

"Violet Duke writes heroes that make me swoon!"
— Kendall Ryan, NYT Bestselling Author

the
unfinished love
series

BEFORE

Caine & Addison • Book One •

that NIGHT

New York Times Bestselling Author

VIOLET DUKE

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BEFORE THAT NIGHT

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Caine & Addison's Story (Book 1 of 2)

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The UNFINISHED LOVE Series

Four brothers
Each fighting for their second first chance at love
Years be damned
A heartfelt new series from NYT bestselling author

VIOLET DUKE

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"From the giant men getting schooled to the happily ever after, I was enthralled! Violet Duke has a touchdown with Jackson's Trust!"

-- New York Times Bestselling Author MELODY ANNE

DEDICATION

For my fabulous Camp Violet Duke FB super fans.

I heart you all.

BEFORE THAT NIGHT

(Unfinished Love: Caine & Addison Story, Book 1 of 2)

Before *that night*, Addison Millan had been just a college dropout secretly raising her two young siblings in a beat-up minivan she'd bought with her first semester's tuition refund—the only money her addict mother hadn't taken off with when she'd abandoned them nearly two years ago.

Before *that night*, Caine Spencer had been just a rough, gruff cop sent to check out the phoned-in claims of suspected child neglect involving the same woman he'd met the month prior when she'd first served him the city's worst diner coffee...which he'd been drinking daily ever since.

Before *that night*, Addison would never have thought the man she'd been fighting hard not to fall for—her only friend in her new shadow of a life—would be in a position to rip her family apart.

Before *that night*, Caine would never have believed any woman could make him fall head over heels, let alone make him feel so damn compelled to look the other way when it came to his job.

Then that one perfect night changed everything.

BEFORE THAT NIGHT (Bk 1 of 2) chronicles the events that take place seven years prior to **EVERY NIGHT WITHOUT YOU (Bk 2 of 2)**, Caine & Addison's story of love, sacrifice, and the lengths one will run—and chase—when their past threatens their future.

Note: The Unfinished Love series follows four brothers, each fighting for their second first chance at love. Each of the couples have two books (duets) that take place years apart. This is Caine & Addison's Book 1; Book 2 reunites them seven years later, and concludes their story.

The UNFINISHED LOVE Series

Four Spencer brothers.

Each fighting for their second first chance at love.

Years be damned.

A heartfelt new series from

NYT bestselling author Violet Duke.

(Caine & Addison) – Summer 2016

-- Book 1: Before That Night

-- Book 2: Every Night Without You

(Gabe & Hannah) – Fall 2016

-- Book 3: Before That Kiss

-- Book 4: Every Kiss Goodbye

(Drew & Skylar) – Winter 2016

-- Book 5: Before That Promise

-- Book 6: Every Promise Unspoken

(Max & Kennedy) – Spring 2017

-- Book 7: Before That Chance

-- Book 8: Every Chance We Lost

CHAPTER ONE

Twenty-One Months Prior

WHY HELLO, MR. LUCIFER. Or do you prefer Satan, with no mister? Sort of like those one-name music legends? Sorry, I'm rambling. I was going to lead with a joke, but I figure you've already heard the 'you-devil-you' thing a whole bunch already, right? Anyway, my name is Addison Milan. Age eighteen. Capricorn. Probably too much of a goodie-two-shoes to have interested your scouts for recruitment, in case you were wondering why I don't look familiar. I just figured I should already introduce myself since I'm likely going to be seeing you one day on account of my getting ready to lie my ass off.

Okay, here we go....

Mentally, Addison crossed her fingers behind her back and dropped the first lie that was undoubtedly reserving her bus ride seat to Hades. "It's not on my resume since it was a family thing and I didn't get paid, but I have waitressing experience—I worked with my dad in his good friend's diner up north every summer all through high school in exchange for our family getting to spend the whole break up in their cabin by the lakes."

The stoic, moderately grumpy potential employer she was interviewing with just grunted in response and flipped her resume upright as a signal for her to stop talking while he looked over her work experience. Or in her case, the serious lack thereof.

Meanwhile, Addison was slowly and surely spiraling down a brain-vomit rabbit hole in her crisis of conscience over the whopper of a three-for-the-price-of-one lie she'd just blurted out.

Wonder if that upgrades me to one of the premium seats on the bus, right next to the broken toilets, situated so the meal carts for sure bang you in the elbows?

To be fair, only the 'waitressing' part was a true lie. The other two were more like...white lies. Or fibs. The kind told to protect the innocent. Or more accurately, the kind kids tell each other to make up for a truth that just plain sucked. Like how their dad is 'really' a spy on a top secret mission instead of someone they've never met, or how their family had gone on a trip up north in the summer instead of spending it watching TV all day in the basement of their mom's latest sleazy boyfriend's crack house that he shared with five other burnouts, who thought a *curtain* was a suitable barrier to separate the children from the adults doing drugs and other things the TV couldn't muffle every other night.

In Addison's case, she'd never been one to fantasize that her father was an astronaut orbiting space for the last eighteen years or anything like that because frankly, she had no clue who her father was, and as far as she knew, her mother didn't either. And truth be told, she probably would've enjoyed working part-time at a diner growing up, like some of her friends had done.

But the main reason why she'd never been able to commit to more than a few seasonal jobs here and there was that taking care of her two siblings had always been her full time job, even back in grade school—aka the blur-like cluster of years her mom had first begun mixing recreational drugs in with her drinking. Addison had learned real quick that if she didn't make a point to feed herself and

her then one-year old brother Tanner, no one else would remember to.

So it was no surprise that by the time Addison started middle school several years later, and her new little sister Kylie was born, she'd been a pro at the whole raising kids thing.

They always say by the second child, it gets easier.

"Why do you want to work in my diner?"

Though his tone indicated he already had his mind set about her regardless of what her answer was, she cut to the chase and told him honestly, "Because it's the job I need."

Not 'want.' *Need*. No sense bullshitting the man in that regard.

He raised a surprised eyebrow, his first non-grouchy response to her today.

"No offense, but you look way too young and way too sweet to 'need' to work in a place like this," he responded after a beat, blunt as an arrow.

Puzzled, she gave a pointed nod out the window at the pristine street the diner sat on. "This is *Creek Hills*. Next to Scottsdale, there aren't much nicer areas around here for miles."

That assertion seemed to reawaken his lovely prickly disposition. "I meant my business, not the neighborhood." He rolled his eyes when she continued to stare at him like she was missing something. "Joe's Diner isn't a teen hangout sorta place. Not sure if it's because of all the cops that eat here but kids don't really like stopping by. So you probably won't ever see any of your little friends here."

God, when was the last time she'd actually 'hung out' with a friend?

Grade school, probably.

Addison shrugged. "Don't have time for friends. Never really got along with the ones my age anyway."

Again with the surprised brow lift. Then: "You pregnant?"

"What? *No*."

He frowned, looking genuinely mystified. "So then why do you need this job so bad?"

She kept it short and to the point. "I've got bills to pay."

Now he was back to looking annoyed with her. For some reason, she liked that though. He was real. And that realness made her not want to lie to him.

"Sorry to break it to you little girl, but I'm not hiring any more part-timers. Plus, it's the closing shift I'm needing to fill. I can't be here in the evenings since I help my brother out at his restaurant in Tempe most nights so I need folks I can count on to close-up shop for me here."

"No problem. Closing shift works perfect for me, and full-time is exactly what I'm looking for."

His eyes narrowed as he studied her for a bit. Then he said simply, "Look, you need to tell me something more. Something to make me understand you. Or I can't hire you. Because to be perfectly honest, I don't trust you not to up and leave when you figure out that being a waitress is damn hard work, or when your feelings get hurt when I yell at you for screwing shit up, or when you get tempted to go enroll in the local community college because daddy says he'll give you back your allowance and car since you've 'learned your lesson' about the real world."

This time, she was the one eyeing him in annoyance. "I'm not some rich kid being punished by her daddy. And for your information, I already got into college, thank you very much. I was all set to start NAU this August, on a *full ride*."

Though his expression softened, he remained silent, waiting for more.

What the heck more did he want her to say?

That the only reason the kids were able to go to school in the Creek Hills school district was because they'd been living with her mom's current boyfriend, who, while a prince in comparison to all the crackheads and abusive sonsofbitches she'd dated before him, the guy was a flat-out conman

with the moral acuity of a mollusk?

Or was Joe wanting to hear that because Sonny's roommate was no longer covering the lion's share of the rent and utilities, Sonny was behind on a month and a half of rent—not including the upcoming rent check due—and lapsed totally on all utilities?

Oh, no wait, she probably shouldn't bury the lead, and should instead begin by explaining how in two days, seeing as how he and her mother were nowhere to be found, Addison and her siblings would be evicted from their now powerless and waterless apartment unless all four thousand seven hundred fifty bucks Sonny owed magically appeared on the landlord's desk.

...That is, if the landlord didn't call the authorities first to have the kids whisked away from her.

Doing her damndest not to let that last threat gut her like it always did, Addison held Joe's gaze and decided to lay her cards out, and go with one big truth. "I'm going to level with you; my mom was a single mom, and she just up and deserted my younger brother and sister to go run off with the guy she's seeing now. They're just kids. They're relying on me. So when I say I need this job, I really *need* this job. I'm not going to flake out on you because I literally *can't*."

His brief pause of silence carried as much empathy as it did hesitation. "How old are your siblings?"

"Twelve and six."

He frowned. "Hang on, exactly how old are *you*?"

"I'll be nineteen in a few months." *Five months could count as 'a few' right?*

He did a surprised double take. "And *you're* financially responsible for them? But you're just a kid yourself. How is that even possible? Where are you guys even living?"

Dammit, she had to go back to lying. But she tried to word it just so. "Our Aunt Bernadette lives not that far from here."

That made the alarmed I'm-calling-social-services look on his face dissipate.

"It works out great because the kids don't have to change school districts this way," continued Addison on a panicked ramble. "Only, Aunt Bernadette is way older than my mom, and living on a fixed income—social security and retirement can only go so far. So I need to do my part to help cover the finances for the kids."

All partially true. The elderly woman she'd been hired to watch from eight to twelve on Monday through Friday *was* on social security and retirement. And she *did* tell Addison and her siblings to call her Aunt Bernadette.

"Which brings me to my proposal for you, Joe." Addison took a breath and steamrolled right along, hoping beyond hope that he saw the merit in the plan she'd been thinking up for days. "You're looking for two new full-timers, both for the closing shift, right?"

"Yeah. No one likes that shift so I need to split 'em up across a few waitresses. Why?" Now he sounded curious where she was going with this.

"Well, what if you just hire me to work a modified swing shift all seven days of the week? It'll save you money. That way, you won't need to pick up two full-timers at forty hours a pop; I'd be here right at the start of your dinner rush and stay until closing. Every day. Five and a half hours a day Monday through Thursday when you close at midnight, six and a half hours a day on Friday and Saturday when you stay open to one a.m., and five hours flat on Sunday when you close at eleven. Think about how much you'd save by just hiring one person to cover all seven nights.

He looked intrigued...for about a second before he shook his head. "I always have two waitresses and one cook on the last shift, but one of the waitresses needs to stay after closing to close

out the registers and all the other nightly duties. *That's the position I'm trying to fill.*"

"Even better. I can be your closer every night. You'll have total consistency that way. So we'll just shift the times forward a bit. About a half hour, right?"

"Yeah, good guess. Did you help close for your dad's friend's diner, too?"

It was a test, she could tell. "Ye— Okay, no," she admitted. "I drove by here last night and saw the lights shut off at about twelve-thirty."

He was *almost* smiling now. *What's that saying about the magic of honesty again?* "My morning crew comes in an hour early so you wouldn't have to do too much."

"I'll pick it all up fast, I swear. I'm smart. And responsible."

"I still don't know." He looked good and torn. "That'd be a crazy schedule for you to keep."

"It sounds perfect to me." It really did.

"Are you kidding? I don't know *any* waitress who'd want to work those hours. Especially not for seven days straight."

Probably because those other waitresses you know have somewhere to go home to after they're done with work.

"Well you do now. I need to pick up my sister from school every afternoon, and since Aunt Bernadette isn't all that active anymore, it'll be great if I could be there to take the kids to the park, or even just be there to help them with their homework and stuff since her eyes aren't that great either." *Reel it in, reel it in, he's starting to look like Aunt Bernadette isn't that great of a guardian either.* "So yes, it's the perfect shift for me. I promise, I won't let you down, Joe. I literally *can't* afford to let you down."

He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, frown firmly settled on his face.

Oh no.

"I'll see you tomorrow for your first night."

The wave of relief that slammed into her almost knocked her to the ground.

As she attempted to get all her runaway emotions under control, Joe gave her a quick rundown as he walked her out of his office. "Shirley, who you met when you first came in, will be with you on most nights. She rotates with Stacy, who's going back to her part time hours around her class schedule once the semester starts back up next month, and Maggie—he pointed at a very pregnant waitress shouting into the order window like a drill sergeant—who will be here for another few weeks until she pops and takes the next year off to focus on being a mom. So I'll have three of you working for the first two weeks or so until you get the hang of things, then wean Maggie back and adjust Shirley's and Stacy's schedules."

He handed her a couple of Joe's Diner's shirts and a few short black waitress aprons. "That's your uniform. I don't have a clock or nothing for you to punch into. If you need to come in late, make sure you tell whoever is working, and then let me know after so we can adjust your hours."

Lastly, he tapped on the security system. "I'll give you the codes and keys and things tomorrow, but again, the girls will be with you to show you the ropes on how to close up. It's easy. And don't worry, the after-hours janitorial crew usually comes in and starts working while you're tallying receipts and things, or at the latest, before you leave, depending on their schedule. So you won't be here all alone after closing. They've got a set of keys, but I scheduled them to overlap with whatever waitress I have closing. So we'll stick with that. Just gives me piece of mind to have people here with you after hours."

Even though she'd kept on a brave face the entire time, that little tidbit did make her feel loads better about being there after midnight on her own.

While she knew it was way too early for her to be asking for any favors, she had to do it. The favor was the big reason why this particular job was so important for her to have.

“Joe, do you think it’d be at all possible for me to park my dad’s van here overnight? In that small lot you have out back? Aunt Bernadette’s place is so close, it’d be easier for me to just lock the van up here and walk home.”

“In the middle of the night?”

“Aunt Bernadette lives only a block away, right on the other side of the police station. I bet you have workers who walk farther to get to the bus stop.”

“True,” he conceded reluctantly. Then his brows furrowed in confusion. “Hang on, there’s nothing on the other side of the station for like a mile.”

“Her condo is in Lakeview Ridge Golf & Country Club. And the top entrance to the country club is literally right next to the police station.”

“Holy shit. That’s where you’re living? Wait a minute, if you have family who can afford a place there, why the hell would you need a job here?”

“Like I said before, Aunt Bernadette is on a fixed income. I know she bought the apartment when the country club was first being built so she’s not paying mortgage on it anymore, but she isn’t rich or anything. As far as I can tell, her social security and retirement only barely cover how much she herself needs to have a modest living.”

Joe’s eyes flickered over to at an old framed photo of an elderly woman up on the wall by the register before he sighed, “Yeah, I remember my mom going through that. For months, she didn’t tell us about a medical procedure she needed because she just plain couldn’t afford it.”

“Aunt Bernadette has a few health concerns as well.” That was actually why Addison was hired in the first place; to watch Bernadette during the hours her two daughters couldn’t. “Bottom line,” she continued, “unlike my brother and sister, I’m old enough to help with the family expenses. I believe in taking care of my responsibilities. School can wait. I’m not too proud to take charity if we ever need it, but I sure as heck am proud enough to step up until that day comes, seeing as how I have two perfectly good feet to stand on.”

While her lie about having worked in a diner before hadn’t impressed him, that little speech, by all evidence, did.

“See now you’ve gone and made me like you enough that I’m really not keen on you walking that late at night,” he grumbled. “You sure they won’t let you just park on the property?”

“Aunt Bernadette already has a car in her assigned stall. And when I tried to rent another stall there, they wouldn’t let me on account of my dad’s van being too big and too old. They claim older vehicles leak oil and they actually penalize the folks in the apartments for even the smallest oil leaks on their grounds.” Addison *had* actually tried, and had been shocked to hear about the oil leak rule—in the dozen or so apartments her family had lived in over the years, she couldn’t remember a parking lot that wasn’t filled with big ole oil spots everywhere. “Personally,” she shrugged, “I’m pretty sure they just think the van is too ugly to be there.”

“Wouldn’t put it past them in *this* judgmental neighborhood,” he shook his head, clearly not a fan.

Honestly, Addison wasn’t a huge fan of some of the snobbish folks in the area, but where Bernadette was concerned, it was actually a good thing since her kids paid for her to have these fancy delivered meals every day, there was zero chance of Bernadette ever going to the diner, meaning Addison’s worlds wouldn’t ever collide.

“What kind of van is it?” asked Joe, curiously.

“A rusty, blue Chevy Conversion Sportvan with, I admit, some really ugly stripes on the sides that don’t belong in this millennium.”

He cringed. “Yikes, I think my grandpa had a van just like that. The thing was as big as a boat.”

“Yup. And since I can’t park it in the country club, finding street parking big enough for the van nearby every night is pretty tough. I’d actually end up parking even farther away than your diner, if you think about it.” He was just on the brink of giving in, she could tell. “Bernadette lives on the top side of the course, real close to the north gate. And there’s twenty-four hour security; I actually have to go past a security shack to walk onto the property. It’s safe, I swear.”

Joe was still frowning with worry—revealing a tiny bit of his soft nougat center under that grouchy hard shell coating—but finally, he conceded, “I *guess* it would be safer and easier for you to just walk past the police station, right up to the gate.” He gave Addison a hard look. “Okay, you can park your van here. But if I hear of even one incident of you coming across any hoodlums or creeps on your way home, we’ll have to figure something else out, alright? And don’t think the boys at the station won’t tell me. Neglecting to tell me important things like that is grounds for getting served up some lunch time surprises in my book.”

Her lips twitched to the side at his ferocious, very specific threat. She had a feeling it wasn’t an empty one.

He confirmed her suspicions a second later. “After they saw my ninth grade daughter necking with some punk outside of the bowling alley last year and didn’t one, arrest the punk on the spot, and two, have dispatch call to tell me about it right away, I gave ‘em all pickled liver and tripe in their milkshakes and burgers smothered with bone-in sardines and the smelliest blue cheese and brie I could find.”

She couldn’t help it, she burst out laughing.

And that’s when Joe held out his hand for her to shake. “You keep on smiling like that while you’re working here, and we’ve got a deal on the parking situation.”

She couldn’t remember the last person who cared about her smiling.

After shaking hands with Joe, and mentally waving at the gatekeeper of hell again when Joe gave her his first genuine grin, Addison left the diner and almost sprinted down the street to where her van was parked. As soon as she hopped in, she put her head against the steering wheel.

And just cried.

* * * * *

A SHORT WHILE LATER, with blurry eyes, and as much relief as there was fear running through her veins, Addison finally remembered to pull out the small piece of paper she’d had with her every minute of every day for the last two weeks. Since she’d first woken up to find the electronics and valuables in the apartment gone, her mom’s closet and drawers empty, their family bank account cleaned out, the hard-earned cash Addison had hidden in her underwear drawer taken, and the car Addison had been covering the insurance on for the past few years missing from its stall.

To her mom’s credit, at least she’d left a note this time. In the past, when she’d disappear for a while with whatever guy she was sleeping with, and whatever high she was chasing, she’d just disappear and then resurface weeks later.

The note had been Addison’s first clue that this time would be different than all the others.

The vodka-soaked note that morning had been scrawled out in the shaky, drug-induced handwriting Addison had watched get less and less legible over the years.

*Sonny and I are getting married.
Be back after the honeymoon.
-- Mom*

Addison didn't even take a minute to wonder. Or hope. And she sure as hell didn't waste any time believing the lie on that piece of paper.

So what she did was flip the note around and start a list.

It'd come down to the wire but as of today, she was now officially able to cross the last three things off her long laundry list. The list that had begun with:

- ~~*Get a tuition refund for the Fall term.*~~
- ~~*Mail out an apology letter to the scholarship fund director with a payment plan to return the semester's tuition amount, and a check for the first installment.*~~

The rest of the list had been no less hard to do. But she'd done it all, one by one. But the last three items on the list were the ones that made the reality of how her life was about to change really hit home.

- ~~*If the mechanic signs off, pay the balance for the Craigslist van.*~~
- ~~*Get the job at Joe's Diner.*~~
- ~~*Get him to agree to let you park in his locked lot. Beg if you have to.*~~

Drawing the line through that last item on the list had been the biggest load off her shoulders. And had started the tears of relief streaming down her face all over again.

She'd spent a week walking all over Creek Hills, searching every nook and cranny for the safest possible place where she could park the van.

The kids' new home.

Addison had actually seen the 'Help Wanted' sign in the window of Joe's Diner before she'd discovered the delivery vans getting waved into his locked parking area tucked in the back of his L-shaped lot, completely hidden from the main stretch, with walls tall enough that the neighboring business couldn't see a thing.

She knew the kids would be safe there during her shift, and that they'd all be able to sleep through the night now in the van without worry.

This is going to work.

It has to work.

Wiping her eyes, she drove over to the nearby public library where she'd left the kids a few hours ago.

Just as she knew they would be, Tanner and Kylie were waiting for her in the front, quietly reading the two books they'd each picked out.

God, they were such great kids. Perfect angels. Just like she'd always tried to be growing up. Probably for the same reason she'd had.

To get their mom to love them.

Despite everything her mom had done that was unmotherly at best, criminal at worst, making Tanner and Kylie feel unloved all these years was the one thing Addison had never, would never forgive her for.

Things were going to be different now.

"Hey kids."

Kylie lit up like the adorable ball of sunshine in pigtails she was.

Meanwhile, Tanner just studied her expression silently, looking far more worried than a boy his age should be.

He didn't ask, but she answered his silent questions anyway.

"I got the job, kids. And, my new boss agreed to let me park the van in his secured lot out back."

Even little Kylie, who Addison knew wasn't grasping the entire situation fully, looked immensely relieved over that.

"We're going to be just fine."

Addison wasn't completely delusional; she knew living in a van wasn't ideal. The kids' safety and well-being was the most important thing in the world to her. But with the big age gap between Tanner and Kylie, she knew that if social services stepped in and put the kids in foster care, the likelihood of them being able to stay together was pretty low. She knew the foster system was at its core a good program—she even knew a couple of friends whose amazing parents were equally wonderful foster parents. And yes, she'd researched enough to know that there were happy stories as well as horror stories about kids in the foster system.

But that very research was what led her to stumble across the huge national study done on children trapped in the foster care system that was published in USA Today under the article title: *Troubled Homes Better than Foster Care*. The findings of the study, which had tracked 15,000 children over twelve years was overwhelmingly definitive. With exception to the children who'd been physically abused and severely neglected, the children in the foster care system were far more likely to have problems with delinquency, drugs, difficulty adjusting as adults, and a host of other hardships.

That was the day Addison had decided that no one was going to break her family apart. "From now on, it's just the three of us. I'll take care of you guys, I promise. No matter what. You hear?"

Both Kylie and Tanner nodded gravely.

"Okay then. Tomorrow's the last day of the month. So let's go do one more check to make sure everything important we're keeping is out of the apartment." She wanted to be sure to be long gone before tomorrow. "Then you guys get to test out the new air mattress in the back tonight. We're going to go to a secured overnight parking lot in Scottsdale tonight because we can't park at Joe's until tomorrow so we'll stop by the rec center first so you can pee and brush your teeth before bed."

She looked in the rearview mirror at Kylie. "That means no milk before bed tonight, okay sweetie? Just to be on the safe side." They'd rehearsed what their nightly routine would be like from now on, and Addison just smiled like this was all perfectly normal.

This is going to work.

It has to work.

"Don't worry, this'll be fun. Like camping." Seeing their pensive, but wholly trusting faces, she added firmly, "It'll be temporary. Just until I can save up enough to make sure we won't ever have to go through this again."

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day

CHRIST, SHE JUST KEPT GETTING sweeter every day.

Caine Spencer sat in his usual spot at the counter of the diner he'd been eating at almost nightly for the past several weeks, and watched the tired, but determined waitress behind the counter draw a big egg-shaped oval on a piece of printer paper before proceeding to zig zag and polka dot patterns all over it with a mix of pastel and neon crayons—and tiny-ass glitter stickers galore—to make yet another colorfully-designed Easter egg to decorate the walls with.

The fact that the woman was taking the entire task so darn seriously because her little sister Kylie had insisted the other night that they simply *needed* to decorate the diner for Easter, just made her all the more sweeter in Caine's eyes.

Sweetness like that was his biggest weakness when it came to women. Bar none. And *this* woman, who was now rocking the tiny glittery Easter egg sticker extravaganza by using one to dot the 'i' in 'Addison' on her nametag, was quickly starting to become his kryptonite.

Though he hadn't known Addison Milan long, the one thing he knew for sure was that she loved and cared for her two younger siblings with all the ferocity of a mama lion who would do just about anything for her cubs.

Hence the festive egg décor that looked totally out of place on the iconic black, red, and white checkerboard interior of the diner, with its classic steel and glass block trim.

Rumor had it that Joe, the owner of Joe's Diner, purposely decorated his place with all the quintessential old diner touches to ruffle feathers with the nearby upscale residential area community board, who'd apparently looked down on him and his diner when he first bought the quaint coffee shop that once sat there years ago. Like its owner, the resulting diner thus had a lot of hard, borderline ornery edges, to accompany the bold, blunt, and refreshingly basic menu.

It was like a second home for Caine. And most of Creek Hills' finest, for that matter. There weren't many guys on the force who didn't frequent the diner at least once a day like he did. Though granted, Caine had an additional reason for having nearly all his dinners there.

And presently, that reason was stepping out from the counter and heading his way.

Seeing Addison's warm, but visibly wiped out smile, he immediately scolded, "You're working too hard again, sweets."

"Right back at you," she tossed back, without missing a beat. "Kylie said you've been at her school doing police presentations all week long."

Caine shrugged. "The principal asked. It fit in with the hours I had off. No big deal."

She gave him a stern look. "You work all night long and then volunteer for everything under the sun during the days. Seriously, do you ever sleep?"

Not if I can help it.

Even after eight years on the force, Caine still sucked at not letting his job affect his sleep. As a result, his non-working hours usually consisted of him beating out some of his demons with whoever

was up for some time in the ring until he eventually exhausted himself enough to drag his ass home and pass out.

Lately though, he'd also been volunteering for as many school and community events as possible. Not just to keep from staring at the ceiling above his bed for hours on end, but also to try and let some goodness and light back in his life.

It was a long time coming.

The last case before he'd put in for his transfer over to the Creek Hills precinct had eaten away at his soul like acid for months, until nearly robbing him of his faith in not just his badge, but humanity as a whole when they finally caught the dirty cop whose actions inevitably resulted in the loss of a lot of innocent lives just weeks before Christmas.

The officer in question had been a friend. It didn't matter his reasons, or that he'd never meant for to get in as deep as he had. A dirty cop was a dirty cop.

In the same way that a friend was a friend.

Meaning it was just that simple.

Even when it wasn't.

Going to Rick's half-empty plain-clothes funeral...consoling Rick's wife and kids as they tried to make sense of everything from the things Internal Affairs had discovered to his decision to blow his own brains out right in front half the force...wondering nonstop ever since if there was something they could've done to help Rick before it'd gotten that far. All of it had taken a toll on Caine over the past months.

Apparently, 'grouchy sonofabitch' was one of the *nicer* descriptions of him lately.

Funny thing was that unlike most folks who'd given him a wide berth when he'd first moved to Creek Hills, Addison had seemed to *like* his grouchiness. Then again, she was also the only person he'd met so far that seemed to think her own boss Joe—who was grumpy enough to make Caine look like the happy dwarf in comparison—was some sort of loveable, jolly saint.

Granted, around Addison, they both did seem to become better versions of themselves on their best behavior, but still. She just saw them through a different lens than the rest of the world. Sort of like the kids that swarmed around him with the cuteness overload at school presentations. The woman was all goodness and light.

Not to mention, really freaking pretty to boot—in a quiet, unassuming way.

She had the kind of beauty that didn't hit you all at once. The kind that kept surprising you. The kind that one day sucker punched the air out of you when you realized she was even more gorgeous than you recall her being the day before.

He remembered that sucker punch well.

It was the day he'd actually looked forward to sleeping for a change, on the off chance that maybe, just maybe she'd help inspire a few dreams instead of the nightmares that normally haunted him when he closed his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

WITH A SATISFIED BELLY PAT, Caine finished up his dinner a short while later and finally answered the question Addison had asked before the last three groups of customers had walked in, “Luckily, I don’t need a lot of sleep.”

Since he knew her job came first, Caine had gotten used to these extended pauses in their chats. It actually worked out well because the downtimes in their conversations often gave him the chance to remember to check in on social media. While he wasn’t a big fan, his brothers and even his parents seemed to think it perfectly normal to broadcast all their business on the internet. Lately, it seemed that was the only way he got updates on their lives now that he lived a good few hours away.

To be fair, his family had of course been trying to bridge the distance between their lives the past few months—both geographical and metaphorical—but he wasn’t ready yet. Sure, he’d always been fairly rough around the edges, but he knew they’d worry like hell when they discovered just how much more jagged his gruff edges had become since Rick’s case had hit the fan.

So for now, the internet would have to be the tether he used to stay connected to his family, his old friends...and every human he used to know pre-Creek Hills, really.

As Addison tended to the nearby customers who had snagged her attention just as he’d been answering her question, he scrolled through two new baby birth announcements and one new engagement, in between ignoring five talking animal videos that had thousands of likes for some bizarre reason. He was in the middle of discovering that his brothers were planning a trip to Vegas soon when he saw Addison hustle over to the order window and then start her trek over to his end of the counter again.

Which meant he had another few minutes to text his brothers to make sure they sent him their travel details. He may be limiting how much he saw them, but that didn’t mean he was any less overbearing about worrying over them.

Just like he predicted, Addison took on a bunch of hobbit tasks during those few minutes, involving checking in on every table, even the ones that weren’t hers, and making about a half dozen customers smile and laugh before completing the journey. “So you only do things you ‘need’ to do?” she replied playfully as she put down her order tray and reached over the counter for the egg art she’d been working on earlier.

Saucy minx. She was throwing his words back at him and referencing the recent discussion they’d had about massages in one fell swoop. Though it had been a perfectly innocent conversation for her seeing as how she’d never had a massage before, it had been far less so for him. He’d made the mistake of telling her about a few common pressure points to help relieve stress, and Addison, being as curious as a monkey with a yellow hat, had immediately started seeking out said pressure points and kneading them inquisitively with her own fingers.

As soon as her eyelids fell to half-mast, and a soft, groaning sigh slipped past her lips, he’d changed the subject asap.

...And stayed seated at the counter for at least five minutes longer than usual to let things, errr, ‘settle down,’ before he’d headed on over to the station for his shift.

“Fine,” he amended. “I just don’t *like* to sleep; I prefer to stay up as long as I can.”

“That’s what *she* said,” she quipped with a wickedly winged eyebrow, before jolting to a stop in her tracks, eyes blinking in surprise. Shaking her head, she lamented dramatically, “Oh no, I’m starting to sound like you.”

He grinned. “You’re welcome.”

Smothering back an amused smile, she hopped up onto the empty stool next to him to stick up another collage of colorful Easter eggs on the wall.

And swear to God, Caine felt his brain blitz out for a second or two.

The woman was a petite little thing. But she had curves for days. He’d never once seen her in anything other than a ‘Joe’s Diner’ t-shirt and some worn jeans. Regardless of how much she downplayed it though, a man would have be blind not to appreciate that naturally feminine hourglass figure of hers.

...Which was currently inches from his face.

Good lord.

“So back to Max,” she broke into his thoughts, clearly oblivious to her effect on him. “You mentioned before I got slammed with the dinner rush that you’re not totally on board with your brother’s plans to start his own business. You think he’s making a bad decision?” she asked quizzically as she wobbled a bit to try and reach a spot about a foot beyond her reach.

His hands shot out automatically to grab her waist and steady her.

It took all his energy and effort not to flex his fingers into her soft, pillowy hips.

What in the world were they talking about again?

“Thanks. I’m okay now.” She finished taping up the eggs and blushed from the apples of her cheeks to the tips of her ears when he picked her up off the stool and gently settled her down on the ground. “Um, yeah. Again, thanks for the assist.” Quick as a skittish kitten, she scurry-shuffled back behind the counter.

Meanwhile, Caine felt like his entire body was drifting in slow-motion—his brain especially, which was taking its sweet time un-fuzzing. Jesus, she’d felt good in his arms.

Dude, she’s asking you another question.

“...So you think he should keep on designing video games instead?”

Oh right, they were talking about his brother.

That was definitely a safer topic to focus on, though not nearly as interesting as trying to figure out if that faint scent of raspberries was coming from her soft, sun-kissed skin, or that silky, tumbling mass of mahogany waves she wore up in a long, no-nonsense ponytail every day.

Cheeks no longer flushed pink, Addison soon had her serene, almost zen-like grace wrapped all around her again as she finished gluing on some fluffs of plastic neon green grass on a coloring book image of an Easter basket she’d printed off the internet. Sounding as puzzled as she had when he’d first expressed his concerns over his brother’s new career aspirations, she gave him a questioning glance. “I figured you of all people would think it’s great that your brother wants to start his own security business. Isn’t that right up your alley?”

Finally, his brain was functioning enough again to answer. “I do think it’s great.” Rubbing the back of his neck, he tried to turn all his jumbled feelings on the matter into words. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m glad that Max has found something he’s passionate about. From what I hear, there’s a steady stream of some high-paying people who go to my folks’ antique arms shop just to hire Max to install all his fancy security systems in their homes. Frankly, he’d be crazy *not* to start his own business.”

“Buuut?” she prompted.

What was it about her that made him want to open up and bare his innermost thoughts, share his soul?

“The ‘but’ of the matter is that he’s wanting my brother Gabe and I to work with him.”

She shrugged. “Again, that sort of sounds like a great idea. You’re a cop; you can see the security aspect of things from a different angle than he can. And didn’t you say Gabe is graduating early from college?”

He couldn’t stop the proud grin over that reminder. His baby brother was graduating a full year early from his engineering program at Embry Riddle, with honors. Not that he was surprised. That boy had always been the smartest one in the family.

Well, with exception to their foster brother Drew, at least. The newest member of the Spencer family, the thirteen-year-old hacker extraordinaire their folks have been lovingly smothering like a baby bird for the past year—what with Caine, Max, and Gabe all living out of the house—could whoop *all* their asses in the intellectual department. Combined.

“Actually, Gabe’s age and unlimited potential are part of the reason why I have reservations,” he confessed. “Gabe is a tech genius. There are half a dozen big corporations who want to hire him right after graduation, to pay him a ton of money to invent more of his crazy gadgets. He could be one of those billionaire inventors in a few short years. Hell, I can even see him working for the government, or making the next eco-invention that helps countries on the other side of the globe or something.”

She processed that silently while she taped half a dozen brightly-colored eggs on top of the plastic grass covered Easter basket, two of which had been decorated and personalized by Addison’s siblings just before he’d sat down for dinner two hours prior. The Easter egg with Kylie’s bubble-letter name looked identical to the one Addison had made—the cute little thing liked to copy everything her big sis did—while Tanner’s egg was adorned with all the new-teen boy subtlety of bold tribal tattoo patterns, jagged orange flames, and crazy-looking alien eyeballs.

She was so great with them; almost like their mom instead of their sister. He’d yet to learn about their parents or why the kids were here in the diner every night, but he seriously doubted anyone could do a better job loving those two lucky kids than she did. Coming from a close-knit family himself, Caine always enjoyed watching Addison interact with her brother and sister as they finished up their meals before she drove them home to turn in during her dinner break, usually around nine after the dinner rush, before it got too late for the kids to be up.

When she would return to work after her break, the hour or so he’d get to spend talking to her before he’d head over to the station to get changed and ready for his midnight shift was now easily one of the best parts of his day.

“Maybe Gabe doesn’t want to make truckloads of money or change the world,” she remarked finally. “What’s so wrong with him using his smarts a little closer to home? Helping folks keep their family and possessions safe is a noble profession. Again, right up your alley.” The soft, unbridled smile that ghosted her lips wasn’t at all the like big flashy one she gave the customers. No, this one was more introspective. More real.

Just for him.

“Too dangerous.” For a brief moment, he wasn’t sure if he was still only talking about his brothers’ business venture, or if he was also describing Addison’s smile.

She stared at him for a beat. “Is that what the hesitation is about? You’re worried about your brothers’ safety if they work in security?”

“No, that’s not it exactly.” How could he explain it to her? While his time on the force had involved some of the greatest good he could imagine being a part of, he’d also seen enough during that time that had changed his entire world view irrevocably. Not for the better.

He just...didn’t want his brothers to come to see the world the way he now did, didn’t want their shadows to chase them the way his now did.

Per usual, Addison never pushed. But he felt his defenses dropping all the same. “I’m worried about what they’ll go through if all these high tech security systems they build, God forbid, end up *not* being enough to stop a criminal from taking something irreplaceable. How messed up they’ll get if they see one of their clients’ companies suffer financially as a result. Or worse, how badly they’ll blame themselves if a family loses a parent or a child to an armed intruder.”

The sound Addison made then shook him to the core. Not because she sounded shocked, but because she sounded...understanding. “I get it. And you’re right to be worried about that for them. It’s one of the most impossible things to deal with—feeling that you let down someone who places all their trust in you.”

His gut twisted at the all-too-familiar tone in her voice regarding the topic. But her shuttered expression told him not to ask. So he didn’t. Not yet, anyway.

“You should tell your brothers how you feel,” she suggested softly. “Not because it’ll change their mind; I doubt it will. But I think you should talk to them so you can see that they worry about the same thing when it comes to you and your job.”

Caine did a double take. “What?”

“Max and Gabe were in here eating the other night, with your foster sister Lia and your foster brother Drew. It was your night off, and they had plans to go over to your place to hang out or something.”

That’s right, they’d wanted to have dinner—aka an intervention—but, darn, he’d already committed to a private security gig for a nearby high school that had needed two uniformed off-duty cops for a reunion. “I didn’t know they came here to eat first.”

“Yep. And they talked about you a lot all through dinner.” She gave him a sheepish grin. “I couldn’t help but overhear some things.”

He shrugged. “No big deal. I don’t think there’s anything they could say about me that I don’t already feel comfortable talking to you about in the first place.”

This time, the sound from Addison’s throat was a soft, surprised, *pleased* little ‘oh.’

And holy crap, did it pack a punch. Especially because it was accompanied by a quietly happy smile she valiantly tried to hold at bay by nibbling on her lower lip.

So focused was he on watching her alternate between teeth nibbles and swift little tongue swipes across that now plump lower lip, that he only managed to catch the tail end of what she said next.

“...Seriously, Gabe has got some serious game.”

What the hell? That jerked him back to the conversation. “Did the little prick hit on you?”

She laughed out loud then. “Gabe is nearly as tall as you are. There’s nothing ‘little’ about him.”

Caine felt his back molars grinding a little bit. He’d never once begrudged either of his brothers if a woman found them attractive. But because the woman in this case was Addison, he wasn’t just feeling resentful, he was feeling downright territorial.

It didn’t help at all that she and Gabe were close in age.

Suddenly, at twenty-nine, Caine felt like an old geezer in comparison. “Gabe has always been popular with the girls,” he warned, feeling a little bit like a shitty big brother for throwing him under

the bus like that.

In all fairness, he'd never once felt compelled to do that before. Something about the woman made him...possessive.

Unapologetically so.

Addison nodded. "That sort of goes without saying. He left the diner with like three numbers that night."

Caine rolled his eyes. Yeah, that was a regular occurrence with Gabe. Not because he was some sort of player. No, it was more like women just gravitated to his energy, and found themselves wanting to be his best friend within seconds, and half in love within minutes.

Mental note: Don't ever agree to meet Gabe at the diner when Addison is working.

"Don't get me wrong, your brother's cute and all, but I've never been a big fan of the whole dating scene."

"No?"

She shrugged. "Too busy working. Plus, I'm not into painting the town red, or even eating out, really. I'd much rather just curl up in bed with a library book and a bowl of cereal." She laughed self-deprecatingly. "Boring, I know."

An insta-fantasy of Addison in *his* bed immediately assailed his thoughts. And it was anything *but* boring. But strangely, not in a sexual way. More in a warm woman curled against his side on a Sunday morning way.

He admittedly liked that even better than a sex fantasy.

"Yeah, I'm a homebody too." He glanced down at her lips again. "Does your boyfriend at least spoil you with some fancy wine and candlelit dinners when you eat in?"

Yes, he was fishing for information. Over the past month, he'd yet to learn anything beyond surface level details about her. She wasn't closed off per se. In fact, she was like a happy-go-lucky, tell-it-like-it-is free spirit most of the time, but she was a locked book for sure when it came to her personal life.

Addison's laugh in response to his question was borderline incredulous. "No boyfriend. And I'd much prefer a hotdog roasted on a fire stick over a fancy dinner with candle light and china."

Music to his ears.

"Plus, I'm not quite old enough to drink, remember?"

Ouch. He could've done without the reminder that she was only twenty.

Humming as she finished taping up her final basket of Easter eggs on the wall nearest the cash register, she peered over at his mug. "Need a refill?"

Of the watery brown liquid Joe called coffee? *Pass.* But just like he'd been doing for the past four weeks, he swallowed back a few big bland gulps and smiled. "Maybe just one more."

Addison brought the coffee pot over to top him off, before going over to do the same for the three other customers still remaining in the diner.

He watched in amazement as they happily guzzled down the stuff.

Seriously, he had no idea how folks kept drinking the 'coffee.' In his book, weak coffee ran somewhere in between warm beer and day-old milk. Especially since he drank it black.

"Sure you don't want pie or anything for dessert?"

The piping hot crime against caffeine now temporarily forgotten, he frowned. "I probably shouldn't." A crying shame, really, because unlike the coffee, the food at Joe's was killer, and the desserts were probably the best he'd had in years.

"If you tell me you're trying to watch your girlish figure, I'm going to clock you on the head

with this coffee pot.”

He chuckled. “For every pie you twist my arm into eating, that’s another few miles I have to run every day to work it off.”

“To get your body fat back down to zero percent?” she retorted dryly as she shot him a wholly unsympathetic headshake. “I don’t even eat the pies and I’d have to run an entire marathon to work off all the calories my hips somehow absorb by osmosis from working here.”

Hallelujah for science. The woman could wear the hell out of a tucked in t-shirt and a plain pair of jeans.

“Sweetheart, if I weren’t way too old for you, I’d do the ungentlemanly thing and tell you exactly how much I like the fit of your pants,” he teased gently, simultaneously giving her a backhanded compliment and himself a backhanded insult at the same time. That was a good combo; it’s been working well for them now that they’d gotten comfortable enough for him to kid about things like this.

A flash of heat fired in her eyes over his words.

Huh, had he gone too far this time?

She answered his unasked question by smacking him with a reply chock-full of sass, “Well, *gramps*, if you weren’t way too old for me, I’d do the hussy thing and tell *you* how much I like the fit of *your* pants right now.”

Well, this was new.

Putting a pin in the implications of what she was saying about her noticing the fit of his pants for a brief moment, he focused on the playful insult she’d just tossed his way. He sure as shit didn’t like it when the newbies at the station called him Gramps; hearing it from Addison’s mouth made him want to do something stupid like bench press a car.

Or kiss the hell out of her.

The alarm on his phone chose that exact second to go off.

Hells bells. Up until now, he’d liked working the midnight shift. It meant he could hang out with Addison until about eleven-thirty before heading in to work.

Tonight, he wanted more time.

“You better go before you’re late,” she said then, her voice back to business as usual.

Dammit.

It was possible he said that last bit out loud.

Because she walked up to him slowly then. If you could call what she was doing walking. She had a definite subtle sway to her hips that she didn’t normally have usually.

Jesus, that was some walk.

When she reached him seemingly an eternity later, she leaned over the counter.

And snatched his mug away.

“I wasn’t through with that.” *Why the hell was he protesting?* Oh yeah, because his throat was so parched just from watching her walk that he’d drink just about anything. He settled on his ice water.

Meanwhile, she was busy pouring coffee from the pot with the green handle, not black for regular or orange for decaf. Interesting. He didn’t actually know what that third pot was for.

Before he could ask, she slid what looked like a big gulp sized to-go cup in front of him. Nearly the size of a carton of milk. Oh joy. “Thanks,” he said smiling appreciatively, even as he was mentally thinking of who he could give the cup of bland coffee to so it wouldn’t go to waste.

Addison’s lips twitched to the side. “This one isn’t Joe’s blend. It’s my personal one that I

brew up just for me with the extra pot.”

He looked down at the piping hot cup and leaned in to take a whiff.

Lordy, that smelled good.

He took a wary swallow.

And groaned in bliss.

“Why have you never poured this for me before?” he demanded, gulping back seconds and thirds. The brew was strong, deep, and flavorful. Better than simply perfect, it was damn near dirty, it was so good. “You’ve been holding out on me.”

“Yes,” she answered, looking more than a little guilty about that fact.

He studied her simpering features. “On purpose?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Criminy, this was better than foreplay. “So why now?”

She chewed on her lip and said softly, “Maybe I like you *not* being ‘gentlemanly’ for a change.”

CHAPTER FOUR

ADDISON COULDN'T *BELIEVE* she'd just said that to him.

And from his expression as he'd cursed when his second alarm had gone off, he was in even more gobsmacked disbelief than she was.

The interruption of a fellow officer stopping in for some coffee to take with him over to the station effectively extinguished any chance of them talking or doing anything really about her moment of female boldness.

It was a good thing too, because her cheeks felt like they were going up in flames, and her knees felt like they'd turned to jello.

It didn't help one bit when Caine yanked the cup of coffee she'd just poured him away from his buddy like he wanted to keep the other man from even smelling it.

Lordy, why had she given him her personal blend? She'd caught on over the past few weeks that he didn't like Joe's coffee, and truth be told, she'd been tempted to pour him her personal blend before. But she hadn't for the same reason why she suddenly decided today she should.

A lot could be read into that gesture.

Until now, the absolute last thing she needed, or wanted, was the complication of a guy in her life. In that regard, having Caine as her friend for the past month had been great. They'd talk, exchange quips that were *juuust* this side of flirting, and most important of all, leave everything in the diner.

Unlike his buddies at the station, he'd never once expressed an interest in asking her out. So she'd always felt...safe. To just be herself.

Herself around a man who was very likely cast from the same mold that served as the base model for all Disney movie heroes.

Tall. Eyes that were as dark as they were deep. A strong chin that could look menacing when paired with a frown, and just plain devastating when paired with a smile. A jaw that could undoubtedly crack crab claws with ease.

And a mouth specially designed for kissing.

The last observation was pure speculation of course. From what she could gather, she wasn't the only one speculating about that fact. According to the gossip she heard on a regular basis in the diner—sometimes it was kind of nice that folks forgot waitresses had perfectly functioning ears—Caine was single, and seemingly uninterested in the women of Creek Hills.

He seemed plenty interested in you tonight.

Addison ignored the dangerous observation that kept popping into her head long after he went off to start his shift. Similarly, she ignored how insanely tickled that new development was making her.

Therein lay the path to the land of impossibilities.

A half hour later, she was still thinking about all the impossibilities of the situation as she finished up the last of her nightly post-closing duties. Per usual, she waited for the janitors to start on the floors before waving them goodbye and heading out. The twenty-minute window she had once the

janitors started working on the floors was just enough time for her to slip out to the van unnoticed. She'd discovered that trick within the first few days working there, and it'd been working like a charm ever since.

With one more furtive glance around the tiny back lot that Joe only used for vendor deliveries and to park his own vehicle when he was here during the daytime, Addison climbed into the quintessential 80s camping movie van to turn in for the night.

It hadn't taken long for Addison and the kids to come up with their daily routine. It all started with her waking up at four-thirty in the morning to drive out of the lot before the morning crew arrived at five. She'd drive over to the supermarket from there to pick up a few things. They couldn't keep much in the cooler so the daily trips to the market was both a necessity, and a way for the kids to get another half hour of sleep in every morning. Next, she'd drive them to the community rec center one town over that opened at five-thirty every morning for the early bird senior citizens. Since her annual membership permitted her two family guests, that's when she and the kids would shower, use the facilities, and brush their teeth, under the cover of their early morning exercise laps in the pool.

After eating breakfast together in the car while they deflated their air mattress and covered up all traces of their living in the van, Addison would drop the kids off at school at around seven, when a lot of their friends were already on campus playing and hanging out. Then, she'd head over to her day job at Bernadette's until noon. She picked up Kylie at the grade school first, and then Tanner a block over at the middle school, then tried to do something fun with them for about two hours. Whether that was going to the park or the library, or just watching some internet TV on the tablet computer they all shared, she made a point to spend that time with them before heading over to the diner about an hour before her shift—never any earlier, to avoid any questions.

Since the diner was always pretty slow at that time, there was always a booth for the kids to sit in and do their homework while she fixed them a quick snack. Since Joe was hardly there anymore, Addison and Shirley pretty much ran the place in the latter half of the day so Addison would do some light managerial things in between helping the kids with their homework until her shift. The bit of paperwork here and there was a nice trade-off for the free snacks and dinners she got to feed the kids every day.

Then, when her shift would start, the kids kept themselves entertained until dinner, which she timed to be about a half hour before her dinner break started. That way, she could spend her break 'taking them home' every night, which basically just consisted of her driving around while the kids closed up the curtains in the back of the van, flipped all the rear seats down flat, inflated the air mattress, and got ready for bed. She'd park for a bit then and read Kylie a bedtime story without fail every night before heading back to the diner to finish her shift.

In the beginning, the kids used to need to watch TV on the tablet to fall asleep—thank goodness for Joe's strong wi-fi signal and the dark as night blackout curtains they drew closed over the van windows every night. But now, they were out like a light before she even parked back in Joe's lot.

Then they'd rinse and repeat. They spent the majority of their quality family time together on the weekends when she wasn't working for Bernadette, and the kids were off of school, so really, the van was just a place where the kids slept. And it worked for them.

In actuality, she'd managed to save up quite a bit of money already, and she probably could've moved them to an apartment at the start of this year. But, there was always the fear that a neighbor or a landlord would call social services when they realized how young she was. Her plan was to save up more money by staying in the van until the summer, and then moving them all to an apartment. Tanner would be starting high school in the fall so it was a good time to make that transition.

He enjoyed running, weirdly enough, so she wanted him to go out for cross-country or track. Maybe that would lead to a scholarship for college, but even if it didn't, she would work double shifts if she had to, to make sure he got to go. And her sister was still young, but if she wanted to dance ballet or do gymnastics in a few years, Addison wanted to have enough money saved up to make that possible.

The extra money also couldn't hurt when it came time for her to file for full custody of the kids on her twenty-first birthday next January.

At that thought she turned to look at the two reasons why her age was a number that had no bearing on how old she was in life. She'd damn near raised both Tanner and Kylie.

Back when she'd been the only eight year old among her friends that was allowed to babysit a newborn, she'd just thought it cool. As the years went on, and she started figuring out that her mom wasn't so much 'letting' her babysit as she was 'needing' her to babysit because she was high as a kite and drunk as a skunk.

Addison had never really had a chance to do the things that other kids her age had done. But she never regretted her life. Those kids were her entire world. And if she could give them the love and care that she never had growing up, she would move heaven and hell to make it so.

Sure, their life wasn't typical, but she took good care of them. The only thing they lacked was a home that didn't have four wheels under it, and a guardian over the age of twenty-one.

They'd been doing better than fine without either.

For that matter, when they'd had both of those 'lacking' factors of a home without wheels and a guardian over the age of twenty-one, their quality of life had been worse. Way worse.

Now, she never had to worry about drug needles on the ground or other traumatizing things for the kids to get exposed to.

Now, she never had to worry about having enough food or money for field trips or really anything the children needed.

Now, she never had to worry about them feeling unloved or unwanted—when she wasn't working, Addison was spending her time with them, whether it was to help them with their homework or go to the park or just snuggle up under a blanket to watch a DVD borrowed from the library, she was there for them.

She'd be damned if she'd let anyone say she wasn't a good guardian for them and risk having them get taken from her, and each other.

That brought her full circle to the Caine situation. Mutual interest or not, they had to just remain in the friend zone. With her life, she couldn't possibly date him.

So the man was ridiculously good looking, and criminally sexy. They could still be 'just' friends. She'd been doing it for a month now, after all.

By the time she closed her eyes for the night, she was pretty sure she had herself convinced.

Convincing the man who had practically devoured her with his eyes while he'd been drinking her special blend, however, was a whole different story.

* * * * *

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, Addison brewed double the amount of her special personal blend and waited for Caine to come in...so she could serve him Joe's usual bland cup of coffee and see how he reacted.

She expected a response of near biblical proportions.

It was her way of re-amalgamating their 'just friends' friendship.

And have a little fun in the process.

Uneventful as her day-to-day life was, this little tiger-poking stunt she was planning was basically the highlight of her week. All morning, she'd been chuckling to herself imagining his face when he took his first sip. Which would lead to her wondering if he'd just glower at the green pot and make polite, teeth-grit demands that she pour him the good stuff, or if he'd simply stomp back behind the counter to pour himself a mug.

Her money was on the latter.

While he was pretty much like a big, gruff, usually-only-mildly-grizzly teddy bear with her, she'd heard him alpha out a few times outside of the walls of the diner and use his intimidating-as-hell cop voice on a few occasions. She'd even seen him take down a tweaked out, knife-wielding guy in ten seconds flat once.

The man just wasn't a guy you messed with.

...Which just made the whole thing she was planning so much more fun.

Only problem was, he didn't show up.

The next night? Same.

For a month, the man had come in for dinner nearly every night, and somehow, without her even noticing it, he'd become a mainstay in her day. The sneaky bastard. He'd been charming and unassuming the entire time. Friendly. And aside from the occasional innocuously pervy, mostly rather clever, and always darn funny comment he'd sneak in here and there, he'd never once hit on her.

She liked him.

Even more astonishing was the fact that she *liked* that she liked him.

Thus, it was strangely unsettling to not be able to chat with him, or at least see him. Though it took her a lot of heavy introspection to admit it, her days felt just a tiny bit incomplete without him in it. And that was insane, really. They barely knew each other. Yet, somehow, the sneaky man had found a way past her defenses and into her life.

Unbelievable.

Sure, she'd known all the other diner workers for a lot longer, and saw them in larger doses every day. But she never truly considered any of them a true friend the way Caine was. Mostly because she never felt comfortable sharing her life with any of them.

Caine, on the other hand...

You trust him.

It was true. She did. Of all the people in her life, if she had to pick one person to have watch Kylie and Tanner, there was no doubt in her mind that she'd pick Caine. And it wasn't because he was a cop. She trusted him *despite* that.

Figured the universe would deem it fit for her to start liking and trusting a man whose actual job it was to stop women like her from breaking the law.

In spite of all that, by the time Day Three rolled around, with still no sign of Caine, Addison flat out started to worry. She'd even volunteered to run a big lunch order over to the station to see if she could catch him.

Nothing.

That is, until she was wiping down the counter before closing on Day Four and saw something a little off about the collage of Easter eggs she and the kids had drawn to put up on the wall nearest the register. It took her a minute to realize what it was.

There was an extra egg in the basket.

In the big easter egg basket with the eggs that had her name, Kylie's, and Tanner's, there was one added egg she didn't put in there.

No name. But she knew.

Caine.

When she went over to investigate, she found it was a white sticky note shaped more like a football than an egg, colored with what looked like department-issued blue and red ink pens, and a yellow highlighter. Grinning, she peered closer and realized that the faint traces of black ink carvings on the egg were actually due to writing on the back.

She peeled the egg off the wall, and found Caine had left a note for her:

Still can't believe you've been holding out on me with that insanely good coffee all this time. That was just mean. Question—have you ever had a dirty dream about coffee before? No? Yeah...um, me neither. Miss talking to you. I'll be back on my regular 12-8 shift hopefully in a week or two. -- C

Laughing at that always playful, *juust* this side of improper sense of humor of his, and swooning a little bit over the 'miss talking to you part,' Addison turned around to survey the rest of the diner.

Caine had stuck a new egg on each of the four other Easter baskets she'd put up on the walls.

She felt her heart beat a goofy rhythm as she went around to pluck them off the walls, smiling over the creative ways he'd figured out to get out of having to do any drawing on the eggs. He'd mentioned the other day that drawing had never been a strong suit...something about disproportionate stick figure anatomy getting him into trouble back in grade school.

Again, *juust* this side of improper.

And always told with that ruggedly earnest Captain-America poker face.

The designs ranged from ruler-lined stripes, to scattered confetti-like pieces in the exact shades of Post-It's five-color variety pack. They all had a signature dude-deco office-supply-chic vibe going on, and were all the more ridiculously adorable for it.

Best of all, there was writing on the back of each one.

Now I see why they teach kids to use scissors in grade school. I must've failed those classes. Of course, if I had your phone number, I could text you instead of subjecting you to all these badly-shaped hearts. Just saying. -- C

She chuckled. If he'd asked, she would've given him her number in a heartbeat.

But now she was glad he hadn't. This was way more romantic.

So I broke down and tried putting ketchup on my eggs yesterday like you said you do. It was every bit as bad as I thought it'd be. You're nuts. And I blame you for my hungry morning. -- C

Aw. What a random and wonderful way of saying he'd been thinking about her yesterday morning. The silver-tongue fella.

Finally took your advice and got one of those futon sofas. You're right, it's comfy as hell for a nap. But, there was one small side effect we didn't foresee. The thing is a magnet for brothers in college who know how to break into your apartment.

Friggin' Gabe. If the futon conforms to his puny body over mine, I'm kicking his ass. -- C

Shaking her head over Caine's idea of 'puny.' Yes, he was bigger than his brothers, in the way that brown bears were bigger than black bears. He'd showed her a family photo once. They were all over six-feet tall, with broad shoulders and cut physique to match. had the sort of body that superhero Halloween costumes probably used as a mold to get the muscles just right,

But the main reason why she was smiling at the moment was because ever since she'd mentioned in passing that Gabe was cute—meaning the excited way he was holding up the fish he'd caught—Caine had developed a habit of pointing out how puny his little brother was. Whenever she made any sort of reference to Gabe's cuteness.

Which wasn't...*all* that often.

In case I don't see you before Sunday, I got you a bag of the seasonal Reese's Peanut Butter eggs and asked Shirley to hide it on the shelf under the register for you. I remembered you saying you like 'em better than the regular Reese's cups. Happy Easter, sweets. -- C

Oh holy hell, the man wasn't just sneaking past her defenses anymore, he was taking a battering ram to 'em. And busting right through.

He wasn't even here but somehow he was shifting the tide in her 'just friends' friendship plan.

At this point though, she wasn't sure she had the strength to fight the tide.

Addison gathered up the bag of yummy chocolate peanut butter goodness, along with all the egg-shaped notes Caine had left for her and tucked them in her purse for safe-keeping before scribbling a note on one of her waitressing order pad sheets and cutting it into the shape of an egg. When she was done, she flipped it over and decorated it simply with five yellow stars, each framed with a green laurel leaf wreath...the combined effect bearing a striking resemblance to the Creek Hills police badge. She tucked it behind a few other eggs in the same basket by the register and then closed up for the night.

After checking to make sure the kids were asleep, and that the curtain separating the back of the van was closed good, she did her nightly task of velcro-securing the blackout curtains on the windshield and front windows, restocking the small cooler of milk and fruits she kept between the seats for the kids' breakfast, and blowing up the dollar store pool float she laid across two front seats and cooler, as a pseudo mattress of sorts, to sleep on.

Before she let exhaustion cement her eyes closed, however, she turned on the flashlight she kept in the cup holder and re-read the notes Caine had left for her. Her own note hadn't been as romantic. She didn't really have experience in that sort of thing. So she'd just gone with unfiltered honesty.

Thank you for my eggs. I love them (both paper and chocolate). My number is yours if you want it. But honestly, I like this better. Don't you dare get hurt on this new shift. I've left instructions for Shirley to make my special brew for you in the mornings...and to top your omelet with loads of ketchup (and a dash of sriracha—that ought to help you see the light). Miss talking to you too. -- A

For the first time, maybe *ever*, she curled up under her tattered blanket with a smile as she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

WALKING PAST THE ENTRANCE of the Creek Hills Annual Spring Carnival with the kids, Addison found her eyes gravitating right over to the police officer ‘Burgers and Deputy Dawgs’ food booth, where Caine was presently charming a small group of wide-eyed adoring kids with his burger flipping skills.

The kids’ *moms* were similarly enthralled, though their cosmetic-perfect come-hither eyes and elegantly manicured hand-fanning whispers were more focused on...something other than his burgers. Sort of more in line with the big gun he was packing.

Addison, frankly, felt young and frumpy in comparison.

Kylie tugged on the sleeve of her shirt. “They’re all staring at you, Addison.”

Huh? She followed Kylie’s gaze. “Who’s staring at me?”

“All the mommies over there.”

She looked back at the same group of sophisticated women now glaring daggers at her and discovered Kylie was right. How odd.

“I think,” Tanner weighed in, “it’s because *he* started staring at you first.”

She glanced over in the direction Tanner was nodding with his chin, and found a deep, dark set of intense, inky black eyes locked on her.

Caine.

“He’s been staring at you since his break started.”

Addison had been so lost in thought for the past few minutes, she hadn’t even noticed he wasn’t working the grill at the police booth anymore.

“Oh yay!” yipped Kylie, suddenly. “They have the swing ride! Can I go on it, Addison? Please? I think I’m tall enough this year.” Kylie lined herself up in front of the red height chart stand in front of each of the carnival rides. “See!”

Sure enough, the squirt was now a few inches taller than the line. That growth spurt she’d had at the start of the new year was bigger that Addison realized.

They were both growing up so fast. Frankly, Addison wasn’t sure how moms—present company’s M.I.A. mother excluded, of course—weren’t more emotional about their kids growing up. Teaching Tanner to ride his two-wheeler in the park, giving in whenever Kylie used to hold her arms up in the air in a bid to be carried around everywhere...that all seemed like just yesterday.

Soon, they’d be getting to the age where it wouldn’t be cool for her to mother them at all.

Almost as if hearing her melancholy thoughts, Tanner reached over to pluck the sheet of carnival ride scripts from her hands. “I’ll take her,” he volunteered, grabbing Kylie’s hand. Before she could mentally sniffle over that, however, he added, “That way, you can deal with *him*.”

Wha— *Oh*.

‘*Him*’ was a hot-as-sin cop now walking over to her with a slow simmering smile that was doing ridiculous things to her insides.

“Hey kids,” Caine called out, intercepting Kylie and Tanner as they were starting to head over to the line for the ride. “What’s on the carnival line-up for you two?” He fist-bumped Kylie and did

the teen-approved cool-guy head-nod to greet Tanner.

Lordy, she loved it that Caine always took the time to really talk to the kids. It was one of the things she'd first noticed about him when he started coming to the diner.

When Caine crouched his tall six-foot frame down to Kylie's height, she proceeded to give him an animated, thirty-second rundown of all the game booths she'd wanted to play after hitting her favorite rides. Meanwhile, Tanner just stood there with his arms crossed, eyeing Caine silently.

Addison frowned. Tanner's odd behavior toward Caine lately was starting to get more pronounced. She'd been meaning to talk to him about it, but just hadn't had the chance yet.

Just then, the operator for the giant swing ride pulled open the gate and started taking scripts for the next wave of riders, and Kylie stopped talking midsentence and proceeded to quickly drag Tanner to the line.

When Caine got up and started to head Addison's way, Tanner immediately did a forked two-finger motion pointing at first his own eyes and then Caine's.

...To which, Caine replied with a silent and very serious nod.

What on earth?

"What was that all about?" she asked straight away, as soon as Caine came up to her. "With you and Tanner just now."

The corner of Caine's mouth kicked up a bit. "That was just man to man talk."

She raised a surprised brow at him. "Really? Since when are you and my little brother engaging in man to man talk?"

"Since I sat next to him the other day and requested his permission to ask you out on a date."

She was pretty sure the top of her head just exploded. "What?"

"You heard me."

Sometimes, she hated that he had just as much experience being the oldest sibling as she did. The man knew exactly how to try a person's patience.

In her case, namely by waiting her out to see what exactly would come tumbling out of her mouth.

"You asked for his permission?"

"Yup."

"What would you have done if he'd said no?"

His eyes, somehow, managed to get even darker and even more intense. "I'd have tried again the next day. And the next."

Wow. Good answer.

"When did this all go down?"

"Earlier this week."

Well, that explained Tanner's strange behavior lately.

Addison didn't really know which bit of information to melt into a puddle over first. The fact that he wanted to ask her out on a date, or his thoughtfulness on asking the kids, or his keen understanding on how to deal with a protective teenage brother. "So...are you going to ask me?"

Caine shook his head. "Can't."

"Why not?" She frowned and looked up at her brother, currently airborne on the octopus-like swinging carnival ride. "Did he say no?"

"He didn't." Caine nodded over at a tickled pink Kylie. "She did."

"What?! But Kylie adores you."

"Aw, that's sweet. I adore the heck out of her too."

Criminy, one thing to melt over at a time. “I can’t believe she said no. Did she give you a reason?”

“She did indeed. She said that I needed to take her and Tanner to the movies first so they could see if I’d be a nice date for you.”

Why that little— “She’s extorting you.”

“Yep, I do believe she is. Which brings me to the reason why I’m here.” He flashed her that lazy, lopsided grin of his that earned her a few more envious stares from the women around them who had two eyes and a pulse. “I wanted to see if I could take the kids out for the whole day tomorrow. Give you a chance to sleep in for a change.”

She stared at him, the words coming out of his mouth sounding like a foreign concept. When was the last time she’d slept in? “The whole day?” she parroted, trying to wrap her head around that. None of the men who’d asked her out had ever expressed an interest in spending time with the kids.

The precise reason why she’d said no to them all.

“Just you and the kids?” Repeating it out loud, suddenly, she felt a little left out.

“Yeah. I thought I’d take them out to breakfast and then over to that park they like so much down by Cactus Creek, and then out for a matinee double feature.”

The kids would no doubt have a blast. She curbed the sudden feeling of loneliness cramping her gut and smiled wide and bright. “I think they’d love that.”

He then handed her an envelope.

“What’s this?” She opened the flap and pulled out the card inside.

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he surveyed her reaction. “A certificate for a massage. To use tomorrow while we’re out and about.”

Somewhere in her head, she could hear the SOS alarm blaring for a ship that was starting to capsize. “Caine, no. This is too much.”

“Consider it a belated birthday present.”

“We didn’t even know each other in January.”

“Then accept it as a grateful thank-you for all the mugs of your special brew coffee.”

“I can’t.”

“But I went to all this trouble to make sure everyone at the massage place knew that if an Addison Milan called for an appointment, that only female masseuses were allowed to touch you. Went over with my uniform to drive my point home, and everything.”

Despite herself, she giggled over his wholly serious expression. She had no doubt he probably did just that. “Caine, you don’t need to get me gifts.”

“I know I don’t need to. I want to. Are you going to deny me something I want?”

Holy hell, that was a loaded question.

And judging by the rising heat level in his gaze, he thought so too.

“Not if it’s something I want as well,” she replied quietly as she tucked the certificate in a safe zipped pocket in her cavernous mommy purse. “Thank you, Caine.”

CHAPTER SIX

HEARING HIS NAME on her lips had a very immediate, very predictable effect on him.

It had taken her about two weeks after they'd first met for her to warm up to calling him Caine instead of Officer Spencer. He still remembered the first time she did it, too. She'd said his name quickly, casually, and accompanied it with a subtle flash of her happy little left dimple, as if simply saying his name was a precursor to a smile.

She'd been saying it that way ever since.

Before, he'd just found it sweet. Now, he found it mind-messingly sexy, too.

He wasn't quite sure when exactly the full shift in their dynamic had happened, but sometime between her pouring him her ruined-him-for-all-other-coffees personal blend and their exchanging the never-telling-the-guys-about-it Easter egg messages, Caine had come to one simple, but big conclusion.

Nine years wasn't that big of a deal.

Addison was smart, funny, caring. Far older than her age in maturity, familial responsibility, and kindness toward others. She was as sassy as she was sweet, which always made him smile.

In a word she was perfect.

Of course, his inner caveman's word choice sounded more like: *mine*.

Earlier, the very second he'd caught sight of her at the carnival entrance, he'd heard both of those words echo loud and clear in his brain. Even more resoundingly so when he saw her tuck her long golden brown hair behind her ears, away from those espresso rich laser beams she called eyes. It had taken him a minute to realize she was scanning all the faces in his booth. When her visual survey had stopped as soon as her gaze landed on him, he'd tapped in a replacement to run the grill so he could take his break and go over to her.

On his way over to her, he saw her do it again—that curling her hair around her ear thing she often did at the diner. He'd always found the habit freaking cute as hell, especially because she did it as an automatic gesture whenever she was trying to hear someone better. Lately, every time he caught her doing it, he'd have to forcibly stop himself from reaching over to replace her hands with his, stop himself from sifting her hair between his fingers and bringing his lips right up to her ear.

All the better to hear him with.

Hell, now that he'd come to terms with their age difference, it was taking all his restraint not to do something uncivilized like throw her over his shoulder and drag her back to his cave.

Especially when she looked at him the way she was right now.

Evidently, he wasn't the only one reacting to the changes in their dynamics.

Given the quick-growing chemistry between them, he imagined that if they'd been starring in a movie, the cinematic segue right about now would involve them straight-up jumping each other's bones.

But in reality, their relationship was transitioning much more slowly. Naturally.

And that worked for him, because he was in this for the long haul.

Just as he was finishing that thought about taking things slow, however, the woman went and

placed a small peck on his cheek following her thanks for the gift certificate.

Well, hell.

Eyes now burning a hundred degrees hotter as he stared at her sweet post-peck blush, he gave her a crooked grin—it was either than or a howl at the sky...he went with the more civil. “Now that was just unfair, honey.”

She took in a shaky breath as she felt the back of his knuckles brush the back of hers. “Wh-what was unfair?”

“You throwing down that dare you just did?”

“Dare?” With him looking at her like he could devour her on the spot, her ability to speak was swiftly disintegrating.

“That was a dare alright. A sweet one, but a dare all the same.”

“Wh-what was I daring you to do? It was just a quick little kiss.”

His grin was slow and molten hot. “And there it is right there. You daring me to show you why that wasn’t a kiss at all.”

She gasped.

“I always knew it was going to be like this with us,” he graveled in a low, raspy whisper. “Do me a favor and close those pretty eyes for a bit. Normally, being able to get a glimpse of the thoughts you keep hidden is a good thing. But right now, I’m not sure I can take much more without downright embarrassing myself.”

She closed her eyes and felt a warm, calloused thumb graze over her heated cheeks. “Much better. At least I can concentrate on our conversation again. So, is eight too early for me to come by your aunt’s house to pick up the kids?”

* * * * *

AND JUST LIKE THAT, Addison felt an icy splash of reality nail her in the face. “Actually, why don’t I drop the kids off to you?”

He frowned. “That defeats the purpose of you getting to sleep in late.”

“I’m an early riser. But my aunt isn’t. The kids and I usually leave the house early so as not to disturb her sleep. Besides, I have a ton of errands to run tomorrow anyway. So I’ll bring them by your place at eight?” She infused a done-deal finality in her question and mentally crossed her fingers that he wouldn’t push this.

He shrugged. “Okay. I don’t want to disturb your aunt. I’ll text you my address later.”

She silently let go of all the air she’d had trapped in her lungs. *Close call.*

His pensive brow furrow in Kylie’s direction shortly after, however, instantly put her back on alert. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just wondering how many points that sister of yours is going to knock off my test score for not picking her up at the door like a gentleman.”

She chuckled. Knowing Kylie, there was a strong possibility that she’d do just that. Whether the ‘door’ in question in their case was their van door and not a front door. “I’ll tell her not to start rating you until I drop them off.”

He brightened. “I appreciate the assist.” Pulling out the compact cop notebook that bore a striking resemblance to her order pad, he flipped open to an empty page and clicked his ball point pen. “Speaking of. Tell me all the things the kids are allergic to. Or just plain don’t like. I don’t want to risk getting docked over something like that.”

Seriously, the man was already so far ahead in points, and he didn't even realize it. "No food allergies. Tanner's not a huge fan of green bell peppers. And Kylie always says she wants chocolate when it comes to sweets, but never actually finishes it because it's too sweet for her."

He jotted the info down as if he were taking a witness statement from her. "Okay, and no meds are inhalers or anything?"

She shook her head.

"What about flowers? Does Kylie have a favorite flower?"

She felt the bones in her knees turn to jelly. "She likes hydrangea. Purples ones."

"Great." He flipped his notepad closed. "I already got a Venus Flytrap for Tanner—figured he'd think it was cool—so I'll be sure to pick up little Miss Kylie's flowers tonight."

She gazed at him, her emotions clogged in her throat. "You're going all out on this."

"They're good kids." He gave her a lopsided grin. "Plus, I really, really want to pass this test."

Before she could tell him that he'd already passed with flying colors, Kylie bounced up to them like a sugared up kangaroo. "Can we go to the game booths next, Addison?"

Tanner lifted his shoulders in a hey-I-tried message. Gah, she loved that little brother of hers. "Of course we can. I've been scoping out the ones with the best prizes while Caine and I have been discussing this movie outing he's taking you both out on tomorrow."

Even Tanner had to smile at that news. "Yeah? Tomorrow?"

Addison perched her hands up on her hips. "He's even taking you to the park and breakfast you little extortionists."

They didn't even pretend to look sorry.

While they immediately began rattling off the names of the movies they wanted to see and started in on the great debate over which was better, pancakes or waffles, she felt Caine's fingers finally twine with hers. Just a little bit.

When Tanner took that as his cue to be the best little wingman in the world and tug the still-hopping Kylie over to the throw-a-penny-on-the-star game booth.

But not without doing that I'm-watching-you motion at Caine again,

"You've done a great job with those kids, Addison. Seriously. They're pretty awesome."

As they watched Tanner empty his pockets and give Kylie all his pennies, only to have her split the bounty in half and give him back a handful so they could play together, Addison felt Caine close his hands over hers fully.

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, the kind friends do when words don't quite get the job done, but still, Addison felt butterflies start to take flight and start knocking around against her ribs.

Sure, she'd been on a few dates back in high school, and she'd even had a few free nights during her senior year—aka, the year her mom discovered she could make psychedelic cocktails out of different bottled pills—to do the things high school kids did in parked cars.

Well, not all the things. But some.

Never, however, had any of those boys ever held her hand.

Frankly, judging by the head over heels cherished way she was feeling right now, if they had taken the time to hold her hand, she might not still be in possession of her virginity.

"I have another shift in the police booth coming up," he informed her quietly. Come by to see me before you and the kids head out? I'll make you all my world famous burgers."

When she nodded, he gave her another gentle hand-squeeze before leaning in to brush his lips against her cheek. Chastely.

And in that instant, she understood what he'd meant about the dare.

Her eyes dropped down to his lips and thought about how daring she could be right now.

Another skin-tingling bump and slide of their hands had her imagination spinning out of control.

“You are just trouble in progress for my good intentions, woman.” It was a rumbling grumble that sounded as amused as it did heated.

“Likewise,” she whispered back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAINE EXITED THE BRIEFING ROOM with a thousand things on his mind. Cases involving children always hit him hard. And today's missing child case was doubly tough because the little four-year boy reported missing—taken right from his bedroom sometime before dawn this morning—had also been the victim of child abuse for years, according to his mother.

Over the past eight years, Caine had seen far too many cases of parents who just shouldn't have been allowed to be parents, and innocent children hurt beyond comprehension.

Not just in the form of bruises, but in neglect. His own foster brother Drew had been a victim of that. With an alcoholic mother who'd hardly been lucid enough to even make sure he was fed most days, Drew had been raised by his older brother Leo until not too long ago. Unfortunately, not long after Leo enlisted in the army—during the promising two years their mom had been sober for the first time in their lives—he got deployed overseas, where his unit's chopper went down without any survivors.

Drew and Leo's mother went into another downward spiral after that, not just in the neglect department, but in the physical abuse too. Caine himself was the officer who went to take Drew out of the dangerous hellhole his home had become.

Drew had only been twelve years old at the height of the abuse, but he'd been taking care of himself for far longer. He was smart as a hell, and socially fine, but emotionally scarred when it came to family figures.

It damn near broke Caine's heart when he'd first seen Drew struggle with day to day family affection. It had been after Drew had finally gotten tested for his IQ. When Caine and his folks had tried to hug the kid after finding out he tested at genius level intelligence, Drew had nearly jumped out of his skin.

What kind of monster makes it so their own kid can't make heads or tails of a hug?

Caine felt his hands curl into helpless fists just thinking about it all again.

He was often accused of getting too emotionally involved with cases involving abused kids. But really, how could he not? They were innocent, just like the kid that had gone missing today.

Little Billy Baker. Just four years old.

God, some days it was harder than others to believe humanity wasn't totally screwed up.

Caine was so lost in his heavy thoughts as he got ready to head on out that he didn't even notice her standing there until she cleared her throat to get his attention.

"Addison?" He blinked. "What are you doing here at the station?" He closed the distance between them in half a second. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." She pointed to the bags of food and boxes of to-go coffee cups sitting on the table in their break room. "That missing boy case has been on the news all morning so I brought some food and coffee. I figured you guys would be working around the clock."

A lot of his buddies that should've already been heading home were still in uniform, wanting to help with the search. They were all gratefully digging into everything Addison had brought over.

"You're amazing. I'm pretty sure everyone here worked right through their lunch breaks."

She gave him a somber smile. “Glad I could help a little. We have more food and coffee ready to bring over if you guys need it. We know the little boy who was taken; he and his mom are regulars at the diner. So even if I’m on break, don’t worry, I’ve already instructed the staff to provide you guys whatever you need.”

Dammit, he wanted to kiss the hell out of her right now. “Thank you, sweetheart. This means a lot to us. To me.”

She handed him a tall to-go cup of coffee and a small brown paper bag. “My special brew, of course. And I packed you a sandwich you could eat in the car.” Stepping back to clear out of his pathway, she made a sweeping motion with her hand toward the door. “Sorry. I know you’re busy. Go on. I’m just going to go back to the breakroom to make sure I don’t need to bring in a second batch of food.”

He gazed at her soulful, empathetic eyes. And wrapped an arm around her to pull her into a hug. They’d never hugged before this, but still, it felt like they’d been doing this their whole lives. She fit him perfectly. And filled some part of him he hadn’t even known had gone missing until now.

She squeezed him tight, and then pulled back slightly to look up at him. Her hands slid out of the bear hug and smoothed up his chest, before settling on either side of his face.

And just like that, she tilted her chin up and pressed a gentle kiss onto his lips.

The whole thing barely lasted a second, but he felt good and dizzy when she was through.

Feeling his heart thudding like a sledge hammer in his chest, and hearing his breathing deepening as if he were changing gears from a job to a sprint, he dropped his forehead down onto hers. “Issuing another dare, sweetheart?”

She gave him one of those soft smiles reserved only for him. “No. Just offering comfort, support.” She brushed another barely there kiss over his lips before taking a step back. “Call me if you need anything. Even if you just need to talk.”

Christ, he really didn’t want her to go. But they both had to get to work. “I will. Thanks again, sweetheart.” Taking a big, grateful sip of the coffee he was seriously in love with, he called out teasingly, “By the way, are you ever going to tell me what makes this coffee so good?”

She hesitated, then walked back to him and quickly recited, “Mix equal parts of two cheapo grocery store brands of coffee grounds, half dark French roast and half plain old American roast, with a handful of salt, a dash of paprika, and...two bags of oolong tea, the smokier and darker the better, and like a *teeny* sprinkle of saffron that I ‘borrow’ from the kitchen.” She nibbled on her lip. “*Buut*, to be honest, you could get rid of the salt, paprika, and saffron and still have a really great cup a joe.”

He blinked in disbelief. “So the big secret to your coffee is...tea?”

Nodding, she lifted her shoulders unapologetically, and held her hand up in a quick wave before turning to hustle over to the breakroom, where she immediately pulled out her trusty order pad from her waitressing apron and asked the guys if they wanted her to bring over anything else.

“Holy shit,” whistled Marco, another cop who’d transferred over to Creek Hills recently. “You and Addison? Seriously?”

They both watched her finish quickly taking orders, before heading to the counselors and social workers sitting with the missing boy’s mother and other family members and taking food and drink orders from them as well. “You are one lucky son of a bitch.”

Jesus Christ, was he ever.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ADDISON AND EVERYONE in the diner breathed a collective sigh of relief when the local news anchor led the ten o'clock news with the a confirmed report that little Billy Baker had been found, crediting the Amber Alert that had been issued right after his disappearance this morning.

While the only thing that they could report was that Billy was unhurt and with authorities north of Flagstaff, and that his father, who had kidnapped him out of his mother's home had been arrested. The reporter on scene noted that police from both jurisdictions had been crucial in tracking Billy's father's movements, but ultimately, it was an eye witness that helped track down their exact whereabouts.

Normally, they didn't turn on the TV audio in the diner, but with so many regulars knowing the Baker family, and half the off-duty cops on the force stopping in to grab a quick bite, they'd kept tuned in for every update throughout the day.

Earlier, when a breaking news update had reported the start of a police standoff with Billy's father, Addison had felt her stomach drop. She had no clue whether Caine was up there or not. Or if he'd been called out to an even more dangerous case.

Worrying about him was pretty much a nightly habit for Addison, but tonight, more so than usual.

The rest of the night seemed to move like molasses.

At one a.m. sharp, Addison turned the open sign on the door to closed, and spent the next half hour closing up, while the kids slept curled up on the small loveseat sofa in Joe's office instead of out in the van.

Silly though it probably was, she'd felt compelled to keep Kylie and Tanner with her inside the diner the entire night. She just smiled and told everyone the kids had asked to stay at the diner since it was a Saturday night and that their aunt was having a boring old dinner party. Thankfully, Bernadette's kids were still going strong with the delivered meals for Bernadette so even nearly two years later, Addison had yet to run into even a single scare over her cover story being blown.

For the kids, Joe's office sofa was a nice change every once in a while. And last summer when the heat had insulated the van to the point of it being uncomfortably warm well past ten p.m., that very sofa had been a godsend. The swamp cooler that Addison ran off a generator she kept in the van usually did the trick in keeping the kids cool, but for about two weeks straight, the heat index had been so high, she hadn't trusted leaving them out there.

Since it'd been a hectic night for the officers, conversely, it was a pretty slow night for them at the diner, so Addison had told Shirley to go on home a little early. Same with Ryan when she saw him smiling over a text from whatever lucky girl the Casanova was dating this week.

She was just about through tallying receipts and checking on supplies for tomorrow's vendor deliveries when she heard a knock on the glass door. "Addison?"

She ran across the diner. "Caine?"

Addison quickly peeked through the closed blinds before unlocking the door to let him in. "Caine. What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" She quickly scanned him head to toe to see if

she could spot any hint of an injury.

He looked perfect, as always.

“Billy’s safe,” he said straight away.

She nodded. “We heard. It was on the news.”

“Oh good. Yeah, I forget how efficient those reporters are. I wanted to make sure you knew.”

Touched, she squeezed his hand. “Thank you. We were all relieved that everything ended peacefully.” She frowned. “We heard Billy’s father might have been high. No officers got hurt, right?”

YOU didn’t get hurt right?

She covertly scanned him from head to toe one more time.

“No. Thankfully, everyone walked away without a scratch. A bunch of us were called out on cases closer to home so I wasn’t actually on the scene, but I know several of the officers who were there from sports leagues and things so I had a chance to check in with some of them afterward.” He exhaled heavily. “They said it was pretty hard to watch. Seeing parents on drugs with kids involved always is.”

“I can imagine.” Actually, she didn’t have to imagine—not that she would ever tell him that. She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to take seeing those enigmatic eyes of Caine’s ever gazing at her in pity.

Noticing finally that her hand was still on his, she quickly dropped it and turned to pull out the nearest chair. “Are you hungry? I know Joe keeps some beer in his fridge in the back. I could grab you one and make you a sandwich or something.”

Caine shook his head, bypassed the chair, and kept on walking.

Toward her.

She backed up a few steps until she bumped into a counter stool. “Caine?”

“I don’t need a sandwich. And I don’t want a beer.” He slid a hand into her hair and dropped a kiss onto her forehead as he exhaled slowly. “The only thing I need or want right now is you.”

Good thing for the stool behind her because Addison felt her legs give out a bit, around the same time Caine picked her up and deposited her on the tall seat.

To bring her lips level with his.

“You kissed me today,” he murmured against her lips.

Words weren’t anywhere near the realm of possibilities right now, so she simply nodded mutely in response.

His arms came to rest on the counter on either side of her, effectively creating a hot as hell Caine cocoon that her body was responding rather dramatically. Partly due to the fact that Caine before his shift, and Caine after his shift were like two different people.

Caine before his shift was sweet, charming, and guy-next-door irresistible.

Caine after his shift was unbridled, magnetic, and bad-boy-on-the-hunt unescapable.

This Caine standing before her now also had an almost palpable aura of undiluted alpha energy rolling off of him in waves.

Oh, sweet lord, his eyes alone were conjuring some wicked, dirty thoughts in her mind.

“You kissed me twice,” he repeated. “So I was hoping it’d be okay with you if I kissed you back. Twice.”

Being that he was after-shift Caine, he didn’t wait for an answer.

He kissed her.

And what a kiss it was. His lips moved from her ear, to her jawline, down to the racing pulse at her neck. And back up again.

“That’s one,” he rasped against her skin.

Jesus Christ, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to survive number two.

It was a near thing.

His arms clamped around her and drew her flush against him mere seconds before his lips came crashing down onto hers. He wasn’t kissing her, he was having burning hot sex with her mouth.

And good God, for the first time in her life, she wanted, needed, craved *more*.

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEXT EVENING, Addison was *still* walking around with a fool grin on her mouth that just wouldn't quit.

"You got lucky last night," gasped Shirley, not even a minute into the start of Addison's shift.

Her cheeks burst into flames. "No I didn't," she hissed back, peering over Shirley's shoulder to make sure the kids were out of earshot.

"Bull. I know a five star satisfaction rating when I see one. And honey, you look like you even went back for seconds. Is it Caine? Is he as intense in bed as he is out of it?"

"I told you, I didn't have sex last night." Or ever. "And why would you assume it's Caine?"

"Please. You two can't keep your eyes off each other when you're in here. And even when you're not together, seriously, I don't think the two of you even realize other people of the opposite sex exist."

That was certainly the case for Addison; it was nice hearing from a bystander that it looked like Caine felt the same way. "We just...kissed."

Shirley whistled. "Must have been a hell of a kiss."

Lordy yes, it was. Even the mere *memory* of last night's kiss was having more of an effect on her than every kiss she'd ever had before it, combined.

Shirley smiled, all teasing in her expression now gone. "I'm happy for you, honey. You don't talk about it much, but Joe and I know that you haven't had an easy life." She leaned in to give Addison a quick hug. "I like seeing good things happen to good people. That goes for both you and Caine."

It occurred to Addison then that this was the first hug she'd had from a motherly figure since she was a little girl. Tears flooded her eyes before she could stop it.

"Oh listen to me sounding like a Hallmark card." Shirley fanned her hand over her face. "My mascara is going to run at this rate. You go on and start your shift. I need to go call my daughter and hug the living daylights out of her over the phone."

Addison gave her a watery laugh. Shirley was always talking about how alike Addison and her daughter at NYU were.

After quickly tying on her apron, Addison went out front to check on the tables, finding herself looking over at the door every so often, even though she knew she wouldn't be seeing Caine tonight. He was starting another stretch on the eight to four shift tomorrow so he'd stayed up all day today, after spending nearly twenty four hours awake, to get on a sleep cycle that would allow his body to be functional during the night and day flip.

Last night, after their marathon make-out session, he'd made a few quiet, *descriptive* suggestions of how she could potentially assist him in adjusting his sleep schedule.

The man was quite the word wizard when it came to dirty talk.

And by the end of the night, judging by his heartfelt groans every so often...so was she.

"Well, that's a pretty smile."

Addison snapped her gaze over to the source of the low, teasing voice.

“David. Hi. How are you?” She flashed her regular the same bright smile she kept on reserve for all her customers. “It’s been a few weeks. How’ve you been?”

His smile went up a few thousand watts. “You noticed. I was wondering if you would.”

She didn’t really know how to respond. He was always saying slightly off-centered things like that. Smile shifted to idle, she nodded over at an empty booth. “You staying or did you want to order something to go?”

“Of course I’ll stay.”

Again. Just a teeny bit off-center. “Okay, well, I’ll grab you a coffee.”

“You read my mind; you’re so good at that.” He gave her a kind of...strange smile. “Can’t wait to have you surprise me with the perfect dinner again.”

Was it just her, or was he more than a little off-center tonight? Her smile dimmed in confusion.

“Remember? The other week? You picked out something off the menu for me?”

Ohhh, *right*. Yeah, that had been weird; she’d blocked that memory out a little bit. Immediately, she feigned nodding at an invisible bid for her attention from a distant table. “Be right with you,” she called out, to the couple talking to each other behind him, and not looking her way at all. “David, I’ll give you some time with the menu and be back for your order.”

“But—”

She got the heck out of there, zipping right back to the kitchen.

Where she almost ran right over Shirley.

“Hey, where’s the fire?” Shirley jumped back, and frowned with concern. “What’s going on?”

Addison did a whole body joint-jiggle to shake the willies out. “Nothing. It’s nothing. Just, that regular is here. David. He just...seems a little weirder than usual.”

Shirley gave her a sympathetic nod. “He still asking you out?”

“Not today.” Which was a nice reprieve. He’d asked her out a dozen times already since he’d started coming regularly to the diner a few months back. And she’d politely declined each time, using the oldie, but goodie that she was on perpetual babysitter duties until...oh, Kylie’s high school graduation in ten years. “But then again, the guy just got here so who knows, he might be getting ready to do it later tonight.” Addison frowned. Turning a guy down was always awkward, but with David, it was more than awkward. It was weird and uncomfortable, too.

“Sorry, hon. I’d offer to take him off your plate, but I’m about to start my break, and I really need to get to the pharmacist to get Steve’s refill on his blood pressure meds.”

“Don’t be silly. You go on. It’s so slow tonight, even for a Sunday. Take your time.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Since it’s Ryan on the grill tonight, you know he’s going to be doing his big show in the order window all night long.” Yet another reason to love their fabulous singing and dancing diner cook; he always kept the customers well-entertained. “With him going at it, I can stay behind the counter as much as possible. It’ll be fine.”

After waiting as long as she could, Addison eventually went back out to pour a mug of coffee for David, all the while mentally calculating how much longer she could put off bringing the check to the two other nearby booths.

“Here’s your coffee, David. Are you ready to order?”

He pouted a little. “I thought you were ordering for me again.”

She *really* didn’t want to. “Hmm, well, the specials today are pretty great,” she said finally, meeting him partway.

He brightened up. “Yeah? Which one do you think I’ll love?”

What was it about his words that made her feel like a cat getting rubbed in the wrong direction? “The Shepherd’s Pie and Chicken a la King have been real popular tonight.” She was doing her absolute best not to bend the conversation the way he wanted.

Not that he seemed to notice. That odd smile was back on his face. “You did it again. Shepherd’s Pie sounds perfect.”

Great. “Alrighty. I’ll go put your order in right now.” She pivoted and went right back to the order menu, trying not to shudder as she *felt* his eyes on her as she walked away.

Her gut had never failed her in the past. And right now, it was screaming at her to steer clear of the guy.

“Hey, could we get our check?”

Damn. That was one.

One more table to go before the right half of the diner cleared out, leaving her and David alone. Hopefully the college kids over by the window and the sweet elderly couple that came in every week to sit at the counter decided to stay for dessert.

Hell, she’d *give* them free dessert.

A half hour later, Shirley was back—thank God—and there were a few more customers. But no one who wanted a booth. Damn.

“Come sit with me for a bit, Addison.” David flashed her a would’ve-been-charming-if-not-for-the-half-cocked-glaze-in-his-eyes grin. “You look like you could take a load off. Want me to order you your favorite slice of cake? It’s on me.”

Okay, the guy was definitely laying it on thicker than usual. Why oh why had she told him that the Chantilly Dobash Cake was her favorite. “Aw, thanks, David. But I really need to go finish up some paperwork for Joe. Shirley will bring you your check when you’re ready.”

David was back to pouting.

She didn’t give a flying fig right now.

Addison retreated to Joe’s office and released a relieved sigh when she was able to shut the door behind her. Something about David tonight had made her feel like a layer of smoke was clinging to her out there. Though it totally wasn’t in her nature, she made a mental note not to smile as much around him anymore.

Maybe if she looked ornery all the time, he would start thinking she was too bitchy to be weird around.

Shirley returned from her break a short while later, and Addison retreated to the office for the next hour or so to do the paperwork she hadn’t been lying about. Shirley checked in once to tell her that David had eventually left in a bit of a snit.

The main thing was that he was gone.

As the clock ticked down to closing, Addison finished wiping up the counters and watched the clock. The last of the customers had cleared out a good fifteen minutes ago, and since they’d been running so slow even before that, Ryan and Shirley had been able to get everything shut down quicker than usual so Addison had sent them on home a little while ago. No sense they all watch the clock together.

While it wasn’t as if this were the first time she’d ever been in the diner alone, for some reason, tonight felt eerier than usual. It didn’t help that the janitors had shifted their Sunday schedule forward an hour, leaving her *really* alone.

Screw it. There’s only a few minutes left.

She went over to the front door to lock up.

Only to have it clang open when she got there.

Crap.

“David. You’re back.”

Addison gripped her phone tighter in one hand, and repositioned her hold on the pen she was carrying so she could jab it in his eye if she needed to. “We’re actually all closed up already.”

“I know. I came to talk to you in private.” David smiled, and gave her a slow-roaming once-over from head to toe.

Gross.

“I know your secret,” he said cryptically then. His expression changed from smiling to... sympathetic.

Weirder and weirder.

He reached behind him to flip the door sign to closed. “*I know*, Addison.”

“Look, David. You really ought to get going. I need to close up. And frankly, I’m not feeling too comfortable with you being here right now.” Honesty was pretty much her only defense at the moment.

He held up his hands in the air innocently. “I don’t blame you for being cautious. I finally understand. When you’re homeless, you just don’t know who you can trust.”

Shit. *Shit*. *Shit*. *Shit*. Of all the people to find out. “David, I need you to leave. Right now.” She edged away from him and moved to push open the door.

He cut her off and blocked her path. “Don’t be afraid. I understand everything now. I want to help.” He reached into his pocket for his wallet. “Let me help you get back on your feet. Get you out of that van.”

“David. Stop it. If you don’t leave, I’m going to call the police.” She held up her phone between them.

A look of utter confusion blanketed his expression. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. I’m just trying to help. You and I both know that a van is no place for *kids* to be sleeping every night.”

That was a threat. *Shit*. She snapped her mouth shut and waited to see what cards he would show next.

“Actually,” his eyes widened as if he just had a brilliant idea, “why don’t you and the kids come live with me? My house isn’t that far from here. The kids can stay in the spare room. They’ll be right down the hall from our room.”

For the first time in her life, Addison was starting to feel truly terrified. Like she’d swum out into a riptide she couldn’t escape. “David,” she tried to keep the fear out of her voice as she mollified him, “that’s a real generous offer, but the kids and I are just fine. This is temporary. We’ll be back in our apartment in no time.”

His eyes hardened. “I don’t like when you lie to me, Addison. I know you’ve had to lie to everyone to keep this little secret of yours going for so long, but you and I both know that I’m not just anyone. You can *trust* me.”

He was crazy. He really was crazy, she could see it clear as day now. She went back to remaining silent, all the while looking for an opening where she could *run*.

“All this time,” he said softly, sympathetically again. “I know now why you could never go out with me. It’s those kids. A girl your age shouldn’t have to be saddled down with two kids to support.” He shook his head sadly. “You’ve had such a big burden on your shoulders for so long. You’re such a good person to take on a responsibility like that. Sacrifice your whole life, and your happiness for those kids.”

At that point, Addison stopped caring about her own safety. The way he kept emphasizing *kids*

wasn't sitting right with her. Her eyes flashed over to door to the kitchen, and the door out to the back just beyond that. If she ran for the kitchen first, she could grab a bunch of knives as weapons. If she didn't wound him considerably first, he'd be able to catch her and the kids before they even got a chance to run.

David took a step closer to her and put a heavy, unrelenting hand on her elbow. "Like I said, sweetie, I just want to help. Help take that burden off of you. So you can just relax a bit and enjoy life again."

She waited for her opening, readied her feet to start kicking and then running.

Suddenly, the blaring siren of a police squad car pierced the air.

A second later, the front door was yanked open so hard she was surprised it was still on its hinges. "Get the hell away from her."

Thank God.

Caine.

He braced open the door with his foot, leaving one hand palm up in her direction, while the other remained hovered over the gun at his hip. His eyes never left David's for even a second. "Addison, come on outside, while this gentleman and I have a little chat."

David shot Caine a death-glare, dark and ugly. "We were just having a conversation."

"Well, she doesn't look to be a willing participant in this conversation." Jaw grit tight, Caine pointed at the David's hand, which was now digging painfully into her elbow.

David released her then. "You can't arrest me for just touching her arm."

"You're right. I can't." Caine held his hand out to her again. "Addison, come out here and go stand by my car."

She did exactly as he instructed.

With one hand still hovering over his gun, Caine reached up to speak into the radio on his shoulder.

Addison was standing behind the driver's side door, which Caine had left open before running in to her rescue. She couldn't make out everything he was saying, partly because all the blood in her body seemed to be rushing into her ears like crashing waves. But she could hear that he was talking to dispatch.

A second later, David scurried out of the diner.

And kept on walking until he rounded the corner and disappeared.

Caine rushed to her side, all the while, keeping one eye in the direction David had rushed off in. "Sweetheart, are you okay?" He put a gentle hand on her arm, but didn't touch her more than that. Funny how that one touch, so similar to David's just minutes prior, felt like night and day. She collapsed against his chest, and he immediately squeezed her tight. "It's okay now. Everything's alright."

So saying, his hand was still hovering over his gun.

While she kept clinging to him, he spoke into his radio again and exchanged a few sentences with dispatch that washed over her like the tide. Caine was here. David was gone and Caine was here.

That's all her brain needed to process at the moment.

When two more squad cars showed up not even a minute later, she finally untangled her arms from Caine so he could do his job.

But he didn't let go of her.

Secretly thankful for that, she dropped her head back down to his chest, right over his heart. He

kept her tucked against his side like it was the most natural thing in the world for him to be briefing two other officers with her stuck to his side like a jellyfish.

Marco, probably her next favorite officer after Caine, drove off in the direction that David had walked off in, while Peter, a rookie cop she didn't know that well went back to his squad car while talking with dispatch.

"Honey, are you able to hear me now?"

How did he know? She looked up at him and repeated her question aloud.

He gazed down at her worriedly. "Because I've been there. Adrenaline crash can mess with your senses." Rubbing his hands down her arms to warm her up, he pressed his lips to her forehead before wrapping her up in a grizzly bear hug. "You scared the hell out of me tonight, woman."

"Thank you."

Oh great. So apparently, adrenaline crash also stole her ability to give logical replies in a conversation.

And now she felt like giggling. *What the heck?*

His arms wrapped around her even tighter. "Don't worry, it'll pass." He peppered another few kisses across her temple.

Eventually, she stopped shaking, *after* she realized she'd been shaking to begin with. "Thank you for saving me," she finally managed.

"I'm just glad I was late coming back from my last call of the night. If I hadn't happened to see the silhouette of you two through the glass door—"

This time, the shudder was hitting *his* large frame. "Honey, you need to tell me everything that happened here tonight. Why was that man harassing you?"

Oh God. Could she do it?

Could she actually tell him *everything*?

CHAPTER TEN

SHE WAS HIDING something from him.

Caine threw his wet towel back up on the hook behind his bathroom door and slid on a pair of old workout sweats to go a few rounds with the heavy bag. He needed to hit something. Badly.

As he pounded out his frustrations for a good solid hour, his mind kept racing with all the possible things Addison could be keeping from him.

He came up with nothing.

Well, for one fleeting moment, he'd thought *maybe* David might've been her ex-husband or something. But the way the creep had been staring at Addison had been proof positive that he viewed her through a looking glass as a challenge, an unreachable obsession.

Either that, or the man was a complete psychopath with the emotional capacity of a sea slug. The giveaway? The dead eyes. That was the only way Caine could explain it. No affection or hatred. No true human emotions at all. Just sickly intense desire sparking in the center of a nothing-filled void.

No way would Addison have ever had anything to do with a man like that.

So that returned Caine back to square one. He couldn't think of a single thing she could be hiding. She was always so candid—with him at least—and her life as simple and transparent as his was as far as he could tell.

Still, he knew in his gut there was more she simply wasn't telling him.

After jumping in another shower, he called up Joe at the diner to get Shirley's number. Shirley confirmed that this David guy had asked Addison out dozens of times in the past, and had been acting stranger than usual last night.

Hearing that last bit had made Caine crazy. He hated knowing that she'd already felt uneasy before David had returned. That she'd braved it alone without even *thinking* to ask for help.

The woman was too independent for her own good.

As much as he admired that, it also scared the hell out of him. A thousand thoughts of what could've happened to her if he hadn't intervened had assailed him since he'd escorted her back to Lakeview Ridge. He hadn't even been able to leave the gated entrance until he saw that big breadbox on wheels she drove disappear halfway down the golf course.

At least she'd agreed to file the restraining order against David last night, which already should've been served to him today. That was the first step they needed to be able to arrest him. Luckily, the guy had paid his meal with a credit card, which had helped them find his address, and also his existing priors.

David's record wasn't extensive, but it was enough to make all of Caine's grim what-ifs worsen tenfold.

A date rape charge back in college that never got prosecuted—surprise, surprise—and then another a few years back where the victim was under the influence of something they lacked the evidence to prove. Apparently, that one got settled out of court. And then most recently, harassment and assault charges—again filed by a woman—that did end up making it all the way to sentencing.

He'd served thirty days in jail...not long before he'd moved to Creek Hills and first started coming to Joe's Diner, apparently.

After seeing the charges, Caine had wanted nothing more than to throw Addison over his shoulder and hide her away under twenty-four hour surveillance, guarded by the best fighter he knew in Arizona, aka his foster sister Lia whose lifetime of martial arts training had armed her with the chops to be not just good, but scary-ass good.

But he knew Addison would hate that. He knew his girl would want to fight instead of hide.

When she'd told him last night about the plan she'd been concocting to grab some knives from the kitchen to go on the offensive with David before Caine had showed up, he'd made a remark that it was clear her 'fight' instincts were stronger than her 'flight' ones.

And that's when she'd replied: "I think a person's response to a threat to his or her own survival could be totally opposite from their response to a threat to the survival of a loved one." Clouds had darkened her eyes for a beat before she'd added, "I think sometimes, your fear for someone you love can give you more strength...strength to fight when you would normally run. And the strength to run when you would normally fight."

At the time, he hadn't fully understood all that she was saying since half didn't seem to apply. Sometimes, adrenaline made folks super philosophical. But the more jittery revelations she started to reveal as her adrenaline crash ebbed away, the more he'd started to wonder if she wasn't talking about things from her past.

She confirmed it a little while later when she was surveying the bruises David had left on her arm.

"I've never had bruises like this before," she'd said quietly. "My mom never hit me or anything like that, but the scars she's left on my heart over the years, I'm sure one day some shrink will tell me that I'm irreversibly messed up because of it." Caine had pulled her into his arms then, and just held her silently while she gave him a small glimpse into the hell she'd lived through as a kid.

"Whenever my mom was really mad at me—like when I wet the bed by accident once because I'd been scared of a drugged-out man who had fallen on top of me during one of her parties—that's when she'd throw back in my face how it was all my fault, how everything that happened to me and to her was *my* fault because the life she was forced to lead was all the result of my having been born in the first place. I can't even remember how many times she's shouted at me that the reason why the love of her life left her was because I came along. That I stole the cushy life she would've had with her soulmate and the kids that she *did* want one day...and that I should be thanking her every day that she didn't just abort me like she'd wanted to all along."

"At least with Tanner and Kylie—whose father she did know the identity of—she only made them feel invisible, a burden at best, and at worst, a failure for not being enough to get him to stay. I was unwanted, unwelcome from the day I'd been conceived, and I'd come to terms with that, but I didn't want my half-brother and half-sister to ever feel the way I did. So I made sure to take the blame and brunt for everything if they'd ever accidentally break a glass or spill the milk...in the hopes that she'd show them the love she never showed me...and kindness, if she could spare it."

Hearing what she'd gone through growing up had horrified him. And the fact that these were just the things she *wasn't* hiding from him flat-out terrified him.

He didn't know all her secrets yet, but as sure as he was that hell was hot and the universe sometimes cruel, he knew that if anything, *anything* like that ever happened to her again, vengeance would be the least violent thing he'd do to get back at the universe.

And if he ever lost her? Nothing would stop him from earning his broken soul a place in hell.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CAINE GROWLED IN FRUSTRATION as he listened to Addison tell him she was going to take the kids to a hotel until this all blew over, to keep her Aunt Bernadette out of it.

“You’re lying to me.”

She paused for a long moment, before whispering, “Yes.” After which, she added softly, “It’s not easy for me. To lie to you. I promise you that, Caine.”

Damn her and her sweetness.

With a rough sigh, he again found himself at a crossroads between wanting to curse aloud over the woman’s freaking independent streak and drag her back to his cave to hold and cherish her even more so because of it.

“Where are you right now?”

“I’m waiting for Tanner and Kylie to get out of school.”

He could tell, she wasn’t making that one up. “Do you want me there? I could call in a favor and have a squad car nearby if it’ll make you feel better.”

“No.”

Never had a no sounded so much like a yes. “You’re a lot of work, you know that right?” he chided gently.

Her quiet chuckle was the only acknowledgement she gave that she *maybe* thought he had a valid point.

“Are you going to work at the diner tonight?”

She hesitated again, before finally admitting, “Yes.”

At least she didn’t lie about that. Not that he liked hearing she wasn’t going to turtle up somewhere he could keep her safe. Exhaling a pent-up lung full of male frustration, he *told*—not asked—her, “I’m on the four to midnight shift again so I’ll stop by when you start your shift to take another look around. If you spot David before then, you call 911. Then you call me. You hear? He’ll be violating the restraining order we filed so we’ll be able to arrest him.” His voice hardened to brook no argument. “Swear to me, Addison. If you see him, you’ll call 911 and then call me.”

Another long pause. Then a slow: “I promise.”

He’d heard the struggle in her voice as clearly as he’d heard the acceptance. “One day,” he rumbled quietly. “One day, you’re going to trust me enough with your secrets...when you finally figure out that I’m not going anywhere, and that I can be every bit as patient and stubborn as you are.”

This time, there was no pause when she replied to his affectionate, albeit slightly ornery vow. “Tonight.”

He froze, and held his tongue so she could finish saying what he hoped she was saying.

“I’ll tell you everything tonight, Caine.”

“I’m holding you to that.” He glanced at the caller ID photo of her on his screen. “Dammit, I hate that I can’t kiss you right now, sweetheart.”

“Me too,” she breathed raggedly.

For as much as her lies drove him crazy, her truths...they could steal the floor out from under

him.

He took in a lungful of oxygen to stop himself from putting an APB out on her butt right that instant. “I’ll see you at four-thirty. You can tell me then whatever that busy brain of yours is planning on how to deal with David. And we’ll save your secrets for *after* my shift. Something tells me I’m going to need to not be in uniform when you do.”

She neither confirmed nor denied his educated guess.

But she did ask him to stay on the phone for a bit longer while she waited for the kids to finish school.

By the time he hung up the phone, he knew a little more about the Addison that no one else knew, and he felt like he was holding a small gift in the palm of his hand—something that she didn’t give to very many people.

Just a tiny bit of her trust.

And it humbled him.

* * * * *

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, even though he was the one with the gun and badge, Caine felt utterly defenseless as he dropped one knee down to the ground inside of Joe’s Diner.

As sweet little Kylie hugged the heck out of him.

“Thank you for saving Addison, Caine,” she said gravely, her voice far too old for her young age. “We’ve been hearing Shirley and Joe talkin’ ‘bout what happened.”

The tight, shaky teenage hand gripping his arm in a silent echo of thanks was another arrow to his chest that reminded him just how much he cared about these two kids, and their big sister. “I just gave Addison a little assist, pumpkin. That sister of yours was getting ready to whup that creep’s a—err, *butt*.”

Both Kylie and Tanner’s twin expressions of grim wariness and fierce awareness of the situation—so much like the one their sister had worn last night after David ran off—burrowed another hole into his heart.

God, these kids were incredible. Just like their sister.

After ruffling Kylie’s hair and double-thumping Tanner’s back once more, Caine headed on back to the small lot behind the diner where he knew Addison parked that historic parade float she called a van.

He checked out all the possible points of entrance and weaknesses in the area, and though she’d probably beat him with a bat if she ever found out, he planted one of Max’s top-of-the-line tracking devices under the back bumper of her van. He couldn’t possibly get anything like this officially approved by his captain for a stalking case, but even if he could, he’d still pick a Spencer security gadget over anything department issued. There was a reason why Max and Gabe would undoubtedly become a huge success if they ever went through with the security business they wanted to start up.

With that taken care of, he went back in the diner to go kiss the hell out of Addison before he headed out on patrol.

Truth be told, he was a bit surprised that it was nearly eleven at night when he got the call from dispatch he’d both been expecting, and dreading.

An indignant and belligerent David was back at the diner demanding to see Addison. According to the intel they were getting, he wasn’t armed, but he was waving around the restraining order paperwork in utter disbelief.

Hell and damnation, the crazy ones always made him ten times more wary. Their instability was without a doubt, the most dangerous weapon in their possession.

Joe, Shirley, two cooks, and apparently three other kitchen workers—double their normal staffing numbers—had all been there to keep David from being able to see, let alone speak to Addison.

By the time Caine got on site, David was long gone. He took off before the officers could get there to arrest him.

And so had Addison.

After making sure Marco was getting the statements they needed to keep building a rock solid case against the ticking time bomb, Caine went back to his car to turn on his tracking device.

Within minutes, he tracked her van to Lakeview Ridge, but not anywhere near her Aunt Bernadette's address. He found the van parked in one of the obscured temporary loading zone stalls at the south end of the country club grounds, just behind the golf clubhouse.

Caine approached the van cautiously, and shined his flashlight into the window, to reveal an empty driver's seat.

Maybe she had the same worries you did about the van. The idea of Addison ditching the very conspicuous van made him nearly break out into a cold sweat. He had no way of tracking her if that was the case.

Just then, the thick curtain separating the front seats from the rest of the van flickered with movement.

Caine circled the van and hovered his trigger hand over his sidearm. "Addison? It's Caine. Come on out, honey."

Silence.

A horrifying, sickening mental image hit him all at once. What if David already found her. What if he had her in there. What if she was hurt...or worse.

He rapped his flashlight on the side door. "Addison, sweetheart. I need to know you're safe in there. Because I'm imagining the worst right now. If you don't open the door in the next five seconds, I'm breaking in."

Mentally, he started the countdown while he ran through all the scenarios of what else might be going on.

God, what if the van was wired for explosives. The guy was crazy, but was he that crazy?

At the four-second mark, the door opened slowly.

Caine froze in shock over what he saw.

"Tanner? Kylie? What's going on?"

The kids were sitting huddled in the middle of an air mattress laying atop the flattened rows of seats in the rear of the van.

He peered inside to make sure David wasn't in there with them.

"Are you kids okay?"

Tanner stared at him in silence, bravery painted all over his young face, even as his eyes looked seconds from filling with tears.

"Addison went to the bathroom," said Kylie quietly, eyes fixed on his hand as he finally moved it away from his sidearm. "This is the one we go to if the cleaners are still in the diner when one of us has to go real bad."

Caine felt a pain hit him square in the solar plexus over that info.

...Which quickly shot up to his heart when he heard the soft gasp from behind him. Pivoting, he

made sure to lower his flashlight so as not to blind her.

“*Caine.*”

He studied Addison’s scared, exhausted features and tempered the cocktail of overwrought emotions coursing through his veins as best he could. Even as every protective, possessive cell in his body was silently *raging* against whoever or whatever was responsible for every painfully beautiful decorative element he’d surveyed inside the van...each detail clearly Addison’s way of making her two siblings as loving a home as she could manage.

Caine pinned her to the spot with a deadly serious look. “We’re not waiting until my shift is over anymore. Tell me everything, Addison. Right now.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

ADDISON NODDED, but before she got right to the spilling-her-guts part, she motioned the kids back in bed. “We need to drive somewhere else first. Can’t park anywhere on this property after eleven unless you’re registered as an overnight guest. The security here is really tight.”

Caine frowned at her. “What do you mean? Then how do you and the kids normally sleep here?”

“We don’t. I park in the lot behind Joe’s diner every night. The only times I come here normally is from eight to twelve every morning during the weekdays when I go to my part time day job as a senior citizen companion for Bernadette Blumenthal, the eighty-year old grandmother of seven who everyone from her doctors to her dog groomer call Aunt Bernadette, at her insistence.”

She shut the van doors and then did a slow double take then. “Wait a minute, come to think of it, how *did* you find us here?” They were nowhere near the residential buildings on site.

For the first time that night, Caine lost a little bit of the ultra-intense, always-on-the-job Swat Team Ken Doll veneer.

...And became the even-more-intense, effing-screw-the-job Caveman Caine in the blink of an eye.

“I put one of Max’s security devices on your van earlier today.”

“You *lo-jacked* me?”

Both his hands flattened against the back of the van, on either side of her face. “Yep.” That single gruff, matter-of-fact word was charged with a thousand kilowatts of undiluted alpha male energy.

Why wasn’t she more upset about this?

Oh right, because he was doing that orbiting her to near-orgasm with just his eyes thing. Lord have mercy. That blistering hot look was *exponentially* more effective when he was in uniform.

His gaze locked on her eyes as he slowly slid two calloused fingers down the side of her neck until it rested gently on the thrumming pulse point near her throat. “Then where, pray tell,” he growled, in a voice as rough and shimmery as coarse silk, “did you park last night after I followed you here?”

Rather than answer, she closed her hand around his wrist. “That won’t work on me. You won’t be able to gauge if I’m lying by checking my heartrate.”

One brow raised up slightly. “No?”

She shook her head. “No. Because around you, my heartrate basically goes haywire anyway.”

His eyelids slammed shut as if he were praying for patience. When they opened again a few long moments later, to reveal a burning hunger that scorched her to the core, sure enough, her heart began beating triple time in her chest. “See?” she said weakly.

He took in a deep, frayed breath, then slid his hand into her hair to lightly cup the back of her head. “Answer my question, Addison.”

Wow, good move. Way more proactive than the pulse point thing. Because holy hell, there was no way in the world she was able lie to him now.

“I drove around here for about an hour just in case David had followed me, and then I exited out of the east entrance that goes right to the freeway. I made sure no one was behind me for several miles before I got off the freeway and went over to the most secure twenty-four hour parking garage I could find.”

He stared at her long and hard before he moved to open the van door back up again. “Pack everything up. And I mean everything. I’ll go talk to security to give us some extra time.”

Addison felt her throat start to close up in fear. Even more fear than she’d felt last night. “You’re taking the kids from me?”

It was every nightmare she’d had for the past twenty-two months juggernauted into one wrecking ball shattering her heart into a thousand jagged pieces.

Her stomach dropped to the ground and her legs all but gave out from under her.

His gaze snapped back to hers in shock and gripped her arm to steady her when her stance faltered. “What? *No*. Of course not. You three are coming to my place as soon as my shift is done in a half hour. You’re never *ever* sleeping in this thing again,” he growled the latter sentence like a violent vow. “Get everything into my car. Don’t leave anything behind; we’re going to leave the van in the underground parking lot at the station.”

Though his expression remained unreadable, his voice gentled as he cupped Addison’s face. “I just need to get some paperwork in so I’m the primary on your case, then we can finish talking at my apartment after my shift.” His gaze was firm, resolute. Filled with a thousand reasons to trust him. “I won’t let anything bad happen to you and the kids. I promise you that. You believe me, right?”

She did.

...Despite what history had taught her over the years on this very subject.

“Kids, let’s get everything packed up,” she said by way of answer, which finally prompted Kylie and Tanner to heed Caine’s orders. She knew them, they would’ve darn well sat there like stubborn lumps on a log otherwise.

And that fact was the reason why her unprecedented trust in Caine came with something just as surprising.

Hope.

She had hope. In Caine. In the universe not being a complete asshole for a change.

Because she didn’t want Kylie and Tanner to have to live in a reality where the one and *only* person they felt they could trust was her.

Caine, being Caine, went back to his squad car without another word, somehow knowing that she needed both time and space to work through her feelings as she packed up the only place she’d ever really considered home. The place she’d made for the kids so they could have a home for once as well. It may not have been much, but it *had* been theirs. And it had been filled with more love and happy memories than all their years at their mom’s apartment, combined.

“We could run,” whispered Tanner when Caine was out of earshot. “That guy...he’s falling for you. I know he is. So I don’t think he’ll turn us in. If you want us to run, we’ll run.”

Hot tears flooded her eyes. Partly because of his thoughts on Caine’s feelings about her—which her heart had squeezed tight over hearing—but mostly because of his unnecessarily brave declaration. “No. No running.”

“Are you sure?”

No she wasn’t. Not even a little bit.

So she lied. “Absolutely. I think we should give Caine’s way a chance.”

But because she’d never been good at lying to the kids, even when it was for their own good,

she added one truth she knew to the marrow of her bones: “Besides, if we ran, I guarantee you, Caine would chase us. And he for darn certain wouldn’t stop until he found us again.”

Strangely, that one wholly overbearing, yet unnervingly heart-filling fact gave her exactly the amount of strength she needed to finish packing.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTER EMPTYING OUT THE VAN, Addison followed Caine to the underground police parking lot below the station and pulled in to the stall he pointed out to her.

Over the half hour it took for him to return the squad car and do whatever cops do to close out their shift, all Addison could do was wonder.

Wonder if she was ready to face what was going to happen next.

Wonder how Caine was handling *not* doing the normal cop thing right now by calling social services to take the kids away.

Wonder why she wasn't freaking out more.

Only the answer to the last was readily available.

She trusted him, a hundred percent.

The question now was if she was doing wrong by him in dragging him into her crazy life.

Caine returned just as her thoughts were spinning her off into directions she wasn't prepared to face.

Silently, Addison carried the now dozing Kylie in her arms while Tanner carried his and Kylie's backpacks. The ones Addison had always told them to keep their most treasured things in just in case they ran into an emergency situation.

She knew for a fact that the emergency backpacks now housed one very well-cared-for Venus Flytrap and a pressed flower arrangement she'd helped Kylie make out of the hyacinths that Caine had given her before taking them to the movies.

The fact that the kids had deployed her emergency protocol as they'd followed Caine's orders hammered yet another set of splintered cracks into her heart.

He walked them over to his personal vehicle—a prototypical cop SUV, big and black with dark bodyguard window tint—and saw that he'd already transferred the things from the van.

He drove in total silence until they got out of the police building. The farther they got from the station, it seemed, the less tense Caine became. Until finally, he asked quietly, “Do you guys need to stop at the store or anything? I don't actually know what your normal routine is.”

Her heart seized in her chest, but in a good way this time. “We've got everything we need. I always keep some extra fruits and pantry items in our cooler so the kids can eat that for breakfast.”

“I'll cook you guys breakfast,” he growled.

Honestly, at this rate, her heart would burst out of her chest before they even arrived at his apartment.

They were back to silence for the rest of the ride.

With one big difference.

Caine had reached over for her hand, almost as if simply reassuring himself she was there at first, but when she laced her fingers with his, he gripped it then as if he never meant to let her go.

Yep, the man was definitely out to slingshot her heart right out of her ribcage.

About five minutes later, Caine was unlocking the door to a cozy apartment that was nothing like she expected. Sure, it was a standard bachelor pad in that there was hardly any furniture. But the

warm, oversized pieces he did have weren't really a match for the modern condo apartment in the city. Rather, they were more designed for a big family home in the country

He even had photos of his family at one end of his kitchen counter.

When he saw her eyes gravitate there, he shrugged. "I should probably hang those up somewhere better; never had the chance."

But he'd made the time to put them out where he'd see them every day. And that revealed more than he probably realized.

It didn't take them long to bring in all the things they'd brought with them from the van. They were just finishing up tucking away the suitcase the kids shared when she noticed that Kylie and Tanner were standing stock still in front of Caine's big flat screen, staring at it like it held the secret entrance to Narnia.

Caine, being Caine, just got that jaw-clenched look of intense, silently ferocious empathy that he made sure to wipe from his face before he handed Tanner the remote. "It's going to take me a bit to get your air mattress filled up—I've got to find my air compressor—so why don't you and Kylie watch some TV in the meantime."

Addison felt an arrow of embarrassment then. "You don't have to fill up our air mattress. We'll be fine out here on the ground with our blankets and pillows."

He gave her a look that shouted, hell no, even as he replied to her suggestion in a deceptively calm voice, "You three take my bedroom. I figured I'd set up the air mattress for Tanner, and you and Kylie can take my bed. I'll sleep out here on the futon mattress."

While Addison was ready with an immediate *vocal* hell no, Tanner and Kylie beat her to the punch. Only they insisted on staying outside for a whole different reason. Courtesy of the big, bright TV they were now flipping channels through like a speed demon.

"We'll stay out here!" they both called out in unison.

Tanner spared a quick glance at the futon sofa before his eyes riveted right back on the TV. "You said futon mattress. Does that sofa open up flat?"

Caine flipped it flat in one easy motion. "Yep."

Kylie and Tanner didn't even tear their eyes away from the TV as they grabbed their pillows and blankets from Addison's hands before racing back to the now flattened futon.

After they were all settled in, Kylie then turned her doe eyes to Caine and asked in her sweet little voice, "Can me and Tanner sleep out here? And watch some TV for a little bit? Pleeeease."

Tanner wasn't even bothering to enter into the negotiations—Kylie had it knocked out of the park the second she'd clasped her hands together and audibly held her breath.

Addison smothered back a chuckle when she saw Caine melt right there on the spot.

Then Addison was the one holding her hands together over her chest—one atop the other, in hopes of slowing down her galloping heartbeat—as she watched the amazing man turn silently to the hall closet, and then return with two more fluffy spare pillows for the kids and a giant, white cloud-like comforter.

"It's late so you guys can watch TV for an hour," he said gruffly. "There are some kids' channels that still have cartoons on right now. Then you sleep. When you wake up in the morning, you guys can watch more TV until you need to get ready for school. Deal?"

Kylie launched herself off the sofa and into Caine's arms before she smattered his face with kisses. "Thank you, Caine!"

Tanner gave Caine the cool kid chin-jut thanks, though he did stare at the soft pillows Caine had handed them for a very telling second.

Meanwhile, Addison felt like she was going to lose it, just a little bit. Okay, maybe a lot. Her siblings hardly ever asked her for anything. And it absolutely slayed her that they were looking so over the moon by the possibility of something as small as watching TV.

She gripped the counter beside her to stem the pain radiating through her entire frame. “They haven’t been able to watch TV in a while,” she confessed to Caine. “I mean I made sure to buy them a tablet that they watch some internet shows on, and occasionally, there’s a family-friendly movie on at night that we play on the small diner TV’s we have mounted up on the walls. But yes, no TV like this of their own to watch.”

Swallowing back the shame cramping her insides, she added, “Even before we were homeless. Our mom pawned our TV off years ago to pay back a guy who had spotted her a loan. For some meth. Not that it mattered since we got kicked out of that place a few days later with basically just our clothes and a few of the kids’ toys—”

His hand on her arm stopped her explanations. Whether it was because he just couldn’t listen to any more, or because he knew *she* couldn’t, Addison wasn’t sure. But she was thankful for the reprieve.

“You’re pretty great with them,” Addison whispered, though she was sure the kids had tuned out all sounds except for the TV at this point. “Firm but fair.”

Caine shrugged. “Just channeling my folks, I guess. I’ve watched them with my brothers and foster siblings for years.” He grabbed an extra throw blanket and tossed it onto the recliner. “I’ll stay out here with the kids. You’ve had a rough couple of days, and my bed will make you sleep like a log.”

“Don’t be silly, I’m not going to take your bed from you. I can sleep on the air mattress out here.”

His jawline grew rigid as a rock, in perfect harmony with the hardened, unrelenting look in his eyes. “You take the real bed, Addison.”

“Caine—”

“No. While you were helping Kylie load some things in the car, Tanner told me you’ve been sleeping on that yellow dollar store inflatable floaty mat. Across the two front seats.”

“I’m short enough that it worked out fine,” she reasoned.

He stared at her with eyes brimming with emotions so raw she had to look away. “Please, Addison. Take the bed.”

Unable to face his tortured gaze again, she nodded and said simply, “Thank you.”

In the silence that followed, she realized the entire room had grown silent. Even the TV.

Looking over at the kids, she found them fast asleep. While their heads were laying on the marshmallow like pillows Caine had brought out, they were each holding their normal pillows tightly in their arms. They looked more blissfully comfortable than she could ever remember seeing them.

“Thank you for that, too.” She gazed at them and suddenly felt overwhelmed at seeing them on actual furniture. “I tried to make everything in the van as comfortable as possible. As much like a home as I could...”

“I know, sweetheart. And you did an amazing job. You raised two incredible kids.”

Tears prickled to life behind her closed eyelids. All at once, she felt so tired. So unbelievably drained.

Two strong arms swooped her up into the air then, before a granite-like chin gently tucked her head against his chest.

Without a word, he walked her to the bedroom.

As soon as they passed through the doorway, he quietly shut the door, fell onto the mattress with her, and then crushed her to him.

Then he just held her.

“Caine—”

“I just need to hold you for a bit. I promise I’ll go sleep outside after that. I just...need to feel you, to know you’re okay.” A broken breath shook out of his lungs. “Do you know how frickin’ terrified I’ve been ever since I found out that creep has been stalking you?” His vice grip tightened even more. “And do you have any idea how insane I’ve been going the last few hours knowing that you’ve been living in your van this entire time?”

Judging from how intense the alpha waves rolling off the man were getting, she was certain she didn’t have the first clue.

She didn’t know how to respond, what she could say to calm him down. So she just went with the first thing that popped into her head. “You can sleep in the bed with me. The kids always wake up after I do.”

That made the muscles in his frame tense, but in a very noticeably different way. His raspy voice nearly shuddered as he told her, “I’m not nearly strong enough to do that, sweetheart. But I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep.”

“Well at least let me help you blow up the air mattress.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s the kids’ bed.”

She flinched. “It’s really comfortable. I bought the best one I could for them.”

He scowled at her. “I didn’t mean anything by that. I have two foster siblings who came to our house with very few things; I know how important those things can be. I just didn’t want Kylie and Tanner to wake up and find me sleeping on their mattress before I checked with them if it was okay first.”

“Oh.” Why was he so unbelievably *wonderful*?

“Besides, I don’t sleep all that much anyway, remember? I’ll probably just nap on the recliner for a bit before jumping on the computer to do some work.”

“But—”

“No more talking. You must be exhausted. Just sleep, sweetheart. I’ll hold you until you do. Though I admit, it’s for selfish reasons. I want to hold you until you fall asleep so I know you’re in a bed, in a home, and safe.” He pressed his lips against her temple. “Is that okay?”

He had her at sleep. All the rest of it just sounded like angelic singing after that point.

She settled into his arms more—mostly because he dragged her closer until not even a breath of air could pass between their bodies.

That’s when she noticed it. Or was it a ‘him?’ Did guys really refer to their, errr, *man parts* as if it were living like they did in some movies?

“Um, Caine?”

“It’s fine,” he muttered, sounding far more relaxed than the current state of ‘it-him’ would lead her to believe.

And his use of ‘it’ just then was *not* a definitive answer to her question.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Again with the double possible usage of the word.

And was he serious with that suggestion? How in the world could she *not* worry about it-him?

She was basically exercising all the restraint she possessed not to poke back at the thing.

"It feels..." *Hot. Hard. Way too big to realistically fit in me.* "Painful," she concluded finally. "It feels painful." She gasped. "For *you*, I mean."

Great, now all she could think about is how it would feel for *her*.

Hot. Hard. And assuredly a whole bunch of other foreign-to-her adjectives she suddenly really, really wanted to apply.

He shrugged. "Lately, I've been like this damn near all the time when I'm around you. I'm used to it. I told you, it's fine. Just don't think about it and let's just rest."

Okay, so they were going with 'it.' Glad she got that all cleared up.

Now on to the other matter at hand. *Rest? Like this?* How ironic that the one time she was finally not sleeping in her van, there would be a big parking brake pressed against her back.

Not that she was complaining.

...Especially not when she did an experimental shift that rubbed her back firmly against his front.

He groaned. A thick pause passed before he commanded in a deep, feral, *hungry* voice, "Woman, behave."

God, how good would it feel to *not* behave for a change?

"While you're at it, stop with all those dirty thoughts," he grumbled. "I can practically hear you thinking, and it's making me harder."

Lordy, was that even possible? And was she totally evil for wanting to do something utterly reckless and decadent to see if it was?

He trailed his lips up her neck before skimming them against her earlobe as he rasped, "Keep making all those cute little sexy noises and I won't be responsible for my actions."

She sighed. But not in a bad way. "Honestly, Caine, I'm not going to get any sleep at this rate."

His lips stopped moving. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"God, no!"

She felt his lips curl up into a smile. "Try counting sheep." He sifted his hand through her hair and whispered with another smile, "Or try counting all the things you find adorable about me. Because I know there's lots."

Her shoulders shook in soft laughter. But she went and tried out his tongue-and-cheek suggestion anyway. After going over about a dozen items on the admittedly long list, her lids felt far too heavy to open to check the time like she normally did every half hour in the van.

Her brain shifted to neutral when she landed on one of her favorite things about Caine. How over-the-top overprotective he was, of both her and the kids.

That's when she came to the sleepy confirmation that there was no turning back now. She was officially and without a doubt, head over heels for the man.

Not because he was her savior or protector, or anything like that. But because he was the man who cared so much about her that he hadn't been able to let go of her hand for more than a few seconds at a time since the country club.

And so she slept, finally.

With her hand still entwined with his.

Non-yielding parking brake hard against her back and all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AT FOUR IN THE MORNING, Addison's inner alarm clock woke her up, just like it always did.

Then, just like she always did each morning, she immediately began stretching to get her normal sleeping-on-a-dollar-raft-in-a-van muscle kinks out. But to her shock, she found her body didn't have its usual aches and complaints.

And that definitely wasn't the cup holder pressing into her hip.

"Go back to sleep," rumbled the sexy, sleep-heavy voice next to her ear.

She snuggled into the covers more, taking just a teeny bit of enjoyment over hearing him hiss when she rubbed up against him unintentionally. Okay, *semi*-intentionally. "I thought you don't sleep."

"I usually don't. Which is even more reason that you should go back to sleep," reasoned Caine, muttering drowsily. "That way I can, too."

She really wanted that for him. Truly. But nature was calling. And from the sound of buzzing sound coming from his nightstand, someone else was too. "I think that's your phone."

Caine shot up in bed like a canon. "Can't believe I slept through that. That's never happened before." He frowned in bewilderment as he checked his caller ID.

An unreadable mask then settled on his face as he hit the redial button.

"Marco? Sorry I missed your call. I was asleep."

Pause. Then: "No worries. You're right, I don't normally sleep so it was fine you called. What's up?"

He listened in silence and all the while, Addison was trying not to imagine the worst. Unsuccessfully. She didn't even have to go the bathroom anymore, she was so on edge.

Caine took one look at her face and said into the phone, "Hey Marco? Hang on, I need to take a leak. I'm going to put you on speaker. Keep going though, I can hear you."

Then he clicked the phone onto speaker.

And motioned for her to be silent.

"—Dude, I'm touched that we've reached that level of friendship," chuckled Marco over the speaker. "Anyway, like I was saying, that David guy called in quote, unquote 'anonymously' talking about your girl. He was saying some crazy shit, and throwing out some bad allegations. Since it's on record, we need to respond, but since he's also been stalking her, I figured I'd check with you first on how you want to play this. We all know Addison; none of us believe the crap that guy is saying, but we still need to respond to the call. On the plus side, this will add to the case against him because the guy is a serious whack job. So yeah, how do you want to proceed with this?"

"What exactly did he say when he called?" asked Caine, expression grim.

The sound of computer keyboard clicking filled the phone line for a few seconds. Marco made a disgusted noise. "Okay, the operator classified it as a case of suspected child neglect. According to the report, he said he saw a lady shove two kids in a van with Addison's license plates, just like he had the night before. Then he went on and on about how the kids were crying and a lot more bullshit like that. Then he said that the van was parked at Joe's Diner and that we ought to go check it out tonight."

Caine snagged Addison's gaze. He looked worried.

Now, she was officially panicking.

"How'd you know it was him that called? We don't trace our tip lines."

"Because the idiot called the station, not the tip line. And he called from his cell phone, which showed up on the caller ID. The minute he said, 'Joe's Diner,' the operator took the phone number down. We all remember what Joe did to our shakes and burgers last year." The sound of a shudder echoed over the speaker.

Caine's voice reached a new level of calm that Addison had never heard before. He was in full cop mode now. "Sounds like he's getting desperate and trying anything to find her."

"That's what we were thinking. We don't want to waste resources by sending someone down there to write up a report that just proves he's nuts, but we have to respond to the call. Captain said we can work it into our schedule for one of the uniforms to handle today or you can take care of it tonight on your shift."

"Thanks. Tell him I'll definitely handle the follow-up. Only thing is, Addison's van isn't going to be at Joe's tonight. It's sitting in our underground parking lot at the station, and it's going to stay there for the time being."

Marco clicked a few more buttons on his end. "Shit, did you put that in the report?"

"No. I didn't confiscate the van. It's just way too noticeable so I told her to leave it in our lot, then I drove Addison and the kids to my place."

"When did all this happen?"

"At the end of my shift. I found Addison at her Aunt Bernadette's getting ready to take the kids to a hotel because she was scared out of her mind over David finding them."

"Damn. Is she doing okay?" Marco's voice was filled with concern. "I hate it when these sick bastards terrify women and kids, man."

"Me too. That's why I brought her to my place to crash for the night. I'm going to talk with Addison and the kids when they wake up to come up with a plan. I know we can't get surveillance on a stalking case, but I was planning on getting my brothers on this, and maybe even ask Lia to stay with Addison and the kids until we're able to bring David in."

Marco whistled. "Wow, you're bringing in the big guns. You're really worried about her, aren't you?"

"You didn't see that guy the other night. He was totally unstable."

"Freakin' A, I really hate the crazies. Okay, well, I'll let Captain know. Do you want to handle the report or do you have your hands full? Since it was a suspected child neglect call, there's all that extra paperwork. I can take care of it for you if you want, or at least go down to the lot and take photos of the vans and stuff to get started."

"No, that's okay. I'll do it all when I come in for my shift."

"Sounds good. Seriously, some of the stuff these freaks lie about is just plain stupid. Tell Addison we're all here for her. We'll catch this fricker."

That's when Caine's all-cop mask faltered a bit. "That's the thing, with these cases, there's almost nothing we can do until the victim becomes a victim."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. The law is messed up when it comes to stalkers."

Fear. That's what it was, Addison realized. It was *fear* that she was seeing on Caine's face right now.

And she wouldn't stand for it.

"Use me as bait," she said loud enough for Marco to hear.

Dead air greeted her suggestion over the speaker.

A split second before Caine erupted, “Are you friggin’ insane? I’m not letting you anywhere near that psycho. You saw him, Addison. You know he’s not right in the head. Hardened criminals, at least you can sometimes talk some sense into. The ones who are mentally off? You can’t reason with them. And you can’t predict what they’ll do.” Unadulterated rage slashed across his features. “He could walk up to you and slice out an organ before you even get a chance to call for help. Do you get that?”

“I do,” she said softly. “But what’s the alternative? Live in fear every day until he decides to strike? Let him sit there and stew and get even crazier in the meantime?”

“Caine, buddy,” broke in Marco, “she’s got a point, man. Maybe if we draw him out now, we’ll be able to catch him off his game. Before he’s had time to plan something more insane.”

When Caine remained silent, Marco directed his attention to her. “Addison, what’s your idea?”

“Simple. I just go to work like usual, only I’ll make sure not to bring the kids with me. I don’t want to risk their safety.”

“But you’ll risk yours?” snarled Caine.

Addison kept her eyes on him, but kept right on talking with Marco. “Then I’ll just park the van in the back like usual. Close the diner up like usual. He’ll come. Maybe not today, or tomorrow. But he’ll come. Even if I have to borrow something slutty to wear to smoke him out.”

Both Caine and Marco hissed over that one.

“Don’t antagonize him,” growled Caine.

Progress.

“So you agree this is the route we should take?” she asked.

Margo suggested gently, “We can’t have uniforms on her, but I know the guys, we’ll all take turns off duty and watch her around the clock when you can’t, man. I promise you that. You know we’ll all do that for her.”

Caine picked up his cell phone and muttered, “I’ll think about it and call you back.” Then he cut the line.

His back was to her when she walked up to him. He’d begun pacing when she had been talking to Marco. And now he was standing with his hands against the wall, frame rigid, fists locked tight.

“He’ll come, Caine. I know he will.”

Caine cursed and spun around. “Don’t you think I know that?”

She did a double take. “Then what’s the problem? Are you afraid he’ll outsmart us?”

He made a disgusted sound in his throat. “No. Like I told Marco, I’m going to get Max, and Gabe, and Lia on this. I’ll even call Drew to hack David’s info if we need to. But again, that isn’t the issue here, Addison.”

“Then what is?”

“It’s all going to come out after this. Everything about you and the kids. Social services will step in.” He gazed into her eyes, with more turbulent emotions than she could name. “They’ll take the kids from you, Addison.”

Addison crumpled to the ground.

He fell to his knees beside her. “Sweetheart, I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you get them back. I swear to you. I have a good friend in social services who I’ll put you in touch with to be your case worker on this.”

No. No, no, no. She started to have another panic attack. Felt fingers of dread and despair clawing at her from the inside out. “I can’t lose them, Caine. I’ve been taking care of them their whole

lives. I know I'm only 20, but those kids are *my* kids. By the time Tanner was two, I was raising him practically by myself full time. And Kylie...I've been her mom from the day she was born. Aside from not having the money to afford a house not on wheels, I've taken good care of them. They're good kids, Caine."

"I know that, baby. And we'll all submit statements describing that. You'll be able to get them back. Maybe not right away. But you will."

"Can you guarantee that? Can you? Every day, you hear all these stories of kids who can't get out of the system. Can you guarantee that I'll be able to get the kids back? Before something bad happens to them?"

His mouth clamped shut.

Addison dropped her face down into her hands. "So that's the choice I have? Either I risk losing my kids, or risk some psycho cutting me up with a butter knife when I'm not looking."

"Sweetheart, your case isn't that bad. Yes, you're twenty, but you have a steady job, great references. It's actually not illegal to sleep in your car here so you weren't breaking any laws."

"But they'd still take them from me, right?"

"Temporarily. Until your case goes in front of a judge...and your biological mother is contacted."

"*What?!*"

"It's a part of the process. You have to have faith in the system, and trust the process, honey. I do."

She stared at him for a miserable second. "Do you really have that much faith in the system?"

He gazed back at her and said without hesitation, "I have enough faith in the system and in what I know when it comes to predators like David, to know that the kids are much better off in the system, than at his mercy, Addison."

A knife sliced straight through her heart. *The kids. What if he came after the kids, just to get to her? Or to get back at her?*

She stood back up then, and walked over to open the bedroom door...knowing exactly what she'd find on the other side.

Sure enough, there was Tanner, crouched on the ground, hugging Kylie tightly, while she was doing her best to cry as quietly as possible against his shoulder.

David did this to them. Put that fear in their eyes.

"Your sister Lia," Addison said softly to Caine. "Do you trust her with my kids' lives?"

"Yes. I can say with absolute certainty that there isn't a man on the force whose ass she couldn't kick. Mine included."

Addison nodded. "Perfect. Can she watch them tonight?"

"You want to try and lure David out tonight?"

"Yes. I'm going to work, just like I said. And we'll leave the van in the back. After closing, I'll go to the van and go through my nightly routine like I always do. He'll come. Then all this will be over."

"He might be laying low for a while, honey. But I'll ask Lia to watch the kids every night she can, and I'll change my schedule and fill in on the nights she can't."

"No, he'll come tonight."

Caine frowned. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because he's been watching me, right? Well then we'll show him the one thing to make sure he comes after me right away."

“What’s that?”

“You. And me.” She looked up at him. “We’ll kiss, hug, do everything short of public indecency right outside of the diner. Then you’ll make a show of going off to work. After work, we’ll make sure he sees everyone leave, and me all alone. He won’t be able to help himself.”

Caine was silent for a long, tense moment before asking, “You sure you want to antagonize him that much?”

“Yes. Hell yes. Because you’re right. He’s a threat to the kids. And I won’t let him continue to be.” She took Kylie from Tanner’s arms, and dragged his shaken, lanky teenage frame up onto his feet. “Will you help me?”

It was hard. This whole asking for help thing.

But Caine made it seem easy. “Anything you need, sweetheart. Just name it.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE NEXT DAY, Addison went to work without the kids.

It was all part of the plan.

Caine and a few of his buddies walked her through everything over the phone. She was to assume David was watching her at all times. Twice, she was to go outside and have herself a good cry. They needed David to think that social services had taken the kids as a result of his call.

Earlier today, in addition to tricking out the van with all sorts of surveillance equipment, courtesy of Max, her van now came with its very own police officer stashed inside. Though Caine had been adamant about wanting to be the one in the van, they needed him available for their little skit out front. So Marco had stepped up. Addison made sure he had all the things the kids normally did when they stayed in the van so he wouldn't go stir crazy while he waited in there.

Now for their skit.

On her third crying session outside of the diner, Caine arrived as planned and held her in his arms, cuddled and comforted her in clear view of anyone watching.

While all of that had been rehearsed, the kiss he gave her then sure as heck wasn't. Jesus, could the man kiss.

Her over-the-top suggestion the night before about doing everything short of public indecency? A very real possibility.

"Stop thinking," he ordered, teeth nipping at her earlobe. "There should be zero thinking when my lips are on you."

She shivered. The combination of hot, hungry Caine and alpha intense cop Caine rolled into one was dangerously, *addictively* sexy.

Mind-erasingly sexy.

She ran her hands up his biceps as he murmured more dirty recommendations of where she should be diverting her thinking energy. When he made one particularly specific suggestion that mirrored her own fantasies about him lately, her breathing hitched and released in a cross between a sigh and a moan. The growl that tore from his chest was positively feral as he yanked her body flush against his.

It happened so naturally, she didn't even realize she'd circled her arms around his neck just seconds before her legs circled his waist. Strong as he was, he was holding her to him with one arm, while using his spare hand to cup her face tenderly, eyes constantly checking hers to see if she was okay.

Instead of diffusing the fast-rising heat between them, his gentleness just supercharged the kiss. Every nerve ending in her body felt like a recklessly exposed live wire. Every touch of his hands and mouth felt hardwired to parts of her body even she hadn't explored yet.

And just that quickly, she was soon approaching critical mass.

"Caine," she gasped, unable to string together the words she needed to explain what she was feeling.

"I know, baby. I've got you."

She felt him pivot and edge her around the pillars to a small alcove near the fire exit, tucked away from any possible viewing eyes.

Her back flattened against the hidden wall as he slid her over to straddle one of his rock hard thighs.

“This isn’t for anyone but us, sweetheart. No one gets to see you come apart but me.”

His lips found the racing pulse at her neck while he rocked her against him in a slow, pulsing rhythm that had her riding closer and closer to the edge.

He speared his fingers through her hair and captured her lips once more. He seared her mouth with a scorching hot kiss as he shifted and fitted himself against her core perfectly.

The moment she felt his hard, thick ridge nudge between her legs, she was lost.

“Come for me, Addison.”

He swallowed her quiet scream as she hurtled into a sensory abyss and simply shattered. Every muscle in her body seized to a halt, and everything she thought she knew about pleasure unraveled with brand new meaning.

His arms locked around her and held her tight as the waves of her orgasm eventually started to ebb away.

“Oh my God, Caine.”

A hard, tortured hiss escaped him as he arched his hips against hers almost involuntarily. “You saying my name like that sounds like pure sex, baby.” He buried his mouth against the curve of her neck and warned roughly, “If you do it again, I won’t be able to control myself.”

Holy hell, Caine losing control was something she really wanted to see.

But given their physical location at the moment, she refrained from testing him like that.

She did, however, tilt her hips up so she could feel him against her fully again.

“Evil woman,” he muttered raggedly. “I’m starting a tab. And you better believe that once we catch this son of a bitch, I’ll be locking you in my bedroom for days on end to collect.”

She leaned in and whispered the first way she wanted to start paying off that tab. And swear to God, Caine almost dropped her on her ass as a lust-filled shock took over his expression. “I’m holding you to that.”

“I can put a down payment tonight if you want.”

This time, he did drop her. But gently. Onto her feet. “If I keep touching you, and you keep talking, we’ll end up in the back of your van before you know it, with me showing you a dozen different ways we can fulfill your fantasy without you ever once being on your knees.”

Her imagination picked up that gauntlet and began running amuck with the erotic possibilities.

“Holy shit, dude,” called out an amused voice from behind them. “Whatever you two are doing back there is fogging up the windows of your squad car on the street. Keep it up and forest animals will start coming out of the mountains.”

Despite her face feeling hotter than a thousand suns, Addison found herself shaking with laughter. “Your brother Gabe, I presume?”

Caine sighed tiredly. “He’s going to be lording this over us at every family function we go to from now on.”

Addison felt her heart somersault. “Us?”

He gave her a hard, non-negotiable look. “Us.” Then his eyes softened around the corners. “Meaning the kids too.”

Every emotion she’d ever known seemed to bottleneck in her throat then, preventing her from being able to answer.

“I’m taking that as an affirmative,” Caine said simply before snagging one final kiss. “C’mon, time to get on with the rest of our plan so I can get you home.”

Family functions. Kids. Home.

All words she never thought she’d hear a man utter to her. And she’d been perfectly okay with that reality. Until now. Until Caine. Now...she wanted things, hoped for things that she only saw and believed possible with him.

“You tell Marco if he so much as comes within one foot of you on that air mattress in the van, I’m castrating him and bronzing his balls as our first Christmas ornament.”

As she followed Caine out of their little hideaway spot, she didn’t even try not to laugh. The more possessive he got, the more vicious his threats against the offending party. And since last night—when Marco made the mistake of joking that they could snuggle under the covers while they waited for David—Caine had come up with a half dozen different household uses for Marco’s testicles.

The Christmas ornament suggestion was without a doubt the sweetest.

The brass door knocker idea, however, was probably the funniest.

And the fact that he kept referencing each gonad art décor piece as something they could enjoy together wasn’t lost on her.

“Don’t make me put my lips on you again,” Caine whispered as he gave her a bone-bruising hug. “You’re dangerous when you think too much.”

“My over-thinking is what made this little mission we’re on tonight possible.”

“I rest my case,” he retorted dryly.

He pressed his lips against her forehead softly, then brushed them against her temple, and finally, after staring into her eyes for a beat, he sealed his lips over hers in a hot, hard kiss that stole all the air out of her lungs. “See you tonight.”

“I’ll be the one under the blankets with Marco,” she confirmed.

“Your tab is getting bigger by the minute, sweetheart.”

She gave a hot, nanosecond long kiss before teasing lightly, “I’m pretty sure that’s *my* line for you.”

He groaned. “I’ve created a monster.”

She gave him an innocent backward wave as she returned to the diner, while making sure her hips were giving it all they got.

As soon as he left, she checked the clock.

Three more hours.

Just three more hours before they found out if David was crazy enough to come out of hiding because of the way she’d antagonized him tonight.

* * * * *

Turns out, he was that crazy.

Crazier, even.

Addison had just finished locking the diner door and was about to get started on her usual closing duties when she heard the commotion coming from the backlot.

Seeing as how they’d told the janitorial staff not to come in tonight, she knew it was David.

She went running out back and felt her blood run cold at the sight that greeted her.

A half dozen cops standing silently around the backlot.

Caine nowhere in sight.

And Marco being used as a human shield by David, who was holding the man at knifepoint.

“Addison, get back,” commanded an officer whose face she couldn’t quite make out in the dark. She evaded his attempts to grab her and ran closer to David and Marco.

She knew exactly what she needed to do.

“David?” Addison infused as much innocent confusion into her voice as she could. “David, what are you doing? Why do you have that knife?”

It sounded like the cheesiest line, normally uttered by the stupidest character in a psycho killer movie. But given the psycho starring in this particular scene, she thought it was the best avenue to take.

“*Addison?*”

David sounded manic, almost like how her mom used to sound when she was on a bad drug trip, only ten times scarier. “David, what’s going on? Why is the police here? Are you okay?”

His eyes widened over that, and the ugly rage on his face turned...hopeful.

She took another step closer. “Is it because of that silly restraining order they made me fill out the other night?”

The glimmer of hope exploded into a full order of crazy, with an extra helping of delusional.

“I knew they forced you to do that,” exclaimed David. “And that’s why they made your coworkers keep me from seeing you last night, too, right?”

She painted a befuddled look across her features. “You came to see me? Was that before or after they asked me to come in for more questions?”

He exhaled a shaking, heaving breath through his teeth so sharply, it sounded like a high-pitched, emotional cackle.

“David, let that guy go. Doing this is just going to get you arrested. Why *are* you doing this, anyway?” Another doe-eyed damsel in distress look, complete with the delicate hand upon her chest. “Wait, how did you all even get in here? It’s a locked lot.”

“I climbed over the wall,” he replied finally. “Because I saw *this* piece of trash sneak into your van. He was waiting to attack you, Addison.”

She gasped. But it wasn’t acting. She was truly horrified at how much it sounded like he believed his own words. “Is that Marco? He asked me out a few times, but I never thought—” She softened her eyes and tilted her head at David. “You were protecting me?”

“Yes.” He swung a wide arcing look at all the cops watching his every move. “I was protecting her. This cop is the one you should be arresting. Who knows what kinds of unspeakable things he would’ve done to Addison.”

That actually sounded pretty believable. And if not for that sick trembling smile that overtook his lips at one corner, she would’ve thought he was merely delusional, not necessarily dangerous. But then his eyes scanned her body, head to toe, with that same twisted grin ghosting his features and it was all Addison could do not to hurl.

Back to the objective. “Are you mad at me, David? For having to turn you down again?” She beseeched him with sad eyes. “I haven’t been able to date anyone because of the kids.”

He nodded vigorously. “I know. And that’s not your fault, Addie.”

She’d never been a fan of that nickname. Figured he’d be the one to use it.

“I had a responsibility to my brother and sister, you understand that, right?”

“I know. That’s why I took care of it.”

Infusing surprise into her tone, she asked incredulously, “*You* were the one who called the police? And got social services to take the kids?”

He beamed proudly. "That was me! I did it so we could be together."

"I wish you had told me. I was so sad, and so confused. I was crying earlier and no one would tell me anything. Caine was the only one who would answer my questions."

David's mouth curled into a snarl. "And that's when he took advantage of you! I saw him kissing you. I knew there had to be a reason!"

Flinging out bait and letting his crazy hooks sink in somewhere seemed to be the best way to navigate this. "It was all so overwhelming. First the kids, and then the kiss." She wrung her hands, and again, noticed how his eyes glued to parts of her body. Yuck. "I suppose you already guessed that with the kids taking up all my free time, I'm..." Lowering her voice and her eyes, she whispered, "Not that experienced when it comes to all of that."

Peeking out through her lashes, she saw him lick his lips.

So, so gross.

"I had a feeling," he sighed happily. "You were saving yourself for me."

Again with the weird, off-balance comments. His brain was a seriously frightening place.

"I know Caine took advantage of you today. That bastard."

"No. He wouldn't do that, would he?" She edged her question with doubt. "Is that...is that why he told me to get a restraining order on you?"

"Yes!" he declared. "Oh, Addie, you're so naive and innocent. Your virginity is such a special gift. And all of these guys have been trying to take that from you. From *me*."

Good lord, it was like following him down a creepy, psychedelic rabbit hole.

Vicious disgust filled his eyes. "Don't worry, I'm not upset with you, Addie. I forgive you for everything. It's all that bastard's fault. He tried to take what's mine earlier today. What you've been holding onto for me. Just like this guy here." David pressed his knife closer to Marco's neck.

Addison did her best not to react. "You really forgive me? You're not going to..." She paused to let his sick imagination start galloping away. "Punish me?" she finished, playing with the hem of her shirt nervously.

"Punish you?" he echoed, looking like she'd just offered him a big bowl of candy.

Caine had been reluctant to share the case reports of David's previous assault reports, so she'd asked his sister Lia to have their foster brother Drew hack the information for her. In his assault charge prior to the last one, the one where it was suspected that he'd drugged the girl, but it'd been settled out of court, the victim had reported that David had tried to force her to strip for him. For being a 'bad girl.' He kept telling her that was her punishment.

"Because I'll make it up to you however want, David. I mean here you are protecting me even after another man was touching my body." Right now, it was better that he directed his anger at a man that wasn't here, than at Marco.

"You were a bad girl," he finished, taking this to the messed up place she knew he would.

"I'd understand if you felt you needed to *punish* me, David. And I promise, I'll do anything to make these guys understand that they can't have my body."

"Because it belongs to me," he snarled, eyes fixating on her hands still wringing the hem of her shirt, this time high enough that he got a flash of skin.

"Strip for me, Addie. Right now. In front of all of these guys." His crazed gaze traveled up to meet hers, gleaming with both violent triumph, and thirsty impatience. "Take off all your clothes and come to me. That'll show them who you belong to. And I'll forgive you for all your indiscretions."

"Will you let Marco go?"

A weird look came over him. He looked down at Marco as if he'd forgotten he was there.

Suspicion narrowed his gaze.

Shit. She'd pushed too hard. She quickly began lifting her shirt to try and distract him. "Could you at least move him to the side? So I can see your face?" she ventured. "Right now, it feels like I'm stripping for Marco because I can't see you."

David immediately shoved Marco to his knees. "You really do love me, don't you, sweetie?"

Aaand they were back in crazy town.

She heard the footsteps beside her, and instinctively moved in the opposite direction. But under the pretense of being illuminated with more light from the squad cars. All the while, she dragged her shirt higher and higher, watching David pivot slowly in the direction she was leading him, eyes riveted on her now fully exposed bra.

She tossed her shirt to the ground near him.

As she moved to unsnap and unzip her jeans, Addison racked her brain on how to get David to drop that knife. She had his undivided focus now, yes, but it would only take a split second for him to slash through Marco's jugular.

She first dragged her zipper all the way down, and then slipped her thumbs under the waistband of her jeans before she stopped.

"Why'd you stop?" he demanded, almost frantically.

"That knife. It looks brown, not black." Moving to rezip her jeans, she started backing away from him. "Did you bring that knife to hurt me, David? That isn't the knife from my van. It's brown, not black." It was clearly black, and she'd never once carried a knife in her van, but she was going with a Hail Mary at this point.

"It's not brown," insisted David.

Frowning at the knife, mentally she was shouting for him to get to the next logical step. If she asked him to do it, he'd balk again. "It's so dark where you're standing. But it looks brown, David." She fiddled with her zipper tab to try and help him along.

He took two steps forward. "It's black, look." He lifted the knife a few inches closer to the glowing beam of the nearest headlight.

That's all they needed.

Caine came flying out of the dark and tackled him, just as Marco spun around and put some hurt on the bastard as well.

All the men around them exploded into action a split second later as well.

Meanwhile, Addison just stood there, frozen in delayed fear and an overdose of adrenaline as she watched David's manic expression fill with hatred.

"You tricked me, you bitch! You're just like all those other cock teases! You whore! You'll open your legs to this police trash but—"

Caine knocked him unconscious.

But he didn't stop there. He began raining down unholy vengeance with his fists, pummeling the already out-cold David like he was a punching bag.

"Caine!"

At the sound of her voice, he stopped. Chest heaving, eyes filled with unadulterated rage...and fear. He looked pained. Almost *unable* to stop.

Addison quickly ran into his direct sightline. "You did it. You saved me. Now stop, Caine. You're a good cop. You trust the system. Now just let him go face justice. And come to me." She held out her hand to him. "Come back to me, Caine."

His voice barely sounded human. "He was going to rape you, Addison. Maybe even torture you.

Kill you.” He flexed his blood-covered fists and raised it to his temples in anguish.

“I know. And you stopped him. So now please. Come here and comfort me. Because I’m scared out of my mind, Caine. Or at the very least come here and yell at me for showing all your buddies my underwear. I know it’s just boring, white cotton and—”

That made him lurch to his feet.

He stomped over to her and didn’t even pause when one of the guys tossed him a blanket from his squad car. Eyes hard, frame tense, expression...raggedly relieved, he bundled the blanket around her and yanked her into his arms. “I can’t believe you did that, woman.”

“I’m sorry. It was the only way I could think of to distract him enough to maybe let Marco go.”

“I’m not angry that these yahoos saw your freaking hot as hell underwear.” His lips flattened. “Okay, that’s not true, I’ll probably be pissed tomorrow at every guy here who didn’t avert his eyes. I’m not angry at you for that though. I’m impressed actually, at your quick thinking and your cool head while you were setting him up.”

He exhaled heavily. “But I’m *furious* with you for putting yourself in harm’s way.”

“But Marco...”

“I know.” He sighed. “You were being Addison and thinking about someone other than yourself, like always.” Holding her tighter, he muttered something that sounded like, “Goodness and light.”

“What?” She smiled at the welcome sight of his eyes softly crinkling at the corners.

“Nothing. You ready to go home, sweetheart?”

Home. She loved the sound of that coming from his lips.

“But don’t you have to finish up here?”

“Yeah, I need to get a statement from you and fill out a shit-ton of paperwork. But I’ll split it up with Marco. My shift ended a half hour ago so I can leave right after I’m done with that. Just let me tie up some loose ends here and then we can go home to the kids, okay?”

Okay? That sounded absolutely...perfect.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CAINE UNLOCKED THE DOOR to his apartment and tried not to let the sight of the two kids in there running up to greet them make him smile like a sap.

He failed pretty spectacularly.

After they both thanked Lia for watching the kids, he putting in the DVD he'd picked up earlier for the kids and popped 'em some popcorn while they got settled under a big blanket on the couch.

Addison came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "How did you know they'd be up?"

"When I picked them up from school today, they both passed out as soon as we got home. Lia said they only woke up a few hours ago. Poor things must be exhausted from the night prior." He nodded over at the TV. "I figured it'd be okay for them to stay up a bit longer seeing as how tomorrow is Saturday."

"School's almost over so their little inner clocks are already starting to adjust to the summer. So this is perfect. Thank you. For thinking of everything. For thinking about them, period."

"No thanks needed." He pressed a kiss onto the top of her head. "After they go to sleep, you and I, we need to talk." His voice turned serious then. "About everything. David's trial. You, the kids."

Her expression was unsurprised. "I know."

"But until then, the only decision you need to make is if you want to put chocolate chips on the buttery popcorn or potato chips on the kettle corn popcorn."

She chuckled. "You're worse than the kids."

He grinned unabashedly. "Both it is. I'll bring over the popcorn and fixings, you bring over the chocolate and strawberry milk."

Shaking her head, she reached into the cupboard for his staple milk supplements. "Do the guys at the station know you still drink chocolate and strawberry milk?"

"Are you kidding me? What do you think the most popular vending machine drink is after we're done with our shifts?"

"I will never look at the guys the same way again."

"Damn straight." He tilted her chin up to brush his lips against hers. "Better still if you didn't look at them at all."

She paused a beat before asking softly, "What about you?"

A slow smile stretched across her face when he understood her meaning. "I make a conscious effort not to check out the guys I work with." He rubbed his thumb over her lower lip. "And as far as any women are concerned, I seem to have developed this contagious affliction where women simply become invisible when they get near me."

She stared at him. "Is that so?"

"Yeah. I think I caught it from you. Used to be, that the only women who would fade out of existence were the ones standing beside you."

"*Movie's starting!*" called out Tanner. "Quit making out in there, you two."

At the sound of Kylie asking him what 'making out' meant, Caine and Addison rushed out to the

living room to stop him from answering.

* * * * *

SINCE THE KIDS INSISTED on sleeping outside on the futon mattress again, Caine helped Addison cover them both with the comforter before turning off the lights, leaving on just the two nightlights he'd picked up along with the DVD.

It'd been hard switching to the four-to-midnight shift and leaving Addison's safety in Marco's hands, even though, all kidding aside, he'd come to trust Marco even more than some of the guys he'd worked alongside for years at his old precinct.

In fact, the only way he'd been able to stay away from the diner during his first break was to go shopping for the kids.

Judging by the way Addison was gazing at the nightlights, it was time well-spent.

He dropped down onto the bed and settled his back against the headboard as Addison entered the room. She looked good in here. Belonged here. "Ready to talk?"

Her steps faltered just a tiny bit, but she continued her path over to him.

When she sat next to him hesitantly, he pulled her in close, tucked her alongside him. He'd thought about this a lot, how this conversation would go. But nothing about the situation was black and white.

Caine had considered what lengths his parents would go to for any of their kids, what measures he'd take for his own.

What lines he'd cross for Addison.

With a heavy sigh, he started with the positives. "You and the kids aren't in any danger anymore. With David's priors showing a continued escalation of dangerous behavior, along with all the different charges against him, not to mention that the search of his place tonight produced photos of you, a bed set up with restraints, along with some ketamine—the date rape drug that wipes your memory—we already had a rock solid case. But since he held an officer at knifepoint, our guys at the courthouse are positive his bail will be set at a million dollars. And not just that, but again, because he was holding a cop hostage, he'll have a tough time getting an affordable bail bond, if at all."

"But," he sighed heavily, "when this goes to trial, everything's going to come out. About your mom, the van, the kids, everything. Whatever lawyer David hires will put you through the wringer. I've seen lawyers harass rape victims on the stand to the point of abuse in my opinion, redirecting the blame from the rapist to everything from how much the victims drank to how wet they were." He shut his eyes to block the images of Addison going through that. "I asked a good attorney friend of mine—off the record, of course—and he said it'll look better if you take the kids to social services now. Before they hire a private investigator to dig up dirt on you."

She looked pale, stricken. "That makes sense. But. Trials like this, they take time, don't they? Months on end?"

He cringed. Honestly, he'd seen some take a year to go to trial. And he told her as much.

"That's a year in the foster care system, Caine. And who knows if I'll get them back after. I mean, what judge would grant me full custody after all of this?"

"I'll testify, we all will, to show the judge how great you've been with them. How perfect a mom you've been to them this entire time."

She shook her head. "You can't testify."

"Of course I can. There's no conflict of interest so I sure as hell will be testifying."

“No, Caine. I mean you can’t testify because...” She paused, clearly reluctant to say what he knew had been bothering her since yesterday. God, he was crazy about this woman.

“Because I denied knowing you and the kids were living in the car when a fellow officer asked, omitted that info completely on a half dozen different reports and paperwork regarding your case, and straight-out lied when my Captain and Joe asked me about it? By the way, Joe told me in confidence today that he’s known almost the entire time, and Bernadette—sharp old bat—apparently figured it out about a year ago, just FYI. Anyway, yeah, are those the reasons why you think I can’t testify?”

A holy-shit look cloaked her expression. “Um...yes. *That.*”

Admittedly this wasn’t going to be easy for him. To not just bend the rules, but flat out break them. For the first time *ever*.

It did help immensely to know that Joe and Bernadette were going to corroborate on the watered down lie they’d come up with about her only staying in her van once in a while with the kids...sort of like camping, whenever she wasn’t staying with one of them. And the part about him not knowing she didn’t have custody of the kids in the first place was absolutely true. He hadn’t asked; she hadn’t come out and said it. Semantics or not, it wasn’t a lie.

The one lie remaining that would have to follow him to the stand, however, was about him personally having no knowledge of her living in the van...in an effort to keep social services from taking the kids from her. Yeah, there wasn’t a semantic way out of that one.

The idea of lying on the stand...truth be told, he was struggling *hard* with. What right did he have to be angry about one of his friends being a dirty cop now? Lying on the stand was the same thing as spitting on the justice system he believed in and faced bullets with little more than his badge because of.

That said, as difficult as the lie itself was to come to terms with, the reasons he had for lying, and the outcome that would result from doing so—those were easy to be on board with.

“I’m testifying, Addison. Period.”

“Caine, I can’t ask you to do that. I know how much it would mess you up on the inside if you got up there and lied on the stand.”

She knew him well.

“But it’ll hurt your custody case if I don’t, honey. You and I both know it’s going to come up when the trial starts. David is crazy. He’ll come at us with all he’s got to discredit you, hurt you. So I’ll lie if I have to.”

It burned his gut to say it out loud. But not as badly as the thought of Addison losing the kids. He’d never, not once, felt there was ever two paths he had to choose from where his badge lay on one path, and not both.

He did now.

By the look on Addison’s face, he wasn’t hiding his moral turmoil well. “There’s still time to change your story to your Captain and Marco. What if you tell them that I lied to you? Or that it was all a part of the plan and—”

“You’re aiming to get yourself pushed up against another wall again, woman.”

That stopped her rambling. And got her breathing going triple time.

Caine tasted his favorite spot on her neck to see if it was as sweet as he remembered. “I love that you’re worried about me. But let someone worry about you for a change, okay? I said it’ll be fine. Whatever crisis of conscience I’m dealing with, I’ll get over.” He sat up. “But that’s actually not what I wanted to talk about.”

She frowned and dragged his now favorite dessert away from his mouth. “It’s not?”

He eyed her neck wistfully before shifting his gaze up to meet her questioning one. “Like I said earlier, you should contact social services now about the kids. It’s far better for your custody case later if you do.”

Her face fell, and it killed him that he was the cause of that heartbreak he could see pouring out of her in pain-filled waves. He just prayed that what he was about to say next would ease some of that. “I promised that you could trust me, remember that?”

She nodded. And thankfully, the trust she had for him was still there, clear as day in her eyes.

“When you’re ready to contact my friend at social services, she’ll get everything started to make me Kylie and Tanner’s foster father until your custody case clears.” At her look of shock, he kept going, wanting to tell her everything he’d been doing to try and protect her as best he could. “I’m getting everything ready to call in every favor I have in my pocket and call in several politicians I’ve done private security for as references if need be. Not that the social worker thinks it’s necessary. She was the same case worker who worked on my foster brother Drew’s case. We can trust her. Since we had an existing relationship with Drew, the judge granted my parents foster parent status straight away. My friend is sure that the same outcome will happen here, especially because they’ve recently started a campaign to encourage more first response folks to become single foster parents.”

Tears flooded her eyes a split second before her face fell to his chest.

“Happy tears or sad tears, baby?” It was driving him crazy not to know for certain.

She slipped her hands behind his neck and pulled him down to a kiss by way of answer.

Best answer ever.

When they finally managed to remember to come up for air, he also remembered he was supposed to do this right.

Heart banging around his chest erratically, he pulled out a small square gift box from his nightstand drawer. He’d given a few trinkets to women he’d dated in the past. But nothing like this. Nothing that exposed him down to the fiber of his being, and uncovered his soul.

Addison’s eyes rounded as she surveyed the small box, and swear to God, she looked about two seconds from running for the door.

“We’re in this together, Addison.” His voice softened around his usual gruff edges. “I’m not sure of a lot of things in life. Occupational hazard. But my dad has always told me that for the big things in life, I’ll just know when I know. It won’t have to make sense on paper. No one else may agree. But none of that will matter. Because I’ll just know.”

He cupped her cheek gently. “And this, sweetheart, *I know* is right.” He placed the box in her hands. “Open it. And before you panic, know that I fully intend for us to date first.”

When it was clear that she just plain wasn’t gonna open the box, he did it for her.

She gasped.

“I told you not to panic.”

After whacking him soundly in the arm, she gave him a brilliant, wholly moved smile as she carefully pulled out the three oval-shaped keychains he’d put in there earlier today, each engraved with an exact replica of the Easter Egg designs she and the kids drew for the diner. Caine had asked one of the gun restoration guys that worked for his parent’s antique arms shop to do a rush engraving job on these for him. The results were just as he’d envisioned.

While Addison was busy gushing over the details in Kylie and Tanner’s keychains—like every mom who saw their children’s artwork as the next Picasso—he reached in his pocket and pulled out a fourth keychain, identical to theirs, and flipped it over so she could see he’d had it engraved with the star and laurel wreath design she’d drawn on the egg message she’d left for him. “The keys hanging

from the keychains are the keys to the lobby, and this apartment.”

The meaning of that seemed to sink in fully for Addison then. “Wait, why are you giving me a set of keys too?”

“Because you’re part of the package,” he said matter-of-factly. “You, Kylie, and Tanner can have my room and treat it like your own apartment. With the master bath in there, you’ll be all set. You and Kylie can take the king size and Tanner can take the air mattress. I’ll sleep on the futon outside. I already asked my social services friend if that was a problem, and she said it wasn’t.”

“Caine, you don’t have to do this. I told you, I can afford to get an apartment. I was already planning to this summer.”

He shook his head firmly. “Save your money and get the best attorney you can to make sure you win your custody trial. Besides, you’ll be devastated if you’re not living together with the kids. And so will the kids.”

She shook her head just as firmly. “No. Foster funding from the state for *just* the kids.”

“Woman, I kid you not, I’ll cuff you to my bed if you try to live somewhere other than right here with us.”

Her reaction to that was not at all what he was expecting.

He groaned. “Sweetheart, could you pretend to not be so curious about my cuffs.”

“You started it.” Her eyes drifted to his headboard.

Oh lord, they were getting seriously off track. With considerable, near-herculean effort, he got them back on topic. “If you’re worried how it’ll look to the kids or social services, don’t worry, I’m already looking into a two-bedroom unit in this building. Once we get it, same thing, you and the kids will take the master, and I’ll take the spare bedroom. We’ll be...roommates.”

“You want us to be *roommates*?” she asked incredulously.

No, I want us to be a family.

But he didn’t want to scare the skittish little thing so he said instead, “Yes, roommates. Well, that is, until you and I go out on a few dates, then we’ll change your title to live-in girlfriend of course. I’m in favor of not necessarily following that order, but you’re a very logical kind of girl so I figure you’d like that best.”

He kept talking, not wanting to give her a chance to think too hard. “But yes, until then, roommates sounds kind of great.”

She just sat there and stared at him like he was speaking a different language. Backward.

“Caine, did you just? Live-in girlfriend?” She shook her head as if trying to jostle herself to a different reality. “Are you being serious right now?”

“Sweetheart, I’ve never been more serious in my entire life.”

“But. We can’t.” Her voice sounded less resolute about that than it had a minute ago. Excellent. “Caine, we can’t just live together as roommates while you’re the kids’ foster dad. And do you seriously expect me to let you take a spare bedroom while the kids and I take the master?”

“I absolutely expect it. Sorry, missy, but we need to have ground rules. You and I can’t live in a bedroom together until I have a whole different kind of gift to give you in a small square box.”

Addison blinked at him in utter shock.

He gently lifted her chin to shut her gaping mouth, and brushed his lips over hers, kissing her the way he wanted to do every night for the rest of his life. “We’ll talk about this more tomorrow. I have an early morning because I switched to the first shift so I could follow-up on your case. But if the kids are up, I’ll make ‘em some breakfast before I go. You go ahead and sleep in.”

Then he snuggled her in closer. “Goodnight, sweetheart. Now I was serious, I’m only going to

sleep in here with you for a little while, and then I'll be sure to go out to the living room before morning so the kids don't see me breaking my own rules."

He closed his eyes, feeling a bone-deep comfort that warmed him to his very marrow. For the first time in ages, he was actually looking forward to sleeping for a change.

"Caine?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm not...tired."

He stilled as he felt her body turn towards him, and her open palm shyly reveal something he was just plain shocked to see her carrying. Cursing silently, he conceded with a rough, raspy groan, "Hell, now neither am I."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THIS MORNING, ADDISON HAD woken up to the perfect morning where she, Caine, and the kids had eaten breakfast together. At the dining table and everything. As a family.

This morning, Caine had kissed her on his way to work as if coming home to her was going to be the only thing he'd be thinking about all day, as if this were the way he'd be kissing her every morning for the rest of her life.

And still, this morning didn't hold a candle to last night.

...When she'd first realized that she'd come to love Caine just as fiercely as she loved the kids.

...When he'd given her a glimpse of something she'd always thought she could never have.

...When she'd *found the strength* she needed to be able to turn the key in the ignition of her van today.

"Where did you guys leave it?" she asked, before quickly retracting the question. "Never mind, you obviously don't have to tell me."

They'd decided they each wanted to leave a gift for Caine, in the part of his home that they'd come to love the best. It had been the kids' idea, and Addison hadn't had the heart to say no.

Kylie whispered softly, "I chose the living room recliner where he read me my favorite bedtime story the past two mornings, because me and Tanner fell asleep before he could read it to me at night. And then I left him the book, so he could read it to his own little girl one day."

Addison knew she shouldn't have asked.

Her eyes were already flooded with tears when Tanner said quietly, "I chose the kitchen table where he helped me with my homework two days ago. And I left him a copy of the A he helped me get on the pop quiz I had yesterday so he knows I heard him when he told me he thought I had a bright future."

Addison clutched the engraved keychain Caine had given her and willed herself to stop crying. When she looked in the rearview mirror, she saw the kids were holding their keychains as well.

While they'd left the keys on the keyring by the door, none of them had been able to part with the keychains Caine had made for them.

"Did you leave something for him too?" asked Tanner quietly. Somberly.

She wasn't sure how to answer that, how to explain that Caine now had a permanent piece of her heart, and resided in a permanent part of her soul. How to explain that unlike their gifts to him, he'd probably hate hers.

Last night, he'd wanted to give her everything she could ever hope for.

And he'd been willing to risk everything he stood for in exchange.

After he'd fallen asleep, she'd looked it up, the 'Oath of Honor' that officers take, and she'd read through each line, practically hearing Caine's strong, resolute voice echoing the words of badge, integrity, character, public trust, the vows to hold himself and others accountable for their actions.

By the time she'd reached the end of the oath, she knew. She knew she couldn't possibly let him break that vow he'd made to his badge, to his honor.

To himself.

They only needed Marco to get David's conviction at this point; by removing herself from the trial, there would be no reason for the defense to discredit, and thus, no reason to question Caine about what he did or didn't know regarding her living situation and guardian status.

There would be no need for him to lie on the stand for her.

So long as she...left.

As she drove farther and farther away from everything they'd ever known, she traced the egg design of her keychain and wondered if her heart would ever be whole again.

It wasn't until she'd pulled onto the interstate heading away from Creek Hills when she finally answered Tanner quietly.

"Yes. On his pillow. I left him the only thing I could."

He gave me one perfect night.

And I left him his future.

Coming July 7, 2016

The conclusion of Caine & Addison's story, seven years later.

Every Night Without You

(Unfinished Love: Caine & Addison, Book 2 of 2)

Seven years.

Seven damn years of wondering whether the woman was still alive...whether she'd spent the last two thousand five hundred fifty five days wondering if *he* was still alive.

Wondering whether *that night* was as burned into her memory as it was his.

Seven years having his heart tethered to Addison—and now she's back. With even more reasons to run than she'd had then.

Only this time, Caine isn't letting the gorgeous little flight risk out of his sight.

Regardless of how noble her reasons may be.

EVERY NIGHT WITHOUT YOU (Bk 2) takes place seven years after BEFORE THAT NIGHT (Bk 1), and is the conclusion of Caine & Addison's story of love, sacrifice, and the lengths one will run—and chase—when their past threatens their future.

Note: The Unfinished Love series follows four brothers, each fighting for their second first chance at love. Each of the couples have two books (duets) that take place years apart. This novel (Bk 2) is the conclusion of Caine & Addison's story, which reunites them seven years after Bk 1.

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FINDING THE RIGHT GIRL

**Serial trilogy, also available in the NICE GIRL box set*

The CACTUS CREEK Series

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LOVE, CHOCOLATE, AND BEER
LOVE, DIAMONDS, AND SPADES
LOVE, TUSSELS, AND TAKEDOWNS
LOVE, EXES, AND OHS

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EVERY NIGHT WITHOUT YOU (*Caine & Addison, Bk 2*)
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EVERY KISS GOODBYE (*Gabe & Hannah, Bk 2*)
BEFORE THAT PROMISE (*Drew & Skylar, Bk 1*)
EVERY PROMISE UNSPOKEN (*Drew & Skylar, Bk 2*)
BEFORE THAT CHANCE (*Max & Kennedy, Bk 1*)
EVERY CHANCE WE LOST (*Max & Kennedy, Bk 2*)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

<http://www.violetduke.com>

New York Times & *USA Today* bestselling author Violet Duke is a former English Ed professor ecstatic to now be on the other side of the page writing emotion-rich stories with fun, everyday characters and sweet, sexy match-ups. Since her acclaimed debut series in 2013, over a million readers have put Violet's "laugh & cry" contemporary romances on the USA Today bestseller list thirteen times, the NYT bestseller list three times, and the Top 10 charts across the major eretailers both in the U.S. and internationally.

When she doesn't have her nose in a book, Violet enjoys the live-out-loud-in-your-PJs sorta lifestyle she loves writing about, which involves lots of: 1) excuses to use her power tools, 2) doing stuff without checking the directions, and 3) impossible-to-be-duplicated 'special edition' dishes that laugh in the face of recipes. Born and raised in Hawai'i, Violet continues to live the no-shoes island way with her kids (daughter Violet & son Duke) and husband (aka their ringleader...and her most devoted fan).

For fan info & epic giveaways, visit: www.facebook.com/VioletDukeBooks

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