
SINGLE DAD NEXT DOOR

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When my bedroom door flies open and crashes hard against the paint-chipped wall, I groan. “Go away,” I say, my voice muffled by my pillow. Not that my roommates will listen, even if they can hear me. Heck, I could scream at the top of my lungs and it wouldn’t faze them, much less send them running back to their rooms—not when the view outside my window is that *hot*.

Seriously though, sharing a house with four college freshmen is not my idea of a good time, not when I’m a senior and working my ass off to get into law school. But when I left NYU two months before the start of my fourth year and transferred to Penn State at the last minute, this place was all I could find—and afford. Ultimately, Penn State is where I want to do my law degree after undergrad. I just ended up here sooner, rather than later.

Someone tugs at my pillow and I open one eye to see Becca hovering over me. “Come on, Rach, he just took his shirt off,” she says. “You’re going to want to see this.”

Why oh why did my room have to come with the best view of the hot neighbor’s driveway?

“Thank God for this heat wave.” Sylvie, roommate number two, fans her face with her hand.

I groan and curl up into the fetal position. I just want one more minute in bed without every member of the house in my room. “I. Don’t. Care.” Well, that might be a lie. I like looking at the eye candy next door as well as they do, but after putting in a late night at Pizza Villa—I seriously have to find a new job—I need all the sleep I can get before class.

“Jesus, would you look at him,” Becca says, her voice a breathy whisper as she peers out the window. “Talk about slurpalicious. I could seriously lick that from head to toe, and back up again.”

“Leave,” I say on a yawn.

Ignoring me, Sylvie squeals. “He’s going back into his garage. Damned if he doesn’t look as good going as he does coming.”

“But I’d rather see him...*coming*,” Becca says, and they start giggling.

“Seriously. Are you both twelve?”

“Shh, he’s back,” Becca says and swats her hand at me, like I’m an annoying fly that needs to be shoed away.

I shift on my bed, not to get a better look outside my window. No, moving has absolutely nothing at all to do with the shirtless mechanic turning my roommates into dim-witted moths. The *only* reason I’m getting up is to herd these girls from my room, and if I happen to get a glimpse of the hot, tattooed, badass daddy next door, well...then so be it.

I rub the blur from my eyes and toss my pillow at them. “Get away from my window, before he thinks it’s me.” They don’t need to know that the hottie’s bedroom window is also across from mine, and that late one night, he caught me staring into his room as he walked around in nothing but boxer shorts. Heck, if they knew that, they’d camp out for the rest of the school year, and that was so not happening.

“Ohmigod!” Sylvie leaps back. “I think he just saw me.” She puts her hand over her mouth and starts to giggle. Footsteps pound down the hall, announcing the arrival of my other two roommates. I shake my head as they come bursting in.

Kill. Me. Now.

“Is he out there?” Val asks, her big blue eyes wide and hopeful.

“Yeah, but he saw me looking,” Sylvie says. Despite that, she edges back around to sneak another look. Megan hurries across the room, and goes up on her toes to peer over Sylvie’s shoulder, trying to catch a glimpse without getting caught.

“Do you really think he killed someone?” Megan asks.

“That’s the rumor,” Val protests, though her tone holds uncertain convictions.

“Then why isn’t he in jail?”

“Maybe it was self-defense.”

“He’s such a badass.”

“He’s good with his little girl, though.”

“Bad Boy Daddy, now that’s hot.”

“Do you think he’d spank me if I was bad?”

Unable to put up with their incessant chatter and giggles any longer, I point my finger toward the door. “Out. Now.”

A chorus of grumbles ensues as they all sullenly walk to my door. Christ, I’m getting that lock fixed, even if I have to eat ramen noodles for the next month.

“God, you’re such a grouch in the morning.” Becca shoots me a wounded look over her shoulder.

“Doesn’t even have to be the morning,” Val adds with a hair toss.

“You need to get your nose out of a book once in a while,” Megan says.

“What she needs is to get laid,” Sylvie informs them all, but her solution to pretty much everything is sex. Problem is,

this time Megan is nodding her head in sad agreement as she follows Sylvie out the door.

“I can hear you,” I shout after them. I shake my head and my mussed hair falls over my shoulders. “I’m still right here.” As I stand there, dressed only in my tank top and underwear, a warm breeze blows in and slides over my skin, a late reminder that I’d opened my window last night before crawling into bed exhausted. Great. Not only could the hot guy working on his car see my roommates drooling over him, he could *hear* them as well. *And* they just announced that I needed to get laid. How freaking mortifying. I stomp across the room and yell down the hall, “And don’t bother to close my door on your way out.” As usual my sarcasm is ignored.

I give the door a good slam, which helps improve my mood a little. With a deep breath, I turn around, not to see my hot neighbor, but to close my window. No way do I want him hearing anything else that goes on inside this place, or get the wrong idea that I might want him. I don’t. Not in a million years.

I’m completely off guys, trying to keep a low profile. After my ex-boyfriend turned violent and abusive, threatening to kill me if I went to the police, I snuck away under the cover of darkness and put several states between us. He was big and hard like my neighbor, his muscles born from rough carpentry work. Last year, when he came to do repairs on the house I was sharing with friends, I was flattered that I was the object of his attention. At first he was doting and attentive, but as time went by, he became possessive and controlling. I came to find out later, he’d had other charges against him from numerous other women.

Jesus, why am I such a bad judge of character when it comes to men. Oh, probably because my only role model had been a mean-assed, alcoholic father who drove my beautiful,

caring mom to an early grave and me out of the house the second I turned eighteen.

If I try hard enough I can still smell the cheap perfume on his shirt when he stumbled in after a weekend-long drinking binge. God, how I hated those women he slept around with almost as much as I hated my Dad. Mom used to try to protect me from his disgusting behavior, but what hurt the most was how he dragged Mom down, aging her pretty face far too early.

My heart squeezes as I think about her. She was a good woman, but was too afraid to leave. Running is hard. I get that now. Not that she really had anywhere to run. Our only other relative was my father's mother. She's still alive, living in upstate Pennsylvania where my Dad was born. While she liked me well enough, when it came to Mom and Dad, she always took Dad's side. That's how it is with parents, I guess.

I lift my arms, place my hands on the frame, and lean in to give it a tug when the hottie slowly lifts his head. Our eyes meet, hold a moment too long, and I suck in a quick breath as heat zings through me—and dammit, it's not the autumn sun that has warmth pooling between my legs.

OMFG.

With a wrench clasped tightly in his right hand he stares at me, like we're in a goddamn Mexican standoff. I swallow hard, and will myself to move, but can't seem to tear my gaze away. Ah, what was that I said about dim-witted moths?

Close the window, Rachel.

While my brain struggles to call the shots, my body has other ideas. Ideas that involve staying exactly where I am and ogling the hottest guy I'd ever seen. Blue eyes, square jaw, a body I could play Plinko on, and low riding, well-worn jeans that accentuate bulges in all the right places, and holy hell, the man has a lot of right places. Want prowls through me, hitting every erogenous spot along the way.

Just shut the window already.

He shifts his stance and taps the wrench against his leg as he looks up at me. A small grin touches his mouth, and that's when I realize I'm half naked. *Please, ground, open up and swallow me.* After hearing the girls, he probably thinks I'm trying to lure him to my room, fix that dry spell I've been going through. I grip the window ledge tighter and slam it down, putting the brakes on my body's reaction, and shutting out six delicious feet of hard muscle and pure testosterone. This is so not what I need right now. Coffee. Yeah, that's what I need. Lots and lots of coffee.

I hurry to the kitchen and shove a pod into the Keurig. I pour milk into a cup and set it on the spill tray. As I wait for the coffee to percolate, I wander into the main level bathroom and glance in the mirror. I look at myself and try to imagine how I appeared through the blue-eyed mechanic's eyes. I see black smudges under tired eyes, boobs that only look big because I'm slender from work, school and lack of proper nutrition and rest. My hair is...wait... I grab a fistful of my curls and examine them closer. Oh, God, pizza sauce.

Could this day get any worse?

Christ, even if he did hear my roommates, I'm sure he'd never look twice at a girl like me—especially the way I look now. A guy like him probably goes out with women who are a little more put together, sexier. Although I have to say in the two months I've lived here, I've never seen a woman come or go from his place. Still, I'm certain a girl next door who always smells like marinara sauce and pepperoni isn't even on his radar.

Good, because I don't want to be.

The coffee machine beeps and I hurry back to the kitchen. I grab the mug to take a big sip. Heavenly. Desperate for a shower, to wash last night's work from my hair, I hurry back upstairs to my room, hot mug of coffee in hand. I check

the time and grab my clothes. Giggles come from Sylvie's room across the hall as I dash into the bathroom. I turn the shower to cool, partly because it's just so hot in the house, and partly because I need to calm my overheated body down. I might be off men, especially big, scary ones like my neighbor, but my body and brain aren't working in sync this morning. Clearly my libido didn't get the memo when I left New York.

I stay under the needle-like spray longer than normal, needing an extra minute to clear my head. When the water turns cooler, I jump out, dry off, and pull on a pair of shorts and T-shirt. I towel dry my hair, then tie it back into a ponytail. I forgo makeup. Not only will it melt off my face, I'm not trying to impress anyone or draw any kind of attention to myself. Once done, I grab my purse, shove my textbooks into my backpack, and head for the front door, feeling a little more alive after the coffee.

The hot morning air hits like a slap in the face and I groan. It's October for God's sake. It's supposed to be time for pumpkin spiced lattes. This is more like beach weather. Mother nature needs to get her shit together. I glance at my watch, and judging by the time—thanks to an extra-long shower—I need to get my shit together, too. This morning I'll have to take my car to school, or risk being late for class. The walk to campus is long, around forty-five minutes, but I prefer it on days like today. I need to save my gas money for the colder winter months.

Since my driveway runs parallel to my neighbor's, I keep my head down, toss my backpack into the back seat and climb into the driver's side. Thank God the hottie is out of sight and I don't have to go through the embarrassment of facing him.

I roll my window down and shove the key into the ignition. I turn it, only for the engine to make some god-awful

sound and stall out. My heart races quicker. Shit. Shit. Shit. Frustrated, I give the steering wheel a thump with my fist. This can't be happening. I need this car. Need to be able to depend on it if I have to run again. It might be an old junker, but it's all I have. I can't afford a new one. Heck, I'm on such a tight budget, I can't even afford to have this one fixed.

I take a deep breath, throw up a silent prayer, and twist the key again, only for it to cough and gasp, like it's dying a slow and painful death.

No. No. No

A tap comes on the roof, and I turn to see my hot—shirtless—neighbor with his arms braced over the door of my car. He leans down, his beautiful face close to mine. “Need a hand?”

“I...uh...it's not working.”

Jeez, way to state the obvious.

He grins, and when I see a cute dimple that contrasts sharply with his chiseled face, I nearly swallow my tongue.

“Yeah, I kind of got that, you know, being a mechanic and all.” As he gives off a bad-boy vibe that messes with my common sense, he grabs a cloth from his back pocket, and wipes his hands before leaning into the car, his head practically in my lap.

Holy fuck!

It takes everything, and I mean *everything*, in me not to grab the back of his head and shove it between my legs. My sex practically quivers at the visual. The girls were right. I do need to get laid. I bite the inside of my cheek to stifle the moan rising in my throat.

“What...what are you doing?” I finally manage to ask, and will myself not to writhe restlessly, and show him what a needy girl I really am.

He pulls the hood release, and the front end of my car jumps. His head lifts and once again his face is close to mine.

“Popping the hood.” He angles his head, and his eyes narrow. “What did you think I was doing?”

Oh, I don't know. Maybe you were taking this opportunity to go down on me.

“Popping the hood,” I say quickly, and try not to think of sex. Dirty sex. Take-me-up-against-the-wall kind of sex. Not that I know anything about that. Sadly.

His laugh is rough and deep as he walks around to the front of the car, and I unbuckle quickly. My legs wobble as I climb out of the driver's seat and follow him. He's grinning when I reach him.

“What?” I ask, my voice raspy.

He touches my cracked windshield washer cap, which I happened to repair all by myself. “Duct tape?” he asks, his voice amused.

“Tools of the trade, right,” I say and try not to sound as breathless as I feel. A difficult task considering I'm standing next to a half-naked man that I want to run my hands all over. I mean I've seen shirtless guys before, but come on. This guy is like a freaking viking. He leans forward to fiddle with something, and the movement shows off impressive bicep muscles. I break a sweat as his closeness sends shudders of need between my thighs. Honest to God, the man is a work of art, and all I can think of is no-strings sex—something I've never done before. But that's crazy and reckless and so not me. Truthfully, if I knew what was good for me, I'd slam the hood shut and run in the opposite direction.

I'm about to do just that when he says, “Uh, huh.”

“Is...is there something wrong?” Is that my voice? Christ, I sound like I'm whacked out on painkillers.

For God's sake, get it together, girl.

He rubs the scruff on his chin, and I step back, needing a measure of distance before I actually reach out and run my hands over all his hard grooves and deep valleys.

“Plenty,” he says again and checks something else. I have no clue what he’s doing. I only know that he looks as hot as hell doing it. As he leans over my car, my gaze slides to his ass, committing the way his pants cup his cheeks to memory. The guy could be in a jeans commercial, or better yet, a Calvin Klein underwear ad. I’m a girl, but advertising like that would have me one-clicking the buy button.

My heart hammers as he stands again. He turns toward me, but I’m far too slow to react. His eyes are piercing, almost a deeper shade of blue when my gaze jerks to his, and I can’t tell whether he’s thrilled or pissed to find me checking him out.

I step closer and look over the engine. “So, what is it?” I ask, disgusted with myself. I should not be fantasizing over this man.

He clears his throat. “I think the first thing we need to do is replace the spark plugs,” he answers, his voice a little hoarse.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” I say, my head bobbing in agreement.

That grin is back when I look at him. “You know something about cars?”

I shrug. “Sure...and duck tape.”

He laughs and says, “It’s not...” he shakes his head. “Never mind. So, you agree then, that something’s not firing right?”

Firing? Oh, things were firing all right, and lighting up my body like a goddamn Fourth of July celebration.

Damn him.

Damn Mother Nature.

Damn dim-witted moths.

I grab the rag from my back pocket and swipe a bead of moisture from my forehead, as the girl from the upstairs bedroom stands next to me, looking so goddamn hot in her tight AC/DC t-shirt and ripped jean shorts that her car isn't the only thing close to overheating. If I didn't love the band before, I sure as hell would now.

She might have lived next to me for two months, and numerous times I've glimpsed her moving around her bedroom with little to nothing on, but this is the first time I've been so close to her—and it's making it a little fucking hard to breathe.

Talk about fueling all my college girl fantasies.

Not only is she gorgeous, everything about her, from the swell of her cleavage, her barely-there curves, to legs that go on for miles, reminds me it's been a long-ass time since I've had a woman in my bed. It's not that women are on my *do without* list, which is sizable now that I'm the sole caregiver to a five-year-old girl. It's just that after working all day and being a full-time single parent at night, it leaves little time for anything else. That, and I have to be very careful who I let

into my daughter's life. No way will I ever let anyone hurt her again.

My sexy neighbor bends over the hood to examine the car again, and my cock twitches—very well aware of how long it's been since it's been touched, too. I try not to chuckle as she tugs on some wires, acting like she knows what she's doing. A moment later, she stands and shifts from one foot to another, her nervous gaze darting from me, to the cars passing by, back to the engine.

"Will it take long?" she asks, as I resist the urge to adjust my thickening cock.

Probably not.

"Uh..." I search for my words, my hard cock interfering with my brain process.

Her eyes fly back to mine. "The car, I mean. Will it take long?" she explains, like I'd misunderstood what she'd meant the first time. I didn't. I just had my mind on other things that likely wouldn't take long, you know, because of the huge hard on I'm sporting at eight in the morning.

I check my watch. "Not long, but I won't be able to get at it for a bit."

She blinks thick lashes over the prettiest brown eyes I've ever seen. "Um...how much will it cost, do you think?"

Her breathy question has me thinking about plunging my hands through her hair and bending her over the hood so I can fulfill all my dirty college-girl fantasies. All I can think about is fucking her until her roommates hear her screams.

"Have you noticed the temperature gauge going high?"

"Yeah, when I was at the stoplight last week, I noticed that."

"Well then, it's not the spark plugs that are going to set you back. It's the radiator. It needs to be replaced."

"Oh...damn." She chews on her bottom lip and crinkles her nose. That's when her scent hits me. Peaches. Why the

fuck does she have to smell like sweet peaches? My goddamn favorite fruit. "Maybe we better forget this."

She starts to back away, and I have no idea why, but I'm not ready for this conversation to be over. "Look, I can probably get you a good deal on one, cut your costs in half, and I can do the labor for free."

Jesus, what the fuck am I doing?

"I can't—"

Just then Cassie sticks her head out the upstairs window. "Daddy, I can't find my shoes."

I shade the early morning sun from my eye and my heart misses a beat the way it always does when I see my little girl. "We came in the back door last night, remember?"

"Right."

Cassie disappears and I hear my neighbor mumbling under her breath. Apparently, a broken-down car, one she can't afford to have fixed, is going to make her late for class.

I shove the rag back into my pocket and close the hood. "What time do you need to be there?"

She blinks up at me. "What?"

The lock clicks into place. "School. What time do you have to be there?"

"Thirty minutes."

"I can get you there on time." I nod toward the window my daughter just stuck her head out of. "I'll drop Cassie off, then take you."

She shakes her head fast. "I don't want to put you out like that."

Put me out? Oh, she can put me out anytime, or better yet, put out for me.

I scrub the scruff on my chin. "It's not a problem... uh...shit, I don't even know your name."

"Rachel," she says.

"Jaxon." I hold a hand out for her to shake it, and she

hesitates, going back to shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Cassie does that when she has to go to the bathroom. But I don't think that's Rachel's problem. Tension vibrates from her, and I take in the almost fearful way she's staring at my hand. Why the fuck is she afraid of me? Is it the murder rap her friends were talking about, or is it something else altogether?

I eye her carefully, note the way she continually casts uneasy glances over her shoulder as she shifts. I might be on the straight and narrow now, but over the years I'd be dragged up and kicked around. I'd survived playground bullies, cruel foster parents, and poverty, so yeah, I know a girl on the run when I see one.

"Jaxon Morgan," I say and continue to hold my hand out, and think back to the night she showed up here, with nothing but a rundown car and her belongings in a backpack. No family or friends to help. While I realize trouble is the last thing I need in my life—with the in-laws trying to prove I'm an unfit parent—I can't just turn my back on her. I'm not looking to be anyone's savior, but Christ, it's obvious this girl could use a fucking break.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Rachel." I roll one shoulder as a strange kind of protectiveness grips me. "Just offering a ride and a deal on some car work. We're neighbors after all, right?"

She shoves her hand into mine, and I give it a squeeze. "Right, sorry...I..." She exhales and gives me a smile, like she wants to start over again. "I appreciate it. Thank you."

"Can you give me a minute to get Cassie's lunch packed?"

"Sure."

"Come have a seat inside the shop. Get out of the sun while I get her ready." She snags her purse from her car, locks the doors behind her and follows me into the service bay, aka the bottom half of my house. I grab a piece of paper from behind the counter and gesture toward my cleanest

chair. “Have a seat there, and fill in your contact information.”

“Oh, okay. What do you need that for?”

“Just in case I run into trouble working on the car and need to run something by you.” I give her a wink. “Since you know so much about fixing vehicles.”

She smirks as she fishes a pen from her purse, and that’s when I realize how much I like her, how easy she is to be around. Not that I know her. I don’t. But I love how she shut down her roommates this morning when they were all staring at me. The only one I like watching me is her. Yeah, I caught her checking me out—and not just this morning.

Dammit, don’t go there, Jaxon. Cassie needs stability, and you can’t bring trouble into your life.

“I’ll be right back.” I dash up the stair, tug on a T-shirt and hurry into the kitchen. I grab Cassie’s empty cereal bowl and drop it into the sink. It teeters on top of the pile of dishes already stacked high. Cassie comes skipping down the hall.

She holds her sneakers up for me to see. “I found them.”

I grin at her, and run my hands over her hair. “Good girl. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, but I want twisted pony, Daddy.”

Twisted pony, aka top twisted pony braid. I groan inwardly. Even after watching the braiding ninjas on YouTube, my big fingers struggle to get it right. According to Cassie, we usually end up with Nightmare Moon—a reference to the villain on My Little Pony. Sometimes I swear she asks just to torture me.

“How about we just put it up into a ponytail.” My mind rushes back to the no-nonsense way Rachel wears her hair. While I like that, I’d love to pull the elastic out and watch those long curls spill over my sheet. I clear my throat. Fuck man, I need to stop fantasizing about my neighbor.

“Please...” she says.

“Okay, hurry, grab the elastic and brush. I have a customer downstairs and I need to give her a ride because her car is broken down.”

As Cassie dashes back down the hall, I reach for her lunch box, but it hits the pile of dishes and two plates clatter to the floor and break.

Fuck. I do not have time for this. “Cassie, don’t come in here,” I yell out.

I crouch down and pick up the big shards of glass and drop them into the garbage can. One cuts my finger. “Shit.” I shove it into my mouth.

“Are you okay?” My head jerks up to see a breathless Rachel standing in the doorway. “Sorry, I heard a crash, and thought you might need some help.” Her gaze leaves mine and takes in the state of my kitchen. Fuck, the in-laws are threatening to call child protection services. If they showed up now, I’d surely lose Cassie. But I’ve been so busy at work, and with Cassie starting kindergarten, I’d gotten a little behind on the housework. Then again, it’s also possible I got a little lax because they’ve been away for the last month, vacationing in the Caribbean. Apparently, their absent daughter, and my ‘unfit’ parenting hasn’t prevented them from jet-setting around the world.

“Excuse the mess.”

“No, it’s okay,” she says quickly, her t-shirt shifting over her breasts as she rests a shoulder against the kitchen door-frame and folds her arms. Does she have any idea how sexy she looks standing there? “You should see my bedroom.”

“I...uh...I have seen your bedroom,” I say. “It’s always clean and tidy.”

Her eyes go wide and a blush spreads across her cheeks. “You...you’ve seen my room?”

“It’s across from mine, hard not to, right?”

Hard being the key fucking word here. Cause yeah, that shit's happening between my legs again.

"Yeah, true. I can see yours, too. Not that I'm trying to look or anything. It's just that sometimes when I'm up late studying, you have your light on, and your blinds open, and like you said, our windows are directly across from one another." A nervous laugh catches in her throat. "I could toss you a slice of pizza. Sometimes I bring a pie home with me." As she rambles on, I take in the flush on her cheeks. Damn if she isn't sexy when flustered.

"Rachel."

She stops for a moment, takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. "Yeah?"

"Can you hand me the broom?" I gesture toward it, and she steps into the kitchen to hand it to me.

"I'm not like my roommates though," she starts up again. "And I want to apolog—"

"Daddy, what happened?" Cassie gasps as she pokes her head into the kitchen, her big blue eyes wide as she takes in the broken dishes. "You're bleeding." She makes a move toward me, but Rachel runs and grabs her before she can walk on the glass.

"I dropped a couple plates, and it's just a little scratch. Stay there, okay, and get your shoes on. I don't want you to get cut. And say hello to our new friend Rachel. She's the client I'm giving a ride to."

Rachel crouches down to Cassie's height, and smiles at her. "Hello, Cassie. I've seen you around but we've never really met before."

"You're Daddy's friend?"

"Yes."

Cassie crinkles her nose. "You're a girl."

"I am."

"Does this mean you're his girlfriend?"

“No, no,” Rachel says quickly and explains the difference between girl friend, and girlfriend.

“You’re pretty,” Cassie says, and I glance up to see her holding her brush and elastics out. “Daddy was going to braid my hair and make me pretty, too.”

“You don’t need your hair braided to make you pretty, but how about I do it for you, since your dad has to put a bandage on his hand.”

Cassie leans into Rachel. “Daddy makes Nightmare Moon.”

“Nightmare Moon, what is that?”

“Her name is Princess Luna but when she’s evil they call her Nightmare Moon.”

“So you’re saying your dad makes evil braids?”

“I can hear you,” I say, but my heart is in my throat as I see how quickly my child has taken to our neighbor. Cassie has seen her around of course, and they’ve waved in passing, so truthfully Rachel isn’t a stranger to her. None of the college girls next door are.

Rachel giggles with Cassie, and in my heart I know how much my little girl needs a mother, one who isn’t an addict and chose a life of drugs and partying over her family. I tried to help her, I really did, but in the end, she ran off with her dealer, without so much as a glance at us in the rearview mirror. I guess we weren’t enough for her to get clean. Then again, I was labeled a lowlife and was never enough for anyone to stick around. But I plan to do everything in my power to be enough for Cassie. Outside of her grandparents I’m all she has.

My in-laws were always worried about me taking care of Cassie—considering my past—when they should have been worried about their own daughter. But they didn’t know what was really going on behind closed doors, and I didn’t want to be the one to shatter their image of their sweet Sarah, a

college-educated girl from an upper-class family who veered off track. They blame me for that, but I was slowing down on the partying scene when I met her, and gave it up completely after Cassie was born.

“I think I want a ponytail, like you,” Cassie says, bringing my thoughts back.

“Easy enough.” Rachel holds her hand out for the brush and elastics, and Cassie hands them to her.

Rachel stands, and turns Cassie around. As she combs out my daughter’s hair, I sweep up the rest of the glass, wash and bandage my finger, then grab Cassie’s lunch from the fridge. I drop the food into her plastic lunchbox, and look up to find the two girls chatting quietly.

“Are you two whispering about me?” I ask

“No,” they both say in unison, but from the grin on Rachel’s face, I know it’s a lie.

“All right, come on. Let’s get you both to school.”

“You go to school?” Cassie asks Rachel as we make our way downstairs and back outside.

“I do.”

“What grade are you in?”

“Well, I’m in college.”

“What’s college?”

Rachel glances at me and I shake my head. “Chatty Cassie,” I say.

I open the door to the back seat as Rachel grabs her backpack from her car. “In you go, kiddo.” Cassie climbs into her car-seat and buckles herself in. “Good?” I ask.

“Good.” she says and picks up her mock iPad and turns it on. As music blares, Rachel slides into the passenger seat. Once we’re all buckled up, I back out of the driveway and head to Cassie’s school.

Rachel casts me a glance. “You have your hands full.”

I scrub my chin and flick on my signal. “Yeah. She’s defi-

nately a full-time job, but I wouldn't change it for the world." Rachel shifts restlessly beside me, and I don't miss the curiosity in her big brown eyes. "What?"

"It's not my business, but I take it her mom's not in the picture."

I stiffen and grip the steering wheel tighter, and Rachel holds her hands up, palms out. "Sorry, none of my business. I wasn't trying to pry."

"No, it's okay. I just..." I pause, not wanting to divulge too much about myself. "You're right, her mom's not in the picture. She left a couple years ago and we've not seen her since. It's just Cassie and me."

"I'm sorry, Jaxon."

"Yeah, me too," I say, and clench down on my jaw.

"I was thinking..."

I cast her a quick glance, note the way she's playing with the straps on her purse. "About?"

"That you could use a little help around your place, and with Cassie. Everyone needs a break once in a while right? You're giving me one with my car."

"What are you suggesting?"

"That maybe I could help you around the house. Cook, clean, babysit, teach you how to braid Cassie's hair," she says with a grin. "Although I hear you make a mean Nightmare Moon."

I laugh at that. "Yeah, I guess you're right. What's the going rate for something like that?" I ask. I'm not hurting for money. I have a very successful business, and have been thinking about hiring someone to help me with the house. I just haven't found the time to look more into it. That, and I don't trust too many people with my belongings—time in juvenile hall will do that to you—or with my daughter.

"Well, I was thinking, instead of money, I could spend the

next couple weeks working off the repairs to the car. You're helping me, I'm helping you."

"Tit for tat?"

Sbit, now I'm thinking of her tits.

"Yeah, exactly."

I mull that over as I pull up to Cassie's school. I jump out as she unbuckles herself. The second I open her door, she hops from the car and is about to take off until I bend to give her a hug and kiss. "I'll see you later, kiddo."

"Bye, Daddy. Bye, Rachel," she says and I wave to the playground monitor as Cassie runs to catch up to her friends. I slide back into the car and pull into traffic.

"Okay, so tit for tat. I like it."

I like it a lot. Which is a real fucking problem.

"Um, just one thing you should know, Jaxon."

"What's that?"

She continues to twist the strap of her purse. "What you heard this morning...from my friends."

I shake my head and laugh. "I heard a lot from your friends."

"Yeah, but the part about—"

"Me having killed someone. For the record, I never killed anyone. Gave a few good beatings to a few bad people who deserved them, but I never murdered anyone."

Rachel nods her head. "Good to know, but I'm talking about—"

"You needing to get laid?"