’ve never actually seen my dog eat a cat, but I’ve seen him chase one with his mouth hanging open. I assume if the big bastard caught the furball he’d have made it a meal.

A maid cleans the place every other day. A gardener keeps the yard perfect. My house isn’t the nicest in town, but it’s built to fit me and only me.

The fence isn’t a delicate iron-rod like my neighbors’, but a thick, concrete mass capable of withstanding a car bomb. The style of the house is considered mid-century modern apparently. I’ve always preferred hard edges. As a kid, I enjoyed playing with blocks. That’s how my house feels - a well-built row of tall blocks with sharp lines.

In my house, I never have to duck. I can enter my shower without squeezing through the door. I’m able to stretch out in my bathtub. Everything fits a man of my size. The house is manly as fuck too. I like dark wood. I like dark colors. I like leather furniture. I hate light and airy. This house looks like me, and I hear it scares the local kids. This idea makes me smile.

Nightmare meets me at the garage door. He has the run of the place while I’m gone. Through his giant-sized doggy door, he can go

outside to do his business. Mostly he hangs out inside and owns the place.

My dog is Leonburger breed and huge like me. He scares the shit out of everyone even though the dumbass hunts squirrels rather than burglars. If someone broke into the house, he would watch them take all our shit. Well, assuming the asshole didn't sleep through it.

Nightmare looks like his name, but he's a softie unlike me. The dog follows me from the kitchen to the massive living room where I turn on the massive wall-mounted TV. I dump his burger and fries on a plate on the floor and then dig into my meal.

After searching my DVR, I settle on an episode of the survivalist show *Alone*. Nightmare finishes his meal and jumps on the expansive sectional couch. He has his spot, and I have mine, and it's been this way for a decade.

"New assistant started today," I tell the dog.

He looks at me with his brown eyes, and I wonder what he imagines I said. My guess is something about food. Only a few things perk him up lately. *Food, squirrels, and food.*

"She's a fucking bossy bitch," I say with my mouth full. "I like her. She might work out."

Nightmare rests his head on his paws and stares at me. I think he's hoping I'll toss him a few fries.

"She's a helluva looker too," I say, giving in and handing the dog a fry. He eats it before staring horrified that I might think one is enough. I give him a few more, and he's a happy camper. "She has kids. Women with kids are too much of a hassle. You remember Brenda."

I think to my last attempt to have a girlfriend. She came with a daughter, an ex-husband, custody issues, and too much whining to make the relationship worth my time. The woman was so self-absorbed I had to dump her twice before she noticed.

Candy might be worth trying again. When I yelled at her earlier about not answering the phone, she yelled she was in the bathroom. *Did I want her crapping on the floor or was it possible for me to get off my ass and pick up the phone myself?*

The chick is ballsy, and I like women with big brass ones. I figure office life will get very complicated if I decide to pursue my assistant. I consider waiting to make my move until she settles in, but I know other men will soon circle her like sharks. Available attractive women in White Horse are a rarity.

No doubt I'll need to put my mark on Candy before it's too late.

FIVE - CANDY

When I pick up the twins, I learn Honey's douche husband is working late and won't be home for dinner. My sister looks like crap, and her kids are writing on the walls. I want to kick their adorable little asses, but instead, I suggest she come with me to dinner at McDonald's. Her kids can wear themselves out in the play area, and I can learn to be friends with Honey. *A simple enough plan.*

"Andrew doesn't want me to discipline them," Honey says when her older two kids throw fries at each other. "He feels his way his better."

"Marriage is a fascinating institution," I say rather than what I'm really thinking.

I turn to her six-year-old daughter Allison. "Stop throwing the fries or I won't let you go in the jungle gym."

"No!" she yells at me.

"No what?" I ask.

"I'm gonna play."

"Not if you don't stop throwing the fries. I will hold you on my lap while everyone else plays. You can fight me, but I won't let go. I'm *very, very* stubborn. You can scream and kick, but I won't let you go. I will make you sit here and watch the others play. Aunt Candy doesn't mess around. So are you going to stop throwing your fries?"

Allison looks at her mom for assistance, but Honey only stares at her food. Exhausted by her life, she wants someone to fix what she's broken. I'd feel sorry for her if I wasn't the middle child and forced to figure everything out in life myself.

"Well?" I ask again.

Allison doesn't respond, but she eats her food without throwing them at Evan. Her brother sitting across the table gets the message too.

"Thanks," Honey mumbles to me.

"No problem. I like bossing around small humans."

Honey stares at me, and I realize how much she looks like our mom. "I'm tired all the time."

Nodding, I say nothing. I'm not someone who offers advice. I don't believe people really want anything besides sympathy when they ask for advice. *I know I don't.*

"Before we move into a house, you should bring the kids to the hotel so they can swim," I say instead of pretending to know how to fix her problems.

"That would be nice."

Her lackluster response steals my interest in talking to her. I focus on Chipper nibbling at his chicken nuggets. I imitate him, and he laughs. He's such a mellow kid. I feel lucky to have done the hard work with the kids when they were little. Now I have them pretty well trained.

Once all six kids finish eating, I give them permission to use the play area. I see Allison peeking back at me to see if I'm watching her. When she finds me eyeballing her hardcore, the kid stiffens. *Yeah, Aunt Candy is a big old meanie.*

"What's it like working for the scariest man in town?" Honey asks as soon as we're alone.

"A little boring. Hayes won't let me do much. I figure he's worried I'll quit. Once I don't, I hope he gives me more to do."

"Is he horrible?"

“No. He yells a lot, but mostly at other people, so I don’t care.”

“I’ve heard a lot of things about him.”

“Like what?”

“That he kills people for pissing him off. That he owns half of the businesses in White Horse. That he will see a woman and order her to sleep with him. If she doesn’t, something bad happens to her family.”

I roll my eyes. “Who told you all that?”

“People talk.”

“People are morons,” I say, realizing I sound like Hayes. “I don’t doubt he breaks rules and laws and does what he wants, but he’s not a monster.”

“You should be careful.”

“No.”

“No?”

“Life is about taking chances and expecting most of them to end up in the dumper. I like my job, and I find Hayes interesting.”

“He is attractive. Rough, if you like that sort of thing.”

Something about her tone makes me curious. “Do you like rough?”

“I married Andrew.”

Arching my eyebrow, I say, “Yes, you did, but that’s not what I asked.”

Honey shrugs, but I know she’s thinking of someone in particular that ain’t Andrew.

“I admit I’m curious about Hayes,” I say, allowing her to weasel out of admitting who she likes. “By curious, I mean freakishly

attracted to him. I want to keep my job, so I plan to behave. Not all risks are worth it.”

A few minutes pass while I watch the kids play and Honey stares at her uneaten fries.

“I’m not a bad mother,” Honey says, but her words sound like a question.

“No, you’re not.”

“It’s Andrew’s rules about disciplining them.”

“I understand.”

“But you don’t like him.”

“Have I ever pretended otherwise?”

Honey narrows her eyes. I catch a hint of her temper hiding beneath her broken-down-woman mojo. “No. You’d still be at the house if you could pretend.”

“I like the hotel better.”

“If you can see the good in Hayes then you should know Andrew’s not a monster either.”

Focusing on my sister, I stare into her eyes and again see our mother looking back at me.

“You want me to lie and say he’s a good husband and father. Not going to happen. I think he’s a thin-skinned wuss who takes his fucking issues out on you. You know that’s what I think. So you either expect me to lie, or you’re looking for a way out with him and think I’ll give it to you. Which is it?”

Honey’s been so beaten down these last years that she doesn’t even look hurt by my words. She only stares at me and considers what I said.

“I can’t leave him.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have the money to take care of four kids.”

“He’ll pay child support.”

“I can’t raise them on my own.”

“How much does he do now? I mean really? You say he is in charge of their discipline, but they’re wild when he’s home too.”

“They’re not bad kids.”

I’m irritated by her weakness. Honey’s path is as doomed as our mother’s. “No, they’re wild,” I say. “They need you to be the grownup, not their maid and cook.”

“It’s not easy to walk away and be alone.”

“I raised the twins by myself. Toby didn’t want them. His family did help financially, but I never got greedy. They babysat occasionally, but I was the one in the trenches every day with two kids who ganged up on me. The twins aren’t saints, and I’m not super mom. They’re sneaky and plot against me when they want something. It’s my job to be smarter than them. Outwitting children isn’t difficult, but it takes commitment and energy. If you’re spending all your time trying not to piss off Andrew, you don’t have much energy left for the kids. That’s how Andrew likes it.”

“He wants me to do more, not less.”

Sighing, I wonder if she’s really so blind or simply wants me to tell her what she already knows. “That’s what he says, but he knows if you were stronger and more confident you’d kick his ass to the curb. You’re still young enough to start over. He’ll keep you down until you feel life’s passed you by. That’s what men like Andrew do. He’s not the kind of guy who beats you down in an obvious way. He does it slowly, every day until you begin doing it for him. You tell yourself

you can't do better. You say you can't be on your own. You believe his lies because you've heard them for too long."

Honey wraps her arms around her body, and I know I should come at her with more finesse. She's been bossed around for a long time, and I'm bossing her around now. I can't edit myself. Not when an asshole like Andrew is involved. I know how losers like him destroy people in my family. We're asshole magnets. The only way to survive is to call an asshole an asshole and face life alone rather than as someone's bitch.

"You think about it," I say when she remains quiet. "If you need help, I'm here. If you need money, I have some saved up. If you make any cash from babysitting, I'd suggest you hide it from Andrew and keep it for the day when you're sick of his shit. A guy like him will empty out your bank accounts as soon as he knows you might walk. He'll want you desperate. That's what I think anyway. Take it as you will."

Honey nods and I leave her to think. At the play area, I find the twins whispering. They see me and smile. If I do nothing else for them in life, I'll raise them prepared to face life alone rather than settling for losers. With them having each other, maybe they'll be better suited for that choice than Honey and her kids.

SIX - HAYES

I storm into the office. Too many fucking stupid people in the world and they're all conspiring to drive me to an early grave. I have enemies surrounding me, and my allies are fucking morons.

Sitting at a cleared off table, I find a boy and girl writing with pencils in math workbooks. The children stare at me, and I stare back at them. When they don't look away, I glare hard at Candy's offspring.

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"Mom has work to do," the girl says.

"Where is Candy?"

"In the bathroom."

I take a step closer and really turn on the scary glare. The boy decides he's had enough and focuses on his school crap. A dark haired version of Candy, the girl won't relent. She narrows her brown eyes at me, and I swear the little bitch is trying to intimidate me.

"Stop fucking looking at me," I growl.

"Stop looking at me," she growls back.

Admiring her guts, I smile. "Nicely done."

The girl isn't sure if I'm tricking her, so she keeps glaring. Candy appears from the bathroom and looks startled to see me.

"I didn't say you could bring them here," I growl at her.

Without missing a beat, Candy replies, "You didn't say I couldn't."

"No, I didn't. I fucked up. Now get them out of here."

"I'm waiting for a phone call," she says, sitting at her desk. "I can't leave unless you're planning to stay in the office and answer the phone yourself."

“Make them leave and you stay.”

“That’s a really great plan but no.”

“Candy, we need to have a conversation about boundaries and work expectations.”

“Right now? I’m pretty busy currently.” Candy leans back in her chair and takes a nail file to her pinkie finger. “How did your meeting go?”

“Like shit.”

“People are stupid. What can you do?”

Frowning, I don’t like how her words amuse me. Candy still makes me uneasy. I want to fuck her, but she’s got kids, and I don’t like kids. I’ve hated all my assistants, but I don’t hate Candy. It might be possible to learn not to hate her kids too.

“What are their names?” I ask.

“Chipper and Cricket.”

“That’s right. I remember you saying they have stupid names.”

The twins look at me and then their mother. She waves her hand as if telling them to ignore me. They return to their work.

“Their father picked their names.”

“You should have insisted on better names.”

“Having unique names makes us unique. Wouldn’t you agree, Angus?” she asks, emphasizing my name.

I swear her daughter snickers and sounds exactly like her mother. I should hate knowing there are two of them in the world, but I don’t. The world is a stupid place full of morons. Having more than one of Candy makes me hopeful for humankind.

“Come to my office.”

Candy follows me immediately. I know she thinks I'll put my foot down about having the kids in the office. She's ready for my rage, so I give her something else. She isn't the only sneaky person in the room.

"Have you found a place to live yet?"

"No. I'm still looking around. I don't know dick about White Horse."

I open my address book and find a number for her. After writing it on a slip of paper, I hand her the information.

"This realtor handles my rental properties. I have a few empty places on the north side. That's where you'll want to live if you want your weird kids going to good schools. The east side has good schools too, but the people there are arrogant fuckers. You won't fit in as a single mom with a stripper name. The south is too close to Hickory Creek, and that place is a shithole. The west side is too close to Common Bend, and the schools are full of junkies' kids."

Candy looks over the number and then nods. Her gaze is soft and appreciative. I drink in her attention and feel like a junkie myself.

"You can pick whatever empty house I have available."

"What's the rent like?" she asks, still watching me with a warm expression.

I think about kissing her. If my lips taste hers, I know I'll devour her whole. Based on her expression, I don't think she'd stop me. Then I remember her kids in the next fucking room and realize I'm going home alone again tonight.

"No rent," I say, finally answering her. "Just get your kids into a real school, so they don't end up being fucking morons like most people in this town."

“You don’t have to do that.”

Sitting in my chair, I lean back and frown at her. “I don’t have to do much of fucking anything.”

“No, but that’s because you’re scary and rich. This gesture is you being nice. You don’t need to do that.”

“I went through a shitfuck of assistants before I ended up with those temp broads. If giving you a rental house keeps you happy and I don’t need to learn a new moron’s name, it’s no skin off my ass.”

Candy smiles at me, but the warmth in her eyes is gone. She’s in smartass mode again.

“This is like the end of one of those *Scrooge* movies where the mean man gets all sweet and syrupy about humanity.”

“Go away,” I say, but I’m fucking smiling because her teasing doesn’t piss me off the way most things do.

Candy bats her eyes at me and then spins around and leaves the room. I hear her rounding up the twins and checking the backdoors. Soon her car starts and she disappears down the road toward the hotel she currently calls home. I imagine her moving into a house and getting settled into White Horse. Keeping Candy happy means making me happy and me being happy is all that really matters in life.

SEVEN - CANDY

Hayes's realtor Janice shows us three houses on the north side of White Horse before we arrive at the red brick box-style home. I don't think much of the flat front exterior. Despite its lack of hominess, the place feels safe. Strong, unassuming, ready to withstand chaos. Sort of like Hayes's office.

When we left the hotel this morning, the twins were thrilled to look for a house. Now they're tired and bored. The first house interested them, but the yard was tiny, and Chipper said the bedrooms smelled evil. When Cricket asked what evil smelled like, he said her butt. *Things went downhill from there.*

By the time we see the brick box, they're ready to live anywhere.

"Nothing feels like home," Chipper whines after the third house.

I don't know what home feels like. Since I left home at eighteen, I've lived in apartments and the Eddison family's guest house. I don't know what I'm looking for in this rental besides three bedrooms, a decent backyard, and enough space in the house for us not to step on each other. My standards are low, yet I still can't find anything that fits until we drive up to the brick box.

The inside of the house is painted a sunny, pale yellow. The floors alternate between plush carpet and shiny wood. Something about the house reminds me of Hayes. Not the yellow, of course, but the place's no-nonsense flow. The tall ceilings remind me of him too. The house isn't fancy but has good bones. Like with Hayes, I'm attracted to something at the house's core.

"I like it," I tell Chipper and Cricket while we stand upstairs.

"It feels like a home," Chipper says.

“The bedrooms are small,” Cricket mumbles and then adds, “We’re used to sharing a room. Having two will be good.”

“Do you like it, though?” I ask. “We don’t have to move here or anywhere until you guys are happy.”

I feel guilty again for taking them away from Cincinnati. They lost their school, friends, and grandparents. I worried about them turning soft from that plush life, and made the decision to ditch the drama Toby’s new wife created. It was my call, but the kids have to live with the consequences.

“I like this house,” Chipper says, walking into a bedroom. “This is mine.”

Cricket runs to the second smaller bedroom. “Mine has a bigger window.”

“Mine has a bigger closet!” Chipper yells.

Smiling, I have my answer. Downstairs, I talk with Janice.

“Hayes made clear you can have whatever house you wanted. He told me to help you with moving too.”

“I don’t have much to move. We lived in a furnished house back in Cincinnati. Where’s a good place to buy furniture?”

“Mister Hayes owns Rickman’s Furniture. I’m sure you’ll get a good deal there.”

Janice’s tone makes me wonder if she thinks Hayes and I are playing hip gymnastics. She likely views me as his assistant in name only. If she works harder and helps more, I’m cool with this misperception. I learned long ago not to give a flying fuck what strangers thought about me. Hell, I only mildly care what my friends think. Life is too short to stress others’ opinions.

EIGHT - HAYES

Who in the fuck have I hired? Candy is a huge pain in the ass yet a great assistant. The problem is she's a good looking chick. *Scratch that.* She's fucking gorgeous, but I've seen plenty of gorgeous women who might even be better looking than Candy. None of them got under my skin. Not a single fucking one of them ever made me wonder about their soft hair.

Candy is fun to look at with her tall, athletic build. Her blonde hair hangs loosely down her back, and I find myself wondering what it looks like up in a ponytail. My obsessed brain wants to see her neck bare. She's been my assistant for three days, and I'm already a dog in heat.

I feel her in the next room. Fucking feel her breathing. I can close my eyes and sense her on my skin. I hate how Candy toys with me without even her knowing it. *What in the fuck will happen if she ever figures out what she can do to me?*

I have shit to do today. Now I have a competent assistant so I should be working more. Not me, though. Not with Candy in the next damn room.

Breaking pencils keeps me from standing up and checking on her every ten minutes. An hour later, I'm out of damn pencils, and I'm forced to ask her to bring me more. *Breaking pencils isn't a long-term fucking plan.*

I should fuck her and be done with it. That's what my problem is, and I know how to fix it. Give my dick what it wants so I can fucking think straight.

If I fuck her, she'll think we're an item. Women always think that shit five seconds after a man fucks them. Only a whore is safe to fuck without worrying about strings attached.

Candy might be capable of remaining rational after I fuck her. Or she might want something from me. Or she might quit, and I'll end up with those crying temps. I'm sick of listening to women cry. Candy never cries. When I yelled at her yesterday for misplacing a file, she only smiled and said she would do better. I realized later I put the file in the wrong place. I also realized she fucking knew it was me who fucked up. Candy shrugged it off. No doubt she's smart and tough enough to let me fuck her and then go back to work.

What if I fuck her, and she remains a good employee but decides to date a guy? An asshole sharing my pussy isn't acceptable.

Does she already have a man in White Horse?

Who is he?

I'll find out and scare him off.

And if he doesn't scare?

I'll beat him with a bat.

I'll take an ax and chop him into tiny pieces.

No, drag him behind my truck until he's mush.

If any man in White Horse touches Candy besides me, I'll beat him until he's half dead. Then I'll let him get medical treatment and heal up, so I can beat him to death for real.

By the time I walk out to where Candy plays a computer game, I'm ready to hunt someone down and kill them.

"What are you doing?"

Candy doesn't even look at me. "My kids like *Minecraft*. I'm trying to care about the game."

“You’re at work.”

“Yes, but I have nothing to do,” Candy says and then glances over her shoulder at me. “Too bad you don’t have boxes full of crap I could clean up and organize.”

My hand reaches out to touch her hair before I regain control of myself. Candy notices but only turns back to the computer screen.

“How long would it take you?” I ask, walking around the desk, so she’s forced to look at me.

“For what?”

“To clean up all this shit,” I say, waving my hand at the stacks.

Candy stands up and surveys the mess. “Depends on what’s in the boxes.”

“Business records. Tax shit.”

Candy’s sexy mouth drops open. “Shouldn’t they be at your accountant’s office or something?”

“They have their copies. I have mine.”

Candy walks to a pile of boxes and shakes her head. “Is there anything sensitive in these boxes?”

“Probably, but my enemies would have to dig through a lot of boxes to find them. I don’t even know which ones have anything important in them.”

Candy frowns at me, and I feel small under her disapproving scowl. *Fuck her for having such power.*

“What did you fucking think was in the boxes?”

“MREs and other prepper stuff,” she says and then adds when I frown at her. “Your office looks like a bunker, and you have a small arsenal in the coat closet. I assumed this other crap was you preparing for the end of the world.”

“For your information, I keep my end of the world shit at my fucking house. I can survive for five to ten years easily. It’ll only depend on if I save anyone with me.”

Candy holds my gaze, and I wait for her to catch the hint that I’d be willing to save her under the right circumstances.

“I’m glad you mentioned that,” she says, turning away and looking inside a box. “If the bombs fly or zombies rise, I’ll bring my kids to your place. Might bring my sister and her kids too. I’ll leave the douche husband at home.”

“You can show up, but I make no promises about whether I’ll let you inside.”

Still checking the box, Candy grins. “If the world is coming to the end, you could do worse than having two hot blondes at your beck and call.”

I shrug, but there’s no denying I’d be a lucky fucker to sit out the end of the world with this woman. Her kids, sister, and even more kids don’t interest me as much.

“You keep bitching about cleaning all this up, so have at it.”

Candy looks at me suddenly, and I can feel her thinking. *Devious thoughts too*. She’s up to something, and I cross my arms in anticipation for whatever bullshit she’ll pull.

“How do you feel about paying someone under the table?”

“Who?” I growl, sounding scarier than I plan, but Candy doesn’t react to my tone.

“My sister could use extra cash, but nothing that can be traced.”

“First, you bring your kids here. Now you want me to hire your sister. I’m not running the Candy Wilburn charity house here.”

She hears how I stumble over my words. Her eyes narrow and she sizes me up. I don't need her knowing she turns me into a dog in heat. I want to shift my stance and let my hard dick breathe. Knowing Candy, I have no doubt she'll notice.

"Her husband is a douche, and I want her to leave him. Any cash she can hide would help."

"Why in the fuck do you think I care?"

"You said her husband is a douche. I would think you'd want to piss him off. Don't you live to fuck with people?"

I detect no judgment in Candy's voice. She's right that I get a kick out of fucking with people. Something about seeing a man squirm makes me smile.

"Fine. I'll pay the same rate per hour as I pay you and I'll pay in cash. I don't want to see her or hear about her emotional crap."

Candy smiles and her dark eyes light up in a way that makes my dick hurt. "I'll slap duct tape over her mouth and keep her focused on cleaning up your mess."

"You do that," I say in a threatening tone for no reason besides my dick's painful throbbing.

The cause and possible relief stand three feet from me. She won't fuck me today. I can see how the thought isn't on her mind right now. No doubt she's considered me inside her, though. Candy isn't stupid. She's a sexy woman, and I'm an available man.

I think to push the topic, but something stops me. My brain might be working again because I realize she's a stranger. I don't know shit about her, yet I'm ready to let her see me at my most vulnerable. No one can have power over me. I won't even give it to my sickly father or Nightmare. No way will I give such power to Candy.

So I walk back to my office and leave the tempting blonde to play computer games. She's only free for the time being. Once I learn her secrets and tilt our relationship in my favor, I'll make my move.

NINE - HAYES

During my usual Saturday routine, I pass the office and think of Candy inside cleaning. She warned me not to visit since Honey and her kids would be running around. The thought of six children making a shitload of noise and stinking up the place fucking horrifies me. On the other hand, I can't deal with going two days without seeing her. Candy's crawled under my skin, and I can't dig her out. Worse is how I'm not even sure I want to.

Country music plays in the office when I walk through the front door with Nightmare at my side. The dog bolts inside and begins smelling the strangers. His nose makes a beeline for Honey Mayer's crotch. I assume she's on the rag.

While Honey freezes in terror, Candy's back remains to the door. Shaking her ass to the song, she's unaware of my presence. I admire the sweet curves of her wiggling butt in a pair of khaki shorts. Before my dick can spring loose from my pants, she turns around.

"Hey, it's the boss man!" she cries, walking over to where Nightmare now stares at Honey. "Can I pet your tiny horse?"

Candy kneels down and strokes Nightmare, who remains wary. The dog doesn't know what he's missing.

"How much have you gotten done?" I ask.

"Three boxes and dusting. Are you checking up on me?"

"Yes."

Smiling, Candy stops petting the dog and glances at her nervous sister. Despite sharing long, blonde hair and big, dark eyes, the sisters are polar opposites personality-wise. In fact, when Nightmare

shoves his nose in Candy's crotch, she looks unfazed while pushing him away.

"Tell your dog he needs to buy me dinner before he sniffs there."

Grinning, I force my gaze away from her and check out my meeting room full of kids. The smaller blond ones are watching cartoons on a tablet. Candy's two sit in a corner playing something on their mom's phone.

"Don't let them stink up the place," I mutter.

"Yeah, we don't want to distract from the cigar smell."

"Funny," I grunt before snapping for Nightmare to follow me.

For a few hours, I pretend to work, but I'm mostly interested in seeing Candy. I often check on the women. Honey cleans while Candy goes through each box and sings along with songs. I suspect she knows her singing voice is terrible, making her confidence more appealing.

Eventually, Candy tells the kids to clean up and get ready to go. Before she leaves, she appears at my office door.

"Do you need anything?"

"No."

Candy grins, but I don't know why. She's in a good mood, and smiles come easily when she's happy. I've seen her in a bad mood too, and she does very little to hide negative emotions.

"I'll work on the mess during the week and see about coming back next weekend."

"Fine."

"It's the kids, isn't it?" she asks, leaning against the door frame. "You love children so much and seeing them makes your ovaries quiver."

“Goodbye,” I say, despite my smirk.

“See you Monday.”

I only nod and watch her disappear from my doorway. The kids make a racket on their way out of the office and then the place falls silent. I look at Nightmare, who doesn't care either way. I'm the only person who has ever interested him, and he's too old to give a shit now.

“What now?” I ask the dog.

Nightmare walks into the main office and sniffs everything anyone new touched. He's pissed about the new stink. Watching him, I realize the feeling I'm nursing isn't fucking boredom. For the first time in years, I'm lonely and all because of a mouthy blonde with a horrible singing voice.

TEN - CANDY

Between moving into the house and cleaning the office, I'm exhausted from organizing crap. At least at the house, I'm working with a blank slate. The office is a frigging mess. I have to check every slip of paper in every box. I've counted at least thirty boxes, but I know more are hidden behind the main stack. Half of what's in the boxes is trash, and the half are business papers dating back a decade. I can't believe Hayes is so successful with such a train wreck system.

"How do you function?" I ask Hayes when he appears from his office.

I notice he comes out every hour or so to check on me. I don't mind since it saves me from checking on him. We've been playing this peeking game since the weekend.

"I have a company that deals with payroll and the financial crap. These are my personal copies."

"Why is it such a mess?"

Hayes crosses his arms and leans against a desk hiding under boxes. "Years ago, I had a real assistant. Tammie was a good woman, but her back went out, and she got behind on shit. Then she started calling in sick a lot, and the temps didn't know what the fuck they were doing. Once she went on disability, I was stuck with morons. This is the result."

"Is Tammie still alive?"

"She moved to Florida to be closer to her grandchildren."

"Do you miss her?"

"No."

Suspecting he's lying, I smile at his bravado. "Will you miss me when I move to Florida to be closer to my grandchildren?"

Hayes shrugs. "You're not horrible at your job so far. Too mouthy, but most women are."

"So you'll miss me then?"

"You have your skills."

"Can you be more specific about my qualities? I'm feeling insecure."

Hayes rolls his eyes, but I catch him smile. "I've been thinking."

"I'm sure you have. A big businessman like you probably thinks all the time."

"I've been thinking about having an heir."

"An heir?"

"An heir like a kid that'd inherit my business."

"Oh. Yeah, you wouldn't want it to end up in the hands of the government."

"I'd rather burn everything down than have that happen."

Grinning at his reaction, I nod. "I'm sure you'd make a great dad."

"You don't really believe that."

"No, but you're smart. You might learn how to be a great dad by the time the kid is old enough to notice."

"You're healthy, right?"

"Healthy like I eat salads?"

"No, like you're capable of creating and carrying a baby."

"Sure," I mumble, unsure where he's going with this line of questions.

"You didn't break anything having those twins?"

“You mean my beloved children? No, I didn’t break anything. What are you getting at?”

“I’ll need to breed with a woman capable of carrying my large kid. You carried two at once so I figure you’ll do.”

“Well, that’s a tempting offer. Whenever you’re ready, just fill a cup with your swimmers, and I’ll pick up a turkey baster on my drive home. We’ll make you an heir.”

“There are easier ways to make a kid.”

“Easier?” I say, looking him over. “I’d say a turkey baster is simpler than climbing you, boss.”

“No climbing necessary,” he says, and I realize he might actually be serious. “You lay on the bed, and I’ll do the work. I’ve heard women make boys if they get fucked in the missionary position.”

“You heard that, huh? Where?”

“Donna was telling some broad at the Waffle House.”

“Well if Donna said so, I can’t really disagree. She’s the Google of diner waitresses.”

I snicker at my joke while Hayes just watches me.

“I’m not kidding.”

“I sense that,” I say, feeling a little overheated. “What would you name our giant baby? It wouldn’t be something stupid like Angus, would it?”

“Said the lady with the stripper name.”

“I didn’t pick my name.”

“You picked your kids’ stupid names.”

“No, their father did, and he only picked them to punish me.”

“Punish you for what?”

“For not having an abortion. He didn’t want kids. He nagged me constantly until I was ready to pop. When I wouldn’t give into his whiny bullshit, he chose the names,” I explain with a hint of anger and then add more casually, “The joke was on him because my kids are cool enough to walk off silly names. I’m not sure our giant baby would be, though.”

“My kid won’t give a shit what anyone thinks.”

“Or he’ll be very sensitive and cry easily. You never know.”

“I know,” Hayes insists.

“So you’re saying you’d name him something dumb like the dad in the song *A Boy Named Sue*?”

“I’d name him something strong.”

“Like Bullet?” I ask, snickering again. “Shotgun maybe?”

“Buckaroo Banzai actually.”

“It has a nice ring to it.”

Hayes frowns. “It’s a movie title. You know that, right?”

“I don’t watch movies.”

“Yes, you do.”

“Fine, Marvel and Pixar movies. That Banzai thing isn’t one of those, so it doesn’t exist to me.”

Hayes crosses his arms and glares super ugly at me. I love when he does that shit. He’s especially hot when he tries to intimidate me. I especially like how his lips get pouty like a really grumpy baby. I smile at his expression and wonder if he’s messing with me with all of this heir talk.

“Not everything is a fucking joke,” he grumbles when I don’t stop smiling at him.

“See this from my point of view, boss. You always seem full of shit. How can I tell when you’re not?”

“Pay attention.”

“Or you could talk differently when you’re not full of shit,” I suggest.

“No.”

“Have you interviewed any other wide-hipped women for this great heir-making opportunity?”

Hayes gives me his junkyard dog expression, and I *should* be scared. He’s a scary guy, but he won’t do anything besides yell at me. When I think of all the effort he goes through to terrify me, I begin laughing.

“Idiot,” he grumbles, walking back to his office.

“I’ll think about it. I mean, giant babies are a lot of responsibility.”

I see him shake his head in irritation, but I can’t believe he actually thought I’d agree.

Leaning back in my chair, I consider breeding with another rich guy. With Toby, I felt no emotional connection to my baby daddy. It’s why his nagging about an abortion never affected me. He could have said anything, and I wouldn’t falter. He was simply a means to an end. *Of course, Hayes isn’t Toby.*

ELEVEN - CANDY

On the kids' first day of school, I'm a basket case of mommy's nerves. I walk them to their separate third-grade classes and admit they won't have fun today. No doubt Cricket will spend the day comparing everything to her old class while Chipper will disappear into the crowd. They'll meet up at recess and recharge their twin powers. I promise to take them out to dinner and let them complain about everything they hated.

By the time I reach the office, I want to cry. It's a mommy reaction. I know they'll be fine, but I feel guilty for giving them a bad day. It's my job to hurt for my babies, and I see no reason to deny the feeling.

"What's your problem?" Hayes asks, walking out of his office when I arrive.

"My babies started school today."

"You should homeschool them," he says casually. "Schools today are failures."

"You told me to put them in school so they wouldn't become morons," I mutter.

"Well, that was before you started moping around the office."

"How can I homeschool when I'm working? Also, how in the hell does someone homeschool?"

"I don't know. Google it."

"You're not making me feel better."

"I wasn't trying," he says, smirking. "I could hug you, but I can't imagine that would do anything except get you moist."

"You're in a weird mood today."

“Not really. I have been thinking, though.”

“About what?” I ask, walking into the mini-kitchen to get myself a cup of coffee.

“I want to trust you with more responsibilities.”

“Okay, but these new responsibilities aren’t gross, are they?” I ask, thinking about his heir offer.

“No, but they involve me trusting you. Can I? You’re not bailing on this job if I don’t baby you during your next period, are you?”

“I’m on my period now, and I don’t want you babying me,” I lie while returning to my desk. “Staying away from me would be helpful, though.”

“No alone time today, babe. In fact, don’t waste time logging in. We’re running errands today.”

I study him and find my smile. He’s in a good mood and the damn thing’s infectious.

Once outside, Hayes helps me climb into his giant truck by grabbing my ass and pushing up. I grunt at his version of chivalry. At least, I was smart enough to wear jeans today, so his hand doesn’t encounter a warm greeting from the spot between my legs.

“Where are we going?” I ask as soon as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“My father has caregivers who handle him and his house, but I need you to check up on them. You need to make sure they’re keeping the place clean, feeding his cat, and giving him meds and food.”

“Are you overly cautious or is there something you’re specifically concerned about?”

“Overly cautious,” he says, honking at a car full of senior citizens. “Balthazar has a full-time caregiver named Lizzy Anne. There’s also a nurse who visits once a week to make sure he’s getting his meds. The setup is solid, but I don’t trust anyone.”

When I smile at him, Hayes’s expression shifts into a grumpy frown. He knows I think he’s a big softie.

“Don’t,” he warns.

“You love your daddy,” I tease.

“Didn’t you?”

“No. He didn’t stick around long enough. When I last saw him, I was living at the Eddison Estate. He showed up wanting money for his girlfriend’s kid’s braces. I called him by the wrong name and shut the door. He hasn’t bothered me since.”

Hayes nods, remaining silent for a few minutes. “Do you like men?”

“Sexually? Yeah.”

“No, I mean, do you think they’re all fucking scum?”

“Of course not. My son is a little man after all. I adored my brother Peat. So I like men just fine. Why?”

“Didn’t know if you were the bitter sort.”

“Is this because I haven’t batted my eyes at you today?”

“I’ll be happy if you avoid fucking crying.”

Grinning, I check my phone. “Your low standards allow me to excel.”

“I think you’d do fine if I expected more.”

I focus on him and grin. “You complimented me! Were you drugged this morning? Why are you such a sweetie pie today?”

“I’m ignoring you now.”

“Did it hurt?” I ask.

“What?”

“When you fell from heaven?” I ask, barely keeping a straight face. “You’re a damn angel; I tell ya!”

“I’m seriously fucking considering firing you.”

I pat his arm reassuringly, causing him to glance at me as if I’ve harmed him in some way.

“What?”

Hayes shakes his head, still looking freaked out. I study my fingers and wonder what unknown powers they possess.

We arrive at a blue, craftsman style home on the east side of White Horse. The small lawn is immaculate, and the house looks recently painted.

I climb down from the massive truck and walk to the front porch where a rocking bench rests.

“Here are they keys,” Hayes says, handing them to me. “I’ll email you the security code later.”

“What’s your dad’s name again?”

“Balthazar.”

“Your name makes a lot more sense.”

“Shut up, Candy.”

“You’re so childish,” I tease while following him into the house.

Hayes wants to say something mean, but he keeps his mouth shut and walks down a narrow hallway to a back family room. I’m so busy wondering if he’ll whack his head on the ceiling that I don’t notice the bald old man sleeping in a wide La-Z-Boy chair.

Hayes walks into the adjoining kitchen and ducks to avoid a beam. I hear the caretaker going over Balthazar’s day. The old man

ate eggs and oatmeal for breakfast, walked around the yard, and then took his nap in the front of the TV. Hayes looms large over the short, round woman who glances at me.

“My assistant will come by when I can’t,” Hayes says quietly, but his voice remains loud enough to wake Balthazar.

“Gussy,” he mumbles, petting the white cat on his lap. “Who’s the broad?”

“This is my assistant, Candy,” Hayes tells him. “I told you about her.”

“Yeah,” Balthazar says. “She’s a looker.”

“Yeah. She’ll come by and check on you when I’m busy.”

“Pawning me off on others again, huh, son?”

“Save the guilt, old man. I’m not interested.”

Balthazar smiles. “You woke me from my nap. Never could whisper.”

Hayes stretches, scraping his hands on the ceiling.

“Don’t break my shit, boy.”

“Well, this was fun.”

I look at the two men and enjoy their bickering. Hayes notices me smiling and shakes his head.

“Don’t.”

“What’s your cat’s name?” I ask Balthazar.

“Gladys the Cat.”

Hayes says, “My mother’s name was Gladys.”

“I didn’t want to learn a new name,” Balthazar explains.

The two men don’t share a single physical resemblance. Hayes is larger than life; Balthazar is tiny. My boss has an olive tint to his skin while his father looks like he’ll burst into flames if in the sun for too

long. Hayes has darker than sin eyes; Balthazar possesses sparkling blue ones. Clearly, Gussy didn't gain anything genetic from his old man.

I feel Hayes wanting to leave already. He doesn't have to say anything or even gesture for me to get moving. I simply feel his tension amp up. We're in sync already, and I can usually tell when he wants fresh coffee before he yells for a refill.

Now Hayes wants to leave. I don't know if he's worried I'll embarrass him with his dad or if his father will be the one to do the embarrassing. I just know Hayes wants to get the hell out of the house.

I wave goodbye to Balthazar, who watches me while petting his cat. Hayes is already at his truck by the time I reach the porch.

"What's the hurry?"

"He needs his nap."

"He seems nice."

"He is."

Hayes climbs into his truck and then leans over to help pull me into the passenger seat.

"Are you embarrassed by me?" I ask.

"Yes."

I grin at him. "You don't look like your dad."

"Don't start shit with me, Candy."

"Ah, the answers are falling into place," I say, buckling myself into the seat. "What next?"

"I need to run by a few sites, and then we'll go to lunch."

"Is this the house you grew up in?"

"Yes."

I look back at the house shrinking into the distance. “You must have ducked a lot.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Can we listen to music then?” I ask, already reaching for the radio buttons.

Hayes says nothing while I flip around until finding a song from George Strait.

After finishing at one construction site, we return to the truck.

“I’ll keep an eye out on your dad,” I promise.

“I know. You’re good at your job.”

“You’re acting weird.”

“He’s getting old, and he’ll die one day, and that makes me sad.”

“Wait, so this is what you’re like when emotional? Huh, it’s similar to a sad robot, I guess.”

“Don’t make me tell you to shut up again.”

“I never actually shut up when you say that. Not sure why you waste your time.”

Hayes smiles slightly and then honks at another car full of old ladies.

“Morons,” he grumbles.

“They’re old.”

“So they shouldn’t drive. I took away my dad’s license when he got dangerous.”

“You take good care of him. It makes me respect you more to see that side of you.”

“Don’t care.”

“I bet you do. In fact, I bet my compliment made you blush on the inside.”

Rolling his eyes, Hayes asks, "How is the rental place?"

"It's really nice. Thank you."

"Do the kids like having their own rooms?"

"Yeah, but they still share a bed. It's habit."

"Weak."

"Said the man who nearly cried while visiting his dad."

Hayes glares at me, but his evil expression only makes me laugh. He's so sexy when he throws a fit.

"The kids want a pet. I'm leaning toward getting a goldfish, but they're set on a cat."

"Goldfish?" he asks, grinning. "You're so fucking lazy."

"True, but pets take a lot of effort."

"Not really."

"You say that because someone else takes Nightmare to the vet and for walks. You're fucking lazy too, boss."

"Yeah, but I'm not goldfish lazy."

"Whatever. They want a cat, and if they keep asking for long enough, I'll take them to the shelter to find one."

"Don't get a shitty shelter cat."

"Where else am I going to get a cat? Please don't say pet store because that's just stupid."

"No. There's always some family with kittens for sale for ten bucks."

"I'd rather get a shelter cat. Adopting one from a kill shelter will feed my savior complex. I'll feel like a humanitarian for doing nearly nothing."

"Aiming low is why you're a happy person."

“Where are we going to lunch and are you paying? I’d be super happy if you let me get appetizers and dessert so that I can take home leftovers.”

“Your dreams are now too fucking low.”

“Is that a ‘yes’ with regards to you paying?”

“Yeah, I’ll pay so you can burrow away old food like a fucking squirrel.”

I smile at him and reach over to fix his flannel shirt cover. Hayes stiffens when I touch him, and my smile grows wider.

“I knew you were trouble the moment you walked into my office,” he says.

Leaning against the door, I stare out the window and think about the first day we met. I was ready for a raging beast and likely built him up too much in my head. The real Hayes disappointed. He wasn’t nearly as scary as I imagined and a hell of a lot easier on the eyes.

After seeing him with his dad in that too small house, I can’t help wondering what else Hayes hides from people.

“Stop thinking,” he grunts while pulling the truck into a steak house parking lot. “I can feel you plotting.”

“I’m not doing anything, boss.”

Hayes frowns at me, but he isn’t in a bad mood. With his nearly black eyes, he convinces people he’s always pissed. I’ve figured out how to tell the various shades of grumpy in his dark gaze.

Hayes knows the restaurant staff, and I wonder if he partially owns the place. I still don’t know just how many local businesses he has a piece of. He might trust me with his dad, but not his house or finances.

“Can we get the potato skins?” I ask while checking my phone.

“We’re not on a date.”

“Are you sure? You did open the door for me, and you’re paying. I also feel like I might be expected to put out at the end.”

Hayes closes his eyes and rubs his head. I immediately laugh at his effort to play the harried victim of my mouth.

“Whenever you wish I would shut the fuck up,” I say, grinning, “just know that’s how everyone feels when you talk.”

Hayes smiles at me. “You fucking refuse to zip your fucking mouth.”

“Why should I? If you really don’t want me to talk, I could play on my phone during lunch, but I sense you want to bond.”

“You sense that, huh?”

“You’re giving off a vibe.”

Smirking, Hayes nods. “Women are an odd bunch.”

“I’m only one woman, boss. Just the one broad. I’d think the son of an accountant would be better with numbers.”

Hayes grins again. “You’d think, wouldn’t you?”

“So, how did you gain control of White Horse?”

“I took it,” Hayes says without missing a beat. “When I saw a weakness, I exploited it. When I saw a threat, I eliminated it. No one gave me shit. I had to take it all.”

“But how? I mean you can’t just walk into a business and threaten them into giving you half. Well, I guess you could, but I don’t think that’s how you did it.”

Hayes shrugs as if he doesn’t want to brag. I roll my eyes at his bullshit, and he finally gives in.

“I had a small inheritance from an uncle. Mom suggested I use it to travel. Dad wanted me to go to school. Back then, White Horse was failing, and businesses were leaving. People needed a vision, so I took the inheritance money and bought partnerships with several businesses. I made those businesses healthy while using my power to bully other businesses into working with me and doing things my way. I looked for uses for the local empty land and abandoned buildings to lure new businesses into White Horse. The more new blood into the town, the more my businesses flourished.”

“You’re pretty fucking smart, eh?”

Hayes adjusts his large frame in the circular booth. “Yeah, but lots of guys are smart. I was willing to break bones to get things done where other guys just wanted to talk or bribe their ways into power. Everyone has a button that can be pushed. With some people, they can’t be bought or charmed into obeying. They only understand pain and fear.”

“You’re pretty fucking scary, eh?”

“I’ve heard, yeah,” he says in a voice reeking of pride.

“The outfit in Common Bend has backers from out of town. The bikers run Hickory Creek. You do it alone.”

“If you mean I outsource much of my muscle, yeah. I don’t trust anyone. People are stupid and selfish.”

“Don’t you have anyone who will watch your back?”

“Are you fishing for a compliment?”

“No way do I want to watch your back. It’s too big, and I’m easily distracted. Don’t you have anyone you consider a friend? Does it really have to be so lonely at the top?”

“I had someone. When he got nailed for a murder charge in Nashville, he could have lowered his sentence by turning on me. He had the info to sell, and the cops were always willing to plea someone down for info that’d increase their conviction count. Moot could’ve made life easier for himself, but he didn’t sell me out. He’ll be out in a year, and I plan to reward the fuck out of him.”

“Ah, you do have a friend.”

“That I haven’t spoken to in four years.”

“Friends are overrated,” I say immediately.

“You always have a response.”

“Silence has never worked well for me. The day I’m speechless, call a doctor.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Tell me Moot isn’t his real name.”

“It’s Sasha. Apparently, it’s a guy name in certain parts of the world, but here in the greatest country on the planet, Sasha is a chick name. So he ended up going by Moot.”

“Why Moot?”

“I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you ask?”

“I’m a guy. I don’t ask questions.”

“You ask me questions.”

“Because you’re a woman and women like to think men are interested in their crap. Men know we aren’t.”

“Fascinating stuff.”

“Tell me about your kids’ dad.”

“What about him?”

“How did you hook up with the rich boy?”

“I worked in a doctor’s office, and he flirted with me. We went out a few times, and I decided to make him my wealthy sperm donor.”

“A fucking fairytale.”

“Fairytales don’t work out for my family. We always end up with the frog that empties out our checking accounts or fucks our best friends or is an all-around douche like Andrew.”

“Did you like Eddison at all?”

“Sure. In the beginning, but there’s something empty about him that turned me off.”

“He didn’t want kids, and you trapped him.”

“Don’t get all high and mighty with me, you big bully. I’ve seen you tell off an old, disabled woman.”

“A mean old disabled woman.”

“Still an old disabled woman.”

Hayes waves his hand around as if to erase any culpability. “You knew he didn’t want kids.”

“He said there were too many people in the world, and most were trash. I didn’t give a crap about his views. I’ve never been interested in romance. I like dating for the free meals and movies. Once things get too clingy, I bail. Romance and Wilburn don’t mix.”

“So you decided to pop out a kid with a guy you didn’t like.”

“I always wanted kids. At that point, I had a stable job and a decent apartment. I was ready to be a mom. Toby had solid genetics, and his family would provide for the kids’ education. I still wasn’t sure until he pissed me off one night. Then I decided I didn’t give a shit what he wanted.”

Hayes’s dark eyes light up. “Pissed you off how?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you. Giving you ammo to irritate me later seems dangerous.”

“Don’t be a pussy. Just tell me.”

Laughing at his hunger for gossip, I relent. “My brother Peat fell for a bad woman, and she treated him like shit. She beat on him, and he took it. Mostly because if he left, she'd faked suicide attempts to make him feel guilty. Then one day, she was wailing on him with a frying pan, and he lost his shit. Punched the bitch out. She called the cops, and he ended up serving three months for assault. Once he was out of prison, Peat avoided her. Moved to a new state and gave up his whole life, but he was free. Until he fell for another bad woman, who killed him when he tried to leave her. The bitch claimed self-defense and the prosecutor decided not to charge her. The fucking whore shot him in the fucking back, and the law believed her.”

I pause to control my temper from spiraling out of control. Every time I think of my little brother’s murder, I want to kill someone.

“Peat was covered in bruises, and she didn’t have a mark on her, but the prosecutor didn’t think she could get a conviction after Peat’s criminal past.”

I grip the table, wanting to shake the world until my brother got his fucking justice.

“So I told that story to Toby one night at dinner, and he said, and I quote, ‘He sounds like a loser.’ I’d just told him my brother was murdered, and the pampered piece of shit responded in a fucked up way. I decided if my feelings didn’t matter then Toby’s didn’t either.”

Hayes studies me, looking irritated. “The guy’s an asshole, so why not get a better man to father your children?”

“Are you deaf?” I grumble, and he smiles at my anger. “My family has bad mojo. Or shitty genetics or whatever. We can’t pick good partners. I’m unable to look at a bad man and see him for what he is. It’s why I don’t date. Toby wasn’t a good man, but he had what I wanted.”

“Fine. You’re cursed.”

“You don’t have to believe in the curse for it to be real.”

“You sound crazy. You know that, right?” he taunts.

“See, you think of the curse as a magical, paranormal type thing, but that’s not it. Some people are just doomed. They make bad choices. It’s like how addictive habits can run in a family. Maybe it really is genetic, or it might be environmental, but we always trust the wrong people. The only way to beat it is to be the asshole, rather than the victim.”

“Makes sense.

“If we can’t be the asshole, we have to be alone. If Peat stayed away from women, he’d be alive. Honey could have gone to college and gotten the career she wanted, but she kept falling for one loser after another. Now she’s married to one, and he’s locked her down with four kids.”

“Love is a hell of a lot of effort even without a curse.”

“Love’s overrated, for sure. I don’t mind being without a man. I always wanted kids, but romance and even lots of friends never mattered to me.”

“You’re smart not to give anyone power over you except your kids have power.”

“I love them enough to let them ruin me. I won’t love anyone else that much.”

Hayes sits quietly for a long time. The appetizers arrive. I eat one potato skin and set the rest aside for leftovers. I'm accustomed to Hayes falling silent and entertain myself on the phone until he's ready to talk.

"I could speak with Andrew Mayer," he offers. "Make him keep his hands to himself."

Smiling at his offer to help Honey, I find his mood today to be nearly irresistible. All of our talk about love being crap is less convincing when we connect this way.

"You could help her, and I'm not going to tell you not to, but I think it's better if you didn't."

Hayes loses the warmth in his expression and just looks pissed. "What in the fuck is your reasoning there?"

"Honey is thinking about leaving Douche. My moving here gives her an out, and she's inching toward it. If Douche stops being rough, she might convince herself that he's not so bad. She'll think he isn't abusing her if he doesn't smack her. He is, though. Douche wears her down with his comments and rules. Whenever he feels threatened about her leaving, he wants another baby."

"I can make him fucking leave her. No inching toward freedom. He'll just be fucking gone."

"Then she'll end up with another Douche. Are you planning to save her forever?"

"Pretty cold thinking," he says, shaking his head.

"Honey needs to break free on her own. Peat never truly left the first bitch, so he ended up with someone just like her. The only way to be truly free of the wrong way of thinking is to face it and make the choice to walk away."

Hayes looks unconvinced, and I admire his desire to save a chick in need.

“Honey is like my mom,” I say, wanting him to understand. “She feels empty in a way nothing fills. Mom let life beat her down, and love was the weapon. Every man broke her heart and killed her a bit more. She used to ask if she was wearing a 'kick me' sign and I'd always think yes. She wore it on her face. My mom was so obviously desperate for love and attention that people knew they could do almost nothing and gain everything from her. Honey will end up that way too if you or I solve her problems.”

Hayes sips his shot of whiskey and thinks about what I said.

“Fine, I'll hold off for now, but Honey is my assistant's sister. If she's getting her ass beat and I don't step in, that makes me look bad. Life's not all about you and your curse crap, Candy.”

I smile and pat his hand. “Naw, you're just a cuddle bear.”

Hayes rolls his eyes. “I checked up on Toby Eddison when I hired you.”

“Of course, you did.”

“He got married and had a kid. You think that one was a trick baby too?”

“No. His wife, Alice, isn't someone who'll trick anyone. She wanted him, and she got him. She's the classic, determined gold digger. Of course, she probably didn't expect her meal ticket to get indicted on fraud charges.”

“Do you ever worry her kid will get all the family's cash and leave your kids out in the fucking cold?”

Hayes knows how to nail me straight at my biggest worries. “When I was pregnant, Toby's parents didn't talk to me. They wanted

to wait until there was proof the babies were his. If you want to understand the Eddison family in a nutshell, they did a paternity test on *both* babies. You know, in case I was a hussy sleeping with several guys and only one baby was Toby's. They don't mess around with the family money."

I steal one of his fries and get a dirty look for my efforts. "Anyway, after the twins were born, Toby's parents wanted to put me somewhere nice. Apparently my apartment wasn't good enough for their grandkids. They offered me an apartment near their home, or I could setup shop in their guest house. I suspected they wanted me close so they could keep an eye on me. The apartment sounded like a better deal, but I chose the guest home. I wanted them to bond with their grandkids, so Toby couldn't convince them to ditch Chipper and Cricket down the road when he had a family. Years later, my worries came true, and they got a legitimate grandchild. By then, Grandpa and Grandma Eddison were in love with the twins. They still Skype with them every night before bed. It's pretty cute how much those uppity bastards love the kids."

Hayes watches me in a strange way, and I realize I can't read him nearly as well as I thought. I have no clue what he's thinking.

"What?" I ask when he says nothing.

"You're an odd broad."

"Said the weird guy."

The corner of Hayes's mouth curves into nearly a smile. While we finish lunch, he often looks ready to speak but chooses to remain silent instead. I don't know what he's thinking, and that scares me. I never worried before about offending Hayes. Now I'm anxious about his silence.

“So you haven’t fucked anyone since coming to White Horse?” he asks suddenly while I enjoy my dessert.

“No.”

“When did you last fuck someone?”

His tone startles me, but I smile. “Well, my twins are nine so…”

“That’s a long fucking time.”

“How about you?”

“Last night. She was excellent.”

Frowning, I look at my ice cream. “I’m assuming it’s a professional.”

“Why would you assume that?”

“You want to fuck without emotional ties and prostitutes are good about not getting clingy.”

“Would it make you feel better if I said she was a whore?”

Rolling my eyes, I think I sell my indifference. “What do I care?”

“You care. That’s why you’re grinding your teeth.”

I eat a scoop of ice cream, hoping the sugar will steady my nerves. “Is this where I pretend I met a hot neighbor and maybe I’ll knock boots with him? You made me jealous, so I’m supposed to make you jealous. Is that the game?”

“There’s no neighbor,” he mutters, jaw clenched.

“There are a lot of men in Tennessee and someone is bound to interest me,” I say and then add, “besides you.”

Hayes blinks a few times quickly. His long arms stretch along the curved back of the booth.

“Sooner or later, this is happening,” he says, studying me. “You best prepare yourself.”

“Prepare myself?” I ask, laughing. “Do you mean with yoga or stretching techniques to prepare for your massive... What’s a classy word for penis? Ooh, I know, I’ll call it a super, big humdinger.”

“Giggle all you fucking want, babe. You know I’m not kidding.”

Grinning, I eat my sundae slowly, seductively even. “I know. My only request is you don’t get sloppy with a woman without showering before getting sloppy with me. I have standards, boss.”

Hayes studies me and suddenly smiles. “You were jealous, weren’t you?”

“Of your prostitute?” I ask with a mouthful of ice cream. “Yeah, actually. I was hoping you’d kept your humdinger clean and secure since meeting me.”

“Your pussy has cobwebs, and my cock is raring to go. I think you’re the problem.”

“My pussy is clean. It won’t confuse your humdinger for another guy. Your equipment won’t be able to tell me from the next broad.”

“Do you want me to tell you I’ve been celibate since I met you? Would that make you feel better?”

“No, lying is for chumps.”

Hayes smiles at me, and his gaze is no longer difficult to read. He’s watching me like a lion with a stomach filled with gazelle and a dick ready for loving before he naps away the rest of the day. Hayes exudes lazy predator. The only question is whether I’m willing prey.

TWELVE - CANDY

My job description involves a lot of vague duties, but the main task Hayes gives me is to keep morons from bothering him. I never ask him to get more specific. I assume if someone shows up without an appointment they're a moron. If someone calls and expects to speak to Hayes, they're a moron. The fact is everyone important has his cell number. Everyone else is looking to bother him with their moron problems.

The guy standing in front of my desk is one of those morons. He storms into the building and says he needs to talk to the boss.

"Unfortunately, Mister Hayes is in a meeting. Can I take a message?"

The moron's beady eyes get really wide, and the vein in his forehead throbs. "Hayes is standing right there!" the moron yells, while pointing at Hayes leaning against his office door.

"Sir, would you like to leave a message? I'll give it to Mister Hayes as soon as he's out of his meeting."

"Are you shitting me?"

Crossing my eyes, I frown at the moron. "I'd prefer you didn't use profanity with me, sir. As a mother, it offends me greatly."

The guy stares at me and then looks to Hayes. "He's standing right there!"

"Mister Hays is in a meeting and can't speak to you. Will you like to leave a message?"

The guy throws up his hands and storms out of the office. I run to the window so I can see him stomping to his car. He slams his door

and pounds on the steering wheel. I'm laughing by the time he drives away, nearly hitting a parked car on his way out.

"Any messages?" Hayes asks, walking over to me.

"None, sir."

"Profanity offends you greatly, huh?"

"Sure as hell does, asshole. Is that going to be a fucking problem?" I say, laughing again.

Hayes startles me when his hand grips the back of my neck. His lips are on mine before I recover. He doesn't kiss me as much as inhale me. His lips cover mine, owning them, and sending hot shivers downward.

I can't breathe, but I don't need to. He breathes for me. I'm a part of him now, an extension of this powerful man.

His lips leave mine as quickly as they joined. I stare at him and find him waiting for my response. Gutted by intensity and passion I've never felt before, I can't think of anything to say. I know silence isn't the answer, though.

"Ever heard of sexual harassment laws?" I ask, holding his gaze.

Frowning like a scolded bear, Hayes steps back. He is genuinely hurt while I can barely tolerate how perfect his need makes me feel.

"I didn't say stop," I murmur, tugging at his shirt and lifting my lips.

Hayes drapes one of his long arms around my shoulders, wrapping me against him completely, as our lips reunite. I shiver in his grip. I've never felt lust like this before, and I'm immediately addicted.

The phone rings, causing Hayes to growl against my lips. I lean over, pick up the receiver, and then drop it back down. After hanging

up on the caller, I wrap my arms around Hayes's waist. I feel his lips curve into a smile and then I'm lost again.

Again the phone rings and again I hang up on the caller. If it were important, they'd call our cells.

Hayes pulls me tighter, and I lean into his embrace. We could remain this way forever, and I doubt I'd complain. The entire world fades except for Hayes and me.

Throwing cold water on our heated moment, a car pulls into the parking lot, forcing Hayes and me to separate.

"The universe has spoken," I mumble while breathing too quickly.

Hayes glares at me before storming into his office where I figure he'll sulk. Instead, he returns carrying a bat, and I realize someone is about to be in a world of pain.

THIRTEEN - HAYES

After weeks of wanting to know what Candy tastes like, I finally find out and she's sweeter than I imagined. Whoever in the fuck picked this fucking moment to interrupt my fucking day will soon have a second asshole.

I grab my bat and head outside. Candy follows me, looking amused by my reaction. The woman is fucking addictive, and someone just tore me away from my necessary fix.

The soon-to-be-dead asshole emerges from a taxi, and I'm ready to swing when the car speeds away. My target looks up at the sky and inhales deeply. *Does he know he's about to die?*

"No hug?" Moot asks, turning to face me.

My bat stops mid-swing, and I laugh. "Fuck, man, I was about to take off your head."

As his blue eyes squint in the sunny day, Moot grins at me. "I see that. You're as charming as ever."

I shake his hand and size him up. "You got fucking old."

"I was just going to say the same about you. I see a couple of grays you missed during your last salon visit."

"Fuck off, man. When did you get out?"

"Today. That's what the taxi is about."

Tapping the bat in my hand, I ask, "Why didn't you call and ask for a fucking ride, idiot?"

"I wasn't ready for all your charm, fucker. So can I come inside and get a cup of coffee?"

I gesture for him to follow me, and we walk into the office where Candy stands at the window spying on us.

“This is Candy,” I say, waving between them with the bat. “This is Moot. He just got out of prison. Get him a cup of coffee.”

Candy struts in her sexy way to the break room and reappears with his drink.

She hands him the coffee and asks, “Were you in prison for stealing purses because I can hide mine to prevent you from being tempted?”

“No, I beat an asshole to death.”

“So should I be concerned for Hayes’s safety then?”

“She’s a damn doll,” Moot says, giving her one of his sly grins.

I slam the bat against her desk and shake my head at Moot. “No.”

“All right, all right, no reason to get violent about it.”

Candy smiles at me, and I wonder if she knows I’m still hard from the earlier kiss. I taste her on my lips, and my arms hurt from not having her wrapped in them. Remaining in a state of heat, I need to get out of the office before I lose control especially with Candy still grinning at me.

“I’m assuming you haven’t eaten,” I say, focusing on Moot rather than the irresistible blonde giving me a raging hard-on.

“Not today.”

“Drink up and I’ll take you out.”

“Want to bring your assistant?” Moot says, giving Candy the once over again. “She can take notes.”

“I said, ‘no’ already,” I growl possessively. “Don’t make me say it again with the bat.”

“You really are grouchy these days,” Moot says and then downs the coffee. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Candy takes the empty cup and nods at him. I set the bat on an empty table and follow Moot to the door. Before I head outside, I stop and study my assistant.

“What happened earlier isn’t over,” I tell her.

“We’ll see.”

“Something’s happening here,” I insist, hating her cool exterior.

“Yeah, but is it a love affair or murder/suicide? Might want to consider how you’re the murder victim in that scenario, boss.”

“Think you can take me?” I ask, arching a brow.

“Without breaking a sweat.”

“Then I guess I better hope it’s a love affair, huh, killer?”

As Candy laughs, I walk outside to where Moot waits.

“She’s a looker,” Moot says. “How long you been boning her?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“So not long, huh?”

“She’s Honey’s sister,” I say, pissing all over his good mood.

“Not cool, asshole.”

Smiling, I climb into my truck. Moot joins me, still frowning about the mention of Honey.

“Where do you want to eat?”

“What’s still open?”

“Everything. I keep my town running smoothly. Want steak?”

“Sounds good. A cold beer sounds better.”

“You’re out early. Whose dick did you suck to make that happen?” I ask, pulling out of the parking lot.

“Hell, if sucking dick would have gotten me early parole, I’d have hit my knees within weeks of arriving at the shithole. No amount of pride is better than being locked up.”

I think of how loyalty got him locked up for so long. Despite what he says, Moot has a lot of pride to keep his mouth shut for so long.

“So what’s the deal with you getting out early?”

“Don’t you read the papers? It was in the Nashville ones.”

“Those are run by Commies, so no, I don’t read them.”

“Commies. You’ll be spouting the same shit in fifty years. You never change, man.”

“So what’s the big story?”

Moot grins at me, clearly proud of his story. “I saved a guard who was getting his ass whooped by a few cons. They were planning on doing more to his ass than that too. I’m a big fucking hero. The warden worked his magic and got me out a year early for taking a beating to save one of his guys.”

“Did a good deed and got rewarded. I hear that happens sometimes. Never seen it before but good for you. Why not call and have me pick you up? The true answer this time and not that shit excuse you gave back at the office.”

“The truth was I didn’t know if you’d care. I figured if I showed up unannounced, you’d have to fake a smile for me.”

“I sent you money,” I mutter, bothered by him thinking I didn’t remember his sacrifice.

“I know.”

“Got you a nest egg set up too.”

Moot taps his fingers against the window. “It’s not about what you do for me, but whether you’d still want me around. I did get busted for something stupid.”

“Saving a whore from her boyfriend was pretty fucking stupid.”

“I still can’t believe she jumped me after I saved her like that.”

“How’s your head?”

Moot rubs the top of his head and rustles up his wild blond hairs. “Still got a knot where she nailed me with the beer bottle. Cunt testified against me too. What a bitch.”

“I offered to take care of her.”

“Killing chicks is cold, man.”

“So is ruining the guy that helped her out.”

“True.”

“Well you’re out, and I’ll get you set up.”

“No handouts. I’m willing to work.”

“Stop acting like a prison bitch.”

Moot gives me a dirty look, but I know he’s dying to grin. Freedom feels golden. The fucker even looks ready to stick his head out of the window like a happy dog.

We arrive at the same steak house where I often bring Candy. It’s one of the few places where I can sit comfortably. Their back booth fits me perfectly, and I stretch out while Moot looks over the menu.

“The ribs are good,” I say when he can’t decide. “They have a new honey sauce you’ll like since you’re too big a sissy to handle the hickory stuff.”

“I gotta warn you that I’m gonna pig the fuck out.”

“I figured. Do what you need to do.”

Moot orders so much food I end up laughing at him. Despite his company, I find myself thinking of Candy back at the office. She’s been playing things chilly since we had lunch. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s pissed about me fucking other women. All of her talk about not needing romance is a con. She wants the fairy tale shit.

I probably shouldn't have lied about fucking other chicks, but Candy is always knocking me off my game. She can smile in my direction, and I instantly turn into a complete fucking moron. I hate her for having that power, so I told her what she needed to hear. Now she knows she isn't holding all the cards.

Based on our kiss, she's still open to my interest. Based on how quickly she rebounded after the kiss and teased Moot, she's capable of blowing me off for good.

"How long has Candy been in town?"

"A few weeks," I say, startled to hear her name.

"She and Honey weren't close. I remember that much."

"Nothing's changed really. You know broads, though. They want to fix what should be left alone."

Moot shrugs. Soon he's enjoying his food too much to get hung up on Honey and their history. I'm glad because I have no interest in rehashing that train wreck.

"I have a few construction crews you can hook up with. Once you're back in the swing of shit, I'll give you a crew to run. Unless you have other career plans."

"I don't care where I work."

"Where are you looking to live?"

"Can't I stay with you?" he asks, laughing with his mouth full. "Fuck. I'm going to choke."

Rolling my eyes at his teasing, I say, "I have empty houses. Or an apartment if you don't want to live surrounded by old people and families."

"I'll stay at a hotel until I buy shit to go in my place."

"On me."

“Don’t overdo it, Guster,” Moot says, using the ridiculous nickname he gave me years ago. “You’ll come off pathetic.”

“I’ll just rough up a few little kids and get my asshole cred back.”

Moot grins. “I noticed pictures of kids on Candy’s desk. Tell me you’re not banging someone’s mom.”

“You need to stop asking about her.”

“What the fuck else am I going to ask about? Your dad? Naw, you’ll tell me he’s alive and leave it at that. If I ask about your business, you’ll say you’re solvent. You’re not an open fucking book.”

“Fair enough, but talking about Candy isn’t on the day’s schedule either so shut the fuck up.”

Moot nods and returns to enjoying his meal. I lean back and think about Candy’s flavor. I remember her intensity when she gripped my shirt. The woman is waiting for me to take her, and I’ve been fucking around for too damn long. Today, I sampled what Candy has to offer. Next time, I plan to take more than a damn taste.

FOURTEEN - CANDY

Hayes texts me to say he won't be back in the office for the rest of the day. While I'm happy to know he has a friend to play with, I wish he'd return so I might know what the kiss meant.

The afternoon wears on, and I keep myself busy by going through the remaining boxes. Each slip of paper is a reminder of Hayes. I smell his cologne at times. Smell his cigars too. His presence remains in the office, making me miss him even more.

By the time I pick up the kids, I'm relieved to have their company.

"Crappy day?" I ask when they slide into the SUV.

"My teacher is an idiot," Cricket announces, having kept her mouth shut all day. "She only pays attention to two brats and ignores the rest of us."

"That's probably why they act like brats," I say, heading home on the quiet, tree-lined streets. "How about you, Chipper?"

"Some boys said I can't be in their group because I don't have a dad. I told them I didn't want to be in their group because they're lame. I said they should ask their dads how to be cooler."

Laughing, I relish how much the kids mimic me rather than Toby. No doubt their father would obsess over getting into the one group who wouldn't have him.

"Did that go over well?" I ask.

"They didn't get it."

"Well they're idiots, and there's no fixing that."

"My teacher says I can be the line leader next week," Chipper announces.

Pulling her dark hair out of the ponytail, Cricket frowns. "I want to be line leader."

"Life never promised you a rose garden," Chipper says, using my line. "I got the better teacher. You got..."

Cricket growls at him, and they frown at each other.

"Want to make pizza tonight?" I ask, hoping to improve their moods.

The twins stop glaring at one another and look at me. I see their heads nodding in the rearview and suspect my ploy worked.

"How much homework are we looking at?"

"A lot, but they're the same."

Sighing, I think the one part of parenthood I will always loathe is homework. Ideally, we could go home and chill for the night. Instead, they get a second dose of school.

I think about Hayes suggesting homeschool. I don't know if I could swing that setup. By the second page of homework, I've changed my mind. I could use the meeting room for their school. They could stay with me during the day while I worked. We could go on field trips to Nashville to see the zoo and museum. Yes, it would be so much fun, and I could get out of doing homework at the end of the day.

I don't mention my daydreaming to the kids. The likelihood of me pulling them from school and becoming their teacher feels farfetched. Hayes wouldn't want them around all of the time. He expects me to run errands with him and check out work sites. The kids are too young to be alone. No, it wouldn't work.

"Did you make any friends today?" I ask them once the homework is done and the pizza eaten.

Cricket gives me a pissy side glance. "At lunch, a girl asked to be my best friend. I said maybe, and she stole my fruit cup. I don't need friends like that."

Chipper sets up the PlayStation and hands his sister a controller.

"I told you about those boys. They said I could be their friend and then changed their minds."

"Aren't there any cool kids at school?"

"Yeah, but they already have friends. What do they need us for?"

Shaking my head, I can't believe how easily they've given up. "You're the cool new kids. Who wouldn't want to hang out with you?"

The twins frown at me, and I can't help smiling at how much they look alike. Seeing my grin, they frown darker.

"Hey, when I was a kid and moved to a new school, everyone wanted to be my friend. You two must be doing something wrong."

The twins glance at each other and then at me again. I only smile until they give in and smile too.

"We only see each other at recess. That's the only time we need friends, and I have Chipper," Cricket says, sitting crossed legged on the ground in front of the TV. "Tomorrow is fish sticks. Can you send lunch?"

"Sure."

The kids begin playing *LEGO Indiana Jones* while I stretch out on the couch and watch them.

My mind returns to Hayes. The man sure can kiss, and I would have been perfectly happy to spend the afternoon wrapped against him. Lust isn't new to me, but wanting to act on the lust sure as hell is.

I touch my lips and realize I'm falling for Hayes. I've never swooned for a man before. Never gotten breathless over a kiss. Never wanted to chase what I shouldn't have. This feeling in my gut is new and exciting. It also scares the shit out of me.

I find myself wondering what he's doing right then. *Does he think about me? Is he with another woman?* My gut switches from happy swirls to jagged rage. *How can he fuck other women when he has me nearby?* He's been inching closer to my bed since we met. *Does he think I want him if he's dripping with another woman's germs?*

Angry now, I sit up and focus on the kids' game. I don't need Hayes or his hot kisses or his sloppy four hundred and fifty seconds. I enjoy my job. I adore my house. I have the best kids. My life is fucking aces. I don't need any fucking complications. Great, now I'm even *thinking* the word "fucking" constantly. *The man is a bad influence.*

I'm still grumpy about Hayes when the kids and I later watch *Inside Out*. I sit in the middle of the couch with a kid on each side. Both rest their heads on my lap while I play with their hair. They're so relaxed, and their calm infects me. Hanging in our pjs is the best.

Life never promised me a damn rose garden, so our happy evening is interrupted by a knock at the door. The kids sit up and stare at the front hallway as if we're under attack.

I walk to the front door, take the baseball bat from the umbrella stand, and open the door a crack. I find Honey and her brood shivering on the front step.

"Can we come in?" Honey asks when I just stare at her.

A part of me wants to tell her no. I have a quiet life with my kids, and Honey reeks of messy drama. She might taint me with her bad

thinking, and I'll corrupt the twins.

I don't shut the door on her, of course. I'm selfish, but not to the point of acting on most of my egotistical impulses.

Honey herds her shivering kids into the house, and I realize they're all wearing pajamas under their coats. The youngest Lauren is barefoot.

"What happened?" I ask, shutting the door and following them into the living room.

Honey opens her mouth to answer but sees the twins and changes her mind. My kids don't look thrilled to have visitors and less so about having these particular ones. Cricket doesn't like her cousins, while Chipper merely tolerates them. They're accustomed to a small, mostly adult family unit. Other children don't interest them.

"I need somewhere to stay tonight. We can go to a hotel, but I don't have any money. I'll pay you back. I promise."

Looking at my sister, I resent her for being in this situation. I want her to be smarter than our mother. I need her to get her shit in order. I feel all kinds of pissy emotions, but I force myself to remember this is my sister. Once she was the person who held my hand when we crossed the street. She made me peanut butter sandwiches when I got home from school, and mom was still at work. Honey took care of me, and I can, at least, help her out tonight.

"Why don't you stay here instead?" I suggest.

Honey knows we're not close, and she knows it's mostly her fault. She married an asshole, and he separated her from everyone who didn't worship him. I know she hopes we can be friends now that we're adults, but we're not friends yet. We're siblings who barely

spoke for years and now have an awkward relationship built on resentment and unspoken disappointments.

“Are you sure?”

I take Lauren from Honey and carry the toddler to the couch.

“We’re watching a movie.”

Drew and Evan drop onto the floor in front of the TV. They don’t even remove their jackets. The boys are immediately happy, but Allison remains near her mother. The oldest child understands more than her siblings, and she isn’t any more thrilled to be here than Honey.

Lauren lets me take off her jacket and then she finds a spot between the twins. She thinks they’re cool. They think she slobbers too much. It’s a match made in heaven.

After asking Allison to join her siblings, I gesture for Honey to follow me into the kitchen. Once we have a little privacy, I ask what happened.

“Andrew freaked and kicked us out of the house.”

“Freaked about what?” I ask, noticing bruises around her throat.

“I don’t know. He came home and said he saw an old friend of mine driving around town. Then he freaked and told me to get out.”

Honey is hiding something. I often sense that about my sister. She possesses an aloof quality that makes her always seem as if she’s only telling half of the story.

“You can stay here until this gets worked out.”

Honey nods, but behind her detached expression, I suspect she’s barely keeping shit together.

“Why don’t we put Allison and Drew in Chipper’s room. Can you share a bed with Lauren and Evan?”

“What about the twins?”

“They can sleep with me. I have a king sized bed, and they often join me during thunderstorms.”

“You don’t have to do this,” she mumbles in a weird voice.

“No, I don’t. You and I aren’t close,” I say, putting out the cold hard facts. “We could be one day. We’re the only ones left in the family, and we could learn to be friends. I’d like that, Honey.”

Her indifference crumbles, and my sister bursts into tears. I’m startled when she falls into my arms but quickly rebound with a tight hug. Her tears only last a few minutes, but they come violently until she’s spent.

“I’m so tired,” she whispers, wiping her eyes. “It’s a tired deep in my bones. Like the kind mom had.”

I hear the fear in her voice. Not of her abusive husband or a life raising four kids alone. I hear the terror of ending up like Mom, who walked into a forest and never came back out. Yvonne Wilbert is still considered missing, but we know the truth. Mom needed an end and didn’t want her kids to know the ugly truth. We did, though. Anyone who knew mom knew she didn’t go hiking that day. She went into the woods to find a peace life never provided.

“You’re safe here,” I say after bringing her a drink. “I will help you. If need be, I’ll ask Hayes for help too. He has houses we can get for cheap rent. He can help you find a job. He’s smart and likes to show off his power. He’ll help you when you’re ready.”

Honey nods, understanding I’ve accepted she isn’t leaving Douche yet. Somehow, she can’t walk away. Not even after he threw her out into a cold night. For so long, she’s conditioned herself to

stay. Now she doesn't know how to leave. Despite all of Andrew's training, I feel Honey looking for the exit from her bullshit marriage.

FIFTEEN - CANDY

Despite sharing my bed with the twins, I sleep well. Like me, they rarely move at night. As babies, they were so still I often checked to make sure they were still breathing.

Waking at six, I take a shower and leave the kids to sleep longer. I glance in at Honey curled up with three of her four kids. Only Allison remains in Chipper's bed. She sleeps with her arms and legs stretched out, taking full advantage of the space.

Downstairs, I make coffee and scrambled eggs. By the time the twins stumble downstairs dressed, I have their lunches packed, and breakfast is waiting.

"What about them?" Cricket asks, glancing upward.

"Let them sleep."

"Doesn't Allison go to school?" Chipper asks.

"Oh, yeah." Rolling my eyes, I shrug. "She has no clothes to wear here. Let her sleep. Honey can figure things out for tomorrow."

"How long are they staying?"

"Until Douche says they can come home."

Cricket shakes her head. "I'm never getting married."

"Jinxed yourself, hug-a-baloo. Everyone knows once you state something as a fact the universe immediately decides you must be proven wrong."

Cricket doesn't believe me. I see her give Chipper a weird look, and he nods. Their twin powers mean never having to make a snide comment about me aloud.

I braid Cricket's hair and fix Chipper's floppy bangs. Once they brush their teeth, we head to the car and leave the drama-filled

house behind.

Hayes is already in the office when I arrive, and I'm nervous to see him. Anxious or not, I hurry inside and head straight for his door.

"Miss me?" he asks, without looking up from his computer.

"Yeah, actually."

Startled by my lack of snark, Hayes frowns. "Why?"

"Didn't you miss me?"

"Nope," he says, standing up.

"Are you going to kiss me again?"

"Probably."

I back away and he follows. "I haven't had my coffee yet."

"Don't care."

"I have a favor to ask."

"I'll be gentle," he says in an anything but gentle growl.

I keep backing away. "It's a favor for Honey."

"Unless you're talking about a threesome, I don't give a shit about your sister currently."

I stop retreating and frown at him. "That's disgusting."

"You're the one who said if I saved you and Honey during the apocalypse I'd have two women. You were disgusting first."

"I meant you'd boink one of us one night and the other the next night, not that we'd have an incestuous threesome. You're so gross."

Hayes crosses his arms over his wide chest. "You're stalling."

"I'm afraid you'll kiss away all my brain cells," I murmur, again retreating.

"Probably," he says, returning to the chase.

"Can you talk to Douche and make him let her come home?"

"If I talk to him, it won't be about something that minor."

“Whatever. If you have to break a few of his bones to make him agree, I’m perfectly okay with that. I just need her to be able to return home. Her staying with me isn’t ideal.”

“Kick her out.”

Shaking my head, I dodge him and walk to the kitchenette. “You’re full of shit. If she showed up at your house, no way would you kick her out.”

“Wouldn’t have to because I’d never let her in the house in the first place.”

“Cold.”

“She ain’t my sister.”

“No, she isn’t,” I say, running out of space.

Backing me against the wall, Hayes grins triumphantly. “Where were we yesterday?”

Smiling up at him, I take his hands and place them on my hips. “Somewhere around here.”

“That sounds about right.”

Hayes kisses me, and I turn to mush. Fuck him for being so sexy. I hate him for possessing the power to make me swoon, yet I love the way he makes my body react. Such powerful lust awakens my every nerve.

My fingers dig into the rough fabric of his shirt, and I tug him closer. Hayes can’t bow to my will. He pulls me against him, wrapping my body in his strong arms.

I don’t know how long we remain entangled together. My mind falls away, leaving my body in charge.

Sliding under his shirt, my fingertips explore his warm skin. Hayes tightens his grip on me, and I know he’s unsatisfied. The kisses are

delicious, but he's hungry for more.

"Not here," I say when he finally allows me to come up for air.

"Fucking duh, Candy."

"Why fucking duh, Angus?"

He runs a hand through his dark hair while my hands tease the seams of his shirt.

"People show up here unannounced all the fucking time."

"Yeah, what's that about? Aren't you supposed to be scary? People sure don't respect you much."

"Watch it," he warns, but there's no anger behind his words. In fact, he sounds a bit uncertain.

Feeling brazen, I ask, "Have you ever fucked a woman in this office?"

"Sure. I did last night."

Glaring at him, I ask, "What if I believed you? Do you ever consider how shit might turn out if you keep talking to me like that?"

"I think it'll turn out how it was always going to turn out."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Hayes shrugs and turns away to pour me a cup of coffee. "I haven't decided how complicated I want to make my life," he says, handing me the cup. "You're a good assistant, and I'm too smart to go back to those moron temps."

"I am a great assistant, and I think I understand what you're getting at. I'll try to be less sexy in your presence. You should do the same," I say, walking to my desk. "You'll probably want to stop shaking your ass around the office so much. I can't handle all the temptation."

Hayes places his hands on my desk and leans forward until we're eye level. "I don't make any promises about keeping my hands to myself."

"I wouldn't believe you if you did."

Hayes studies my face. "You're a good woman. I'm not a good man."

"No, you are not," I say, holding his gaze.

"I'm not necessarily a bad guy either."

"No, I suspect you aren't."

Hayes gaze tears me apart, looking for my every secret. "This is complicated."

"Yes."

"If you weren't my assistant, I'd have gotten you in bed by now."

"In theory, yes, you would have."

"You wouldn't be able to tell me no."

"I can tell anyone no. It's my gift."

Hayes smirks. "Do you worry I'm your curse?"

"I do now," I say, frowning at him. "I thought you were a fun fantasy before. Way to ruin the damn dream."

Hayes stands up and crosses his arms. "I think I'll kiss you again this afternoon."

"I'll schedule that in for you, boss."

Grinning again, Hayes walks back to his office. "I'll visit your douche-in-law after I get a few other things done."

"Thank you."

"Remember these heartwarming moments when I forget your birthday or name down the road. Oh, and I'm not giving you shit for Secretaries Day."

“I’ll steal some of your emergency cash from the sugar container and buy myself something for Secretaries Day.”

I hear Hayes laugh quietly. He falls silent while working on plans for new housing units. I’m tempted to peek in on him and see if he needs anything. I know he doesn’t, and he’ll know I know he doesn’t. My lust makes me want to do it anyway. In fact, I’m fairly certain my lust will get me into loads of trouble sooner or later.

SIXTEEN - HAYES

The fucking irony is Andrew Mayer is a woman's safe choice. He has a boring office job, managing a boring company selling boring products. He shoots hoops with his boring coworkers and has pool parties with his boring neighbors. When his pent-up energy needs a release, he grabs for his boring wife and makes her pay for choosing him over a more "wild" man.

I stop by his office where he sells blinds and carpet. He's laughing it up with his moron coworkers when I enter. The look on his stupid face when he sees me is fucking priceless.

Asshole Andrew tries to send one of his coworkers to help me, but I shake my head and point at him. He shuffles toward me like a kid knowing he's got a beating coming.

"Can I help you?" he asks as if he doesn't know who I am and why I'm here.

"You have a house," I say, lighting a cigar. "Is that right?"

"Yes."

One of his tubby coworkers rounds a counter, sees me lighting up and is ready to tell me to put out the cigar. Then the moron realizes who I am and his mouth clamps shut.

"Your wife and kids are sleeping in that house tonight. I don't give a shit where you sleep, but they'll be back in that house this evening. Do we understand each other?"

"Did Honey talk to you?"

Exhaling smoke in his face, I shrug out my shoulders. "Are you looking to make trouble for me like you do your woman, Andy?"

"No. I just..."

I cock an eyebrow. "I have a direct line into your household. You do something wrong, and I'll know about it. You keep that in mind next time you overcompensate for your small dick. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes," he mutters.

"Just between us men, your wife would make out fine as a widow. You keep that in mind. I know I will."

Exhaling smoke in his face again, I pat him hard on the shoulder. He grimaces, fighting the urge to cower. Men like Andrew aren't fighters. They don't like pain. I see the fear in his eyes. A little part of me fucking hopes he smacks Honey tonight so I can smack him. Letting him live makes me look like a fucking pussy, but I know Candy wants her sister to make the big play.

I spot Andrew's car on my way to my truck. For the hell of it, I pull out a blade and cut one of his tires. I'd rather cut him, but I'm apparently taking orders from my assistant these days. Something has clearly gone wrong in our fucking relationship.

When I return to the office a few hours later, I find Candy's children playing soccer in the parking lot. They stop and look at me when I arrive and then return to kicking the ball back and forth.

I consider ignoring them but decide to give a shit about their frowning faces.

"Problem with life?" I ask.

Cricket frowns bitchy at me. "Yeah."

"Who's messing with you?"

"At our old school," she blurts out as if she's been waiting for someone to ask, "they let me and Chip be in the same class. In our new school, they say because we're twins we should be separate."

They want us to make friends with other people, but other people suck. I want to be with Chip. He gets me.”

Chipper begins nodding as soon as his sister speaks. They stare at me with dark, cranky eyes. I tell myself these kids mean nothing to me. It’s a lie, though. They belong to my assistant and future fuck partner. So like with Honey, the twins’ happiness is part of the package.

Besides, Cricket’s disdain for people is admirable. I agree with her hatred for school fucks and their well-meaning bullshit.

“Which of you has the better teacher?” I ask.

Chipper isn’t sure about talking to me, but he’s pissed about the teacher situation. “Mine. Mrs. Dover.”

“I’ll make a call. With that out of the way, are you two aware soccer is a Communist sport?”

The twins look at each other, and then Chipper picks up the ball and walks inside with his sister close behind. I follow them and find Candy sitting at her desk, reading paperwork.

“Mom, is soccer a Communist sport?” the boy asks.

Shaking her head, Candy doesn’t look up. “No.”

“Yes, it is,” I tell her. “It’s popular in Communist nations.”

“Baseball is popular in Cuba. In fact, the only truly American sports are football and basketball. Nothing else should be trusted.”

I can’t tell if she’s making fun of me. The kids glance between us before focusing on their ball.

“Should we play soccer?” Cricket asks. “And what’s Communist mean?”

Candy looks at her daughter and gives her a wonderful smile. “Kicking a soccer ball is good practice for kicking people in the balls

when you're older. As for the definition of Communist, grab my phone and google it."

The kids take her cell and hurry to a table. I appreciate their enthusiasm. Like them, I was a curious kid growing up. Unlike the twins, I did my shit alone. A team sounds smarter, but people are morons, and I trust no one.

"Any calls?" I ask Candy.

"Three but I didn't take messages."

"Why not?"

"They were all whiny shits being whiny. I told them to fix the problems themselves and call back when they had something positive to say."

"Good."

Candy's never sexier than when she focuses her bitchiness on morons.

"Can I see you in my office?" I ask.

Candy shakes her head, but she's fucking with me. I walk to the back, and she follows. I hear the twins babbling about the definition of Communist.

Candy shuts the door behind her "They get off early on Wednesdays but didn't want to go home and see their cousins."

"Don't care," I say, wrapping her against me and kissing her hard.

Somehow, her body fits perfectly with mine. I hate how well we work together. She's the kind of woman I could care about, and I'm not in the mood to care about anyone. Being nice to Moot, Nightmare, and my dad already takes too much good will.

Candy smiles up at me when my lips leave hers. “You kiss good enough to last me hours.”

“Is this your way of saying you’re not putting out today?”

“Oh, I was never going to do that anyway,” she teases while her fingers play with my shirt buttons.

My arms remain wrapped around her. “I’m ignoring your lies, but I want you to listen up.”

Candy blinks rapidly as if trying to focus. “Spill it.”

“I talked to your douche-in-law, and his pants remained dry. I want you to understand how the next time there’s a problem, Mayer is dead meat. It’s not about you or your sister or some magical potion to break an age-old curse or whatever crazy shit you have in your pretty head. It’s about me and my reputation. I didn’t scare the shit out of this town for nearly two decades, so I could piss it away for a chick.”

Candy studies me. “Now you say you didn’t make him piss himself, but he was scared, right? I mean, I didn’t want you playing nice with him.”

“Did you hear me?”

“You know I did. The kids even heard you through the door. You’re very loud, boss.”

Smiling, I kiss her quickly. My body wants more. *Fuck, it does!* I want every inch of her. My dick is begging for me to tag it in, but I remain in charge. Life is about more than physical relief. It’s about power, respect, and making my enemies shit their pants. I refuse to allow Candy, and my dick, to distract me.

SEVENTEEN - CANDY

The school principal asks to speak to me when I pick up the twins. I assume Cricket's temper got the best of her. If the blowout happened during recess, Chipper would back her up, and they'd kick kids in the balls. *It's the only move I've ever taught them.*

Arriving at school, I'm prepared to fake concern about a schoolyard brawl. When I was growing up, kids fought all the time and called each other names. No one cared. Acting like fools toughened us up. The only thing considered bullying was when a douche stole a kid's lunch money. Enough of us ganged up on him, and he learned to keep his hands to himself.

These days, kids need to be sensitive and care about others. Not even fake-caring either, but they're actually expected to worry about everyone's every feeling. Children basically have to behave as no adult has behaved ever.

Hayes didn't get where he was in life by being nice to anyone. He was an asshole, but he was the asshole in charge. Not the guy who cared and hugged everyone. No, Hayes was the mean guy who took what he wanted.

I'll be happy if the twins become as pushy as Hayes without going fully scary mutherfucker like him. A mom needs to dream, and that was mine.

The principal is a high maintenance lady with perfect hair and flawless makeup. I don't know how she keeps her shit in gear after a day dealing with snot machines.

"I wanted to let you know that after discussing placement with the district psychologist, we feel Cricket and Chipper should share a

class. We'll move Cricket tomorrow into Mrs. Dover's class unless you have any qualms."

"No, that sounds great."

Principal Lady gives me a curt nod, giving away how a discussion with a shrink didn't change the twins' placement. Instead, a big scary man was the reason. Yeah, a big scary man who kisses great and whispers louder than some people talk.

Hayes is the kids' hero and not only because he pulled strings for them to share a class. They know he also scared Douche, and that's why Aunt Honey and the cousins leave our house. While their grandparents' money bought access, the Eddisons couldn't intimidate anyone the way Hayes did.

As soon as their homework is finished, the twins begin working on thank you cards. I sit at the kitchen table and watch them meticulously draw pictures. Every inch of the papers is lovingly covered with crayon and even glitter.

The next morning when I drop them off at school, they make me swear I'll give Hayes their cards. I smile all the way to the office. My kids are happier than they've been since we moved to White Horse, and much of their joy is thanks to my sexy boss.

I hurry into the office and find Hayes sitting at his desk. He looks at me as if I'm a stranger. I'm accustomed to his morning grumpy reaction.

"You called the school and got Cricket moved," I say, taking in the sight of his handsome features.

"I know."

"That was sweet."

“It wasn’t personal. I just don’t like public schools. Mine was awful. I didn’t learn shit there. My mom’s the one who taught me everything.”

“You’re so damn adorable when you go mama’s boy,” I say, stepping closer.

“What’s in your hand? I don’t want more work.”

“The kids made you thank you cards,” I say, handing him the papers.

Hayes looks at the drawings the twins put so much effort into and then frowns at me. “What the hell am I supposed to do with these?”

“Hang them on your fridge with all the other thank you cards you get,” I mutter, losing my smile.

Hayes gives me a dirty look. “Don’t be so sensitive.”

“You did something nice. My kids think you’re awesome. They worked hard on their cards. Don’t be such an asshole.”

“They’re not here so what does it matter? I’ll act really impressed by their crayon crap where they’re around.”

“Fine,” I say and stomp to my desk.

A hard, pained sensation grows in my gut that I can’t shake. My kids own my heart. Imagining their happy faces when they talked about sharing a class, I admired Hayes for fixing a problem I couldn’t. When I watched them create their cards, I let myself dream of a future that included the asshole.

Now I realize he has his tender moments, but they’re fleeting. Hayes doesn’t need to be sweet to anyone. He lives separate from the rest of us. Hayes has no need for friends, girlfriends, and even his father. He is perfectly happy living in his Hayes world where only his needs matter.

My bad mood worsens as I accept I want something from Hayes I'll never have. We normally kiss off and on during the day. Each time feels more comfortable yet hotter. I know his touch. I wait for it all day. Now I don't want him touching me. His reaction to the cards is a wake-up call I shouldn't need. I'm smarter than this heartbroken dipshit I see in the mirror.

"Let's meet a moron for lunch," Hayes says, walking out of his office.

I follow him without speaking. I'm hoping if I remain silent for long enough that he'll never know I'm upset. We climb into his truck, and he frowns at me. I'm too quiet, and I usually talk a lot. Before he can push for an explanation, I turn on the radio and find a song I can hum along with.

Hayes isn't fooled but focuses his anger at the moron we're meeting.

"The asshole picks Arby's out of all the places in town to meet," he grumbles while we wait at a red light. "It won't take long for him to whine about his bullshit and for me to tell him to fuck off."

My voice will betray me, so I only nod at his comments. Hayes frowns for the rest of the drive, remaining silent until we arrive at Arby's. He blocks my way before we go inside.

"What's your deal?"

"What are we doing here?" I ask, hoping to change the subject.

"You act like you've got a stick's rammed up your ass. Why?"

"I'm on my period," I say, afraid to look at him and give away how my feelings have changed.

"You were on your period last week. I remember because you used it as an excuse to order two desserts during lunch."

“I’m just moody. Why do I need a reason?”

Hayes studies me. “Why won’t you look at me?”

“I am looking at you.”

Hayes frowns. “Not like before.”

Forcing my gaze to meet his, I mumble, “You get to be in a bad mood all the time. Why can’t I have an off day?”

“So nothing’s wrong?”

“No.”

Hayes calls my bluff when his lips meet mine. I can’t enjoy our kiss. I don’t push him away, but I can’t give him what he wants. Hayes nips at my bottom lip, showing his anger at how unresponsive I am.

I stare into his eyes, and he studies me hard. Hayes is a smart guy, but he doesn’t get why I don’t want him. I could end the suspense and explain why he and I can’t work. I don’t though.

The words are too difficult, and I’m too weak to face reality yet. I wanted something amazing to happen between Hayes and me. Now I realize it never will.

EIGHTEEN - HAYES

Candy claims a bad day is why her usual loud mouth has turned silent on me. She's lying, of course. Her bad day stretches into a second one and then a third. When I kiss her, my lips don't meet resistance as much as indifference. Worse is how she doesn't smile anymore. She refuses to even fucking look at me.

In the past, Candy talked so much and answered me so openly that I believed I knew her. I don't know shit.

She sits in the next room, working at her desk, and I don't know why she's turned cold. I run through possibilities, but none make sense. There's no other man to steal away her affections. I'd know if anyone so much as flirted with her.

One minute, Candy was smiling and teasing me. Then she was pissed. Now I'm pissed. I asked why she was upset, and she fucking lied. *I'm not asking again.* She's a great assistant, and I care whether she lives or dies. She matters to me, but I won't beg. Not for her. *Not for anyone.*

My life feels too quiet since she turned cold. In fact, I'm desperate enough for a break from the quiet that I invite Moot to my house to watch a football game. Friendship isn't something I enjoy, but I'll pretend if it gets my mind off Candy.

"What the hell?" Moot asks, looking at the thank you cards on my fridge. "Do you have kids I don't know about?"

I study the colorful pictures and try not to let Moot's question piss me off. Talking about Candy does not in any way keep me from thinking about her.

"Those belong to my assistant's kids."

“Candy?”

“Yeah, that would be her name.”

“Ah, problems in paradise, huh?” Moot asks, opening the fridge to get himself a beer.

“She does good work in the office.”

Grinning, Moot takes his beer to the adjoining family room. He reclines in a chair and sighs.

“I forgot how great leather chairs feel.”

I sit on the couch next to Nightmare, who doesn’t even stir. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t hate having someone in my house.”

“Why invite me?” Moot asks, leaning back as his legs go up.

“You were loyal. Few people are. Allowing you into my house is my way of putting you above other people.”

Moot smirks. “I do feel above other people, so your gesture is working.”

“Asshole,” I mutter.

We silently watch the pre-game until Moot glances at me. “Wilburn women are tricky. Honey liked me until she didn’t. I never saw it coming. You can’t take it personal, man.”

“I’m not taking anything in any way. Stop talking.”

“Don’t be like that. Sharing your feelings is healthy.” I glare at him, and Moot laughs. “They taught us about feelings in prison. It was a group thing. I got to see evil fuckers cry about how their daddies never hugged them. Very enlightening.”

“Sounds awful.”

“It was a way to waste a few hours. In prison, time is one of the biggest fucking obstacles. It was like school. Time frigging crawled.”

I smile at his comment, but nothing shakes the funk Candy's bitchiness gave me. I wonder if she even knows how she's messed up my life. Hell, does she even fucking care?

"I liked Honey," Moot says, startling me from my thoughts. "I never dated many sweet women. Once when I got in a fight, Honey put Band-Aids on my face."

Moot laughs at the memory. He's happy about reminiscing, but I suddenly see us as two lonely men approaching middle age. Never before did I feel my life lacked a single fucking thing. Before Candy, I was happy. Moot should be happy to be free. Instead, we waste time thinking about two women out of billions.

"Four kids," I say and chug my beer. "Honey might be sweet, and she might put Band-Aids on your face, and I admit she still looks good for pounding out a litter, but she still has four fucking kids."

"She's also married," Moot murmurs, leaning back with his eyes closed.

"You know he could be under cement within a few hours."

"Yeah, but I'm not going to kill some lady's husband so that I can rekindle old times."

I think to mention Mayer's violent behavior. I've considered saying something before, but I know Moot. He went to prison to help a stranger. How would he handle knowing his old flame was getting smacked around? He'd be out the door in a flash.

"Besides, she dumped you," I say rather than mentioning Asshole Andrew.

"True."

"You only think you missed out because you spent seven years in prison. That'd make anyone nostalgic."

Moot's eyes remain closed, and we fall into silence as the game starts. Whenever something happens to cause the crowd to cheer, he opens his eyes. I stare at the screen, but my mind is on Candy.

I know she isn't watching the game. Her brother loved sports and taught her the basics, but she doesn't follow any teams. Candy's open book routine made her easy to get to know. It also makes her silence worse. I wish I thought she was purposely fucking with me so I might hate her.

I love hating people. My enemies list is long and varied. When I'm tense and need help sleeping, I close my eyes and mentally run through all of the names. I'm asleep before I hit the hundredth moron.

Candy should be on the list for turning against me. I don't allow that shit from anyone, but I still hope she'll open up to me again. We can go back to how things were, and I won't even ask for anything more.

Bullshit.

Being friends will never be enough. *I want Candy.* Not just for chat time in the office, but I want her in my bed. I don't know how to make that happen now. She comes with baggage and now an attitude problem.

I wouldn't mind returning to the days when I only needed my damn dog to keep me company.

NINETEEN - CANDY

This morning, Hayes does nothing to hide his bad mood. He walks into the building and kicks my desk on his way to his office. When I bring him a cup of coffee, he glares at me.

“Women,” he grunts as I walk away.

Despite his anger, I know he won't fire me. He might currently hate me, but he hates the temps more. I also suspect he doesn't want me working for anyone else. In his mind, I belong to him, and he isn't changing this arrangement even if I'm currently on his shit list.

When Hayes goes to breakfast and runs his errands, he doesn't bring me along. He doesn't tell me he's leaving either. This is my punishment, and I feel the sting of his silence.

An hour after Hayes returns, two vehicles pull into the parking lot. The trucks turn, so their beds face the building. I walk outside to find out what they want.

“We have an order to put sod in the back area,” the head landscaper says.

“An order from whom?”

“Hayes ordered it. Is there a problem?” he asks, handing me the work order.

Looking over the square slips of sod, I ask like an idiot, “It's for the back of the building?”

“Hayes told me to bring the best sod I had and make sure it was safe for kids. Is there a problem?”

I gesture for him to go to work. As I walk inside, my heart clenches and I feel like I might fall over. Hayes ordered this grass for

my kids. How long has he left the backyard a muddy ditch? Now he makes a change. *For my kids. For me.*

A man incapable of love wouldn't have ordered the sod. Hayes isn't a monster. My fears are stupid, and I need to be smart.

Without thinking, I rush into Hayes's office where he stands next to his desk. He knows I'm here. I see the way his shoulders tense, but he doesn't look at me. I've hurt his ego, yet he still ordered the sod.

"Hayes," I say when he won't look at me.

He turns, frowning ugly at me. I feel foolish under his gaze, and the right words are difficult to find.

I reach up to cup his face and then lift my lips, but Hayes doesn't kiss me. Letting out a grunt, he turns away.

"That ship sailed, babe."

A punch to the gut, his words nearly topple me over. *Is he really so cold? Am I such a fool to believe otherwise?*

"Have it your way," I say, hiding my hurt.

I don't reach the door before Hayes's hands grab my waist. He turns me just enough for our lips to meet and I lose my breath.

His arms wrap around me, lifting me off the ground while he presses me against the wall. I'm a doll in his embrace. Fragile in ways I've never known.

Hayes lets me down and steps away. His gaze flashes to the door, and I suspect he remembers we're not alone in the office.

"Tonight, we're going out to dinner," he demands.

"I don't have anyone to watch the twins," I mumble while trying to compose myself.

"Bring them. I'll spend the night at your place."

“My kids sleep down the hall,” I whisper as his nearly black gaze engulfs me.

“I’m not loud when I fuck.”

Something about that four-letter word breaks through my lustful haze. I want him so badly I am nodding at the thought of him coming to my house and fucking me in the room next to my children’s. My desire-mired brain approves of this plan until that one word awakens me.

“You’re the devil,” I whisper.

Hayes smiles, thinking I’m complimenting him.

“I was wrong to come in here,” I say, backing away. “I should have given you a thank you note. Bought you a gift basket. Not this,” I mumble, hurrying out of the room.

Hayes follows me. “You’re certifiable. I better make sure the medical plan covers mental health.”

I stop at my desk and pretend to focus on paperwork. My mind is reeling, and my body aches for his touch, but I can’t give into my basest needs.

I feel his arm around my waist and begin to protest, but he’s already lifted me off the ground. Carrying me under his arm like a package to be delivered, he walks into the meeting room and shuts the door.

“What the fuck?” he demands, setting me down.

“I always thought I was so smart, but I’d just never been tempted before. Now I am tempted to be stupid, and I’m failing just like Honey did.”

“Because of me?” he barks. “I’m the fucking bad guy. The devil. You’re dumping this bullshit on me?”

“Don’t act so shocked. You’re a big, scary, rich guy who’s my boss. You have the power to ruin me. I mean, you get that right? Your dick hasn’t drained your brain power, has it? Fearing you is the sanest shit I’ve ever done.”

“Well fuck you,” he says, resting his hands on his hips. “Fuck your curse too.”

“Some people are naturally attracted to bad choices. You mock that kind of thinking all you want, but it killed my brother and wore down my mother. Look at fucking Honey.”

“You’re not any of those fucking people, you dipshit.”

“I was going to fuck you right next to where my kids sleep!” I cry, “I never would do that crap, but you make me weak and dumb as fuck.”

“Bullshit, idiot.”

“Eat shit, asshole.”

Hayes narrows his raging eyes. “Why did you kiss me?”

“You got that sod for the kids, right?”

“No, it’s for my dog,” he lies.

“You make me forget about everything besides you.”

“You don’t affect me at all.”

I smile slightly. “I wish things were different.”

“Why? Things are fucking fine. You’re the problem. Just change your crazy thinking and everything will be peachy fucking keen.”

“I should be turned off by your rude mouth, but you cloud my thinking.”

Hayes crosses his arms and stares at me. Then he uncrosses them and shakes his head.

“You’re not worth the effort.”

Nodding, I only watch him and wish my confidence might return. Rather than storming out, Hayes crosses his arms again.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. No arguments. No bitching or whatever bullshit you might think up. You understand?”

I think to point out that I don’t know what I’m agreeing to and thus won’t agree to it. Instead, I keep my mouth shut. Hayes takes my silence as agreement.

“I’ll take you and those kids out for dinner. We’ll pretend to be friends. I won’t fuck you tonight. Tomorrow, I’ll figure what happens next. Tonight is a done deal, though. Fine?”

“Yes, but why do we have to pretend to be friends? After all this time, I’d assume we were friends.”

“I refuse to have women friends.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t have anything in common with women.”

“We have stuff in common.”

Hayes studies me. “Like what?”

“We both think you’re super. We both think I’m hot,” I say, and Hayes smirks.

“Anything else?”

“We both hate morons and think the Beatles are overrated.”

Hayes nods. “I fucking hate the Beatles.”

“We like coffee in the morning and bacon for breakfast.”

“Everyone likes that shit.”

“My sister drinks Pepsi with breakfast and eats turkey bacon. You can’t be friends with her.”

Hayes doesn’t want to smile, but his eyes give away his amusement. “No, I can’t. I’ll fucking survive without her playing

buddy.”

“You and I are buddies.”

“We’re something. That’s for sure.”

I fix his collar and then ask, “What time do you want to meet for dinner?”

“I’ll pick you up.”

“Oh, that reminds me of something else we have in common,” I say, crossing my arms and mimicking him. “We’re both horrible drivers. Try not to kill my kids tonight.”

“Fuck you and your bad driving bullshit.”

“Wait, did you not know you were an awful driver?”

Hayes rolls his eyes and opens the door. I follow him out of the room.

“Where are we eating?”

“I know a place. You’ll find out where when I pick you up.”

Unsure how to feel, I only watch Hayes disappear out the backdoor to supervise the landscapers. I still taste him on my lips and crave another kiss.

The man makes me feel like a million bucks, but the feeling is a lie. Hayes is not family man material. Sure, he talks about an heir, and he shows compassion for Chipper and Cricket. He isn’t the monster people think, but his future isn’t my future.

As long as I can remember our different paths, I’ll avoid wanting more from Hayes than he can provide. Who knows? I might enjoy a fiery relationship with Hayes while retaining my job and sanity. I promise myself it’s possible.

TWENTY - HAYES

I expected Candy to pick a different rental house. The little yellow one always gets positive comments from broads. Instead, she chose the blocky, brick house. It's the kind of house I'd have picked. Like the fuckwit I've become, I take her choice as a sign that she and I are made for each other.

"Why are you in a bad mood?" she asks after opening the front door.

She's wearing a pale gray sweater and blue jeans. Without trying, she's got my dick rock hard.

"I'm not. Are you ready?"

"Don't be mean to my kids. You can treat me like a turd, but they're off limits."

"Don't be a bitch and just get ready."

Candy walks outside and maneuvers me away from the door.

"What is your problem?"

"You make me a fucking asshole."

"No way are you dumping this on me."

Sighing, I rub my neck and kick at the ground.

"Are you throwing a fit?" she asks.

"Fuck you, Candy."

We glare at one another, both confused about why I'm in such a bad fucking mood. Her expression shifts from bitchy impatience to something her kids likely know well.

"I'm sorry I got weird with you," Candy tenderly says like I'm a whiny bitch. "I didn't know how to say what needed to be said. I'm

not great at that stuff, but neither are you. It's one of those things we have in common."

"I wish you were a bitch," I mutter. "I wish you were a horrible fucking cunt so that I could hate you."

"I sometimes wish you were ugly, so I wouldn't want to touch you."

Her words don't tease me nearly as much as her tone. I know she's messing with me, but it still fucking works. Even shaking my head, I smile.

"If I piss you off, or you get stupid again, just tell me what's happening," I say, caressing a lock of her hair. "I'm not a moody chick, and I won't fire you. I can handle knowing what you're thinking, and you should never assume I'm a mind reader. When it comes to chicks wanting anything more complicated than a desire to fuck, I need shit spelled out."

"Are you sure you want to have dinner with the kids?" she asks, touching my fingers playing with her hair.

"Yeah."

"It can be just you and me."

"No."

"Why?"

"They're your kids. I want to see what they're like."

"Are you curious how your heir might turn out?" she asks, poking me in the gut.

"Sure. Besides, I might decide to do more than fuck you. If that happens, I need to see what your baggage is like."

"Don't call them that," she growls.

"If I get sappy, my balls might fall off. I can't chance it."

“Lck. I can’t even imagine what kind of bullshit you’d put up with if you lost your cajones.”

I lean down and kiss her quickly. Candy doesn’t pull away, but she doesn’t deepen the kiss either. The little faces at the window are likely why she doesn’t climb me.

“Tall Mickey’s has a good kid menu for your baggage.”

Candy shoots me a dirty look before walking back to the door. She disappears inside for a few minutes. I look at her neighbors who don’t look at me. Smiling at their fear, I think to ring the doorbell and get Candy’s ass in gear. I don’t, of course. She was sexy as hell when she pitied me enough to ditch her kids. I have no doubt if I said yes to her offer she’d hold a grudge.

Candy opens the door and hurries outside with the twins. They don’t look as nervous as she does. Their dark-eyed gazes study me, and they smile in unison. I don’t know much about kids, but that smiling trick is creepy.

“Thank you for talking to the school,” Chipper says.

“No problem. You’ve got to take what you want in life. No one will give you shit.”

Chipper and Cricket look at their mom and giggle. Feeling on the outside of an inside joke, I frown.

“What?”

Cricket grins at me. “Mom said you cuss a lot.”

I grunt at their amusement. As they follow me to the SUV at the curb, Candy whispers to the kids. They laugh again, and I glare at them over my shoulder.

“Hey, you have another car,” Candy says, staring at the Suburban.

“I own a used car lot, so I have plenty of other cars.”

“You can just take them?” she asks and then shakes her head.
“Yeah, yeah, you can do whatever you want.”

I open the back door, and the kids climb inside. Candy smiles when I open the door for her.

“Manners,” she says, and I hear mockery in her voice.

“I’m trying.”

“Why?” she asks, frowning at me. “Don’t pretend to be someone you’re not. You can’t keep it up, and it’ll only prolong the inevitable.”

I study her beautiful face and smile at how open she is to me again.

“I’ve always had good manners when I wanted to. I’m not faking shit.”

“Good,” she says and climbs into the SUV.

The drive to the Tall Mickey’s is quiet. The kids whisper to each other while Candy bobs her head to Alan Jackson. She smiles at me and then back at the kids. Her mood is fucking glorious, and I order myself not to shit all over it.

I reserved a back circular booth at the restaurant. The kids sit between Candy and me as if to test my ability to handle baggage.

“Can I get ribs?” Chipper asks Candy.

“They have ribs on the kid menu?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure. Order whatever you want. My boss pays well,” Candy says, giving me a smile that hints at more than a friendly evening.

“I ate here when I was a kid,” I tell them once we’ve ordered. “My parents knew I had a big appetite, and this place serves a lot of food.”

“Do you have brothers and sisters?” Cricket asks.

“No.”

“Do you want them?”

“No.”

“I don’t like cousins,” she says. “They’re noisy.”

The three of them smile, and I feel like the odd man out again. Candy might sense my unease because she gently kicks me under the table. I hold her gaze while she grins at my frowning face.

“Why did you name your dog Nightmare?” she asks.

“Because the breeder described him as getting so big he’d be the thing of nightmares.”

“He’s not scary.”

“He is big,” Chipper admits. “Like a small horse.”

“Don’t even think about riding him,” I mutter.

Chipper rolls his eyes at me. “I know. I’m not a baby.”

His sister sits up on her knees and pushes away her brown hair. “I have no interest in riding a dog or a horse. Sitting on a live animal seems stupid.”

“A dead one is okay, huh?” I ask.

“Sure. It can’t fight back.”

I don’t know why, but I’m fucking nervous, and Cricket’s answer makes me laugh enough to break the tension.

We settle into a quiet dinner. The kids talk about school while sharing a side salad. I skip the lettuce crap, but Candy chows down on hers. I know she’ll order a big entrée plus dessert. The woman loves taking home leftovers.

“We’re getting a cat,” Chipper announces.

With her mouth full of BBQ pork, Cricket nods. “We bought the poop box and bowls. We just need a cat now.”

I look at Candy, who dramatically sighs. “We’re looking this weekend.”

“I don’t like cats.”

The twins shrug immediately. Candy only watches me. I know what she’s thinking. *What’ll happen to the cat if we end up together?*

“I’ll feed it to Nightmare,” is my answer.

Cricket laughs and looks at her brother. They whisper to each other and then return to eating.

“Which of our cards was better?” Chipper asks.

The kids watch me, and I’m nervous again under their gazes. If I give the wrong answer, will I face tears?

“I liked them both equally,” I say like a schmuck. “I have them on my fridge at home.”

The kids smile and return to whispering. Candy watches me. Based on her expression, I finally fucking get why she was so pissed the last few days.

“You’re kidding me,” I mutter, frowning at her.

“They own my heart.”

“Is there room for anyone else in there?”

Shrugging, Candy divides the food on her plate into what she’ll eat here and what she’ll take home.

Eager to change the subject, I say, “I’ll give you twenty bucks if you eat it all now.”

Candy considers my offer and then smiles. “I want to say yes, but I really don’t want you to win, so I choose no.”

“Resistance is futile.”

“That’s a geek saying. Are you a big comic book reading, *Star Trek* watching geek?”

“Is that a real question?”

“Sure. You could be secretly into something weird like collecting gnomes or ventriloquism.”

“What if I was?” I ask, thinking about the gnomes on my front lawn.

“I’d still be sweet on you.”

The twins made gagging sounds before laughing at us. I roll my eyes, but they’re likable kids. Neither one has tried to touch me or messed with my food. I admit I don’t know shit about kids, but I have a lot of fears about my food getting drooled on by a tiny, crazed person.

By dessert, I can almost imagine seeing these kids on a regular basis. I’m not to the point where I want to play step-daddy. Hell, I haven’t even fucked Candy, let alone started calling her “girlfriend” rather than “hot assistant.” The idea of domestication doesn’t terrify me as much as in the past.

When we arrive at the house, the kids show me the kitty litter. They’re psyched about a cat. I don’t care about that part, but I do like how they want me to be psyched too.

“I like your kids,” I say after they’re in bed, and Candy sits on the couch with me. “They’re not like other kids.”

“You have a very baby-centric view of kids. Once they pass a certain age, they don’t scream so much or stink up the place.”

Smiling, I wonder what she’s thinking. Her expression is completely unreadable.

“Do you want to give me an heir?” I ask.

“Maybe. I always assumed I was done after the twins, but I guess I could have one giant baby.” Candy grins and stands up. “Do you know what I’m thinking?”

“That you want me to leave?”

“You’re no mind reader, Mister Hayes.”

“Fine, then give me a hint.”

“Remember the last week at the office when I brought you the plans for the Highland house?”

I think back to that day. I’ve just caught up to her point when Candy straddles me.

“Sitting on your lap like that was so unprofessional.”

My hands wrap around her waist, and I inhale her sweet scent. When our lips meet, Candy tastes like barbecue sauce. I wrap her tighter in my arms until I doubt she can breathe. Candy doesn’t complain. Her hands cup my face, and her lips meet my hunger.

I’ve missed this woman too much to pretend she’s a fling. I don’t know if I’m capable of love, but our future is my next challenge.

Candy pulls her lips away from mine, long enough to study my face. Her gaze is desperate and primal. I suspect hers mirrors mine.

“When was the last time you were with a woman?” she asks in a shaky voice.

“Fifteen minutes before I picked you up for dinner.”

Candy frowns at me, and I know that disapproving look.

“Why do you have to be an asshole?”

“That’s my comfort zone.”

“Comfort? You’re fucking kidding, right? I’m taking all kinds of scary chances with you. Why can’t you put on your big boy pants and take a chance too?”

Honesty is overrated. Lies keep people off their game, but I'm not playing with Candy.

"My last lay was a few weeks before you came to work with me. It was after some asshole shot at my house. I was tense and figured a hard fuck would help."

Candy's dark eyes study my face. "Did it?"

"No. Besides sleeping and maybe showering, fucking is when a person is at their most vulnerable. I hate feeling exposed with people I don't trust, and I don't trust anyone."

Candy's thumbs stroke my lips. "Can you learn to trust me?"

Her lips suck on mine, and I groan against her mouth when her hips roll. I feel the heat of her pussy even through her jeans. My cock aches for relief. First, I want to take out my cock and let it breathe. Then I want to give my dick a taste of the sweet, hot pussy it craves.

"I feel like calling you Angus," she whispers. "Is that fine?"

"I don't give a shit," I murmur, covering her lips with mine.

Candy's warm body slides against mine. Frenzied, she wants to be closer, gluing herself to me.

"Angus," she mumbles when I come up for air.

Her lips refuse to leave mine for more than a second. I think of her kids upstairs and wonder if they'll peek on us. As much as I want Candy, I'm not looking for a quick fuck on the couch. I know her better now. If I mess shit up with her kids, she'll turn off her feelings toward me.

"Stop," I say, prying her off me.

"No," she cries, wrapping her arms around my neck.

Candy is a tough woman, but I easily detach her from me and set her on the couch.

“You need to get your shit in order,” I grumble as if I’m not sporting a painful boner.

“We can do it here,” she says, tugging her shirt over her head.

I take in the sight of her pink bra restraining handfuls of soft flesh. My mind imagines what her nipples look like. I see them pushing hard against the fabric, begging for my touch. I can already taste them between my teeth.

“Not here. Your kids could walk down and see. Trust me a boy’s greatest horror is seeing his mom getting banged.”

Candy smiles at my comment, but her eyes remain dilated with lust. “We could go in the kitchen. Or the bathroom.”

“You’ve lost your damn mind,” I say, even if I’m imagining Candy’s pussy splayed out on the kitchen island for me to feast on.

Her hands take one of mine and force me to cup her tit. I squeeze without thinking. I know I need to stop, but I ache to tear off her clothes and shove my cock deep inside her body.

“Please,” she murmurs while my thumb strokes her fat nipple hiding behind the bra.

I kiss her as my free hand gropes her other tit. I’m going to fuck her right here and worry about kids and consequences later. My fingers pull aside the cup on her bra, just before I suck her tit into my mouth. Her nipple grows harder against my teasing tongue.

I’ve never wanted to fuck someone so badly in my life, but I force myself to let her go. Not quickly. Not easily, but I stop.

“No,” I say while nearly lunging away from her. “I am not the bad guy fucking up your life. I’m the voice of fucking reason here.”

Candy stares at me with glazed eyes and rosy cheeks. She wants me to fuck her so badly that I can even smell her arousal. The

musky scent calls to me, but I'm not a horny teenager or animal. I will control myself.

"Get your shit together," I demand again.

Candy lifts an eyebrow and then glances down at where I'm stroking her still exposed nipple.

Rolling my eyes, I force my hands to leave her. She doesn't put her tit back in her bra. The woman is fucking killing me with her inability to turn off her arousal. Voice of fucking reason or not, I'm minutes away from tearing off her jeans and drilling my cock inside her.

"You need to put that away," I say, gesturing toward her tit still shiny from my tongue.

"You took it out. You put it away."

I frown as mean as I can at her, but Candy is in a state of arousal where her brain has left the building and is waiting for a flight out of the country. I don't know when it might return.

More carefully than when I yanked her tit free, I return it to the cup. Then I take her shirt and slide it over her head. She won't help me with her arms, and I feel like I'm dressing an unwilling child.

"I'm leaving," I say once she's dressed.

"My shirt is on backward," she mocks in a voice filled with desire. "You should try again."

"And you called me the devil," I say, standing up and hurrying out of the room.

I don't even hear Candy, but she's right behind me when I open the door and embrace the cold night. Her fingers cling to my shirt.

"Tell me why?"

I cup her face and take in the sight of her desperate expression. She really is an extraordinarily beautiful woman, and I swear she gets better looking every day.

“You and I are complicated, but fucking like this is simple. We don’t do simple, Candy. Now take a cold shower, and I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

A cold breeze brushes past us, and Candy wraps her arms around her body.

“No cold shower for me. I’ll keep it steamy and find relief,” she taunts, still hoping to get me to fuck her. “Good luck with your hand.”

“You’re being a bitch.”

Candy gives me a wide smile. “Thank you, Angus.”

“For what?”

“Dinner and being sweet to my kids. Also for getting me riled up and knowing when to leave me hanging. You’re not such a bad guy.”

Candy says the words, but I don’t think she believes the last few. She still worries I’m the man who’ll ruin her. While I wouldn’t mind ruining her for all other men, destroying Candy isn’t an option. I’m not a monster despite what my enemies claim.

TWENTY ONE - CANDY

Awkward isn't a strong enough word for how I feel when I arrive at work after my lust tantrum. I don't know how Hayes will react. He might taunt me or ignore what happened or try to fuck me on his desk.

As usual, Hayes is already working when I arrive. I poke my head into his office and study him. His hair is still damp from an early shower, and his soapy scent returns my body to lust mode.

Smiling casually, I ask, "Need any coffee?"

Hayes looks up from his laptop and stares blankly at me. "Will you hump my leg like a dog if I say no?"

Rolling my eyes, I leave him to gloat. At my desk, I try to concentrate, but Hayes looks too damn sexy in the morning.

I hear him get up from his chair, and the sound of his boots against the hardwood floor mimics the banging of my heart. I pray his gloating doesn't last the entire day.

"Hey, horndog, get your coat, and we'll eat breakfast."

I stand up and go to the door without looking at him. Hayes takes one long step and ends up next to me.

"Don't get shy now," he teases, poking my back.

"I appreciate you not taking advantage of my stupidity last night."

"It's not stupid to want this," he says, strutting ahead of me and showing off his ass. "There'd be something wrong with you if you didn't want a piece of this beefcake."

Despite turning beet red, I laugh at how he struts on the walk to the Waffle House. He opens the door for me, and I walk inside feeling like an absolute fool.

Hayes doesn't say anything more until we order. I finally force myself to meet his gaze. I wish he didn't look so fucking handsome sitting next to me.

"I do appreciate you stopping us," I say in the most solemn voice I can manage. "It's been a long time since I've been with a man and clearly I was unprepared."

Hayes nudges me. "Why are you so damn embarrassed today? You've put me through the ringer since day one. Can't I tease you a little without you turning red and hiding your face?"

"I'm a sensitive woman."

Hayes snorts. "Tell me one woman that isn't sensitive."

"I was being sarcastic."

"Women are full of drama."

"You know what," I mutter, glaring at him, "fuck you. I have one moment of weakness, and you think that proves your stupid ideas about my entire gender."

"That's the spunky bitch I'm accustomed to. Nice to have you back."

Smiling now, I lean my head against his shoulder. "I never masturbate, but I did last night. Twice, in fact."

Hayes narrows his eyes. "Damn, woman. How did we go from me in control to you making me feel like a horny chump?"

"Your fault for showing me pity," I say, batting my eyes at him. "Now I'm back in the game."

Hayes grudgingly smiles. "I jacked off three times last night, so I think I win."

"Yeah, but were you thinking of me every time?"

“Yep. You were a dirty girl in my head. I could barely keep up with you.”

Beet red again, I laugh. “I’m lazy in bed. Not at first, but I get bored and just go through the motions.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Don’t grab my hair during blowjobs,” I whisper. “I panic when my hair is pulled and feel the urge to lash out. I’m sure your dick would survive. Your tender balls probably not so much.”

Hayes studies me with his hypnotic, dark eyes. “Well isn’t that something? My dick reacted positively to your threats.”

I pat his hand and sweetly gaze into his eyes. “I know you’re worried about being vulnerable during sex, but I promise I won’t hurt or scare you while we’re knocking boots.”

“Is that your version of sensitivity?”

“No, that’s me being seductive.”

Hayes grins. “If you keep up this shit, I’m taking you somewhere private after breakfast and working off these calories.”

I hold his gaze and imagine finally knowing what we’re like in bed. If it’s a train wreck, we can be friends. Or employer, employee. If it’s great, we can be more. At this point, I don’t even care what more means.

“Yes,” I say, answering a question he hasn’t asked.

Hayes studies me and then nods casually. He understands what I want. No reason to discuss it further. We eat our breakfast and talk about work. Hayes mentions a fire at a competitor’s restaurant overnight. I know he wouldn’t mention someone else’s problem if he weren’t behind it. I smirk at his feigned concern.

“People need to know their place,” I say, mimicking something Hayes has told me a million times in the short period I’ve worked with him.

“I agree.”

We understand each other. While I didn’t necessarily agree with burning down businesses or busting kneecaps, I admire the way White Horse functions. The town lives under a dictatorship, but so do most places. In Cincinnati, the wealthy and politically connected control the city and leave the citizens to fend for themselves.

In the nearby Common Bend and Hickory Creek Township, obvious crime organizations control everything from elections to business licenses. Hayes’s more subtle in many ways. Fairer maybe too, but he never bends. His world is black and white. What he supports is on the side of righteousness even if it involves putting troublemakers in their graves. What interferes with his little utopia is evil and needs stomping.

I’m not naïve. I’ve seen how wealth controls power, and power controls the lowly citizens. Hayes built his empire through fear but also hard work and intelligence. He’s a benevolent dictator and a man I can’t get out of my system.

TWENTY TWO - CANDY

Hayes opens the Holiday Inn hotel room door and waits for me to enter. I enter a standard room with a king-sized bed, dresser, and desk. Nothing special about it, but this is where I'll finally see if Hayes's sexiness is all in my head.

During the drive, he states, "I'm not using a condom. If you get pregnant, I'll get my heir."

"What about the other worries condoms help with?" I ask, feeling suddenly very nervous.

"Not a concern." When I open my mouth, he interrupts in a hard, arrogant voice. "I use them with other women. Never with you."

The thought of him with other women irritates me. The thought of him viewing me as just another conquest irritates me. The thought of how much I want Hayes and how little he might want me irritates me. I'm a ball of pissed off bitch as I stand next to the bed.

Hayes says nothing about my frown or how I haven't set down my purse. He must know I'm grumpy. He should ask what the fuck is my problem. He doesn't because he doesn't want to know.

Hayes stands over me, and I really take in his height. He'll squish me during sex. I bet he's a selfish lover. I'll probably pull a muscle. I should just ask to leave.

His lips meet mine, and I lose my fucking mind. The heat from his tongue sends shockwaves through my entire body, and I drop my purse. Kicking it away, I grip his shirt and deepen the already hungry kiss.

I swear to myself my reaction isn't personal. I've simply gone too long without any passion in my life. Hayes understands the rules.

We're only having fun. Sex doesn't need to mean anything. Fucking can just be fucking, and I very much want this man to fuck me.

I don't remember yanking off my clothes. I might have even torn my shirt to remove it faster. Hayes isn't as overcome with lust. He pulls off his shirt leisurely like we're on vacation, and he has all the time in the world.

My hands immediately go to his chest. I ache to explore the hard muscles and thick, black hairs. Hayes lifts my chin and kisses me again.

I forget about my hands and his chest. My brain shuts down as the throbbing spot between my legs runs the show.

Hayes's lips remain locked on mine while he leans me back on the bed. My hands grip his shoulders. My hips wiggle wildly as my legs try to ensnare him. Hayes takes my thighs and presses them down, pinning them to the bed. I grunt in his mouth, and he nips at my tongue.

Pushing him away, I frown darkly. "What the hell?"

Hayes opens his mouth to say something. I even sense he wants to tell me to shut the fuck up. He doesn't speak, though. Instead, his fingers stroke between my legs.

"Better," I mumble.

Watching him through half closed eyes, I shiver as his long, thick index finger slides along my slit. He switches fingers and uses the wet one to tease my hard nipples.

Hayes tests and teases the flesh between my legs. I swear he's like a kid with a new toy. *What does this button do? How about this lever?* Hayes wants to figure out my body, but I can't understand his

hesitancy. My body is like every woman's. The buttons and levers do the same stuff.

I watch him until his gaze meets mine. He lifts an eyebrow at my unasked question.

"I've been waiting to get you naked for weeks. Don't rush me, woman."

His voice is soft, but his meaning remains clear. He's in the driver's seat. I'm simply along for the ride.

I consider giving him a hard time about his attitude, but his curious fingers are teasing me in just the right way. However, if I were in charge, I'd no doubt have orgasmed by now. Then I could rest lifelessly while he did his experimenting. Hayes is a slow ass driver on this ride.

To prevent myself from angering the big bully, I cover my mouth, close my eyes, and give myself a pep talk. *Just enjoy the ride. Don't think. Just feel.* It wasn't as if I'm shocked Hayes is controlling. This is his M.O. for everything. So I need to let him play and stop being in such a rush.

Ooh, that right there feels exquisite.

Hayes's lips find mine again, and I'm startled by the heat behind them. None of the hesitancy I feel from his teasing fingers. He's a man on fire and I smile at his need.

"Angus," I murmur when his lips leave mine.

Testing out his name, I say it again when he gives my right nipple a lick. He then devours my nipple and areola, sucking rhythmically until his name comes out as stuttering noises.

My body breaks out in sweat and goosebumps as he sucks and sucks. His tongue bathes my nipple until I'm a whimpering mess.

The heat between my legs is unbearable, and I reach for my clit. Hayes pushes away my hand and presses his fingers deep inside me. Groaning loudly behind my hand, I lose control. Hell, I can't even remember where I am. Hayes is completely in control of my body now.

His rough knuckle strokes my sensitive clit, and I explode. Never in my life have I come this hard and wildly. Right now, I'm all raw nerves firing with pleasure.

Hayes uses his free hand to uncover my mouth. Devouring my moans of pleasure, he kisses me while pumping his fingers into my body. My arms wrap tighter around him. His skin is blazing hot, and I need to feel him inside me.

I don't think I actually say those words when our kiss ends. Instead, I mumble incoherently.

Hayes takes his dripping fingers from my pussy and brings them to my lips.

"Taste," he commands, and I obey.

We lick his fingers clean and then he kisses me again. Hot and demanding, he won't let me breathe until I become an extension of him. Settling into his tongue's rhythm, I feel him move over me. Is he naked? I hadn't even noticed him take his pants off. Having lost all connection with time, I don't know if we're going too fast or too slow. There is only Angus Hayes.

TWENTY THREE - HAYES

Candy stretches out on the bed with her lanky limbs wrapped around me as my cock teases her swollen clit. I've never before seen the look on her flushed face. If I didn't know her, I'd think she was stoned. Apparently, one orgasm is all she needs to go brain dead with pleasure.

The thick head of my cock disappears inside her. Her breathing speeds up as I fill her one inch after another. The heat of her gripping pussy nearly sends me over the edge. I only remain in control because I refuse for my body to give in yet. Too many weeks of imagining this very damn moment left me desperate for more than a quick fuck.

"Candy, look at me," I demand as the head of my cock finds resistance deep inside her.

Her dark eyes open and she smiles. Shit, I nearly jizz myself again. She's fucking stunning on an average day. Right now, with me thrusting steadily into her sucking pussy, she is the most beautiful creature in the world.

Her feverish expression fades long enough for her to caress my jaw. When my thrusts become harder and faster, I watch her face for a sign I'm hurting her. She groans deep in her chest, and then her hips lift to take more of me.

Candy can't keep up with my rhythm. I nearly laugh when she frowns after giving it her all, but our hips refuse to move together. She finally stops trying to keep up, instead caressing my face while my cock drives deep into her.

"Angus," she says, looking stoned again.

I know she's ready to come again. If she does, I won't be able to hold on. My hips slow down, and her partially closed eyes pop open.

"Jerk," she growls, but her smile makes my cock twitch.

"We're not done after this," I growl back at her.

Candy's grin widens, and I know she's feeling smug about how badly I want her. Fuck her arrogance. She's beautiful and fucking her feels fantastic. There's no shame in begging for something this incredible.

Her fingers caress my nipples, and I grunt. Unable to stop my hips, I move faster, thrusting rough enough for her to groan in both pain and pleasure. One of her hands slides between her legs until I feel it against the root of my cock as she strokes herself. Her other hand teases my nipple.

"Angus Hayes," she moans.

I don't know why hearing my name said in her lust-filled voice sends me over the edge. Like a song, she says it again and again while I unload what feels like a gallon of jizz into her.

Candy makes a weird noise, and her pussy convulses around my still hard cock. Coming harder than the first time, her hot center sucks me dry. I watch her sweaty, flushed face go through several expressions before she opens her eyes and meets my gaze.

"I want to be on top now," she says immediately.

Smirking, I keep thrusting shallowly inside her. "My cock is happy where it's at."

"I'll suck you first," she offers.

I study her pretty lips and imagine them spread wide around my cock. In my mind, I see the head of my cock teasing the back of her

throat. I think of filling her mouth with my jizz until it drips down her chin.

“Fuck,” I moan, thrusting harder again.

My hips pull back until only the head of my cock remains inside her, and then I plunge deep into Candy. She groans and grunts from the pressure of my cock banging against her cervix. Her hips shift under me, and she lifts them until I swear she opens up and takes another two inches of cock inside her.

Candy cries out, and I think she’s in pain, but I can’t stop fucking her. Her hands grip her tits, and I watch her pinch her nipples.

“Oh, fuck, shit!” she cries and then her words make no sense.

In a saner mood, I might laugh at how I’ve fucked her into speaking in tongues. There’s nothing funny at this moment, though. I’ve hit a point of sexual arousal beyond anything I’ve ever known. Her pussy takes everything I give it and slurps hungrily for more.

I don’t know if I come again first, or she does. Candy might have come a dozen times. I can’t think straight. My cock is painfully thick, and her dripping pussy is scorching hot. Our hips bang wildly together by the time my balls release another gallon of cum into her ravenous cunt.

Out of breath, I still thrust. I don’t want to stop even for a fucking second. This pleasure is like crack. It’s more than sex. My entire body feels the orgasm. My balls tighten even after I come, wanting to release themselves again. My cock never fully softens.

“Candy,” I say, feeling like I haven’t spoken in years.

“Angus,” she whimpers.

I lower myself on top of her and cover her lips with mine. Her pussy spasms and my cock instantly thickens in response. My mind

is numb, but my body is more alive than ever.

Lifting myself over her again, I study her face. I want to ask if she's okay, but I don't want to know the answer. If she says I hurt her, we'll have to stop, and I can't stop. My cock is already growing rock hard while my hips work up a rhythm.

"I need to get up," she gasps.

I'm torn between my needs and hers. Normally, the answer would be clear, but I relent and roll off her. My wet cock sticks straight up as I sit at the end of the bed and struggle to regain my senses. Candy climbs off the bed and immediately pushes me backward.

Straddling me, she grips my cock and tries to guide it back inside her. When her shaking hands don't cooperate, I take the head of my cock and dip it into her waiting cunt.

Candy lets out a long sigh as she lowers herself on my cock. She keeps pressing her hips down until my balls tickle her ass.

"Well I'll be damned," she says, and her hips begin to move. "You're so fucking big. I've never seen such a huge cock and here I am riding it." Candy throws her arms up into the air and laughs. "I'm the queen of the world!"

The sight of her bouncing on my cock is too gorgeous to look away. The fucking hotel could burn down around us, and I don't think I'd be able to pry my gaze from Candy and her jiggling tits.

TWENTY FOUR - CANDY

The hotel reeks of sex by the time I take a shower. The hot water feels great on my sore body. Despite aching between my legs, I'm more relaxed than I've been in my life. The sex was shockingly incredible, and I finally understand why people get so worked up over the act. With Hayes, fucking is addictive.

I walk out of the bathroom and find Hayes sitting in the corner chair. He's focused on his phone but slowly looks up and meets my gaze.

"Do you want to shower and wash off the sex smell?" I ask, feeling shy for no apparent reason.

"No," he says, standing up and shoving his phone in his back pocket. "I like having your pussy's scent on me."

"If it's so great, I should bottle it. Candy Stank for Women."

Hayes smiles, but he seems different now. We walk to the elevator and out to the truck before I realize what's changed. For the first time since I met him, Hayes is relaxed. *Mellow even*. The man always carries coiled hostility in his shoulders even when he's otherwise relaxed. Now he's like a stoned hippie, and I'm afraid the world is ending.

We don't return to the office but stop at a restaurant instead. I frown at him when we arrive.

"We ate a few hours ago."

"After a fucking like that one, I want a steak and a shot of bourbon."

Smiling slightly, I climb gingerly out of the truck and let my crotch adjust to the change of position. Hayes walks around the side and

looks me over.

“Problem?”

“You have a big dick,” is all I say before walking past him.

I hear him chuckle behind me, but he catches up by the time I arrive at the front door. The waitress sits us in Hayes’s usual spot, and I grimace a few times before getting comfortable.

“That bad, huh?” he asks, actually looking worried.

“You nearly split me in half.”

“Sorry.”

“Are you really?”

Hayes shrugs as if he doesn’t give a shit. I know he’s lying, so I slide closer and lean my head against his shoulder.

“A little pain is worth feeling that good.”

His gaze holds mine, and I sigh at the warmth of his expression. The moment is too cozy for him, and he quickly looks away.

“Tonight, I’ll sit on an ice pack,” I whisper, wrapping my arm around his. “When do you think we can sneak off again?”

“I don’t know. We missed a lot of work.”

Frowning, I turn his jaw so he’ll look at me.

“Look, boss, I get how you have commitment issues, and I’m a clingy woman stepping on your giant ego. That’s fine, but don’t act cold, or I’ll act cold too. We both know you can’t handle when I’m cold to you. Last time, you nearly cried.”

Hayes smirks. “Arrogant little bitch.”

“You can insult me, but it only makes you look weak.”

“Why weak?” he asks, losing his smile.

“By devaluing me so you’ll look better in comparison, you actually make yourself look like a punk.”

“Thanks, Doctor Phil.”

Narrowing my eyes, I scoot over in the booth and pull out my phone. I ignore him for five minutes before he breaks down and dramatically sighs.

“Fine. You’re great. I’m stupid. Whatever you need to hear, I’m saying. Now put the phone away and act normal.”

Slowly, I rest my phone on the table. Hayes pats the spot next to him, and I scoot over.

“You’re weird,” I whisper.

Hayes gives me a side glance and nods. “You’re not exactly normal either.”

My hand caresses his resting on the table. “You said you feel vulnerable during sex. If that’s why you’re acting weird now, just keep something in mind. I’m your friend. I don’t want anything from you. I’m happy with the way things are now. I’m not working a con. You’re safe with me.”

Hayes frowns at my tone. I know he hates being babied. I also know he worries I can hurt him. Keeping everyone at a distance kept him safe as he took over White Horse. He relies on no one person. This gives him safety in some ways but makes him vulnerable in others.

“I don’t trust people either,” I say once our food arrives. “I don’t want to be sucked into people’s drama or feel like I owe anyone.”

“Do you trust me?”

Without thinking, I shake my head. Hayes grunts in response.

“Do you trust me?” I ask.

Hayes’s frowning face softens. “No.”

“So then we’re on the same page.”

Finally, the big grump smiles. "I guess we are."

"Trust is overrated anyway. When you trust someone, you give them the power to fuck you over."

Hayes cuts his steak into big pieces and then smiles again. "You're a great broad, Candy. If this fucking thing doesn't work out, don't throw a fit and quit. I like having you around."

For him, this is one hell of a compliment. He might as well say I'm the most special person ever! Hayes knows he's gushing. His face struggles to shift into a frown, but he can't manage it. Between the morning of sex and a good piece of meat, the guy is in heaven.

I feel pretty great too. Lust without fear is a novel idea for me. Great sex without consequences isn't something my family ever manages. We always fell in love, usually to our disadvantage. I wonder if that's what happened with Honey. Was Andrew great in bed and the powerful orgasms blinded her to his many, many flaws?

I glance at Hayes and feel safe. Not because he's a nice guy. He's most definitely a jackass, but he's my jackass. I've known his flaws from day one. He's known my boundaries all along. We work because we both suck at normal relationships. This fucking employee/employer/friends thing could totally work especially if we don't think about it too much.

TWENTY FIVE - HAYES

Restless during the weekend, I drive around White Horse and check on my investments. People bow to me and say happy things, but I only become more agitated. I can't even lie to myself about why I feel this way.

I want to see Candy.

Two days without her feels like a fucking eternity. I consider dropping casually by her house. We're friends. Her kids know me. I can hang out and do whatever normal people do during the weekends.

I imagine taking them out to dinner. We can play family, and I am the average dad who happens to cuss a little too much. The twins think my foul mouth is funny. Candy does too. They understand me. I bet they won't mind at all if I drop by.

Instead, I visit my father. Seeing him won't open a can of damn worms like going to Candy's house would. She'll think I'm her boyfriend when I'm not sure what the hell we are anymore.

Balthazar is in his comfy chair. Gladys the Cat sits on his lap. The TV is on as usual, and he's watching something on the Discovery Channel. I check the kitchen to make sure it's well stocked. His aide Lizzy Anne doesn't work on the weekends unless it's an emergency. She left a note on the fridge, so Balthazar knows what food she made for him to eat at each meal.

On the counter, his medicine is in three containers. Each is labeled with large letters. I doubt Balthazar needs shit dumbed down to this level, but Lizzy Anne doesn't want him dying on her off days.

Or she doesn't want him calling her when she's at home and ruining her weekends.

I sit in the spare chair and ask how he's doing. Balthazar only shrugs and pets his cat. He's like a bitchy teenager these days. He grumbles, shrugs, rolls his eyes, and gives me shit constantly. I wonder if this is typical behavior for old people or if Balthazar is just using his last years on the planet to give people a hard time.

"Has Candy been coming by?" I ask when he ignores me to watch his show.

"Every day. She and Lizzy Anne don't like each other."

"How do you figure?"

"Lizzy Anne said she doesn't like Candy, and Candy flipped off Lizzy Anne when she thought no one was looking. I was looking, though. I'm always looking."

"I'm not paying her to like Lizzy Anne. I'm paying her to check on you."

"She does."

Balthazar doesn't say anything else, and I watch the show with him for a few minutes.

"What do you think of Candy?"

"She's a looker."

"Anything else?"

"She's taller than Lizzy Anne."

Rolling my eyes, I sigh loudly so he'll pay fucking attention.

"I'm dating Candy." I say and then pause to wonder if hotel fucks count as dating. "We're seeing each other, so I wanted to know what you thought of her."

"I suspected you'd sleep with her."

“Why’s that?”

“I told you. She’s a looker.”

I nod and consider leaving. Rather than give up on this father and son bullshitting session, I try again.

“She has two kids.”

“Oh, you don’t want any of that. I’ve seen on TV what happens when mothers and kids get new men around,” Dad says with a knowing nod. “Never goes well.”

“It’s a package deal. If I want Candy, I have to deal with her kids.”

“Good luck then. Won’t end well. I’ve seen it on TV.”

“Not everything on TV is real.”

“Enough of it is.”

I think about Candy and immediately crave her touch. I want to hear her voice, see her smile, and taste her body. She’s got me feeling like a fucking fool inside.

“Even if she and I don’t stay together, I think she’d be a good candidate for giving me an heir.”

Balthazar gives me a side glance. “What do you want one for?”

“Don’t you want a grandchild?”

“No. Your mother wanted one. I don’t like children. They steal and never flush.”

Frowning at him, I ignore his dig at me for waiting too long to have kids.

“I never stole from you, and I always flushed.”

“Yes, but you were a weird kid. Most kids steal and never flush.”

“Candy’s kids are well behaved.”

“That’s what they want you to think,” he says conspiratorially.

Frustrated, I stand up. “I don’t know why I came here for advice.”

“You don’t want advice. I gave you some, and you got your panties in a bunch. You want an ass pat. I’m too old to pat your ass, Gussie.”

“Well, all right then. This was a good talk.”

“Don’t pout just because I don’t see why you’d want an heir. You don’t like kids, and yours won’t live up to your expectations.”

“I worked hard to make my money,” I say, wanting someone to agree with me since I’m always right. “I want to leave my businesses to someone.”

“Like I said, your kid won’t live up to your expectations. You’ll want it to be like you, but no one is like you. “

I think back to my childhood and suspect Balthazar’s correct about me being outside the norm. At ten, I started a lemonade stand with a neighbor girl. We made okay money, but I decided our profits were taking a hit from the competition down the street. My solution was to threaten the other kids into shutting down their stand. Once they folded, my business doubled its profits.

I’d never considered that kind of thing was weird. My business partner did eventually quit, saying I wasn’t any fun.

Even if I was strange and my kid turned out normal, I didn’t see an alternative to having an heir.

“I’d rather burn my businesses to the ground than have the government take my shit when I die.”

“Then burn them. Of course, you probably won’t know when you’re going to die. Few people do.”

Irritated by his rational yet annoying responses, I walk to the door. “Have a good night. I’ll come by in a few days.”

“Good to see you.”

Balthazar is already focused on the TV before I open the door. He has no time for me anymore. He was a decent father when I was growing up. Even when I got taller than him and looked like another man, Balthazar Hayes did right by me. More likely he was doing right by the woman he loved. Once Mom died, he stopped pretending as much. He once told me “an old man doesn’t have time for lies.”

Balthazar isn’t wrong about why I came. I did want him to pat my ass and say life was about easy choices. I could have Candy and deal with her kids and still be me. I might even have a kid of my own and leave my empire to someone I trusted. I could have everything I wanted without any downsides.

Yeah, talk about an unearned ass pat.

TWENTY SIX - CANDY

I can't stop thinking of Hayes. Why did we have to fuck on a Friday, so I'm forced to go an entire weekend without seeing him? The tenderness between my legs is a welcome reminder during those two days. I also notice big purple hickeys on my breasts. Hayes left his mark on me, but my desire to see him is about more than fucking.

I miss him and wonder what he's doing. I saw him at his most vulnerable, and now I don't want to look away.

I take the kids to the movies on Saturday. The entire time out, I keep hoping to run into Hayes. Or even just see him on the road. A single glimpse will sate my desperate need for him.

By Monday morning, I'm chewing on my nails in anticipation. Cricket notices me tapping my foot while we wait for our turn to drop off at school. She shakes her head.

"We're not that bad."

"It's not you. I have to pee."

Chipper frowns at me. "Girls are weird."

"They really are," Cricket replies.

They laugh at their comments until it's time to climb out of the car. I watch them walk inside and then haul ass to the office. When I see Hayes's truck in the parking lot, I cry for joy.

I hurry across the parking lot. After slipping on the gravel and nearly falling on my ass, I get to the front door and find the front office empty. Hayes is in the back, reading something on his laptop.

"Good morning," I say with too much enthusiasm.

Hayes narrows his eyes. "Hello."

I wait for him to show some sign that he missed me over the weekend. Hayes frowns and then returns to reading. I don't storm out of his office. My retreat is more like moping.

We're pathetic. Both him and me. Him for being an insensitive dickhead even if I already knew he was an insensitive dickhead and shouldn't be shocked when he behaves like an insensitive dickhead. Me for, well, expecting him to be anything more than an insensitive dickhead. Ugh, what in the hell is my problem that I raced into the office as if he'd be waiting with open arms?

Sulking at my desk with a fresh cup of coffee, I give myself a pep talk. I have two great kids. I live in a nice house in a nice town and have a nice job with an insensitive dickhead for a boss who also happens to be super hot and lenient about my need to surf the internet for hours a day. Yes, I'm living the fucking dream, and there's no reason to be upset about anything ever. *Cheer up, Candy!*

By the time Hayes appears from his office, I'm wearing a fake, happy smile and thinking fake, happy thoughts.

"Hello, boss."

"Hello, employee," Hayes says, leaning against the wall near my desk. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. How are you?"

"My dick was tender over the weekend. I think you might have bounced too hard on it."

"I regret nothing."

Hayes smiles in an amazing way that ruins any progress I made with my internal pep talk.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Not really. I had something to eat with the kids."

“Wrong answer. Let’s go.”

I stand up too quickly and nearly knock into him. Realizing he planned to plant a kiss on me before our near collision, I grab his shirt and tug him back toward me.

“I felt you inside me all weekend,” I admit, completely pissing away the pep talk.

Hayes hesitates, but I don’t care.

“You’re so sexy when you play hard to get,” I say, lifting my lips.

Unable to deny me, Hayes kisses me just like I’ve craved. His lips are angry as if two days without mine have enraged them. I wrap him in my arms, and his kiss softens. Deepens too, and I love how he nearly devours me.

“We need to get to the hotel and fuck,” he says, pulling away his lips.

“I thought you were hungry.”

Hayes hands my jacket to me and frowns. “I’ll eat you. Let’s go.”

Excited, and a little terrified, to find out how Hayes’s version of going down on me will play out, I hurry to the truck. He drives like a man on a mission while I try to relax in preparation for the intense fucking I know awaits me.

We arrive at the hotel where Hayes already has a room waiting. I don’t know if he always has a room or if he plans ahead, but I’m not asking. The wrong answer might put me in a bad mood, and I’m looking forward to a few hours alone with Hayes after a long weekend without him.

Once the door shuts, Hayes kisses me hungrily. He tugs at my clothes and his own. When they don’t relent fast enough, he pulls his lips away.

“Strip.”

“You’re so bossy,” I tease, pulling off my shirt and sliding down my jeans.

I barely remove my bra before he’s buck naked in front of me and sporting the kind of boner that would make a lesser woman shriek in terror.

“You’re too slow,” he grunts, wrapping an arm around my waist and carrying me to the bed where he yanks off my panties and tosses them to parts unknown.

I try to prepare for his frenzied lips between my legs and fail. His beard tickles my inner thighs while his mouth latches onto my damp flesh. I cry out in both surprise and pain when he sucks at the still tender area. What his lips lack in tenderness, his long tongue makes up for with penetration. I’ve never been fucked by a man’s mouth before, but I must say I approve. I come too quickly and lose out on a longer tongue fucking.

Hayes’s dick is leaking something fierce, and I doubt he’ll last more than ten thrusts. I’m wrong again.

He attempts to press gently through my swollen lips, but his erection has a mind of its own and enters me in one fast thrust. His hips take over and bang against mine wildly. He’s ready to come. I know he is, but he doesn’t for nearly ten minutes. I stare up at him, admiring the unhinged expression of a man lost in lust. He’s fucking me so hard and deep that I have to hold onto him to keep from smashing my head on the headboard.

Once I get the hang of his rough rhythm, I play with the thick hair on his muscled chest. My fingers feel the groan rumbling in his chest as his orgasm grows. He literally growls as the first wave of cum fills

me. Gritting his teeth to keep from howling, Hayes is gorgeous as he pumps everything he has into my waiting body. I never think of coming myself. I only want to witness him give into all of his pent-up desire. An unleashed Hayes is a truly remarkable sight.

Giving our bodies a short break, Hayes relaxes next to me. He slides his index finger between my lips, and I suck at it instinctually. Popping it from my mouth, he uses it to follow the curves of my breasts.

“Can I ask you something really personal?” I ask, taking advantage of his good mood.

“No.”

“Is Balthazar your real father?”

Hayes gives me a dark frown. “What does it matter?”

“I’ll take that as a no.”

After a minute of silence, Hayes loses his frown. “I only know rumors.”

“I like rumors.”

Still playing with my nipple, he tugs at the hard flesh until it hardens even more.

“Balthazar was a long haul truck driver before I was born. He’d leave Mom for days, even weeks at a time. Apparently, she had an affair. She might have had many of them. Balthazar likely had his own. I don’t want to know about their sex lives, but the rumor is my bio father is an electrician in Common Bend.”

“Have you ever wanted to meet him?”

“I checked up on him, yeah. He had a family and was retired like Balthazar. I considered contacting him, but I didn’t have anything to

say. I'd only wanted to find him because Mom hinted I shouldn't. Once I did, I lost interest in the rest of it."

"Why would she only hint not to find him?"

"Because she knew straight out telling me not to would only ensure I'd find him."

"Oh, so you were always a pain in the ass."

"Since I was sucking my thumb in the womb," he says, leaning down to suck at my nipple.

I enjoy his attention and fall silent while he goes from sucking to nibbling and then back. When he switches out his lips for fingers, I concentrate long enough to ask another question.

"Does this guy have kids besides you?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't you a little interested in having siblings?"

"I considered that too, but they're not the kind of family I'm interested in having around. They'd want me to loan them money or come to their kids' birthday parties. I'd be the rich relative they invited to all kinds of stupid shit because they figured I'd just send a gift instead. I don't need that crap from strangers. I have plenty of employees and acquaintances in White Horse that invite me to crap I won't go to."

"That reminds me. I sent a get well gift to Velma Chase from the call center. She called to thank you for your generosity."

"I wasn't too generous, was I?" he asks, frowning.

"You were just generous enough to make her feel special, but not so much that she thought you wanted to bang her."

"Good."

Running my fingers through his thick hair, I say, "I'm sorry about your dad situation."

"Why? Balthazar fucking raised me. He fed me, clothed me, and gave me whatever kids need growing up. He taught me how to play sports, and he came to my boring school events. He was my father even if I was taller than him by fifth grade."

"Still awkward."

"You shut the door in your father's face."

"I know."

"So why feel sorry for me?"

"I'm sweet on you, dumbass. It makes me soft and sentimental."

"Oh," he says and grins. "Did you ever feel like you were missing out when you were a kid by not having a father around?"

"No, but I think Honey did. I even think that might be one reason she stays with Douche. She thinks her kids are better off with a bad father rather than no father. Of course, even if they divorce Andrew isn't going anywhere. He loves his kids. He's just a shitty father because of his stupid parenting philosophy."

"What's that?"

"He believes, and this is something his family raised him to believe, that children are born with an understanding of the world. They only need to grow up to fully express who they are. So Andrew doesn't discipline the kids because he figures they act the way they're supposed to act."

"He sounds like a hippie."

"It's some New Age follow your aura bullshit. That's not how my mom raised us. She had rules. We followed them, or she grounded us. She'd feed us bread and water if regular grounding didn't work."

She'd make sure we were miserable, so we'd never want to be grounded again. It was impressive especially considering I liked to break rules."

"I'm not surprised."

"Rules are for suckers," I say, reaching for his cock and finding it already hard.

"That they fucking are."

"Do you want to fuck again or are you okay with us spending the morning talking about our feelings?"

Hayes is on his feet in a shot. He pats the end of the bed.

"I'd like to get a good look of your pussy. Turn over and present it."

"I've never met such a bossy man before."

"Did you expect me to be tender in bed when I'm never tender any other time?"

Smiling at him, I ask, "Couldn't you, at least, fake it a little?"

"Does that mean you're not getting on all fours?"

"Don't put words in my mouth," I say, turning over and scooting down.

"I'd like to put something else in your mouth."

"I changed my mind about ever giving you a blowjob. Your dick is too big."

"I like when you talk about my big dick."

"It's so huge I feel it knocking against my ribcage."

"Not a great visual."

"It slams against my tonsils," I say, laughing with my butt facing him. "I think it poked my brain once. Now I can't spell colossal anymore."

“Stop talking.”

Wiggling my butt, I glance back at him. “You’re very sexy, Angus Hayes. So manly in so many manly ways.”

“I really should have shoved this in your mouth,” he says, stroking his cock.

“Nope, I’m not kidding about it being too damn big.”

Hayes grins at my babble. “I like this pussy.”

My eyes close as he slides the head of his cock against my slit. He takes his time entering me this time. Slowly, almost patiently, he presses one inch after another into me until I’m unsure how I can stand so much of him.

Hayes’s rough fingers find my clit and work the delicate flesh until I’m pounding back against him wildly. My breasts swing rhythmically with his thrusts. Once I come loudly, Hayes leans forward and pinches my nipples to the same rhythm as he caressed my clit. I squeal in pleasure, and he makes a noise I’ve never heard before.

“You’re going to make me come,” he groans.

I smile at how much he enjoys my body. To see him so fucking desperate is sexy as hell. Having him own my body is even more irresistible. He pounds into me with abandon, pinching my nipples until I come uncontrollably. I’ve never had a man take from me what he wants and leave me so perfectly satisfied.

TWENTY SEVEN - CANDY

The twins are suspended from school for three days after getting into a fight with a few kids at recess. The principal has a no-tolerance policy for violence and sends the offenders home for the rest of the week. *Yes, because nothing punishes children more than taking away their beloved school.*

I punish the twins, but they don't care. Losing Xbox means nothing to them if the alternative is taking shit from kids at school.

"So what were you suspended for?" Hayes asks when I bring the kids into the office on their first day off.

"This boy was making fun of Chipper," Cricket explains casually. "I told the kid to stop being an asshole. He got mad and threw dirt at Chipper. I jumped on the kid and made him eat dirt. One of the kid's friends tried to hit me, so Chipper knocked him to the ground. We did nothing wrong, but the principal had to make an example of us."

"You got into a fight at school," I say. "That's something wrong."

"I was defending Chipper, and he was defending me. We were loyal to our family. How can that be wrong?"

I look at Hayes and sigh. "See what I have to put up with? They're too damn smug for their own good."

Chipper smiles at Hayes. "When I knocked that kid down, he cried."

"Good," Hayes announces, surprising no one. "Punks need to be treated harshly, or they won't learn. It's in their DNA to keep messing with people until they hit a wall. You were that wall. Now you get a vacation from school. Everyone wins."

"You're not helping," I mutter.

Hayes grins. "You didn't expect me to."

"No, I guess I didn't," I admit, grinning. "I swear I'd homeschool them if we didn't do work here that no child should witness."

Hayes knows what I'm talking about, and he also suddenly realizes the kids' vacation will leave him sexless for the rest of the week.

"Get them a babysitter," he says.

"Who?"

"Anyone," he mutters, walking away.

"Would you leave Nightmare with just anyone?" I call out to him.

Hayes shuts his door without answering. He pretends to be pissed, but I know he's only horny.

The twins go with us to the Waffle House for breakfast. They ride with me while I follow Hayes around to all of his sites. The four of us eat lunch together. It's a weird arrangement, but no one complains. The kids are happy to be out of school. During the afternoon, they work quietly on their assignments in the meeting room while I finish up with things for Hayes.

On the second day, the boss man brings his dog. I suspect Nightmare is meant to entertain the kids. Whatever the reason, we order pizza into the office for lunch and skip running to the various sites.

"The backyard looks great with the sod," I say, leaning against the doorway while watching the kids kick a soccer ball.

"I miss you," he says, kissing my shoulder and then walking away. "Feels like we're running a daycare."

Watching him sulk, I laugh. "This is nothing like a daycare. There's no crying or tantrums. Well, except the one you're throwing."

Hayes frowns at me from his spot near my desk. I look outside to where Nightmare chases the ball. The kids laugh and run around the fenced area. They're happy here, and I wish I could bring them every day.

"Don't you miss me?" he finally asks in a grumpy voice.

"Of course. I could leave them at Honey's house for a few hours tomorrow if you want."

"Why not all day?"

"They hate it there."

"Why?"

"Wouldn't you hate hanging out with little kids and an unhappy housewife?"

Hayes shrugs. "Normal women get daycare when their kids stay home."

Now I feel grumpy. "Besides missing out on the fucking, how exactly are you put out in this situation?"

"I paid for their food."

"I'll pay then."

Hayes waves off my offer. "This is a workplace, and they shouldn't be here."

"I'll stay home with them tomorrow then," I say, crossing my arms angrily. "On Monday, they'll go back to school, and I'll be back."

Hayes grumbles under his breath, but I pretend to ignore his irritation.

"I drove by your house the other day," I say, and he instantly glares at me.

"Why?"

"I was curious."

“Are you stalking me?”

“Yeah, sure. Love the gnomes, by the way,” I tease and then flash him a grin. “So anyway, I noticed your house is really large, and that got me thinking.”

“About what?” he growls in a voice his enemies know well.

“This office is set up all wrong,” I say, pretending not to notice the death stare he’s giving me. “All of the space is in the front while you have a tiny office where you can barely stand without knocking over shit.”

“So?”

“So you ought to have one of your crews move that wall out and open up your office. I’ve cleared up all the mess and organized it into the cabinets. You could easily double your office, and I’d still have plenty of space out here.”

Hayes says nothing, and I finally look directly at him. “You’re a big man, and you live in a big house. You should have a big office.”

“Everything is so simple for you, isn’t it, Candy? You think something needs to happen so I should just open up my checkbook and do it.”

Nervous heat flows up my back, and I instantly sweat. I’ve seen Hayes go junkyard dog on people before, but he’s never focused all of his angry energy at me.

“It’s not like you’d be getting a bigger office for my benefit,” I say weakly.

“How long do you think I’ve fucking worked out of this fucking office?” Once I shrug, he continues, “Do you think I never fucking considered moving the fucking wall? Apparently you think I’m a

fucking moron, and only Queen Candy is fucking smart enough to think of such a fucking thing.”

His voice is loud, and the kids stop playing outside. Feeling cornered, I cross my arms tighter and lift my jaw.

“Is there a brilliant fucking reason you haven’t moved the wall, boss?” I say, forcing my voice to remain steady.

“Because I didn’t fucking want to!” he yells loud enough to send Nightmare into a barking fit.

Hayes rolls his eyes and yells at the dog to calm down. Nightmare obeys yet remains confused. He wants to protect his master, and he isn't sure where the threat is coming from.

“Are you happy?” he growls at me.

“That you scared your dog? No, not really. I’m more upset that you scared my kids. I want you to apologize, so they know you’re not a monster.”

“Fuck you,” he mutters, walking to his office.

I hurry after him. “You better apologize to me in front of them.”

“Or fucking what?” he says, leaning back in his chair.

“Or I’ll quit.”

“Bullshit.”

“Apologize,” I say, shaking from the surge of anger-fueled adrenaline.

“Only if you apologize to me in front of them first.”

“Fuck you,” I say, stepping back. “I’m leaving, Hayes, if you don’t apologize.”

“Then go.” Hayes jumps up and follows me into the main office where I shove things into my purse. “You’ll be back once you’re done throwing your fit.”

“I won’t come back until you apologize.”

“Then don’t come back. You’re replaceable.”

“Ha! You went through how many assistants before me?” I say, laughing bitterly. “Good luck with the temps.”

“Good luck finding another job where you show up whenever you want and bring your kids to work and get to fuck the boss.”

I glare at him, and he glares right back at me. My hands ball into fists, and I want so badly to hit him. I want to pound his handsome fucking face for making me feel disposable. He’s the one throwing a damn fit. I dared to interrupt his strict schedule, and he’s freaking out.

The twins stand at the door with the dog. They’re scared, and I see their hands balled into fists too. They don’t believe in backing down either. I raised them to be tough enough to face trouble. Life offers them nothing. They’ll have to demand whatever happiness they find.

Hayes looks at my fists and then my face. He seems amused by my anger. Fuck, I think he expects me to hit him. I won’t because I can’t win that fight. With our stalemate, I will win, though.

I refuse to apologize. He’ll be the one to say the words. I’ll never do it. Even if I end up with a shitty job, I won’t bow down to Angus Hayes. My kids need to know they shouldn’t take shit from people they care about. If they do it once, it’ll be easier the second time, and then they’ll get used to doing it. Eventually, they’ll wake up as someone’s bitch.

So I tell them to grab their school stuff and go to the car. Hayes watches us walk out. He and Nightmare stand at the front door as I

pull out. The entire time, he thinks I'll chicken out. Even after I speed away, he probably expects me to call him later and play nice.

Hayes might get what he wants normally, but this is one fight he'll lose.

TWENTY EIGHT - HAYES

Jackknife Casino is one of the places Moot wants to visit now that he's a free man. Enjoying rules, I rarely play games of chance. I only choose to go with Moot because the idea of sitting alone at my place isn't appealing. The house feels too quiet.

I blame Candy and her need for noise. Or I ought to blame the twins and their need to create noise which led to Candy craving it even when they're not around.

"We can eat dinner in the smoking lounge," I tell Moot while he sits down to a game of Texas Hold 'Em. "They serve steak."

Moot frowns, having never heard of the smoking lounge. I'm not surprised since it's a big rollers perk. I don't shit much money at the casino, but I have meetings there.

"They serve great scotch too."

This comment gets a smile out of Moot. All he wants since he's been out is to eat and drink well, sleep on a big bed, and drive fast. Freedom looks good on the man, and I try to enjoy a few hours of gambling.

After a lucky streak, Moot surprises me by choosing to stop before he pisses away all of his winnings. We retire to the smoking lounge where only two other people are eating on a Sunday evening.

"Work is good?" I ask, hoping he doesn't bitch about his construction crew. I'm not in the mood for anyone's drama when I'm still smarting from Candy's.

"It's good, man. Feels great to get my hands dirty."

I nod and fall silent. Over the lounge's speakers, Toby Keith croons about lost love. I suspect Candy is a fan of the song. She

likes country music and plays it rather loudly at her desk. I've yelled at her plenty of times to turn it down. She occasionally obeys but often doesn't. Candy handled my yelling well until she just up and decided to be a sensitive bitch about everything.

"Heard your assistant quit," Moot says, and I think he wants to laugh at me.

"They always do."

"I thought she was a keeper."

"Me too, but fucking her was probably a mistake."

"Only probably?" he asks, giving me an amused look.

"She's a great fuck."

Moot nods and his eyes light up when the food arrives. After he digs into his steak and potatoes, he studies me.

"What do you want to happen with Candy?"

"Simple," I say, puffing on my cigar. "I want her to apologize for throwing a fit. Then I want her on her knees."

"Didn't you say you acted like an asshole?"

"Yeah, but she knows I'm an asshole."

"Chicks have limits, man."

I shrug. "She'll break down and apologize."

"Because she wants her job or she wants you?"

I frown at his question, and I'm shocked I hadn't considered it. When she comes back, I'll never really know the true reason. What if she does only apologize for the job rather than because she wants me back?

"In the end, what matters is what you're willing to live without," Moot says, going philosophical on me. "If you just want Candy to be your assistant, you're right that she'll come back. It's a good job, and

she puts up with your shit well. Now if you want her back as your woman, then you ought to rethink your plan.”

“I’m not apologizing.”

“Then you have your answer.”

“I shouldn’t have to apologize.”

“Sounds good to me,” he says, eating casually.

“She overreacted.”

“Yep.”

“Might have been on her period. That was how irrational she was.”

“Women are moody.”

“I’m right about this,” I say too angrily.

“No doubt. You’re right about most things. Don’t see why this time would be any different.”

“Candy is replaceable.”

“Everyone is.”

Puffing on my cigar, I realize I’ve gone too far. While Candy did overreact, and she is a moody chick, and I shouldn’t have to apologize, she is in no way replaceable. There is no one else in the world like Candy. If another woman like Candy exists, I’ll never meet her. I’m not that damn lucky.

Candy isn’t replaceable, but maybe I am. Hell, she’d be fine without a man in her life. The chick went without sex for a decade. She can do it again.

Fuck! She can just show up to work one day and ask for her job back, and I’ll say yes, and she’ll be happy for the paycheck. I’ll never touch her again, and she’ll fucking skip through her life without a care in the world. *What in the fuck about me?*

“You bow to women a lot,” I say, and Moot grins at me with a full mouth. “How would you handle this situation if you wanted to get the bitchy part over with?”

“You’re going to have to apologize, big guy. No getting around that.”

“That’s it?”

“Flowers couldn’t hurt.”

“Any particular kind?”

“There ain’t no designated apology flowers.”

“Well, I can shell out a few bucks for flowers and say a few words. Problem solved.”

Moot looks at me for a moment, and I know he disagrees. I wait for him to say something, but he chooses to return to his steak.

“You need to enjoy life more,” Moot finally says when his plate is clean. “Stop trying to control every damn thing, and just smell the damn roses.”

“Do you think roses are the kind of flowers women want?”

“You live in the same world as me, man. Why are you asking questions like you’re an alien new to the fucking planet?”

“I don’t apologize to women.”

“Or anyone.”

Sighing, I nod. “True. So I don’t have any experience with this situation.”

“All you got to do is ask yourself what you’d want in the situation and then feminine-up the answer a little.”

Leaning back, I think about what I’d want if Candy came to me and apologized. Somehow, I don’t think she’s sitting at home wishing I’d give her a blowjob.

I imagine knocking on her door. She answers wearing something sloppy and probably pink. Her hair might be damp from her evening bath. I remember her saying she likes to take bubble baths and pretend she's an evil queen washing away the troubles of her reign. When she told me that, I thought she was drunk at work. Candy noticed my expression and laughed until she was bright red. Then she ran to the bathroom to keep from peeing herself.

Shaking off the memory, I imagine I'm at her door, and Candy is frowning like I smell bad. I hand her the flowers and say the words. What is the end game to that setup? Does she forgive me and I stay the night and then...

What do I want from Candy? This blowup we had might allow me to get her back as an employee and nothing more. I have the opportunity to change the dynamics. If I do, Candy will adjust. She's stronger than most women and won't cry herself to sleep over me.

Despite my certainty she'd never stoop to such theatrics, I let myself imagine her crying in her pillow over me breaking her heart. I like this image better. She *should* be sad over losing me. I'm the best fucking thing that ever happened to her. Well besides her kids, and that's the real dig for me.

If I let myself need Candy, I can't only need her. I will have to learn to need her kids, and that's a lot of fucking need for me to suddenly endure.

Can I love another man's children? My father did it, but only because he loved my mother. Plus he knew me as a baby and a part of him probably hoped I was his. Once he knew I wasn't, he had already grown accustomed to me.

Do I love Candy enough to love her children as my own?

Yes, I love Candy. No big shock for me on that realization. She's been under my skin since she walked into my office and called me an asshole to my face. The woman is the right kind of beautiful, smart, and tough. Those ingredients are in plenty of women, but never in the right amounts to make me consider apologizing for doing nothing wrong.

Candy is the one, but I don't know if I can be the one for her. I like my life. I want her, but the rest is more complicated.

So I imagine myself at her doorway, and she forgives me and takes the flowers and then what? She has me come inside, and I spend the night and wake up to the sounds of children making too much noise. Is that what I really want? Once I open that door, I can't close it easily.

I'm not a coward, but I am a pragmatic man. I can't allow my heart to run the show. I have to think long term. Not for Candy or me, but for the twins, I need to be certain. Kids don't bounce back from rejection.

I again see myself outside Candy's door. This time, I imagine her angrily shutting the door on me or worse taking the flowers and coolly saying she'll see me at work the next day. I don't know if I could accept her indifference.

So I stand in front of her door with a bouquet of pink roses in one hand and a bouquet of red roses in the other since I couldn't decide which one she'd like better. I knock on the door of the rental house and wait to apologize even though I don't think I'm wrong.

Candy answers, wearing a flannel nightgown. Her expression tells me nothing. I'm flying blind, but I utter the horrible three words I say to nearly no one.

“I am sorry.”

TWENTY NINE - CANDY

The kids aren't thrilled to return to school tomorrow. My mind is searching for a new job. Cricket offers to find a job and work rather than going to school. She even suggests I could attend school for her.

"No one will notice. The staff is a bunch of morons," she says, sounding like Hayes.

Sunday night comes, and they finally get a hold of their grandparents after nearly a week of missing them.

"Where have you been?" Chipper asks the laptop where their grandparents' faces beam back at them.

His grandmother wipes her cheeks since she's always concerned she's wearing too much rouge. "We took a quick trip to Canada."

"To see Communists?" Chipper asks.

Grandma Edelle looks around confused. "Communists?"

Cricket nods. "Mom's boyfriend said Canada is full of Communists."

"How is school?" Grandpa Charles asks.

"We got suspended last week," Chipper announces, and I roll my eyes at how proud he sounds.

"Why?" Grandma Edelle cries.

Cricket leans into the camera on the laptop and says conspiratorially. "It's mostly politics."

"They got into a fight," I explain, leaning into view. "Someone was picking on Chipper and Cricket stuck up for him. The principal made a big deal even though no one got hurt."

“Oh, well, public schools can be rough,” Grandma Edelle says, looking awkward.

Grandpa Charles adds, “Perhaps your mother can look into a private school option.”

“Mom’s thinking about homeschooling us,” Cricket says immediately, and I pray she doesn’t mention how I quit my job. “I think having more attention would help me get better at math.”

Her grandparents buy her bullshit and nod in unison. They are totally duped by their darlings. I wouldn’t be surprised if they think the kids are incapable of lying. If only they knew...

After the kids finishing quizzing Grandma and Grandpa about their Canada trip, they show off our new adopted cat. I think the grandparents finally realize we aren’t moving back when they see the terrified striped cat pressed against the screen. I know they miss the twins, but this is our home now even if I have no way to pay for any of it.

The moment the kids tell their grandparents goodbye and hang up, I sigh with relief at how they didn’t rat me out.

“Do you think you can work at McDonald’s?” Cricket asks, turning on the TV. “We could get discounts on hamburgers.”

“You don’t want me working at a fast food place. I wouldn’t make enough money to keep up with your Xbox subscription.”

“We’ll ask Grandpa to get it for us. They can pay for everything, and you can stay home and be our teacher.”

“Ah, to be young,” I tease, patting their heads. “You have a half hour of TV before bed.”

While the kids entertain themselves, I sit at the kitchen island and think about Hayes. I think about calling him nearly every fucking

second I'm awake. I dream of calling him too. Despite the nearly painful need to hear his voice, I hold my ground.

The knock on the front door sends the cat into a panic spiral. The kids turn to me like we're under attack because apparently visitors are a sign of the apocalypse. I wave off their concerns and casually reach for the bat on my way to the door. Checking the peephole, I see the man I've been craving for days.

Both of Hayes's hands grip bouquets. I admire how he covers his bases by buying two different colors, but I don't want flowers. I need him to understand I come from a long line of people who take shit from people and ask for more. I refuse to be one of them. My kids need to know they can say no too. So I told Hayes no and walked away even if it broke my heart. Flowers won't fix our situation.

"I am sorry," he says like someone has rammed their hand up his ass and turned him into a dummy.

"For what?"

Hayes frowns, and I realize he thought the words would be enough. He's so arrogant and stubborn. Two qualities I normally find quite attractive in the giant asshole.

"For upsetting you," he finally says.

Narrowing my eyes, I take one of the bouquets. "Are you sorry for what you did to upset me or just sorry that I got upset about what you did?"

"Whichever answer that makes you happy."

Hayes stares at me with his dark eyes, and I know he doesn't feel a bit sorry for what happened. He just wants things fixed. I'd slam the door in his face if he didn't look a little like a sad puppy.

"You can come inside and plead your case," I say, stepping back.

Hayes fills the hallway with his size, and I'm relieved he doesn't bang his head on the doorway. The kids look up from the TV and stare at him. He stares back at them. I don't know who would win the contest if I didn't break it up by gesturing for Hayes to follow me into the kitchen.

I have nothing to put the flowers inside, so I use two large cups. Studying the flowers now sitting on the counter, I think about the man behind me.

"So you liked the pink ones more," he says.

"How do you figure?"

"You took them first."

"Only because you looked ready to break them in half."

Hayes's expression shifts from sad puppy to junkyard dog. "So I'm the bad guy with the flowers too?"

"Yes. You are *a/ways* the bad guy."

Hayes glares at me. "I apologized."

"Yes, you did, but you didn't mean it."

"Exactly. That's why it means so much."

I nearly laugh at his exasperated expression. Instead, I gesture for him to continue. "Explain."

"If I were sorry, it'd be easy to apologize. I did something wrong, and I should apologize. Simple. Except I don't think I was wrong, yet I'm still apologizing. I'm doing it anyway because your feelings matter more than mine. Doesn't that make me the fucking nice guy here?"

I consider his words and shrug. "I hadn't thought about it like that."

Hayes takes my words as a sign of agreement and moves closer.

“So we’re good?”

“Good for what?”

Hayes stops and frowns at me. “Do you want your job back?”

“Sure.”

“Do you want anything else?”

“I don’t want to be Honey, so where does that leave us?”

“I said I was sorry. Does Asshole Andrew apologize when he isn’t wrong?”

“You *were* wrong, though.”

“I yelled at you. How is that wrong? I yell at everyone. I’ve been yelling at you since before you started. Why are you suddenly changing the rules?” he asks, sounding genuinely confused.

“Sometimes I can’t deal with you yelling at me.”

“It’s harmless shit. I yelled at birds the other night. They survived and so will you.”

“What about them?” I ask, pointing at where the kids watch TV.

“Think they can handle having you yell at them?”

“I didn’t yell at them, did I?”

“Not yet.”

Hayes waves his hand dismissively. “I won’t yell at them. They’re good kids.”

“And I’m a good assistant and don’t deserve to be yelled at.”

“First of all, you suck at your job half of the time, and you know that. No one should spend that much time on Amazon while at work.”

“I like to window shop,” I say, shrugging.

“You are a great assistant the other half of the time. One thing you’re great at is knowing I’m full of hot air when I yell at you.”

I shrug again, not budging. Frustrated, Hayes glares at me for nearly a minute and then he has a light bulb moment. I see in his eyes how he's figured something out.

"You weren't thinking like my assistant when you threw your fit."

"I did not throw a fit."

"You were thinking like my... girlfriend or woman or whatever. You weren't thinking about your boss yelling at you, but your man and that's why you got your panties in a bunch."

"I don't want to end up like Honey. She got beaten down by Douche's crap until she couldn't tell him no," I say, crossing my arms defensively.

"That'll never happen to you. I'm not him, and I don't want you beaten down. I want you to be you. I just don't want you making me change either."

"You can't yell at my kids," I say, uncrossing my arms and stepping closer. "I don't want them learning to eat shit when they're young. It's in their blood to make a habit of getting stepped on. I want them to grow up expecting to be treated well."

"This isn't about your kids. It's about you."

"I know, but I can't explain why your yelling upset me that day. It just did. You made me feel like shit, and I don't let people treat me that way."

Hayes blinks a few times and then something shifts in his gaze. *Oh, boy, I realize, he's turning on the charm.*

Erasing the few feet between us, Hayes reaches out and caresses my messy hair. "We need a safe word. That way, when you're feeling especially sensitive and I'm especially loud you can let me know before I end up in trouble."

“A safe word, huh? Sounds sexy.”

Hayes smiles softly, and I realize he’s really laying on the sweet guy shtick. I might be done for if he keeps it up.

“What if I hadn’t agreed to let you come inside?” I ask. “Would you consider me your enemy? Kick me out of the house? Ruin me like you ruin your enemies?”

“Even if you did me wrong, I’d never see you as my enemy,” he whispers. “You’re the best fuck I’ve ever had. You cleaned up my office. Most importantly, you make me laugh, and people rarely make me laugh. You’re a one of a kind woman, so you’ll never be my enemy.”

Rolling my eyes, I grumble, “Asshole.”

“I want you to know,” he says ever so softly, “that I never pull this nice guy bullshit on anyone, but I’m doing it for you.”

Hayes leans down, and I notice a hint of hesitancy in his kiss. He worries I’ll cut him short. Our lips meet for a moment, maybe two, but I don’t allow the kiss to deepen. As much as I want to taste Hayes, the kids can see us if they turn around. Knowing them, they’ve been peeking since he arrived.

“I missed you,” I say, pulling away. “I really did.”

“Would you have broken down and apologized if I hadn’t?”

“Probably, but I would have lasted longer than you. I’m just made out of stronger mettle.”

“Funny,” he murmurs before following my gaze to where the twins now fully stare at us.

“We need a word for when Hayes is getting too loud,” I say, focusing them on something besides Mom and a man kissing in the kitchen. “What’s a good word to use?”

Chipper looks at his sister who is staring at Hayes. “How about Doritos?”

Cricket grins and focuses on her brother. “Yeah, Doritos.”

I walk into the living room and grin. “Okay, Doritos, it is.”

“Inside joke?” Hayes asks, seeming awkward, which isn’t a good look on him. The man should reek of bravado, but he’s feeling out of place.

“What do you get when you mix a potato with a tomato?” I ask, and the kids snicker.

“I don’t know.”

“Doritos,” the twins announce.

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s a joke they came up with.”

Hayes opens his mouth, and I suspect he plans to poop on their parade. Fortunately, his brain works faster than his mouth.

“Funny,” he says instead.

“Are you staying here?” Cricket asks Hayes.

“I don’t know.”

“You can sleep in my bed,” Chipper offers.

“Yeah, and we’ll sleep with Mom,” Cricket adds because Hayes isn’t the only one who likes to poop on people’s parades.

I caress Hayes's shoulder. “He’s too big for your bed, but that was a nice offer.”

“Maybe I should go,” Hayes says without making any effort to sell his words.

“Or you could stay the night.”

“Grownups have sleepovers?” Cricket asks like a smartass.

Narrowing my eyes at my daughter, I grumble, "Finish watching your show so you can get ready for bed."

Chipper and Cricket turn around, but I hear them whispering to each other. Hayes joins me in the kitchen where I set out the rules.

"No sex."

"Ever? I don't think I can agree to that."

Grinning, I glance at the kids. "I think I've done a good job raising them to be emotionally healthy. I don't want them hearing anything and being horribly traumatized."

"You do get very loud sometimes. Not that I blame you."

"You growl like a fucking bear. They'll think I'm under attack."

Hayes grins. "I'm putting that role-playing idea aside for later. So should I stay or not?"

"Can you stay without having sex?"

"Of course, I'm perfectly in control of myself. You're the one who insists on coming repeatedly."

Studying him, I whisper, "This would be the first night we've spent together."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"Said the guy who brought me flowers and apologized and nearly begged for a second chance."

Hayes shrugs. "You remember that any way you need to, babe."

Soon, the kids finish their show, and I take them upstairs. They brush their teeth, and we sit in their room for nearly a half hour talking about Hayes and if I have a job now. I tell them not to worry. I'm super smart and can handle anything. Chipper believes me more than Cricket, but they both cuddle up in the bed with grins on their faces.

Downstairs, Hayes waits for me. He dwarfs the couch with his long legs, and I admire the sight of him stretched out watching the news. I've really missed the asshole. Not enough to swallow my pride yet, but I knew the time was coming. Hayes might be infuriating, but he is my guy, and I plan to keep him.

THIRTY - HAYES

Candy and I can't get comfortable in her bed. Once in the room, I strip down to my boxers and consider going commando. She looks at me and shakes her head. I watch her remove her robe. She's wearing a simple, pink sleeveless nightgown, and I instantly wonder if we can fuck quiet enough to keep the kids from interrupting.

"No," Candy says, crossing her arms. "Never going to happen."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, climbing onto her California king-sized bed.

"Look, it's your fault really," she says, joining me on the bed. "If you were a lousy lay, I could keep quiet while you fucked me."

"I could probably do a shitty job if I tried. Get naked and we'll give it a shot."

Candy shakes her head and slides under the covers. "Tomorrow, the kids will go to school, and we'll have the house to ourselves. We could stick my cell in their room and record to see if it picks up our grunts and groans."

Resting on my side, I lean my head on my hand while my other one caresses her face. "Your problem-solving skills is one reason you're a great assistant."

Candy studies me. "I thought we might be over."

"I never considered that."

"Because you always get what you want?"

Smiling, I lean over and give her a quick kiss. "Do you always sleep this early?"

"Sure."

"No wonder you're so damn perky in the morning."

“Will Nightmare be okay alone at your house?”

“Yeah, he has a doggy door, plenty of food and water, and even knows how to hit the remote if he wants to watch TV.”

“Smart dog.”

“He’s getting old. I don’t know what I’ll do when he kicks the bucket. I’ve had him for so long that any new dog will feel like a fucking loser in comparison.”

Candy scoots a little closer. “He’s not that old yet, is he?”

“No, I guess not. He probably has a handful of years left.”

“Then why worry?”

“Because that’s what I do. I take care of what’s mine.”

“Yes, you do,” she softly says, kissing my hand. “I know this wasn’t your idea of a makeup sleepover, but life never promised you a rose garden. Now go to sleep so I can sleep. Tomorrow we’ll do the makeup thing right.”

“I’m so bossy I forget how bossy you can get.”

Candy grins and turns over to switch off the light. The room isn’t completely dark. Between the moonlight and a hallway nightlight, I see her clearly. Having slept like shit the last few nights, I figure I’ll crash quickly and sleep like the dead.

With fucking, we have great chemistry. However in the simple task of sleeping, we can’t find a rhythm. She rolls into me at one point. Later, my arm stretches out and lands on her head. We kick each other, shove one another nearly off the bed, and steal the covers back and forth.

“I’ve never shared a bed with a man before,” Candy complains at two in the morning.

“Not even with Eddison?”

“He’s a man, so no,” she mumbles.

“You might be a morning person, but you’re a bitch this early in the morning.”

“You nearly broke my face an hour ago.”

“Well, I’m accustomed to having a bed to myself.”

“Bed hog.”

“Bed slut.”

Candy laughs and climbs out of the bed. I wonder if this is when she orders me to sleep on her tiny couch downstairs. I’d rather sleep on the damn floor. Candy leaves the room, returning a few minutes later. She throws a second blanket at me and dumps a long pillow on the bed.

“I’m not sleeping on the fucking couch,” I say instantly.

“No shit, boss. You’d kill my poor couch.”

Candy crawls into bed and yanks the first blanket to her side.

“That’s your blanket, and this is mine. Stop hogging.”

“Is this my pillow too?” I ask, patting the long pillow.

“No,” she says, pressing it between us. “The body pillow will act as a buffer. I used it with the kids when they were little and would dig their little feet into my legs.”

“This is sexy,” I tease, getting comfortable.

Candy smiles at me in the darkness. “I’m glad you’re the first man I’ve had sleep over.”

Her words make me feel protective of her in a new way. This is all new. I’m her first. In my gut, I know I’ll be her last too.

“I’m a fast learner,” I whisper. “I’ll figure out how to sleep in here without beating the shit out of you.”

“I know,” she says, patting my cheek. “I’d kiss you, but you’re looking a little too irresistible, and I’m too tired to get sweaty.”

“Fucking tease.”

Candy laughs and rolls over, so her back faces me. My fingers play with her hair, but she ignores me and soon she’s sleeping comfortably.

I imagine her in bed with her kids climbing on her, playing with her hair, and moving around constantly. She has the mom routine down, but she’s rusty with the girlfriend role.

I crash after an hour of watching Candy sleep. Her soft breathing soothes my awkwardness at being in a strange place.

Candy’s alarm is an obnoxious song called Good Morning. I’m ready to punch the singer in the face when Candy rolls over and turns it off. Then she rolls over and rests her hand on my chest. My anger disappears, and I smile. Seeing her when I wake up makes up for the stupid alarm.

“Good morning. I’ll turn on the coffee and get the kids up,” she says, looking at me with sleepy eyes. “You can shower if you want, but it might be tight in there.”

“I’ll manage. The world has always been too small for me.”

Candy grins, and I realize she really is a morning person. Her sleepy gaze is already brightening. I watch her grab her robe and head downstairs. A few minutes later, I smell coffee brewing and hear kids whining.

Forcing myself out of bed, I shut the door and then check out the small adjoining bathroom. Candy wasn’t kidding about the tight shower. I end up washing my face and pits rather than trying to fit into the stall.

Downstairs, I find Candy still in her pjs and the kids dressed for school.

“Coffee,” she says, placing a cup at the kitchen table for me. “Would you mind hanging out while I take a shower?”

I agree with a head gesture since I’ll need a few cups of coffee before I feel like talking to anyone. Candy hurries upstairs to clean up while the kids eat their cereal and watch the living room TV. A few minutes pass before I realize they’re staring at me.

“We got a cat,” Chipper says, digging into his bowl of Apple Jacks.

“Where was the cat last night?”

“She doesn’t like when people knock on the door.”

“She’s a scaredy-cat,” Cricket announces.

The twins snicker, and I smile at how easily amused they are. Kids on TV are always so obnoxious. I like how these two find the simplest shit hilarious. They whisper to each other for a few minutes while I finish one cup of hot coffee and hurry to down another.

“What’s the cat’s name?” I ask, feeling like an asshole for ignoring them.

“Bad Dream,” Cricket says, staring at me with eyes I know well.

“You look so much like your mother,” I mumble without thinking.

“You like her,” Cricket teases and then smiles at Chipper. “Hayes and Mom sitting in a tree.”

“Don’t sing in the morning. It makes my brain hurt.”

“Do you think Mom is beautiful?” Chipper asks.

“Yes.”

“Do you love her?” Cricket asks.

“Yes,” I say and then add, “But don’t tell your mom.”

“I’m good at keeping secrets,” Chipper says. “Cricket isn’t.”

Mouth full of cereal, the little girl nods. “I like telling people stuff.”

“Don’t tell your mom what I said.”

“I’ll try, but I can’t promise. I have a big mouth.”

“So does your mom.”

The twins laugh and look at the gray and black cat slinking near the doorway. I’m relieved to change the subject from Candy and love.

“What’s the cat’s real name?”

“Dreamy.”

“You’re messing with me.”

The twins shake their heads, thoroughly creeping me out with their identical movements.

“Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what,” Cricket says, staring widely at me. “Are you scared?”

Chipper laughs and then she laughs. Finally, I give in and smile. They’re annoying, but I like them. I’ll like them more if they don’t snitch me out to Candy.

“There you are,” Candy says, picking up the cat. “Where were you hiding all night?”

I enjoy the sight of Candy with her damp hair and fresh face.

“Will Hayes be here when we get home from school?” Cricket asks her mother.

Candy shrugs. “I don’t know. Is your schoolwork in your backpack?”

The twins lose interest in me and begin whining about having to make up a math test. I’m glad to have the heat off me. I’ve never

been a social person in the morning. As a kid, my teachers left me alone for the first hour of school or else I'd end up in the principal's office for being an asshole.

Candy glances at me a few times, but her focus remains on preparing the kids for school. I watch her tie Cricket's hair into a ponytail. She has such a soft touch when she wants. I admire her tenderness with her children and think again how she'll make a perfect mother to my kid. She has all the qualities I loved in my mom along with the spunkiness and toughness mine lacked.

I end up alone in the house with a skittish cat and the morning news on the TV. After checking my phone, I relax on the couch I refused to sleep on the night before.

Finding it rather comfortable, I doze until Candy returns home. I open my eyes to find her wearing a grin.

"We have the house to ourselves," she says, sliding out of her jacket. "I'll meet you upstairs."

Candy hurries upstairs, and I have to roll awkwardly off the couch to follow her. By the time I lumber up to her room, she's stripped down to her bra and panties.

"I'll set up the recorder in the next room," Candy says, sliding past me with a quick graze of her hip against my crotch. "I want to see how loud I am."

"Pretty loud," I tease, pulling off my shirt.

Candy returns when I'm stretched out naked on the bed. "Wow, I forgot how impressive you are."

"Take off your bra so I can say the same to you."

Her smile makes me feel like a fucking stud before I even touch her. Candy climbs onto the bed and gives my hard cock a slow lick

from balls to head.

“You keep teasing, but I still haven’t gotten a single blowjob,” I say as she straddles me.

“Big dicks cause big problems,” she says, laughing at her comment.

I cup her jiggling tits, but Candy doesn’t stop giggling about my dick. Only when I suck one of her nipples into my mouth does she get quiet.

“If the first guy I ever fucked was as good as you,” she murmurs while running her fingers through my hair, “I’d have become a fuck junkie.”

“Shitty lay, huh?” I ask, nuzzling my face between her tits.

“Yes. I figured it was just because I was inexperienced. The next guy was boring too. I tried twice more before realizing I just didn’t like sex. A lack of romance led me to Toby and the kids and eventually you. I should send those crappy lovers a thank you gift card. I’m thinking Kmart would suit them.”

Candy barely gets the last word out before she lets out a groan. The head of my cock finds her waiting slit and parts the flesh with a hard nudge. She gazes down to where our bodies come together and then looks in my eyes. Her expression is so accepting I nearly proclaim my love and make things very awkward. Fortunately, she tightens her pussy about my cock, and my balls cry out in approval. The emotional stuff falls away, and we’re simply two people searching for relief.

THIRTY ONE - CANDY

After our morning romp at my house, we stop for breakfast and then stop by a few businesses so Hayes can scare people. Hungry again, he insists we have lunch. Finally, we end up at his office where we have nothing to do for the afternoon.

Hayes sits in the spare chair in the front office and stares at me while I surf the web. I glance at him, but he shows no reaction. I return to looking for Christmas gifts. We picked up Nightmare earlier, and now he stares at Hayes.

“Don’t you have work to do?” I ask without looking at Hayes.

“I’m brainstorming.”

Grinning, I glance at him again. “Brainstorming is sexy on you, boss.”

“How sexy?”

I turn in my chair and slide to the ground where I crawl to where a grinning Hayes waits.

“Very sexy,” I murmur, resting between his spread legs. “So very sexy.”

I lick the seam of his jeans and Hayes fucking shivers. Grinning at him, I do it again.

“I thought you refused to give me a blowjob.”

“I do. It’s too big, and I’m afraid to die.”

Hayes throws his head back and laughs. The sound catches in his throat when I suck at his bulge.

“Candy, don’t play. People could walk in here.”

“Are you shy about showing your dick?” I ask, laughing before I finish speaking. “A shy Angus Hayes would be a sight.”

Hayes plays with my hair while I nuzzle my lips against his crotch. "This isn't the time," he says in such a gentle tone.

My gaze meets his and I understand. "You care about me," I say, standing slowly. "How adorable."

Hayes pulls me into his lap and sucks hard at my throat. I cry out and then moan approvingly. His arms remain wrapped around my waist, and I wonder if the chair will crumble under our weight.

"I do care," he says, lifting a brow as if daring me to challenge him.

"A lot?" I ask, deciding to challenge him.

"Yeah."

"Do you think you could ever love me?" I push because I have no work to do for the day and having a big argument would give me something to do.

"Yes, I do."

"In this century?"

"Could you love me?"

"No," I say, instantly laughing. "Okay, yes, but wouldn't it be awesome if I could never love you, but you hardcore loved me? Man, that would be great."

Hayes rolls his eyes. "Why exactly would that be great?"

"Because you're used to getting what you want, and I'd be the one thing you couldn't have. I'd love to have the power to break your fucking heart," I say, caressing his furrowed brow. "No worries, boss. I'm pretty hardcore into you, so your heart is safe."

Hayes cups my neck and pulls me closer for a kiss. His lips are tentative, and I sense he plans to say something heartfelt.

"That's good to know," he says instead.

“You’re a careful man.”

Lips an inch from mine, he smirks. “That I am, but I know what I want.”

“And you get what you want.”

“That I do, Candy Wilburn.”

We play tongue tango for twenty minutes before Hayes tenses in my arms. I hear the approaching motorcycles too, but I just keep sucking on his lips. He adjusts until I nearly fall off his lap.

“You could have asked me to get up,” I mutter, steadying myself.

“I didn’t want to be rude.”

Laughing, I follow him to the front door where the motorcycles rumble in the parking lot. Hayes gets bigger next to me. Turning into an angry bear man, he’s ready to tear someone a new asshole. I look at the two blond bikers idling next to Hayes’s truck and think about how I’ve never been into fair-haired men.

Hayes disappears into the back office and returns carrying a shotgun.

“What the hell?” I ask as he storms to the front door.

“Stay in here.”

“No way. I got your back.”

Hayes prepares to tell me to do what he fucking says, but I see by his expression he knows he’ll be wasting his time.

“Get behind me then.”

I grab my purse and dig around inside. “I’ll get my pepper spray.”

“I’m not messing around,” he growls.

“Neither am I.”

I show him my little pepper spray bottle. Hayes frowns at me and then looks at the waiting men.

“Don’t say anything.”

“Should you go out there when you’re sporting a woody? You tend to be overly aggressive when your dick’s hard.”

“Say nothing,” he repeats, adjusting his pants. “Not a fucking thing or you’re fired.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Hayes gives me one final pissy look before he storms outside waving his shotgun and a hard-on. I follow after him with my pepper spray and damp panties.

“Turn them off,” Hayes orders the men.

Once the motorcycles fall silent, Hayes rests the shotgun on his shoulder.

“Why are you here?”

“We’re missing one of our people Thought you might know where to locate his shallow grave,” the man on the left asks, and I realize they’re identical twins.

“I haven’t dug any in the last few weeks. If he disappeared longer than that, my memory is sketchy.”

“Is this your latest assistant?” the other man asks. “She keeps hanging up on us when we call.”

Hayes glances back at me, and I shrug.

“They must have sounded like whiny bitches, and I won’t let you waste your time talking to those sorts.”

The twins grin but Hayes remains in angry asshole mode.

“Candy Girl,” one of them says, giving me a wink.

Hayes literally growls like a dog before growling actual words. “Dayton, if you keep eyeballing her, I’ll tear off your head and send it to your mother.”

“Dude, be cool. You don’t want to mess with my mom. She’s a little bit crazy.”

The non-Dayton twin rolls his eyes. “We’ve had a few people disappear recently. We figure either you grabbed them up, or the assholes in Common Bend did.”

“If your people come to my town, they’re bound to disappear.”

“What if they want to go to the mall?” the non-Dayton twin asks.

“If they want to shop or eat at the fine establishments in White Horse, they’re welcome. If they’re doing business in my town, they become my problem.”

“But you didn’t make anyone your problem recently?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be surprised to see you here.”

The twins glance at each other. I hate how these two big men are ganging up on my big man. I wish I could grow a foot taller and maybe gain a hundred pounds of muscle. I’d kick some major ass then. I bet I’d make a sexy as hell muscle bound man too.

I’m still imagining a hot guy version of me when the twins turn on their motorcycles. Flinching at the ferocity of the sound, I even step behind Hayes like a chickenshit. The men say something over the roaring engines, but I can’t hear them. Hayes doesn’t respond to their comments, and soon they disappear down the road and around the corner.

“What was that about?” I ask as he ushers me back into the office.

“Grab your shit. We’re going to the hotel.”

“Why?”

Hayes rests his shotgun on the spare desk. “I’m tense.”

“My vagina is not a punching bag you can use whenever tense.”

Grunting at me, Hayes is a ball of irritation. He glances down at my hand holding the pepper spray and smiles.

“You would have gone after them, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course. I have your back, asshole.”

Hayes steps closer and cups my face. “You wanted to have fun before they got here.”

“I don’t want you taking out your frustrations on my vagina.”

“I’ll be as gentle as possible.”

“So not all that gentle then.”

“I’ll do my best.”

I walk to my desk and slide the pepper spray in my purse. “Do you think I’d make a sexy man?”

“Sure. Can we go now?”

“You’d be an ugly woman. I’m sorry if the truth hurts, but you have no feminine qualities.”

“And you have no masculine ones. Well, you do scratch your crotch sometimes like you have itchy balls. I like that.”

I stand at the doorway and sigh. “Those guys won’t cause problems, will they?”

“Not for me.”

“It’s sexy how they sent two guys to scare you. One just wouldn’t do.”

Hayes locks the door behind us and takes my hand. “No, it wouldn’t.”

“Would you have shot them?”

“If I had to, but if they come for me, it won’t be so obvious.”

“Being in charge is tricky shit,” I say once I’ve slid into the truck.

“It is, but those guys are harmless.”

“They didn’t look harmless.”

Hayes turns on the truck and then frowns at me. “Did you think I couldn’t take them?”

“Of course, you could. I had your back, remember?”

Grinning, he pulls out of the parking lot, and we head to the hotel where we’ll spend a few hours grunting and groaning. I can’t complain about the perks my job comes with, but the asshole bikers leave me nervous. Hayes is always so busy scaring other people that I forget how he might face enemies not so easily frightened.

THIRTY TWO - HAYES

Candy and the kids are dressed up for dinner in red shirts and dark pants. I consider teasing their matching attire but keep my mouth shut. This is a big move I'm making, and I don't want anyone's temper shitting on what I'm trying to do.

"Where are we eating?" Candy asks, adjusting her seatbelt.

"It's a surprise. Don't hassle me, okay?"

Candy grins. "Are you upset we didn't tell you to wear red?"

The twins ignore us while playing on Candy's phone. I glance back at them before focusing on Candy.

"Leave me alone."

She laughs and caresses my face. "I think you've hit your limit for family time, boss."

"Shut up and let me drive."

Candy leaves me alone for a few minutes while flipping through the radio channels. She's already reset the truck pre-sets to stations she likes, and I suspect she'll do the same in the SUV.

Sitting at a light, I study Candy. Her face is covered by her hair as she leans forward. When she sits back, Candy grins at me.

"I saw George Strait in concert before. Have you ever gone to a concert?"

"No. I don't need morons screaming all around me."

"I didn't like it either. A couple was arguing on one side of me, and these girls were cry-singing on the other side. It was distracting, but George sounded great."

My shoulders hurt, and I realize I'm so fucking tense that I'll probably say something overtly hostile soon.

“You look beautiful,” I say, sounding grumpy.

Candy studies me, and I feel small. *I never feel fucking small.* I wasn't even born small.

“I dreamed about you last night,” she murmurs, leaning toward me. “You were climbing a mountain, and I was trying to keep up, but you were going too fast, and I fell behind. Eventually, you were so far ahead that I couldn't see you, and I realized you'd left me behind.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Probably that you're a force of nature, and I don't think I can keep up.”

I lean closer to her and whisper, “You mean fucking-wise, right?”

Candy sits back and laughs. “No. I'm just impressed by what you've built in White Horse. Take the compliment and keep your mind out of the gutter.”

Grinning now, I feel the tension easing off me. Having Candy worry about losing me helps calm my fear of losing her. I never give people power over me. Even as a kid, I kept other kids at a distance. I've never trusted a single damn person, but I trust this woman. She even tried to watch my back when the Rutgers twins showed up at the office.

I take her hand and enjoy the way her fingers curl around mine. She knows I'm edgy, but doesn't fear me. Even after our blowout a week ago, Candy remains fearless in the face of my bad temper.

Fearless until I pull down the street to my house. Her expression shifts to terror, and she reaches for my arm.

“Where are we going?”

“My place,” I announce, hitting the button for the gate. “I have the chef from The Glenn coming over to cook us steaks and chicken.”

Candy stares at me in horror. “Why?”

After pulling down the drive to the garage, I turn off the SUV and glance at her. “Why not?”

When I open my door, Candy hurries herself and the kids out of the SUV. She pulls them aside and whispers in a panic. I don’t know what her problem is, but the kids peek around her so they can stare at me. *How has my grand gesture turned into a horror movie where they need to plan their escape?*

Candy walks to where I wait at the front of the house. She and the kids watch me with weird, steely gazes.

“What?” I ask.

“I reminded them to behave here like they would at their grandparents.”

“Why?”

“Because your house is a precious thing you’re weird about, so they need to be very careful not to get anything sticky.”

Cricket grins at me, and I wonder if she’s planning something. I imagine her wiping sticky shit all over my walls. Taking a deep breath, I remind myself I have the place cleaned daily, and the maid is perfectly capable of removing child residue.

“I’m not worried,” I lie.

Candy still looks nervous while Cricket looks devious. Chipper is focused on the gnomes in the yard.

“Cool trolls,” he says to me.

“They’re gnomes, and my mom bought them for me before she died.”

“I like my mom too,” he says.

Feeling on the spot, I exhale hard. “Let’s go inside.”

I take them through the large foyer and down a long hall to the living room/kitchen/dining room combo.

“You really like TV,” Cricket says, staring at my 90-inch flat screen.

“Yes, I do.”

“Can we watch TV?”

“You can watch TV at home,” Candy says instantly.

Cricket peels her gaze from the TV and stares at her mother. “What are we going to do while you kiss Hayes?”

“I brought multiplication practice sheets in case you get bored,” Candy says, staring back at her daughter.

Cricket shakes her head. “I’m not bored and never will be.”

“Good,” Candy says and then looks at me. “You have a beautiful house, boss.”

“Beautiful?”

“I mean impressively massive and manly.”

A few minutes after we arrive, Chef Jerry from the restaurant arrives. He gives Candy a big, nervous smile when we join him in the kitchen.

“Tell him how you want your steak and what the kids want,” I tell Candy, who frowns at Jerry’s huge smile.

Candy gives Jerry very specific instructions for the food. I swear she’s messing with him, but she only smiles at me.

“Does this house have bedrooms?” she asks, once she’s done tormenting Jerry.

“Yes.”

“Are the guest rooms away from the master?”

Understanding her meaning, I smirk. “Actually, they are. Let me show you.”

We glance at the twins sitting on the couch and staring at my multifunction remote control.

“It’s as big as my arm,” Chipper says in wonder.

“Nightmare is in the backyard if you want to play with him.”

They look to their mother who shrugs and opens the back door. The kids hurry outside and stand on the patio in the darkening night. The dog doesn’t appear until they call his name. Then he barrels out of a hidden part of the yard where he lies in wait for people. I smile at their squealing reaction to his appearance.

“He’ll keep them safe.”

Candy walks with me down the hallway to my bedroom. “I have four spare rooms on the other side of the house. I use one as an office. Two are empty. One is a guest bedroom for the zero number of people I have visit.”

Candy says nothing until we enter my room with my massive bed in the center of the room.

“Wow! So this is where you masturbate while thinking about me.”

Laughing, I smack her ass. “I use the shower too.”

“Oh,” she says, peeking into the bathroom. “The whole place smells like you.”

“Is that your way of saying your panties are wet?”

“No,” she mumbles and hurries to the bed. “Why is it in the middle of the room instead of against the wall? Do you make porn films in here?”

I watch Candy crawl on the bed before she decides to bounce on her knees.

“Good springs,” she says, giving extra bounce to her tits. “Yeah, gotta have quality springs.”

“Are you having fun?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“Why did you bring us here?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Are they top secret?” she asks, resting on her stomach and swinging her legs. “Like your personal porn films.”

“Don’t get your dirty shoes on my clean bed.”

“Can I get other dirty parts on your clean bed?” she asks, humping a pillow. “Oh, Angus’s bedding, don’t stop.”

Laughing, I walk over and yank the pillow free from her thighs’ death grip. “Knock it off.”

“Not until you tell me why you brought us here.”

“What’s the big deal?”

Candy rubs her boobs on my comforter. “You’re the weirdo who never invites people to his house. You made this a big deal so tell me why.”

“If I do, will you stop sexually harassing my bed?”

Candy sits up and shakes her head. “Sexually harassing? That’s big talk from an employer who wants his assistant to suck him off at the office.”

“I only ask because I know you’ll say no.”

“One day, I’ll try. Maybe as an old woman with a death wish.”

“I would never kill you.”

“I’m not worried about you. It’s the boa in your pants that terrifies me,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows.

Candy takes another pillow and begins making out with it. I cup her head and force her lips on mine. She tosses the pillow aside and

grips my shirt.

Candy pries her lips away and whispers, "Why are we here?"

"Because I want to prove I love you," I whisper back.

Candy stares at me stunned for a few very long seconds before smiling casually. "Of course, you love me. I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."

Smiling, I kiss her again and lean her back on the bed. She doesn't remind me about the twins outside. I think of them anyway and slowly let her up.

"I love you too," she says.

Rolling my eyes, I walk toward the door. "Yeah, fucking duh, Candy."

"Sure, as if you had any idea. You're not fooling anyone." Candy grabs my arm and smiles up at me. "Thank you for bringing us here."

"You're welcome. I want you to know how I understand the kids are part of the deal."

Candy pulls me to a stop before we reach the back door. "I promise I'll never hurt you on purpose. Even though trusting people isn't your strong suit, you can trust me."

I study Candy and then cup her face. Kissing her softly, I feel both powerful and scared as hell. She has the power to hurt me. No one in the world can break me like Candy can now. I've given her this power, and I'll learn how to live with feeling vulnerable. Until I get the hang of it, I'll pretend to be the asshole I've always been.

THIRTY THREE - CANDY

The minute we turn onto Hayes's street, I know something is up. I'm uncertain what he has in mind when we pull up to his big, modern, concrete home. Now I'm outside watching the kids play with Nightmare in the expansive, manicured backyard. A too quiet Hayes stands at my side. When he crawls into his head, I always worry. Normally, he's thinking about how many people he needs to kill to get what he wants. Now he's thinking about me.

"I like your house," I say, breaking the silence. "It feels like you in every way."

"Well, it is my house."

"I'm Candy, Hayes. Don't put on your bullshit mask for me."

His dark eyes find me and study my face before he finally asks. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're overwhelmed by having us here and by saying those three words in your bedroom. You want space, but you're afraid to ask for it. You think I'll be mad, but I know you, and I know you've been alone for a long time. Space makes sense. Not only for you but for me too. I've been without a man all my life. Even when I was dating, I never viewed myself as part of a couple. Now I love you, and I want to spend all of my time with you, but I also want to have my life stay the way it was. I know what you're feeling, so you pretend with me."

"You want time away from me, huh?" he says.

"Not yet, but I will. It's normal for people like us. We're basically loners. If I didn't have the kids, I'd be alone a lot, and I'd be okay with

that. I don't need to be entertained by people. I want my space, so I understand you feeling trapped."

"You're projecting."

"Am I, Oprah?"

Hayes grins. "I actually did hear that word on her show. It was years ago while I was waiting at the dentist."

"Don't lie, boss. We both know you love Oprah. I bet you watched her every day."

"Pain in the ass."

"Maybe but I love you. I'm not in denial of who you are. I understand all the bad that comes with all the good. I know you aren't a man accustomed to having children playing at his house or a woman rolling around in his bed."

Hayes stares at the sky, and I catch him smirking. "What you were doing to my pillow was damn sexy."

I smile too and take his hand. "Having us here is a big step. I don't need you to make any other big displays for a while. Just relax."

Hayes leans down to kiss me, hears the kids nearby, and changes his target from my lips to my cheek.

"They know we kiss," I say, pulling him down to kiss his lips.

Hayes wiggles free. "My parents once made out in front of me. I still have nightmares."

"No offense, but your parents weren't as hot as us."

"My mom was a good looking woman."

"Yes, very handsome," I say and then dodge his hand when he tries to smack my ass.

I walk to where the kids are petting Nightmare. The mammoth dog stares at me with his big, dark eyes, reminding me of his owner. They're both giants living in a normal sized world. Though excited to have company, they're also still hoping we'll leave soon.

"He likes when I scratch him behind the ears," Chipper tells me.

Kneeling down, I pet the dog, and he rolls on his side to get tummy love. I glance back at Hayes watching us with his dog. There's something a little lonely about the way he stands apart. Every night, he comes home to an empty house. Nightmare is accustomed to being alone all day. They've only had each other for so long and adding to their little group is probably scary as hell.

I know I'm scared about my future with Hayes.

His house feels like his. Mine feels like mine. The kids just settled into their new lives in White Horse. None of us are really interested in change. As long as we keep things simple for the time being, this arrangement can work.

Unfortunately, Hayes doesn't believe in simple.

"We ought to go somewhere for your fall break," he tells the kids after we sit down at his dining table to eat.

"Where?" Chipper asks immediately.

I know my son wants a father figure. He tried with his real father, but Toby has no interest in children. He won't even hold his "wanted" son, Charlie.

Chipper tried bonding with his grandfather, but Charles Eddison isn't the warmest man. He loves his grandkids, but they freak him out. I doubted he was hands-on with Toby either.

Now Chipper is looking to Hayes to play the dad role. Cricket looks at Hayes as an amusement, but she doesn't trust people.

Outside of her brother, grandparents, and me, she doesn't seem to like anyone. Hayes can ditch us, and the kid would shrug it off. For Chipper, the rejection would hurt more.

"Where do you want to go?"

The twins look at each other but say nothing.

"Why don't we stay around here?" I suggest. "We can go to the zoo during the break."

Hayes frowns. "Think bigger, Candy. What about Disney World?"

The kids' eyes widen, but they remain wary. Their grandparents once suggested Toby take his three kids to Disney World. He agreed, but nothing ever came out of the plan. Now he sits in jail, so things turned out for the best.

"That's an expensive trip," I say.

The twins look at me, and I realize I'm the bad guy. *Ugh, can I blame the law for this situation? Is it possible the po-po banned us from Florida?*

"I haven't been on vacation in a decade," Hayes says, focused on his food.

"Where did you go last time?" I ask.

"Australia."

"Why?"

"For the koala bears," Hayes mutters.

The twins laugh, not realizing he's grumpy with me. I admit Hayes and koala bears is funny.

"Why not the boxing kangaroos?" I ask, being grumpy back at him.

Hayes narrows his eyes, and we frown at each other. The kids stare at him and then decide to focus their big brown eyes at me.

“Disney World will be full of children,” I say to Hayes.

“I doubt it,” he says full of sarcasm.

“It’ll be loud and crowded. People might talk to you.”

“Can’t wait.”

Realizing he refuses to take the out I’ve graciously handed him, I smile at the kids. “I guess we’re going to Disney World.”

The kids smile at each other and then beam at me. After all, I’m the one who kissed this big man into taking them somewhere cool. *Their mom has mad skills.*

“Why did you really go to Australia?” Cricket asks Hayes.

“I wanted to go on a walk-about.”

“What’s that?”

“Where you walk around the outback of Australia.”

“Was it fun?”

“No. It was a lot of walking in the heat.”

I burst into laughter at the thought of Hayes wearing a big wad of sunscreen on his nose and wandering around in the heat. *What in the hell kind of vacation is that?*

Hayes frowns at me as if knowing I’m laughing at him. He stares hard, trying to intimidate me. Instead, I imagine his frowning face covered in sunscreen and laugh louder. The twins react by laughing too. They’re laughing at me rather than Hayes, but he frowns darker.

“Stop,” he demands.

“All right, mate,” I giggle.

Hayes wants to be angry, but he ends up grinning.

I wrap my fingers around his. “There’s a lot of walking at Disney World. Might even have a koala bear somewhere.”

“Funny stuff.”

The kids and I smile at him, and he finally settles down.

“You’re due for a vacation,” I say, still holding his hand.

“Probably.”

“You like to golf, and they have courses at the resort. You don’t have to spend the entire time with the kids.”

Hayes never considered having fun on the trip. He just wants to make the kids happy and play the role of the nice boyfriend. Now he realizes he could actually enjoy himself.

“Years ago, we planned to visit Orlando,” I explain, “and I remember reading something about babysitters at some of the resorts. We could ditch these two and go out in the evening.”

“Hey,” Cricket says. “I don’t need a babysitter. We’re like eighteen, remember?”

“That didn’t work before. Won’t work now.”

“But it’s a different state. The laws might be different,” Cricket insists until Chipper whispers something to her. “Never mind.”

“You’re the voice of reason,” Hayes says, grinning at Chipper.

My boy eats up the attention. Cricket is mostly focused on me. I reach over and pat her hand. She looks at my hand on hers and my other hand on Hayes. I don’t know what she’s thinking, but I suspect she’s threatened by the changes.

I’m proven correct when she grabs onto me after dinner and wants to hold my hand while we stand outside. Hayes and Chipper throw the ball to Nightmare until the dog decides he’s bored of exercise and walks inside.

“I like animals,” Chipper says. “I wish we could have a dog and another cat.”

Hayes looks at me like I'm a bad mom for not instantly driving to the shelter to get new pets for my first born.

"Let's see how they do with Dreamy."

Hayes gives Chipper a look like I'm a pain in the butt. I give Cricket a look like the guys are dorks. She smiles knowingly.

We go inside and find Nightmare stretched out on the couch.

"He owns the place," Hayes says. "Let me grab a few things and we'll head to your place."

I talk to the kids about the massive remote and what I think all the buttons do. They're dying to play with it.

"I'll show you how to use it the next time you come over," Hayes says, reappearing with a duffle bag.

The kids smile at the idea of returning, but Cricket still grabs on me possessively. She likes Hayes and his big house. She likes her family of three more, though.

Once in his SUV, I ask about the duffle bag.

"It's my clothing for tomorrow."

"You're sleeping over?"

"Of course."

"Don't you miss your bed?"

"Not as much as I miss yours."

I study him while he drives us to my house. In his hurry to prove he's boyfriend material, Hayes might push himself too far too fast. I want to tell him again how it's okay to need space. I even open my mouth to say something but chicken out.

"I'm not a child," he says when we pull into my driveway. "I know what I want," he adds before leaning over to look me in the eyes. "And I get what I want."

Smiling, I kiss him quickly and elicit gagging noises from the backseat.

“I like waking up next to you,” is all I say before climbing out of the SUV and opening the door for the kids.

We head into the house, and I tell myself not to worry. Except Hayes is the man I love and this family routine is all new to him. I also have two kids unaccustomed to their mom dating. Chipper wants a new daddy while Cricket wants no daddy. I might be a killjoy, but worrying makes sense with these three.

THIRTY FOUR - HAYES

Once I decide to plan a vacation to Disney World, the scope of everything grows. I figure the week we're out of town will be a good time to do renovations in the office. Moot meets me to go over my plans, and he can't stop chuckling.

"What?" I mutter.

"I keep picturing you scaring little kids at Disney World."

"Can you fucking focus?"

Moot shakes his head. "I don't know, man. You and Disney World are distracting me."

"One day, you'll have kids, and then you won't think it's so funny."

"No, I'll still laugh at the thought of you on that Tea Cup ride."

Shaking my head, I walk into my back office. "I need more space."

"Hell, man, I told you that shit years ago."

"Yeah, well, shut the fuck up now."

Moot laughs again. "Okay, so you want me to get this all done while you're out of town. Shouldn't be a big deal."

"I'm edgy about leaving town in such an obvious way. People might think they should fuck with me."

"Yeah, but you're coming back. It's not like they'd have much time to do the fucking."

"They might think I'm turning soft because of Candy and her kids."

Moot shrugs. "So kill someone when you get back."

"I'm serious."

“So am I. People have been scared of you for a long fucking time. They ain’t going to get over that in a week. If anyone does, you deal with them and teach everyone else a lesson.”

Running my hand through my hair, I admit, “Maybe I am going soft.”

“Yeah, but you’re soft where it counts. With your enemies, you’ll always be an asshole. No doubt about that.”

I share his grin. “I guess. This family man shit makes me feel like a pussy. I’m thinking about making kids smile rather than making my enemies bleed.”

“You’ve worked for a long time to be in a stable place with White Horse. Why not enjoy what you’ve got? Never know how long it’ll last.”

I think about his words while he looks over the plans. My mind is on Candy as usual, and I wonder about her safety.

“A few months before you got out, the sheriff in Common Bend got it into his tiny fucking head to do a drive-by on my house and the office. He caused only minor damage, but I was pissed rather than scared,” I say and then add in a quieter voice. “If that happened now with Candy, I don’t think I’d feel so invincible.”

“I get that, but it’s worth feeling scared. To have a woman you love and trust is a magical fucking thing. A whole lot of people never find that. Especially not guys like you.”

Nodding, I crack my knuckles and then shove my hands into my jeans. “I hate feeling vulnerable.”

“Everyone does. They just don’t whine about it as much as you do,” Moot says, stepping back in case I retaliate.

“Asshole.”

Moot laughs, and I like seeing him so happy. A lot of men would have let prison eat them alive and turn them hard. Not Moot. He's like a kid out for summer vacation.

If he can keep his shit in order, I certainly can too. I leave the office and head to Balthazar's house. I find him in his chair as always. Lizzy Anne is in the kitchen while Gladys the Cat sits at the window. I swear they're in the same positions as the last ten times I've visited.

"Bring me anything?" Dad asks, looking at my hands.

"No."

"Too bad. I could use good toffee."

"You shouldn't eat that shit with your dentures."

"Always got something to say, don't you? Apparently, you're a dentist now."

Sitting on the couch to his right, I get straight to the point since he clearly isn't in a warm and inviting mood.

"I'm in love with Candy Wilburn."

"Don't blame you. She's a looker."

"I'm planning to make things official during our week in Disney World. That's why I want you to come on the trip."

"I don't like traveling."

"It's one week. We're flying first class. You'll get your own room at the resort."

"What about Lizzy Anne?" he asks, gesturing at where she stands listening.

"I'll pay for her to come with us."

"Will she get her own room? I don't want to share."

“You’re kidding, right? Why in the hell would I think she’d want to share a room with you?”

“You’re not always aware people have feelings, son.”

Frowning, I look at Lizzy Anne. “We’re staying at the animal resort where the kids can see giraffes. I was thinking of putting Dad at another nice resort where there ought to be fewer kids. I can get you a room on the same floor. They have room service and massages. It’ll be a paid vacation. Are you game?”

“What about Gladys?” Dad asks before Lizzy Anne can answer.

“I’ll pay to have someone come over and feed her. Clean her shit too. She’ll be fine.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t want to go anywhere.”

I frown at my father. “Look, I haven’t asked for shit in a long time. I’ve paid for this house and your care and that ridiculously expensive surgery for your cat. You owe me, and I’m calling in my damn markers. Pack up your shit, make sure you have your prescriptions in order, and prepare to have the time of your fucking life.”

“You don’t need to be rude about it.”

“This trip is important. Candy and her kids are important. Don’t fuck this up for me.”

Balthazar says nothing. I can feel how much he wants to bitch and moan. I’m asking him to vary up his incredibly boring schedule. If I hadn’t lost my temper, he’d tell me fucking no and wouldn’t change his mind.

“Sounds like a good deal to me,” Lizzy Anne says, walking to the kitchen. “I’ll check the weather in Florida and start getting your dad packed.”

“Good. We’ll leave Friday night after the kids finish school, and we’ll be gone for their autumn break.”

“That’s a long time,” Dad grumbles.

“They have golf courses at Disney World,” I tell him. “Fishing too. I’m sure you and I can find things to do together and give Lizzy Anne a break.”

My father frowns at the TV, but I notice less irritation around his blue eyes. Back in the day, Dad took me golfing a few times a month. Once Mom died, he didn’t have much use for golf or anything else outside his house.

This trip can give him the sense of family he lost years ago. I think he worries about stirring up those old feelings. Life with Gladys the Cat and Lizzy Anne is easy, safe, and mind-numbingly dull. If he thinks he can avoid feeling anything when Cricket and Chipper are around, Balthazar’s in for a rude awakening.

THIRTY FIVE - CANDY

Honey and I sit on a bench while our six kids run around the busy park near her house. I check out the other mothers and think about making friends. As usual, I realize I don't want to deal with their drama. Something about these women tells me they're drowning in self-created bullshit. Uninterested, I focus on Honey.

"How are things with Andrew?"

"Okay."

"What does okay mean?"

Honey shrugs. "He's tense and blames me for getting Hayes involved."

"Well, as long as he's the one suffering, who cares?"

Honey shoots me a disapproving frown. "He's my husband."

"Why is that again?"

"Because I didn't want to end up alone like Mom."

Her honesty surprises me. Honey rarely talks about our mother or brother. She avoids upsetting topics. I'm proud of her until she opens her mouth again.

"Isn't that why you're with Hayes?"

Temper flaring, I think of a few cruel things to say to my sister. I force myself to remain civil instead.

"I know you're going through a stressful period in your life, but you'd be smart not to comment on things you don't know anything about. Okay?"

"He offers you security. How is that any different than why I picked Andrew?"

“Hayes doesn’t hit me,” I whisper angrily. “He doesn’t tell me what to wear.” Pausing, I remember when Hayes told me to stop wearing a shirt he thought was too revealing. “Fine, he does tell me what to wear, but he doesn’t freak out and hurt me when I ignore him.”

“I’m not judging you.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel guilty for judging you?”

Honey shrugs, and I realize my bitchiness won’t faze someone beaten down for years.

“Hayes treats me well. If he didn’t, I wouldn’t be with him. I’m not afraid to be alone.”

“Mom was. That’s why she walked into the woods that day. All her life was about finding someone to love her, and that day she realized no one really would.”

“We did,” I mumble.

“We had our lives. She wanted a man to love her.”

“She was weak.”

Honey studies me. “What happens when the twins get older and move away like we did with Mom? Will you be so confident then?”

“Yes because I’m not Mom.”

“I guess that means I am.”

“You don’t have to be.”

Honey shrugs again. Her gaze leaves me and focuses on her kids playing on the jungle gym. Cricket and Chipper are off to the side, away from the other children. My twins laugh at something, and I love how they have each other. They don’t beg for attention from others. That confidence is something I have to work hard at, and Honey never learned.

“Mom could have done anything,” I say. “She could have started over somewhere new. She talked about traveling, but she never saved up money to go anywhere. Mom had choices, but she only wanted a man.”

“She was lonely.”

“She could have gotten a hobby.”

“Do you have a hobby?”

“No, but I have a whole list of possible ones for when the kids get older. I plan to try each of them to see which ones I enjoy.”

Honey nods. “You always make things look so easy.”

“It’s a decision I made. You could make the same decision.”

Honey inhales deeply. When she exhales, I swear she looks a decade older.

“Why Andrew?” I ask, recalling how Hayes mentioned Honey once dated Moot. “Wasn’t there anyone else who made you happy?”

“There was one guy around the time I was dating Andrew. I liked them both, but I knew the other one wouldn’t make a good husband and father.”

“Why?”

“He was rough and wild. He didn’t have a secure job.”

“Do you ever have regrets?”

Lying on cue, Honey shakes her head. “He ended up in prison. I made the right choice.”

“But you liked him more than Andrew, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but I made the right choice,” she says more strongly.

“This other guy wasn’t someone you could show off, huh?”

Shooting me a dirty look, Honey crosses her arms. “It wasn’t about that. I didn’t fit in his world, and he didn’t fit in mine.”

“If Andrew fits in your world, you should ditch it.”

Honey rolls her eyes. “Stop acting like you know me so well.”

“I know you well enough.”

“In high school, when kids made fun of you, you didn’t care. When they made fun of me, I cried myself to sleep. We’re different, Candy.”

I think of how much Honey always wanted to be accepted even by losers.

“I never understood why you cared what those morons thought. They weren’t your friends. They didn’t know shit about you, so what did their opinions matter?”

“They just did.”

“And they still do, huh? That’s why you wear makeup to go to the park and dress your kids up in their Sunday best just to get dirty. You want to make a good impression on these strangers.”

“I feel their judgment if I don’t try to make a good impression.”

“Maybe there’s a pill to fix that.”

“I’m not crazy,” she says, glaring at me.

“I never said you were. I’m saying modern medicine has help for people’s phobias. Mom never wanted to try an anti-depressant. It might have saved her.”

“That and a hobby, right?”

Narrowing my eyes, I want to say something nasty to my sister. She waits for me to let loose, but I don’t. Douche has kicked her around too much, and I’m not him.

“I do resent her giving up. If she hadn’t, she’d probably live in White Horse with us. We’d take our kids to grandma’s house on the

weekends. It makes me mad that the twins will never know her. Doesn't it piss you off?"

Honey stares at her hands, and I realize I've kicked Honey despite my intention to be gentle.

"I miss her," she whispers in a wobbly voice. "We talked once about her making my kids' sandwiches and taking them to the park. She acted like she was looking forward to being a grandma, but she never got to meet them."

Honey and Mom shared a bond I never managed to duplicate with either of them. I was closer to Peat, but he was easy to love. The guy loved making people laugh.

"I miss Peat," I mutter, ready to cry too. "He would have made a great uncle."

Our afternoon out has turned into a miserable walk down memory lane. I'm depressed by the time I return to the office with the kids. They run outside to play with Nightmare while I stand at my desk and think about how Peat would have found Hayes funny. They might have even become friends.

"Are you all right?" asks one of the gardeners.

Before I can say anything, Hayes storms out of the back office and waves a gun at the guy.

"Go away," he growls, and the gardener isn't the only one ready to run. I nearly piss myself at Hayes's sudden rage.

"What happened?" Hayes asks, looking around as if we're under attack. He checks on the kids in the back with Nightmare. Once he feels satisfied with our safety, Hayes returns to my side. "Why are you crying?"

"I wish you could have met my brother and mom," I sob.

Hayes set down his gun and sweeps me into his arms. I feel dainty while he rests me in his lap. I feel young too. Or maybe it's how I'm crying like a baby that makes me feel young.

"What happened? Why are you upset now?"

"I talked with Honey, and she was in a bad mood, and now I'm in a bad mood."

"You should stop hanging out with your sister," he says instantly.

I wipe my eyes and frown. "I'm not avoiding my sister."

"Hey, you gave me a problem, and I solved it for you."

"I don't want you to solve it. I want you to hug me and say you're sorry for my loss and let me cry myself out. Then maybe we can make out a little before the kids come inside."

"I can do that too," he says, nuzzling my forehead. "Thanks for the instructions. Life is a lot easier with them handy."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry I'm crying."

"Are you really?"

"No," I sniffle. "My brother Peat was a warm and funny person who made people happy. He shouldn't be dead."

"Want me to have his murderer killed?"

"Maybe," I say with a slight smile. "Ask me tomorrow when I'm calmer."

Hayes nods while my crying turns to sniffles.

"I feel bad my mom gave up on life. I also hate her a little for that."

"I've never been depressed, but I hear it's a powerful thing."

"I know I should be more sensitive, but she could be alive to see her grandkids. She could meet you. She could have made new friends. Had wild sex in public. She had options."

“You said your family was genetically inclined to make bad decisions. That’s what she did. Blame genetics instead of her.”

I study his handsome face and enjoy his soft caress. This big, mean man is capable of such tenderness when he wants. Honey can’t see that about Hayes. She thinks of him as a brasher Andrew. I admit a part of me worries about Hayes too. He can often be a temperamental bitch. For right now, I only see the kindness he feels for those he loves.

THIRTY SIX - HAYES

Balthazar tells me if he dies during the flight, he blames me, and I should blame myself too. In fact, I should spend the rest of my life haunted by killing him. I assure him on the way to the airport that I'll schedule in the guilt thing. Candy shakes her head immediately while squished in the backseat with the kids.

"Your schedule is pretty booked, boss. I don't know if you'll have any free time for guilt. You'll need to delegate that to someone."

Grunting, Balthazar isn't happy with her big mouth or my smile in response to her comment. The old man probably wants to give her a piece of his mind, but the kids are staring at him. He knows they're staring too. More than once, he lowers the visor to look in the mirror. No way is he checking his appearance. He's keeping an eye on the dark-eyed demons in the backseat.

At the airport, the twins decide to sit on each side of him.

"We already have a grandpa," Chipper says.

Cricket adds, "He flies all the time. Why don't you?"

"I have a busy life. No time for flying."

Balthazar's need to impress the twins makes me laugh. Candy catches my reaction and rolls her eyes.

"Don't encourage them. They're tormenting an old man."

"What do you call what you did in the car?"

"Being honest. You are busy. He'll need to survive, or you'll need to delegate. Don't give me the job, though. I suck at guilt."

"I'll keep that in mind when you break my heart."

Candy throws her head back and laughs so loudly the other waiting passengers frown at her. I hear someone suggest she's

drunk.

“How is that funny?” I ask, spotting Lizzy Anne heading in our direction.

“I’d never break your heart. In fact, I consider part of my job to protect it,” she says, wrapping her arms around one of mine. “Even from me.”

After giving Candy’s forehead a quick kiss, I regain my hard exterior for Lizzy Anne.

“I could have driven you or sent a car,” I tell her.

“I drove so I’d have a car nearby in case I needed to be able to make a fast getaway when we return. I’ll likely be sick of you people by the end of the trip.”

“A ray of sunshine as always,” Candy says before walking away and joining the kids.

We board first and get settled into our seats. I give Chipper the window seat, and Candy does the same with Cricket. I sit in the aisle seat with Balthazar and Lizzy Anne in front of me. My father bitches a little until he gets comfortable. Before we even take off, he falls asleep and remains out for the rest of the flight. I suspect Lizzy Anne drugged his ass.

During the takeoff and landing, Chipper gets nervous and looks to his mother for comfort. Candy tells him to hold onto me like Cricket is holding onto her. The boy isn’t sure about cuddling with me, but I take his little hand and squeeze it.

“What amusement park do you want to visit first?” I ask.

Chipper looks to his mother for reassurance again. Relaxing, he scoots closer to me and shrugs.

“The one with the castle.”

“Sounds good. Does that one have the Pirates of the Caribbean ride?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll check once the air waitress lets us use our phones again.”

Chipper smiles. “She’s called a flight attendant.”

“Yeah, well, she can be called whatever she wants, but she’s a waitress.”

The boy likes the waitress thing and refers to her that way the entire flight. He says I need to tip her too since she’s a waitress. I decide to do what he says considering the kid managed to get through the flight without crying or puking.

We take a private shuttle to the Disney World resort. Balthazar and Lizzy Anne are dropped off first at their hotel. I go inside to make sure they get checked in safely.

When I return to the shuttle, the twins are dozing against Candy by using her tits as pillows. We arrive at our hotel, and the kids awake immediately. They’re suddenly excited like only children, or a tweaker can get excited. Happy kids mean a happy Candy, and I’m looking to make my woman smile.

I reserved us a two-bedroom suite with savanna views. The kids love the idea of having their own room. Candy looks at our room with the two beds and smiles.

“This bed is for fucking, and this one is for sleeping,” she whispers while the kids stand on the balcony and point at animals.

“And the rooms are far enough apart that you can be noisy without waking them.”

Candy claps her hands, and I think she’s ready to tell the kids to take a nap. They’re wide awake of course, so we unpack and

prepare to visit the Magic Kingdom.

I call Balthazar on the way to the park and make sure he's okay. Lizzy Anne said he was soaking in his big tub. I take that as a positive sign.

Hanging up, I look at Candy with her arms wrapped around each kid. She's smiling so widely I bet her face will hurt later.

"One day during our trip, I'll take Balthazar golfing."

"Can we come?" Chipper asks.

"It's real golf, not the miniature kind."

"Our grandpa likes to golf," Cricket says. "He makes business deals at the course. I want to make business deals too."

"What kind of business deals?"

"The kind where I win."

Even though she's clearly serious, I laugh at her expression. The kid wants to rule the world. No doubt she just doesn't want other people to rule it.

We arrive at the park, and I need a minute to deal with the sheer mass of bodies around us. Babies scream, kids cry, parents meltdown, the happiest place on earth looks like a fucking horror show.

"No one except us four matters," Candy announces. "We don't hear anyone else. We don't see anyone else. We're here alone."

The kids nod and get ready to push through the crowds of unhappy people. I take a deep breath and focus on my woman and her kids. No one else matters. The noise disappears. The people fade away. I am at this family place with my family, and I refuse to care about anything else.

Candy sees me prepared and takes my hand. Cricket has her other hand, and Chipper holds onto his sister. Together, we are an unstoppable team with only one goal. To eat a lot of overpriced food, stand in long fucking lines for silly rides, and embrace the cheesiness children love.

THIRTY SEVEN - CANDY

If not for our reservation, we likely wouldn't have gotten a table. The restaurant is packed when we arrive. I know Hayes hates these crowded spots, and he's likely sick of so many people. He shows none of his annoyance, though.

Standing over everyone around him, Hayes owns this place as he does everywhere we go. I love how people move out of his way. When they try to hold their ground, he gives them a look that gets their asses moving. Well, except for the little old ladies near our table. He patiently waits for them to pass us with their walkers.

"Such a good boy," I tease, as he pulls back my chair. "Mama raised you right."

"She said good manners tricked people into thinking you were a good person."

"Wise."

Hayes sits in the chair closest to mine and takes the menu. We order steaks because nothing will improve his mood like red meat.

"Long day," I say, running my index finger along his slightly burned nose.

"Your kids are well behaved. You did good, Candy. I was worried they'd whine, and I'd need to duck out and hide."

"They're happy to be here. They also like you."

"Cricket isn't sure about that," he says, giving me a pouty frown.

"She's afraid you'll steal me away. I haven't had a boyfriend since she was born, so this is new to her."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one sweating shit."

"Chipper thinks you're a superhero."

Hayes grins as if he feels like a superhero. "He's an easy kid to win over."

"Don't be fooled. He's just sneakier than Cricket. My kids are well behaved, but they're devious. Never assume they aren't working an angle."

Hayes loses his smile. "They're kids."

"So were you once."

"True."

"I adore them because they're devious. They don't sit around expecting life to hand them crap. The Wilburns never get things easily. We have to wade through the bullshit to find our happiness."

"You're happy now, right?"

"Yes, Angus. I was nervous about the trip, but spending time with you and the kids today was magic."

"Well, it is Disney World."

"With anyone else, it wouldn't be as good. You were really funny today with the kids. I liked when you held their balloons. In fact, I think I have a picture of you playing their mule."

Hayes grins. "I love you, Candy. I'm not always going to be a pleasure to be around, and running White Horse can make me an asshole. Still I'll always put you and the kids first."

"Put yourself first too," I say, taking his hand. "You're not a machine. All these years, you've worked so hard and barely taken any time to enjoy what you've built. I see what the groups in Common Bend and Hickory Creek built, but they did it with a group. You made decisions alone. That's fucking amazing, and I want you to sit back and let the success sink in."

Hayes considers my words for a few minutes before speaking. "I've wanted to ease off the pedal the last few years, but I never had anything else to do with myself. Moot is the only guy I hang out with, and he was in prison. My dad never wanted to leave the house. No woman interested me. Work and Nightmare were all I had that gave me any pleasure. Then you walked into my office."

"You were so hot that first day. I don't know if I ever told you that, but damn."

Hayes gives me one of his arrogant male smiles. I give him an approving glance. He looks pretty damn sexy tonight wearing all black with a buttoned up shirt and jeans. I let my fingers caress his strong thigh until he removes my hand.

"Spending the night with a raging hard-on isn't my idea of comfortable."

"Yes, but the kids will crash early tonight from all the walking. I can help you deal with your raging hard-on."

"Then give it to me closer to the dealing with it part."

I scoot my chair closer to him and lean my cheek against his arm. "I used to fear falling in love. I thought it would make me fucking stupid, but except for the one night when I wanted to hump you in the house while the kids were upstairs, I've remained relatively smart. And you protected me when I did lose control."

"I'll always protect you."

His tone sends waves of heat through me. I admire the hard-fucking, ass-kicking, tough side of Hayes, yet always find his gentle side a welcome surprise.

Our food arrives, and Hayes eats like a man starving. I take my time with the steak and enjoy the chunky mashed potatoes. I moan

approvingly about the food while stealing glances at Hayes. Tonight, when the kids are asleep in the next room, I plan to have raunchy fun with this man.

Halfway through the meal, Hayes places a small black box on the table and slides it over to me. He doesn't look my direction or say a word. Once the box is next to my plate, he returns to eating.

I glance at the box but don't reach for it. I'm nervous in a way I shouldn't be. I feel as if I open the box I will be forever changed. I know what's inside. Hayes didn't buy me earrings or a necklace. I don't wear jewelry. He wouldn't waste money on what I wouldn't use. No, I know what he's bought. If I open it, I will need to answer him, and I'm unsure of my answer.

Why is he in such a rush? Why can't he be patient and enjoy what we have? Why can't loving me be enough? Why are my hands shaking?

I rest them on my lap and lean back in the booth. Staring at the box, I'm afraid of this new step. If I say yes, I'll create a million changes in our lives. If I say no, I don't think Hayes's ego will allow him to remain with me. He can't be patient because he isn't a patient man. He wants what he wants, and he gets what he wants.

And he wants me.

The fact is I want him too. The changes might scare the shit out of me. I also worry about the kids' reaction to more upheaval in their young lives. Despite all of my fears, I love Hayes like I'll never love anyone else. I have no doubt he'll love and care for me like he's never done another person. I've clawed my way into his heart and made him acknowledge his feelings. I can't reject him now. Even at my cruelest, I wouldn't have the heart to break a man like Hayes.

“Did you buy yourself one?” I ask, returning to eating.

“Why would I?”

“So women will know you’re taken and not to mess with my man.”

Hayes never stops eating, but I catch him grin. “Good point. Women are always throwing themselves at me. I should put an ‘out of business’ sign on me somewhere.”

“When we get back to White Horse, I’ll buy you something big and gaudy.”

“Are you going to open it?” he asks, glancing at the box.

“Do you want me to start crying in public?”

“No. In fact, I might bolt if you start that shit.”

Grinning, I shrug. “Well, then I best not open it. I’d hate to embarrass myself or force you to run.”

“Good plan. I hate running. I’ll do it if I get to crush someone at the end, but just to run, no, I’d rather not.”

I lean my head against his shoulder and sigh. “I love you, Angus Fishhead Hayes.”

“Fishhead?”

“I don’t know your middle name, and I thought that one fit.”

“It’s Michael.”

“Oh, that’s much better.”

Hayes nuzzles my forehead with his lips. “What’s your middle name? You didn’t put it on any of your forms.”

“Don’t laugh.”

“I promise nothing,” he says, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s Corn.”

Hayes snorts. “Tell me you’re kidding.”

“I am,” I say, grinning at his expression. “My mother didn’t give me a middle name. She said the only one she liked was “Cane,” but she thought it might make me hate her. She wanted Pot for Honey and Moss for Peat.”

“What about the twins?”

“They’re both Eddison. I figured if they had good middle names they’d resent using their silly first ones. I think silly names make people stronger.”

“Didn’t help Honey.”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s a tough chick inside her somewhere. She just hasn’t been introduced yet.”

Hayes kisses my forehead and then my lips. I moan at the taste of steak on his tongue, but he won’t let the kiss deepen.

“If we have a son, his middle name can be Peat,” he says, returning to his steak. “I do insist we spell it correctly.”

“What if we only have girls, or I can’t get pregnant because your sperm is faulty? What will you do for an heir?”

“First, girls can be heirs as long as they act like me. Second, there is nothing wrong with my sperm. Third, if all else fails, I have your kids. They’re smart, and I’m fairly sure I can turn Cricket into a no-nonsense badass.”

“She does have the bitchy thing down.”

“I like how she stares at people until they’re uncomfortable. I wasn’t even that big a jerk at her age. She’s advanced, I guess.”

Smiling, I take a deep breath and accept Hayes and I are getting married. I’ll be this man’s wife. I might even have more children. I hadn’t believed we’d arrive at this moment since Hayes can be a

tricky man to read. Now he's put all his cards out on the table and made clear what he wants.

THIRTY EIGHT - HAYES

Balthazar's skin glows from yesterday's spa treatment. I want to mock the old man for getting a facial, but I keep my mouth shut instead. Later, Candy and I can giggle at Dad's expense. For now, I'm on my best behavior. Though I think I'm giving myself hemorrhoids from behaving for so long.

On our second to last day at Disney World, we take out two golf carts and spend the early morning enjoying a manicured course. Candy drives her cart as well as she does her car, meaning I have to veer out of her way repeatedly to avoid colliding. She flips me off and tells me to stay in my lane.

"She's an awful driver," Balthazar says, sitting next to me.

"I'm not marrying her for her driving."

"Are you sure you want to settle down? Kids are a big hassle."

"Thanks, Dad," I mutter.

"You were good, but her kids might be evil. I've never trusted twins."

"They're good kids. They just like messing with people. They get that from Candy."

"Lizzy Anne says Candy is a gold digger."

Imagining the housekeeper relaxing at the pool, I wonder if I should have a few words with her when we get back.

"Lizzy Anne's opinion doesn't mean shit to me."

"You ought to get a prenuptial. I saw on TV how you need one."

"Well, if it's on TV, it must be true."

"Don't mock me, boy," he says, frowning under his goofy, wide hat.

“If I want to piss away my money on a woman I love, what’s it to you or Lizzy Anne?”

“Just looking out for you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I like Candy,” Baltazar says. “She’s a horrible driver and will probably kill you while you sleep, but I think she’ll make a good mother to your kids. That’ll be important after you’re dead.”

Rolling my eyes, I look at Candy doing circles around the next hole. “Candy is my Gladys. I’ll be happy to die first, so I don’t have to live without her.”

Balthazar frowns at me. He’s probably pissed at me for comparing his precious wife to my future precious wife. Or maybe he thinks it’s strange to see me sentimental. Either way, I park the cart next to Candy’s and climb out.

“My grandpa crashed his cart one time,” Chipper tells me as I carry the club to where the ball rests.

“Old people aren’t great drivers. They’re usually better than your mother, though.”

Candy pokes me with her club and then plays swords with Cricket.

“No, Grandpa was drunk when he crashed.”

“Well, that would do it,” I say, leveling the club with the ball.

Chipper watches me hit the ball and then imitates me when I cover my eyes to see where it landed. Baltazar stands next to me and shakes his head.

“You’re rusty. I best take you golfing more often back in White Horse.”

I smile at his comment before hiding my grin by scratching my beard. Chipper scratches his chin like I did. He follows me around, imitating my every move. Chipper even decides to join me in my cart, and not because he's afraid of his mother's driving.

Candy and Cricket have no interest in golfing today. They keep mentioning how much better miniature golfing is and how this course needs more windmills. I consider telling them to wait for us at the hotel if they're so bored, but the girls have fun goofing around in the cart and acting out scenes from *Caddy Shack*. *At least for the first hour.*

"We're thinking about going back to the park and shop for souvenirs," Candy says while adjusting my baseball cap. "You and Balthazar can spend quality time alone."

"What about this little man?" I ask, patting Chipper's shoulder.

The boy stares at me and then looks at his mother before finally focusing on his sister. He doesn't know where he wants to go. He likely wants to go with his mom and sister but is afraid to leave my side.

"This kind of golf is pretty boring for a kid your age. Why don't you go with your mom?" I suggest and then add, "When we get back to White Horse, we'll go to a miniature golf course. I own one, you know?"

Chipper looks back at Candy. "We'll go to his miniature golf course when we get home," he tells her, and I realize the kid is nearly in tears.

Kneeling down, Candy hugs him and whispers something in his ear. He nods and a single tear spills down his cheek. Her fingers tickle at his gut, and he laughs. Just like that, he's happy again.

“We’ll see you back at the hotel,” she tells me and stands on her tippy toes to kiss me goodbye. “Call me when you’re done here, so we can meet you.”

“Have fun. If anyone messes with you, call me.”

Candy walks to the cart before glancing back with a smile. “It’s Disney World, boss. No one is going to mess with us.”

Sitting next to her brother in the cart, Cricket says, “If they do, I’ll nail them in the balls.”

Before I can respond, Candy speeds away. I watch her make sharp turns and hear the kids screaming in delight. They’re as bad as she is.

“I don’t like her,” Balthazar says after taking his shot and missing badly. “I’ll take the penalty.”

“Why exactly don’t you like her?”

“She hassles Lizzy Anne.”

Picking up the balls, I walk to the cart. “Lizzy Anne’s job is to take care of you. Candy’s job is to make sure Lizzy Anne takes care of you. She stays on her ass, so I don’t have to.”

“She’s too rude about it.”

“That’s how Candy is.”

“No, she’s nice to me. She only gives Lizzy Anne shit,” Balthazar says, sitting next to me.

“She’s only nice to you because she thinks she has to be. Candy is rude to pretty much everyone. She regularly hangs up on people for mumbling on the phone or if they mispronounce my name or a million other reasons. She annoys half of my employees and the other half straight out hate her. Lizzy Anne isn’t special.”

Balthazar says nothing until we stop at the next hole. He's slow to leave the cart, and I suspect he's already tired.

"So she's like a girl version of you."

"Yeah."

"No wonder you love her. You've always been arrogant," he says, winking at me and then sliding out of the cart. "Figures you'd want to marry yourself."

After Balthazar realizes Candy isn't gunning for Lizzy Anne, he's on board with the marriage. No more talk of gold diggers or evil children. He's a happy motherfucker even though I kick his ever loving ass the rest of the afternoon. The poor bastard finally gives up and watches me. I admit showing off a little for dear old dad. Clearly spending time with the twins has put me in a childlike mood.

THIRTY NINE - CANDY

The kids are exhausted by the time we finish shopping at Big Top Souvenirs in Fantasyland. I drag the bags to where we can catch a bus back to the resort. Hayes texts to say he's an hour from finishing. I text back to say I need sleep and ask how he's doing with his daddy/son time. He sends me the middle finger emoticon. *My man is always eloquent.*

Sitting on a bench, I hand Chipper the bottle of soda we bought in the store. He takes a gulp and hands it to Cricket. She drinks a little and leans against me.

"I love it here," she mumbles.

"Me too," an exhausted Chipper says.

"Me three," I add and then decide the time has come to mention Hayes's proposal. "Hayes wants to marry me and become a family."

Cricket tightens her grip on my hand. "No."

"Why no?" I gently ask, having assumed she wouldn't be excited.

"I don't want to move. I like our house. I want to stay where we are. So no."

Chipper looks at me in the same way he did on the golf course. He's torn between wanting what he has and craving what Hayes offers.

"I love him," I explain as people pass us.

"He yelled at you."

"He yells at everyone. He also apologized, and he never apologizes. He loves me, and I think he's falling in love with you two too. That's why he brought us here. To make you guys happy."

“I don’t want to move,” Cricket whines, crying against me. “I like our house.”

Chipper can’t handle his sister crying and begins to sob too. I ignore all the people looking at us. *Screw those idiots.* Their kids were likely bawling earlier in the day. Now my kids get their turn.

“I was thinking about Dreamy,” I say, wrapping them against me. “She’s so scared of the new house, and it might take a long time before she gets used to Hayes’s house too. I think we should stay at our house some nights and his house other nights. That way, Dreamy will get used to the changes. Nightmare will probably need time to adjust too. He’s used to having the house to himself.”

Hearing about the animals calms their tears.

“If you marry Hayes, we’ll live in his house?” Chipper asks.

“Well, technically they’re both his houses. We’d eventually move to his bigger house. We don’t have to do it right away. I think Hayes needs time to get used to us living there. We all need to get used to new stuff so we won’t rush.”

Tears over, they rest against me and wait for the bus. Cricket takes a sip of the soda and then clears her throat.

“Hayes got us a nice room at the hotel,” she says. “That cost him a lot of money.”

“He wants us to be happy.”

“He scared that little kid yesterday when we were in line,” she says, grinning at me. “The kid kept staring at him, and he stared back, and the kid cried. That was funny.”

“He’s a scary guy, but he’s good inside.”

“Like Cricket,” Chipper says, and his sister sticks her tongue out at him.

“I like Hayes,” Chipper says as we stand for the approaching bus. “He’s nicer than Dad.”

“Yes, he is.”

Cricket helps me with the bags, and I see her already adjusting to this new reality.

“I wonder if Nightmare and Dreamy will fight,” Chipper asks once we’re on the ride back to the hotel.

“Probably. We’ll keep them apart if we have to. They’ll adjust with time, and we’re in no rush.”

The kids smile at me, and I feel a burden lift from me. Soon we shuffle into the hotel and take the elevator up to our room. The minute the air conditioning hits our sweaty bodies, we’re ready to crash. I drop the bags on the couch and walk into the kids’ room where two beds await. They crawl into one and then watch me full of hope I’ll take the other. I kick off my shoes and collapse on the second bed.

The kids laugh at my dramatic display before they get comfortable. A few minutes later, I hear them sleeping. I don’t take long to follow them into dreamland. Sometime later, Hayes returns to the hotel. I’m too tired to lift my head. I don’t want to call out to him and wake up the kids. I just wait for him to find us and hope he’ll curl up with me.

Hayes moves around the suite for what feels like forever before I feel the bed shift. His fingers slide up my spine and caress the hair from my neck. He kisses the exposed skin and then relaxes against me. I smile at how the four of us must look like a normal family after a long day on vacation. I doze off thinking this is probably the first time Hayes has been normal in his entire life.

FORTY - CANDY

On our last day at Disney World, the four of us try to get in every last bit of fun. We hit our favorite rides, eat at our favorite restaurants, and spend the evening watching the animals on the savanna outside of the hotel. I know we didn't do a million things on the trip, but there's no time to visit every sight and ride every attraction. Hayes promises the kids we'll come back soon, and they believe him. They're realizing he isn't their father who talks a great game yet never comes through. Good or bad, Hayes is an open book. If he says something, it happens.

At our last dinner, Balthazar and Lizzy Anne join us at a long table at a Mexican-style restaurant. Hayes claims his father thinks I hate Lizzy Anne. I claim I don't and spend a good part of dinner proving my lie.

Balthazar finally says we don't have to pretend. Family doesn't have to like each other. Lizzy Anne and I share a smile at the thought of being family. Then we spend the rest of dinner ignoring each other.

Back in the hotel room, the twins babble wildly at their grandparents about everything they've done on the trip. Grandma and Grandpa Eddison sound genuinely happy, yet I suspect they're unsure about this man suddenly playing the father role. I know they'll want to visit and meet Hayes. I know he'll scare them initially, but they'll end up respecting him. The Eddisons appreciate money and power and Hayes possesses both.

After the twins crash from exhaustion, I sit on the couch in the suite and look at my ring still in the box.

“We’ll get it resized in White Horse,” Hayes says, stripping down for bed. “I figured it was better to get a size too small than too big. I know how women are about their weight.”

Laughing, I watch him disappear into the bathroom and listen to the shower. Waiting for him to return, I study the ring and think about the last week. I never had a father yet never missed out. I spent most of my adult life without a man, and I never missed that either. I was satisfied because being unsatisfied meant becoming my mother. She gave up, and I refused to.

Now I had Hayes, and he needed me. Not to look pretty or fuck him. No, he needed someone to have his back. From following him around White Horse, I learned how many people viewed Hayes as indestructible. He was a flesh and blood man, though, and needed someone capable of letting him be weak when need be.

Hayes appears from the bathroom wearing only boxers and smelling like soap. I’m drawn to the bedroom where he rests against the headboard. He’s tired after a long week of playing family man with his dad, kids, and future wife.

“I always thought people were full of shit when they said they needed a vacation from their vacation,” I say, closing and locking the bedroom door. “I get that saying now.”

“If you’re asking for a few days off when we return, the answer is no.”

Crawling on the bed, I smile. “You’re a tough boss.”

Hayes shares my smile and reaches out to caress my sunburned skin. “You look sexy with that burnt nose.”

I rest on my knees and drink in all of Hayes. With him wearing only boxers, I decide it’s time to get reacquainted with what’s hiding

underneath.

“Hello,” I say, stroking his cock through the fabric. “Remember me?”

Hayes reaches out for me, but I shake my head. “Keep your hands to yourself. I need to concentrate. Oh, and no holding my head or shoving your humdinger down my throat or maneuvering me.”

“You’re finally giving me a blowjob, huh? Should I be worried?”

“For my safety?” I ask, grinning. “Sure. For your dick’s safety? Sure. This could go terribly wrong.”

I tug off his black boxers and stroke the colossal dick. Hayes says nothing and watches me like I might be a threat. I don’t blame him for worrying. I’ve given two blowjobs in my life, and I bit down both times. In each case, the dick was half his size and my mouth hasn’t gotten any wider.

“Be nice to me,” I tell the dick while my hand slides along its length. “I’m the sweet lady attached to the vagina you enjoy pounding.”

Hayes fights a grin, but he looks nervous.

“Shh, don’t cry,” I say and lick the drop of pre-cum.

Exhaling hard, Hayes is a minute from simply fucking me. The tension of having an inexperienced chick like me in control of his dick is palpable. I ignore him and focus on the hard flesh in my hands.

My tongue bathes the length of it and the damn thing twitches with appreciation. I smile and take another long lick before teasing the slit. I think Hayes says my name, but I’m too focused on staying focused.

The thick head of his cock slides easily into my mouth, coating my tongue with discharge. I suck once, twice, and finally a third time before sliding my tongue down the tender underbelly to his heavy balls. Hayes makes a pained noise when I suck gently at the flesh. My hand continues to pump the length of him while I make him squirm by teasing his balls with my tongue.

By the time my lips return to the head of his cock, the slit leaks thick cum. I lick it off and glance up at Hayes. He feels vulnerable, exposed, but unafraid. My man trusts me. The rest of the world might come crashing down on him, but I never will. I'll always be at his side.

I feel Hayes's balls ready to explode. Stroking his cock with both hands, I suck steadily at the head, enticing it to let go. My earlier fears are gone, and I only want to hear Hayes's groans as he finds release.

The first spray of cum against my throat startles me for only a moment before I swallow the hot liquid. Sucking more from him, I close my eyes and enjoy the wild moans of a man completely under my control. He's lost in pleasure as I drink down what feels like gallons of pent-up need.

Hayes's body is spent long before his cock softens under my touch. My tongue circles the head, licking it clean. I stare up at a blissful Hayes watching me. He doesn't look even a little bit arrogant. No, I'd say his expression is more grateful than anything else.

I finally relent and gently rest his relaxed cock against his thigh. Crawling up to Hayes, I lick my lips.

"Want to taste what I accomplished?"

Hayes grips the back of my head, and his sudden touch startles me. His kiss is hot and desperate. He's a man afraid he'll lose something important if he lets go. I wrap my arms around his neck and straddle him. He needs to know I'm not going anywhere.

"I love you," I whisper when his lips leave mine.

"You survived," he said, attempting to joke, but his expression remains too panicked to sell the humor.

"I think your dick and I have come to a mutual understanding. That means you won't go through the rest of your life without blowjobs."

Hayes understands how I mean to keep him. Even after the proposal, he worried I'll change my mind. Trusting people never came easily to either of us. I doubt it ever will, but we're not people. We're Angus and Candy, and I've trusted him from the beginning. I couldn't always deal with his bullshit, but I always knew where the bullshit was coming from.

Hayes isn't a mystery to me. I hope I'm not one to him. If I am, he'll have a lifetime to figure me out.

FORTY ONE - HAYES

White Horse doesn't change while I'm on vacation. As Moot puts it when I return, "the world didn't end without Asshole Hayes telling it what to do." I'm relieved to know I can relax without the place going to shit. With a woman and kids in my life, I suspect I'll relax a lot more often.

On the flight from Orlando to Nashville, Chipper sits next to me again. He explains how Candy said we'll live half of the time at my house and the other half at the rental place. At first, I'm unimpressed with this plan. I believe in tearing off the Band-Aid fast rather than prolonging the pain.

Candy calmly reminds me how Nightmare won't be thrilled with sharing the house with two loud kids and a skittish cat. Splitting our time will allow the dog to adjust. I realize what she's saying, and she has a good point. If the dog has trouble with change, so will the kids, and they're slightly more important than my beloved pooch.

Also on the flight back, Chipper gives me a long explanation about how public school sucks and he needs more individual attention to "unlock his potential." Candy wasn't wrong about her kids being sneaky. They've clearly done their research on how to sell homeschooling. I don't disagree with them, though. They're weird kids, and public school will try to make them normal. I know since I was weird too. Despite the best efforts of my teachers, I remained weird yet turned out better than anyone else I knew growing up.

Candy says she'll think about starting homeschooling after the Christmas break. I know she worries about teaching them wrong. We both worry about how she'll handle the office and schooling the kids.

Plus we'll barely have any time alone, and Candy is excited about practicing her new blowjob skills.

Donna at the Waffle House gives us a solution. Her sister was a homeschooler. Now Leslie's kids are at college, and she's looking for a job. Candy likes Leslie a hell of a lot more than she does Donna, and we find our nanny/teacher for the kids.

"We learn with the lady during the mornings," Chipper explains to his grandparents on Skype. "We stay with Mom and Hayes in the afternoon."

"At work, we're learning life skills," Cricket adds, really playing up the entire thing.

The grandparents nod in unison. Watching their weird rich bullshit, I tell Candy I don't like them. She only laughs and says life never promised me a rose garden, so I need to stop my whining. The grandparents love the twins and we'll need to deal with them for a very long time. Much like we will with Balthazar.

When my father returns to White Horse and Gladys the Cat, I expect him to fall back into his old routine. He surprises me by wanting to meet for weekly golf at the nearby course. I'm wary at first, having gone a long time without a close relationship with him. In fact, I'm more comfortable being uncomfortable during my visits. Now he wants to be friends, and I feel a little lost.

Balthazar acts less like my disgruntled father and more like a guy shooting the shit. We play a few holes, stop for lunch, and finish up before he's ready for his nap. He talks a lot about Mom and him when they first married. I like hearing the stories. My mother only died ten years ago, but I feel like I've lived most of my life without

her. Now she's alive again with his stories. Balthazar even mentions their infidelities and how marriage was difficult with him on the road.

"She was my love, and I never loved another. Maybe we weren't the perfect couple, but I was never unhappy enough to consider leaving. She might have gotten lonely, but she only loved me."

Balthazar never admits I'm not his biological son, but whenever he makes a point to say Gladys was his only love, I feel like he's telling me I wasn't a mistake created out of a bad marriage. I also wasn't why they stayed together, and he never regretted having me around. Spelling it out in more detail wouldn't be our style.

Upon our return, I find my office perfectly renovated. Moot shrugs when I look surprised.

"You don't believe in no one but yourself, Angus."

"True. Nicely done."

Candy walks around and shakes her head. "You took too much space. Now my office space is cramped."

We frown at her, but she only smiles. "Just kidding. I'm going to organize your office now."

I look at Moot and shrug. "She likes to organize."

"Good thing he met you," Moot says to Candy, and I instantly frown.

"Don't talk to her," I growl.

"Ever?"

I glare at him until Candy clears her throat. "What if I'm falling off a cliff and Moot is the only one who can save me? If he offers me his hand to pull me up, can I take it?"

"How high up is the cliff?"

“Pretty far,” she murmurs, sizing up Moot. “Can I take his hand and then hug him super tight when he saves me?”

“No.”

“So I should just plummet to my death?”

“Or don’t fall off the fucking cliff in the first fucking place.”

Candy smiles wider. “Okay, but then you can’t have women touching you. Oh, and don’t even fucking think of cheating. If I catch you cheating, I’ll cut the bitch’s face off and sew it onto your face. That way, if you want to see your bitch so much, you can just look in the mirror.”

Candy sounds genuinely pissed and threatening. Her warning makes my dick hard.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, and she walks into my office to begin organizing.

“You found the perfect woman for you, man,” Moot says. “Not just anyone would look you into your scary eyes and threaten to sew someone’s face on you. That takes a special brand of crazy.”

“Don’t call my future wife crazy. With our money, we’re considered eccentric.”

“I stand corrected,” Moot says, laughing as he heads out for another site.

With us alone for the time being, I lock the doors before cornering Candy in my office and bending her over the desk. She pretends to be annoyed even though two orgasms. The chick knows how to commit to a lie.

FORTY TWO - CANDY

This first time Dreamy visits Hayes's house, she ends up under the couch with Nightmare trying to smoke her out. The kids attempt to coax the dog to play outside, but he's too busy watching the cat. Whining frequently, he pushes the couch with his nose. Everywhere the couch scoots, the cat goes too.

"He wants to eat her," Hayes tells the kids.

"Not cool," Cricket mutters, crawling to the couch and talking to the pets.

They're unimpressed with her pep talk. We finally drag Nightmare away long enough to grab the cat and stick her in the carrier. These two don't appear capable of becoming friends.

By the time we officially move into Hayes's house just before Christmas, Dreamy uses Nightmare as a pillow. The kids get accustomed to Hayes's house too and soon use one spare room for their beds and the second one as a playroom. We finish unpacking stuff from the rental house one week before the wedding.

The weather gives us a break, allowing the sun to break through the clouds on our winter wedding day. I wear a simple white gown, short enough that I don't need heels. Chipper and Cricket walk me down a white tarp in our backyard to where a pastor and Hayes wait. We have white chairs set out for our few guests. Grandpa and Grandma Eddison sit in the front row with Balthazar and Lizzy Anne. Moot wears his fanciest jeans for his role as best man. Honey is decked out in a summer dress and a winter jacket as my maid of honor.

Hayes wears black slacks and shirt, looking like the devil to my angel white. In fact, we're somewhere in between on the evil to holy scale.

I'm not the only blushing belle on my wedding day. Reunited with her old beau, Honey goes goo-goo over Moot, who stares hypnotized by her. An hour after the ceremony, I wonder if either of them remembers she's married. Even with four loud kids running circles around them, Honey and Moot can only see each other.

Hayes watches the flirting couple and shakes his head disapprovingly. "Why can't people make sense the way we do?"

"We're special, boss."

Hayes gives me a knowing smile. After all, he's the feared Junkyard Dog, and I'm his not-so-sweet Candy Girl.

EPILOGUE - HAYES

Contrary to the rumors around town, marriage and kids don't turn me soft. More than once, I am forced to remind everyone I control White Horse. Moot acts as my muscle while I play family man. He also puts together a team of trusted men to help him do my dirty work. Moot might not be as scary as I am, but everyone knows he's backed by my money and power.

Candy gets pregnant six months after we marry. Every day, I tell her she looks beautiful even when she gets bigger with my one boy than she did with twins.

"I'm giving birth to Sasquatch," she complains while rubbing cocoa butter on her stretch marks. "He better be gorgeous."

Our baby is born in the afternoon on a stormy Saturday. I stare at him in absolute awe. I mean I know what babies look like, but this is my kid, so he's fucking special. Candy keeps playing with his thick, dark brown hair.

"I don't want to be mean," Cricket says, staring at her little brother, "but he's not cute."

"Did he fall out of you and land on his face?" Chipper asks.

"I will cry," Candy warns in a quiet, sing-songy voice to keep the newborn from waking. "I will cry a lot, and there will be snot, and I will use you two as giant napkins for all my boogers. Do you understand how much snot I can produce as a new mother? Gallons and gallons. Now let's try this again. What do you think of Casper?"

The kids look at each other and then their brother. "He's beautiful," Chipper and Cricket say in unison, playing up the creepy twin angle.

“Better.”

“Why Casper?” Balthazar asks the next day when he visits the hospital.

“I wanted to honor you,” Candy says, grimacing from her C-section as she tries to get comfortable in bed.

“Why me?”

“I figured you were trying to make a kickass statement by naming your son Anus but then chickened out and added the ‘g’ at the last minute.”

Balthazar frowns at me, but I can only roll my eyes. Candy’s reasoning for the name is bizarre, but she gave birth to my fourteen-pound son, so I’m not arguing with her.

“Get it? Anus and Ass-per?”

“You’re a strange woman,” Balthazar says and then smiles at Casper. “But you make beautiful babies.”

Candy grins until she moves again. “I forgot how much C-sections suck on the second day.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling rather useless standing there.

“For giving me everything a woman could want?” she asks, smiling brightly.

Just like that, I feel like a fucking king.

On our first anniversary, I give her something she’s too afraid to ask for. Candy opens the gift box and finds a newspaper clipping of a woman’s grisly death. She frowns for a long time, and I wonder if I was wrong about her wanting Peat’s murderer dead.

“And I only bought you a sex toy,” she finally says.

Candy always has a way with words. She never says anything else about the dead woman, but I notice less anger in her eyes

whenever she mentions her brother. After everything Candy's given me, I'm relieved my gift brought her an ounce of peace.

Until her, I never knew I was lonely. Until her, I never figured I'd have the patience to be a father. Until her, I hated change. Until her, I never truly knew how it felt to be a man.

EPILOGUE - CANDY

Something magical happens at our wedding. Honey's independence, with an assist from her libido, awakens. I knew she dated Moot years ago, but Hayes made their relationship sound one-sided. Apparently, my sister still holds a flame for the bad boy.

While I enjoyed my honeymoon at Disney World, Honey kicked Douche to the curb. By the time I'm pregnant with Casper, Andrew is past tense and Moot is her current beau. Both free after too long locked up, Honey and Moot go wild for a few months. I constantly tell Hayes how I don't approve of their partying ways. I never say anything to Honey though. I love seeing her smile.

Eventually, Honey and Moot settle down and become a family. By then, I'm knee-deep in giant baby madness. Casper, or Cap as I get to calling him, loves his mama. For the first year of his life, I can't leave the room without him losing his shit. The twins view Cap as their enemy. He isn't fond of them either. He only wants me. *All the time.*

"I can't believe I'm jealous of a baby," Hayes says one night while we sleep with Cap between us.

"He's a baby. He's barely crawling. The world is a big place, and he needs security."

Hayes grins slightly in the dark room. "I'd want to climb all over you if I could."

"Right back at you, big guy."

Cap is a perfect form of birth control until he turns one and learns to walk. Suddenly, he's Mister Independent. He chases his siblings. He chases Nightmare and Dreamy. Best of all, he chases after his

daddy. Cap runs himself into exhaustion and begins crashing early each night.

“We’re free!” I cry the first night Cap sleeps without hours of cuddling.

Hayes yanks off his shirt and shivers. “What’s fucking like? I have vague memories of liking it.”

I nearly injure myself in the rush to the bed. Hayes isn’t much more coordinated. Too long without sex has left us rusty. I don’t know what to do with my hands. He nearly dislocates my hip, trying to find his way inside me. We’ve become clumsy virgins. By the next night, we’re aces again. *Practice makes perfect after all.*

Cap has my big mouth and Hayes’s trust issues. He never wants to play with anyone outside his family. He’s wary of his cousins and watches them the same way Hayes watches twitchy people in his territory.

“Anti-social runs in the family,” Hayes says, gesturing toward Cricket and Chipper who always keep their distance from outsiders.

The twins warm up to Cap when he begins smiling at them. That’s all it takes. They crave applause, and he finds them hilarious. Once he’s mobile, the twins become triplets. Everywhere they go, he wants to go too. Cricket teaches him to throw a fit on command. Chipper teaches him to do the pouty face that turns Hayes to mush.

My man has no resistance to the children’s trickery. All he can do is force me to play the bad guy. I throw the blame on the po-po when I can, but most days I’m cool with being the scary parent. There’s no denying Hayes makes a very sexy softie.

Disney World becomes a bi-yearly event for the family. As the kids get older, the trips become more relaxed. Balthazar and Lizzy

Anne join us on each trip. Occasionally, Honey, Moot, and their brood come along too. My favorite moments are when Hayes, the kids, and I watch fireworks. No matter how big the kids get, they ooh and ahh like when they were little. Hayes also never fails to laugh at how no matter how old I get I always ooh and ahh too.

While Casper might be the official heir to the Hayes organization, he's as laidback as his brother. By the time she's a teenager, Cricket causes fear in White Horse. Her favorite hobby is showing up unannounced at work sites to scare the lazier employees.

None of the kids show any interest in going to college. They take a few business and accounting classes at the community college. Otherwise, they learn everything they need to know from Hayes. He expands his main office to give each kid their own space. Doling out more and more work to them, he's officially retired by the time Cap turns eighteen. Even as his kids become the public face of the Hayes organization, my sexy man will always be the Junkyard Dog calling the shots behind the curtain.

ABOUT BIJOU

Living in Indiana with my three sweet sons, three wacky cats, one super mom (and her ugly dog), I love writing, cats, Denny's, 1970's rock, Beanie Boos, and sitcoms cancelled before their time.

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