

WOLF
VALLEY



A Very Crumpy
BEST FRIEND

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SHAW HART

A VERY GRUMPY BEST FRIEND

WOLF VALLEY: GRUMPS

BOOK 1

SHAW HART

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We were always meant to be more than just friends.

Lilliana:

I've been best friends with Foster since I was a kid.

I've been in love with him for just as long.

We've always been close.

Just not as close as I'd have liked us to be.

Foster:

Lilliana has always been mine.

I thought that she knew that, but after an incident in high school, I wasn't as sure.

That's why I came up with the marriage pact.

When she had agreed to it, I had felt relieved.

Now that the pact is almost up, I'm worried that she might have forgotten about it.

Luckily for her, I'm ready to remind her and to show her just how perfect we'll be together.

ONE



Foster

“I’M surprised that you even came in this morning,” my twin brother, Ford, says as he takes a seat across from me.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I ask him, even though we both already know the answer.

“Um, maybe because Lilliana is coming back today.”

I give him a blank look, and he rolls his eyes.

“Don’t give me that. We both know that you’ve had this day circled in your calendar for freaking months.”

“Prove it,” I grumble, and he rolls his eyes.

“Are you finally going to tell her that you’ve been obsessed with her for your entire life?”

“Probably not right away. I was thinking that I’d welcome her back to town and stuff first, maybe help her get settled.”

“Smartass,” he says with a laugh, and I grin.

“It must be hard for you that I got all of the brains and the looks,” I say with a sigh, and he flips me off.

“We’re identical twins, moron.”

“Am I interrupting a brotherly squabble?” Ransom asks as he joins us at our table.

“Almost always,” we say at the same time, and Ransom grins.

We’re at the Nosh Diner, but it’s mid-morning and the place is empty. I’m sure that won’t last long. This place is always packed. It’s one of the only restaurants here in Wolf Valley, after all.

Ford actually owns this diner. The previous owner, old Mr. Riley, sold it to him right after high school. Well, sold it to us. Ford couldn’t have afforded it without my investment, and neither one of us could have afforded it without the money that our mom left us when she passed.

“What are we talking about then?” Ransom asks.

Ransom came to town a year ago and moved in next door to me. We became fast friends and try to grab breakfast or lunch together once a week. I had forgotten that today was when we were meeting for a late breakfast so I’m lucky that I had a lull at work and came over.

“Lilliana is coming home today,” Ford informs him.

“Ah, Foster’s long lost love. I can’t wait to meet her.”

I glare at him, and he grins, grabbing a menu and pretending to look it over.

“You’ll love her,” Ford tells him, and jealousy starts to eat at me.

Lilliana is finally coming back to town and I don’t want to even think about sharing her with anyone else. It’s been too long since we were last together, three years to be exact. We’ve stayed in touch, texting or talking on the phone every few days or so, but it’s not the same as seeing her face to face.

“I’m sure,” Ransom says, and I know that they’re both just messing with me.

“Are we eating or what?” I snap, and they share a look.

“She left for college, right?” Ransom asks, and Ford and I both nod.

“Yeah, she went to the Pratt Institute in New York,” I tell him.

“That’s a long way to go for school. Are you sure that she wasn’t trying to get away from you?” Ransom asks, and I know that he’s joking, but my stomach drops at his words, and my mind flashes back to high school, to one of the last times that I saw her in person.

Ford thinks that I’ve never tried to tell Lilliana how I’ve always felt about her, but that’s not true. There was a party towards the end of summer that we all went to. Lilliana and I had snuck outside for some fresh air and wound up sitting on this porch swing staring up at the stars.

I had brought up the idea of a marriage pact if both of us weren’t married by twenty-four, and she had agreed right away. I thought that was a good sign that maybe she liked me too. I mean, normally, marriage pacts are made for later in life, not like six years in the future.

Still, even with her agreeing to the pact, it had taken me almost an hour to work up the courage to turn to her and try to kiss her. I had almost done it, too, but then she had pulled back.

Thinking about her pulling away from me still makes me flinch, and I clear my throat and try to focus on happier things.

She’s coming back to town and I’m finally getting my friend back.

Plus, there’s the marriage pact...

“Are you two going to order or what?” Ford asks, and I blink.

“Of course. I’ll have the burger,” I order, deciding that it’s late enough in the morning for lunch food.

“Same,” Ransom says, and Ford nods and heads back around the counter.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ransom asks me as we wait for our food.

“Plan for what?”

“For winning over your girl.”

“I’m just going to welcome her back to town, help her move in and stuff. Then maybe ask her out to dinner or a movie or something.”

“No, that’s not going to work. You have to do some big gesture, really lay your heart out on the line for her,” he tells me and I stare at him like I’ve never met him before.

“Big gesture. You don’t know words like that. Who the hell are you?”

“Shut up,” he mumbles, and I laugh.

“What do you know about grand gestures? Who are you trying to romance?”

“No one! We’re talking about you,” he reminds me, and I smirk.

I see the way that his eyes look around the diner for a certain brunette.

“Ruby isn’t working today,” I inform him, and his eyes snap back to mine.

“Okay?” He asks, pretending that he wasn’t just looking for her.

“Maybe we should be talking about your love life instead,” I say as Ford brings over our food.

“Why? You got a girl, Ransom?” He asks, taking a seat next to me.

“I’m going to stop coming here if I just get interrogated all of the time,” he threatens.

“Seems too defensive for the answer to be no to that question,” I say to Ford, and he nods.

“Who is she?” He asks.

“Yeah, do we know her?” I add with a grin.

I don’t know how Ford hasn’t noticed that Ransom has eyes for one of his waitresses, but I’m not going to tell him. It doesn’t seem like my place.

Ransom glares at us as he takes a big bite of his burger.

“How’s work going?” Ransom asks me, and part of me wants to keep questioning him about his own love interest, but I relent and let him change the subject.

“It’s going good. It’s been busy,” I tell them.

I took over the mechanic shop from our dad. He just retired a few months ago, and now the shop is all mine.

Ford was the chef in our family, but I’ve always been good with cars or anything with an engine. They make sense to me. There’s always a reason for every problem, unlike with people.

“My bike has been acting up. I was hoping to bring it by later today,” Ransom says, and I nod.

“Of course.”

A group of tourists pours into the diner, and Ford stands.

“I’ve got to get back to work. I’ll see you guys later. Are you going over to Dad’s place today?” He asks me, and I nod.

“Yeah, right after this,” I confirm.

“I’ll make a to-go bag for him. Tell him I said hi and that I’ll be by on Sunday.”

“Will do.”

He waves and heads back behind the counter, and Ransom and I finish off our lunch and get ready to go our separate ways.

“I’ll come by in a bit,” Ransom says as he climbs into his old truck.

It’s weird seeing him in it. Usually, the guy is always on his motorcycle. Even when it’s freezing out, he still prefers to ride his bike.

“Okay, give me a call if I’m not there when you drop it off.”

“I will.”

He waves, and we head off in opposite directions. My dad still lives in our childhood home in the northern part of town,

and I head that way. I pull into his driveway a few minutes later, and my eyes still slide over to the house next door.

Lilliana grew up there. Her parents sold the house two years ago and moved further south then. I had been afraid that maybe Lilliana would move south too after college or stay in New York, but she's always loved Wolf Valley. Hell, she stayed in New York, taking classes during the summer too, all so that she could graduate a semester early and come back to this place.

"Hey, Dad!" I call as I walk in through the garage door.

"Hey, Foster. I was wondering when you would be by," he says with a smile as he pushes himself up from his favorite armchair.

I set the takeout bags that Ford packed for him on the counter, and he smiles when he sees them.

"How's your brother doing?" He asks as he opens the bag and grabs a fry.

"Good. He said he'll be by on Sunday."

"Good, good. What about you?"

"I can come for dinner on Sunday."

He nods, smiling.

It's been just our dad and us for the last eight years. Our mom passed away when we were fourteen, and we were all devastated. I know that Dad won't ever remarry. He always says that Mom was the love of his life and that no one could ever replace her.

I know what he means. Lilliana is the love of my life. I just wish that I was the love of hers.

"Lilliana comes back today. Are you ready?" He asks me, and I sigh.

"Ready for what?"

"To woo her."

"People don't say woo anymore, Dad."

“Sure, they do.”

I don't bother arguing with him.

“You would think that Lilliana would know since everyone else in town seems to know that I love her,” I grumble, and my dad laughs.

“She doesn't because you've always treated her like your girlfriend, just without the kissing and all of that.”

“So, how do I change that now?”

“You don't. You just need to tell her how you feel about her. How you've always felt about her.”

“Not always,” I argue weakly, and he snorts.

“Son, I saw you that first day that she moved in. You looked like you had been hit by a truck when she got out of the moving truck. Trust me, you've always been in love with her.”

I know that he's right. It's always only been Lilliana for me. I never dated in high school and never even looked at another girl. Hell, even after she left, I never tried to date or paid any attention to other women. It's Lilliana or nothing for me.

Now, I just need to figure out how to get her to see that we're meant to be together.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out, my heart lodging in my throat when I see Lilliana's name on the screen.

“Go get your girl,” my dad tells me, and I look up.

“Yes, sir,” I say, giving him an excited smile as I head back out to my truck and climb behind the wheel.

She texted me her new address, saying that she stopped for gas but should be there soon, and I head that way. It's right in town and I'm there in under ten minutes.

I pull up behind her old Ford Explorer with the U-Haul trailer attached to the back, and just like all of those years ago, as she climbs out of the SUV and our eyes lock, I fall in love with her all over again.

Now, I just need to work up the nerve to tell her that.

TWO



Lilliana

BEING BACK in Wolf Valley is amazing. I never came back when I was in college, partly because it would have been expensive, but also because I didn't trust myself not to stay here. This place has always been my home, and I knew that once I graduated, I would be back. I just had to leave for a little bit to chase my dreams.

Now I'm finally back, and I don't think that I've stopped smiling since I saw the town welcome sign.

The man that has fueled every single one of my fantasies hops out of his truck, that familiar smile that he only ever gave to me, and occasionally his brother tugs at his lips, and I relax.

Foster.

If I'm honest with myself, he's what I missed the most about this place.

"Welcome home," he says, wrapping me up in his arms, and I grin as I wrap my arms around his trim waist.

"I missed you," I whisper, and he hugs me tighter.

"I missed you too, Snow," he whispers back.

The old nickname has unexpected tears stinging my eyes. He used to call me Snow all of the time when we were kids because he said that I looked like Snow White. I have to admit that with my long black hair and pale skin, I can see the

resemblance, but I'm about eight sizes bigger than any fairytale princess.

We pull back at the same time and I take him in. He still looks the same. His dark brown hair is a little longer, but those blue eyes are exactly how I remember. He's a foot taller than me, and I have to crane my neck to meet his eyes.

"How was the drive? I still think you should have let me come and drive with you," he grumbles, already reaching past me to open the back of the small U-Haul.

"It was good. I had my roommate with me for most of it. It was just the last hundred miles or so that I was alone," I remind him.

He grunts, and I smile. I'm used to Foster's lack of words. He was always happier to sit and listen to me talk than make conversation. I guess that hasn't changed in the last few years either.

"You don't have to help me unpack. There's not much. I can get it later," I tell him, and he gives me a hard look that has me lifting my hands in surrender. "Or you can carry it all upstairs. Whatever makes you happy."

He grunts again and grabs the first few boxes.

"I thought that was you," Ford says as he comes up and wraps me up in a tight hug.

"Ford! I missed you," I say with a laugh, hugging him back.

"Did you hear that? She missed me," Ford tells Foster.

He rolls his eyes, juggling his grip on the boxes.

"She told me that she missed me more," Foster tells his twin, and I dig my keys out of my purse and open the door leading up to my new apartment.

"She was lying," Ford tells Foster, and I giggle as I grab a box and lead the way upstairs.

I missed being around these two. They were always teasing each other, but it's obvious how much they both love

each other, and I know that if the other ever needed them, they would both drop whatever they were doing to be there.

Sometimes I wished that I had siblings, someone to always have my back. Luckily for me, I had the Miller brothers living next door, and they were the next best thing.

I'm out of breath by the time we reach the top of the stairs. Meanwhile, the two brothers aren't even breathing hard.

"What have I missed around here?" I ask them as I drop the box and unlock the door.

"Not much. A few new businesses opened up on Main Street. Just a few doors down," Ford tells me.

"Like what?" I ask as we all head inside.

The apartment is small and smells like coffee from the coffee shop downstairs, but I don't mind. There's floor to ceiling windows overlooking the street below, and I smile as I walk closer to them.

"A sex toy shop, dirty bakery, and romance bookstore," Foster says, and I spin around, gaping at him.

"Really?" I ask him, and he nods.

"Have you been to them yet?" I ask.

"Just the bakery," both brothers say at the same time, and I laugh.

"I want to go to all three."

"Alright," Foster agrees.

"I'm just here to help with the boxes. Then I need to get back to work," Ford says apologetically.

"We'll go tomorrow or something then," I tell him.

They set the boxes down by the kitchen counter and we head back out to the truck.

"How's the diner been?" I ask Ford as we make another trip up.

"Good, busy."

Just like Foster, Ford doesn't really have much to say. Ever. He's always been sweet to me, maybe even flirted with me a few times, but I've never felt anything other than friendship for him. My heart has always belonged to Foster.

I can still remember the day that I fell in love with him. It was my first day of school after we moved to Wolf Valley, and I was so nervous. I was joining fifth grade in a town where everyone knew everyone, and I was sure that I would stand out like a sore thumb.

I did. I was the one that everyone stared at as I walked into the school, and I hated it. I never really liked to be the center of attention, and I didn't know how to handle it back then.

I must have looked like I was going to be sick. I can still remember my palms sweating as I tried to unfold the school map and find my classroom. Then Foster and Ford had walked up to me. Ford was busy talking to one of his friends, but Foster had looked right at me and smiled.

He had taken the map from me and then walked me to class. It turned out that we had the same teacher, and he had sat next to me and turned so that I couldn't really see the rest of the classroom or the students. I had relaxed then.

He had spent the whole day acting as my personal bodyguard. By lunchtime, I learned that he and Ford lived next door from me, and by the time that the Miller boys walked me home that afternoon, I was thinking of Foster as my own personal knight in shining armor. I didn't fall in love with him until we were almost back to our houses. My shoelace had come undone, and he had stopped me before I could trip or fall and bent down to tie it for me. When he looked up at me and gave me that crooked smile, I knew he was the boy I wanted to marry someday.

Unfortunately for me, somewhere over the years, I seem to have been firmly put in the friend zone, and I never knew how to get out of it.

I blink out of my memories and follow Ford and Foster back out to the U-Haul. The boys run down to grab the furniture I brought back with me and I unpack some of the

boxes. I really don't have much. Hopefully, now that I'm home, I can start to put down more roots.

"This is the last of it," Ford announces, and I smile.

"Thanks again for helping. It's so good to see you," I say, hugging him goodbye.

"No problem. Come by the diner tomorrow and I'll get you something. On the house," he offers.

"I'll take you up on that."

He waves goodbye and jogs back downstairs, leaving Foster and me to unpack everything.

"Where do you want these boxes?" He asks, and I peek inside to see some clothes.

"In the bedroom, please."

He nods, grabbing the boxes as I unpack some of my design gear and fabric.

"I can't wait to see your latest designs," he tells me, and my face flames with a bright red blush that has him freezing and giving me a funny look.

I'm not surprised that he wants to see what I've been working on. Foster was always my biggest supporter. When I told him that I wanted to design clothes for plus size women, he encouraged me to go for it, even when no one else thought that I could do it. He was always cheering me on.

Foster heads into the bedroom with the boxes and comes back out to see me fidgeting in the kitchen still.

"What? You don't want me to see?" He asks me, and I shake my head.

"No! It's not that. You can see them. It's just that I actually started designing lingerie," I tell him as he heads toward my bedroom carrying my comforter and pillow.

BANG!

I gasp, my eyes going wide as Foster drops the blanket and rubs at his forehead.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, rushing over to his side at the same time that he turns to me and blurts out, “Lingerie?”

We stare at each other for a beat, and an image of me modeling some of my designs for him flashes behind my eyes.

I want that.

But I can't lose Foster. He's my best friend, and that's all that he's ever going to be.

Unfortunately.

THREE



Foster

THE IMAGE of Lilliana in lingerie was enough to have me almost blacking out.

Or that could have been because I might have just given myself a concussion walking into her door frame.

My cock strains against my jeans, and I grit my teeth, trying to think about the splitting pain in my head and not my best friend wrapped in sexy, lacy things.

“Here, sit down,” she urges me, leading me over to the couch that looks like it’s from the early nineties.

The floral pattern is a bit of an eye-sore, but it’s surprisingly comfortable as I sit down.

“I don’t think that there’s any ice,” she apologizes as she checks the freezer.

“It’s fine. I’m alright,” I promise her, and she sighs as she sits down next to me.

We’re silent for a beat, and I clear my throat.

“Lingerie, huh?” I ask, and she nods, smiling slightly.

“I know. I still do some clothes, but I did lingerie for an assignment last year and fell in love with it. Plus, there are not a lot of sexy plus size options. Most of it is just white, beige, or black, and they all look the same. I want to change that.”

“Then you will.”

She beams at me, and my heart beats wildly against my ribs. I love making her look at me like that.

“I’ll show you some of the ones that I designed next time we hang out,” she promises me, and my mouth drops open at the thought of Lilliana standing in front of me in nothing but one of her designs.

“Sounds good,” I say, sounding half strangled.

She gives me a funny look, and I try to get ahold of myself when there’s a knock on her door. A second later, Cameron comes rushing in.

“You’re back!” She screams, and Lilliana smiles as she jumps off the couch to hug her friend.

“I missed you so much,” Lilliana says as they embrace, and I stand, trying to get my hard-on under control now that we’re not alone.

“I wanted to come by before I head to work. Can’t have this one monopolizing all of your time,” Cameron says, pointing at me with a knowing smirk.

I just blink back at her, and she rolls her eyes.

Cameron and Lilliana were friends in high school, and I put up with her because Lilliana likes her. That’s the same reason why I’ve been giving her free oil changes and tune-ups too. Well, that and the fact that Ford has been half in love with her since she moved here in high school.

“I want to hear all about everything that’s been going on around here,” Lilliana says.

“I’m surprised that Foster hasn’t caught you up to speed,” Cameron says as both girls sit on the couch.

“I already told you about the new businesses.”

“That’s not what I mean. Who’s dating who? What’s the latest scandal?” Lilliana asks, and I frown.

“I don’t know,” I tell her, and she smiles.

“Figures. Foster never talks to anyone. Someone could propose right in front of him and he wouldn’t even notice,” Cameron says, shaking her head at me.

“They’re not proposing to me, right? So, what would it matter?”

Both girls giggle, and I sigh.

“I need to get to work. Ransom is supposed to be bringing his bike by.”

“Who?” Lilliana asks.

“Ransom. He moved to town like a year ago. He’s this big, sexy biker. Totally hot, and I think that he’s single!” Cameron tells her helpfully.

“Oh, are you going to hit on him?” My girl asks her friend, and I’m glad that she doesn’t seem all that interested in him.

“Maybe,” Cameron says, and I file that away to rub in Ford’s face later.

“Dinner tomorrow?” I ask Lilliana, and she nods.

“Yeah, I’ll text you later and we can make plans.”

“Sounds good. Welcome home,” I say when she stands to hug me goodbye.

“Thanks. It’s good to be back.”

“Cameron, I’ll see you around,” I say with a wave as I head for the door.

I jog downstairs and over to my truck, pulling out my phone as I go. As I climb behind the wheel, I wonder if I have enough time to go home and take a shower. A very, very cold one.

FOUR



Lilliana

“SO, WHAT HAVE I MISSED?” I ask Cameron.

“Not much. Remember Xavier from high school?” She asks me.

“Kind of. He was a year ahead of us, right?”

“Yeah, he joined the military but moved back a year ago, and he brought his hot friend with him.”

“Ohh,” I gush, even though the only man that I can think about just walked out of my apartment.

“Xavier is dating one of the Baker sisters. The one who opened the bakery,” she goes on.

“I heard about the bakery and stuff. Have you been yet?” I ask her, and she nods.

“Yeah, the Baker sisters are really nice, and the bakery is so good. I may have also gotten myself a little toy from the sex shop too. And then I needed a romance book to go with it,” she says with a laugh.

“Of course,” I agree good-naturedly.

“Foster is still single too,” she says out of nowhere.

“Oh, um, that’s good.”

“Is it?” She asks, giving me a knowing smirk.

“I mean, I wish that he was happy and with someone.”

“Yeah, with you,” she tells me, and I blush.

“Now that you’re back, are you finally going to tell him that you love him and want to have his babies?” She asks me.

“No, we’re just friends.”

The familiar lie rolls off of my tongue and only kind of tastes like dirt.

“No, you’re not,” she sighs. “You want to know why Foster is still single?”

“Um,” I start, but she continues before I can say anything.

“It’s because he’s always been in love with you. He’s only ever had eyes for you. It’s painfully obvious to everyone except for you, apparently.”

My heart feels like it’s lodged in my throat at her words.

Could Foster really love me the same way that I love him?
Could he want me as much as I’ve always wanted him?

An image of us in high school, sitting on a porch swing in the backyard of Kye Lightfield’s house at his end of summer party flashes behind my eyes. We had been all alone out there, and I had decided that I was going to kiss him and tell him how I felt before I left for college. I had leaned towards him, and I could have sworn that he leaned in too.

Then he had pulled back.

I had been so embarrassed. I left a week later for college and vowed to try to get over this crush. I failed.

“Want help unpacking?” Cameron asks as she looks around at all of the boxes.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say, but she’s already standing and heading over to the first box.

“Nonsense. Come on, we’ll work and talk.”

We head into the kitchen and start to open up the boxes. I don’t have that many things, and we have the mismatched dishes and silverware put away in no time.

“How’s work?” I ask Cameron.

Cameron is an artist. She’s been selling some of her work online and picking up some orders on the side. She told me that sometimes she draws tattoos for clients too, and I’m not surprised. She’s an incredible artist.

“It’s slow,” she admits. “I’m going to need to look for a part-time job or something soon if things don’t pick up.”

“Is there anywhere in town that’s hiring?”

“Not really, but we’ll see. I still have a bit of savings left. What about you? What are you going to do now that you’re home?” She asks, clearly wanting to change the subject.

“I’ve sold some of my designs back in New York. I’m hoping to see if maybe somewhere in town will carry them too. I’ve been working on my website too, and there are some orders coming in from there, too.”

Cameron smiles as I break down the boxes.

“I need to return the U-Haul. Want to grab something to eat?”

“I wish that I could. I need to get back to my place and finish up a piece. I’ll see you tomorrow, though, right?”

“Of course.”

We head downstairs, and I dig my keys out of my pocket. Cameron hugs me goodbye before she hops into her car and heads back to her apartment. I climb up into my SUV and pull up directions to the U-Haul lot. I groan when I realize that they closed ten minutes ago and turn my car off.

“Guess I’ll have to do that tomorrow,” I say to myself as I head back upstairs to my apartment.

I’m actually kind of glad to put it off. I’m exhausted from driving and hauling boxes around.

I get showered and changed, and as I climb into bed, I smile.

It’s good to be home.

FIVE



Foster

I HEAR Ransom's old truck pull up outside the bay that I'm working in, and I climb out from under the car that I'm trying to fix to greet him.

"Hey, how's it going?" He asks me as he gets out of his truck and heads my way.

"Good. I figured out your bike. It needs a new cylinder block. I went ahead and ordered one. Should be in tomorrow or the day after."

"Sounds good."

I wipe my hands off on an old rag and squint at him as he shifts from one foot to the other.

"What?" I ask when he still doesn't say anything.

"Nothing."

"You're being weird."

He sighs, and I lean back against the bay door frame, trying to stretch out my back. I've been bent over one car after another all morning, trying to finish up with work so that I can go see Lilliana. I came in extra early this morning just so that I could leave and take her out to dinner tonight.

"How's your girl?" Ransom asks, and I frown.

“She’s good. We got her stuff all moved in yesterday afternoon.”

“That’s good.”

“Uh huh,” I mumble, staring at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Did you tell her yet?” He asks, and I shake my head.

“No. We’re supposed to grab dinner tonight.”

“And you’re going to tell her then?”

“No, why does everyone seem to think that I should just blurt it out to her?” I ask, my voice coming out harder than I intended. “I mean, she just moved back to town. She just graduated, and she’s trying to get settled and get her designs out there. I don’t need to go dumping all of this on her right now.”

Ransom blinks, and I realize that my hands have tightened into fists at my sides.

“Obviously, this is a sore spot for you,” he says, and I grit my teeth and glare at him.

“Why do you care anyway?” I snap.

He hesitates, and some of my annoyance starts to fade. I can tell that he’s worried about something.

“What’s going on, Ransom?” I ask, my tone more even.

“There’s a girl...” he starts, and I nod.

“Yeah, I know. Ruby.”

“How do you know?” He grumbles, and I snort.

“I have eyes, and I have seen you staring at her every single time the two of you are in the same room. When we went to that car show the other month, I thought you were going to break your neck when we saw her walking to the diner.”

He rolls his eyes, his cheeks turning slightly pink.

“She doesn’t seem to notice,” he tells me.

“Doesn’t notice you or your crush on her?” I ask him.

“Both,” he admits, looking glum.

“So, why don’t you just tell her? Ask her out or something,” I suggest.

“I just...” he starts, trailing off. “I don’t want to mess things up with her. What I feel for her... it feels big. Important, you know?”

I do know. That’s how I’ve always felt about Lilliana. It’s why I was always so afraid to try to tell her that I loved her when we were younger.

“Yeah, I know,” I say quietly.

“I guess that I was just hoping that you would have told Lilliana and could have given me some tips.”

“I wish I could, but I’m still working up to that.”

“Maybe I should start with being her friend,” he says, cracking a smile.

“Couldn’t hurt,” I say with a shrug.

“Couldn’t it?” He asks me quietly, and I think about it.

Has being Lilliana’s friend been painful? Sometimes. Especially when we were teenagers. Wanting her this badly and not being able to be with her in the way that I want has hurt.

“Sometimes,” I say finally.

We’re silent for a minute, watching as the traffic drives by on the icy roads.

“Well, it’s not like I can ask Ford either. Cameron came into the diner this morning when I was there, and he almost tripped over his own feet trying to get to her table.”

I snort, not at all surprised.

“Yeah, I guess the two of us don’t really have much luck with the ladies,” I sigh.

“I don’t know about that. You’ve done the hard part and found your soulmates. Now you just need to figure out how to

get them to see that.”

“That feels like the hard part,” I grumble, and he laughs.

“Maybe you’re right,” he agrees.

“You’ll figure it out,” I assure him, and he nods.

“Thanks, man. I’ll let you get back to work. Good luck tonight.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you later.”

He waves and heads back to his truck while I get back to work. It’s only noon now, and I have a few things left to do here before I head home and clean up. I’m hoping to be at Lilliana’s apartment by six tonight to take her out to dinner, but I have a feeling that I won’t be able to wait that long to see her again.

I grab my phone and smile when I see that she responded to my good morning text.

FOSTER: Did you sleep in?

Lilliana: A little bit. I was so tired!

Foster: Glad that you got some rest then. Are we still on for dinner tonight?

Lilliana: Yep! I’m going out to lunch with Cameron right now, but then I’ll be free for the rest of the day.

Foster: Have fun with Cameron. I’ll see you later.

Lilliana: See you!

I TOSS my phone back onto the cart next to the car that I was working on and take a deep breath. I try to focus on work as I climb back under the car, but all I can think about is seeing Lilliana again.

By four, I throw in the towel, close up my shop, and head home. It’s time to get cleaned up and then to go get my girl.

SIX



Lilliana

“CRAP!” I grumble when I look outside and realize that I never returned the U-Haul. I had forgotten about it when I first woke up, too busy getting settled into my new apartment. I had meant to run errands today too, but then inspiration had struck, and I spent most of the afternoon sketching out a new design.

I grab my keys and head downstairs, determined to return the trailer and then maybe grab some groceries. I slide behind the wheel and I’m about to start it when Foster’s truck pulls up behind me.

“Where are you off to?” He asks me, leaning against my driver’s side door.

“I need to return the U-Haul. Want to come with me, and then we can grab something to eat?” I ask him.

“Sure. Slide over. I’ll drive.”

I hop over the center console, and he scoots the seat all of the way back. I’m tired of driving so I’m happy that he’s taking over.

He steers the car down the street. The U-Haul station is in the next town over, and I stare out the window as we go, smiling at all of the familiar sights.

“What are you hungry for?” He asks me as we pull into the station.

“A burger from Toasty Buns,” I tell him right away, and he smiles.

“Of course. I should have known.”

Toasty Buns was my favorite restaurant when we were in high school. They have the best milkshakes and burgers. I missed it while I was living on the East Coast.

“I’ll go in and take care of the trailer,” Foster says, already climbing out of the car.

“Thanks, but I think that I have to sign something.”

We head inside, and Foster asks where to park the trailer then heads outside to drop it off while I sign the papers and turn in the keys.

I head back out to my car and Foster opens my door for me.

“Thanks,” I say as I slide into the car.

“Ready to eat?”

“Yep!”

We head back towards Wolf Valley, and I tell him about some of my favorite restaurants and spots in New York along the way.

“How’s your dad doing?” I ask him as we park outside of Toasty Buns.

“He’s good. He retired a few months back. Now he putters around the house and helps out at the shop when I need a hand with something.”

“You took over for him?” I ask as we head inside.

“Yeah, I bought him out.”

“Good. I know how much you love that place.”

We head over to our favorite booth, and I slide in across from him. Neither of us reaches for a menu, and I grin as a waitress comes over to take our order.

“We’ll take two bacon burgers and two chocolate shakes,” Foster orders for us, and I grin.

“I can’t wait,” I say once the waitress leaves to place our order.

Foster grins, and I grin back at him. He’s got a smudge of grease close to his hairline, and I stare at it, wondering why that little smudge makes him so damn hot.

“Cameron said that you were still single,” I blurt out.

I want to take the words back as soon as they’re out, but it’s too late.

“Yeah, I’ve been busy with work and stuff,” he tells me, and I nod. “What about you?”

“Still single,” I confirm.

“Well, at least we still have the marriage pact,” he jokes, and my heart kicks against my ribs.

I’ve thought about the marriage pact a few times over the years, but I guess I thought that Foster had forgotten about it, or maybe that it was just a joke to him.

“That’s true,” I try to joke, but I’m not sure that it comes out like one.

Our food is dropped off, and I take a bite, moaning as the burger melts in my mouth. Foster stares at me, his hungry gaze locked on my mouth.

A tightening starts in my core as I stare at him. Only Foster has ever been able to make me feel like this, like I’m burning up. An ache settles deep inside of me, one that I’m familiar with.

I’m a twenty-two-year-old virgin. No one at college ever tempted me. No one besides Foster has ever made me horny like this. He’s fueled all of my fantasies, and now that I’m back here and close to him again, all of those feelings are bubbling up inside of me.

I want to seduce him, but I don’t even know how to go about that. A bubble of courage grows inside of me, and for the first time in years, I want to make a move on my best friend.

Foster finishes his food first, and I drain my milkshake, looking around as the place starts to fill up with people. I recognize more than a few of the people, and I smile and wave at a few.

Everyone looks so much older, and it hits me then just how much time has passed since I was here last.

I've wasted years pining after Foster. I should have told him how I felt about him long ago.

Mrs. Campbell shuffles past with one of her grandchildren. My parents told me that her husband passed away last year, and regret starts to nag at me.

I want to know what it's like to be with Foster. I don't want to waste years or decades wishing that I was with him. God forbid if he starts dating someone in town. I know that I would never be able to handle seeing him with anyone else.

So maybe it's about time that I made my move.

"Anyone that you want to stay and talk to?" Foster asks, breaking me from my thoughts.

He's, as usual, ignoring everyone in the place except me.

He's always been like that. There could be a whole group of people calling his name or trying to get his attention, and he would never look away from me. I know that most people in town think of him as a grump, and he is, but not with me. Never with me.

"No, I'm getting tired. I'm ready to go if you are."

"Sure thing."

Foster pays the bill, ignoring me when I try to offer him some money. He takes my hand and leads me out of the crowded restaurant and back to my car. He opens the door for me and I smile up at him as I climb into the car.

The drive to my new apartment is short, and when we pull up out front, I turn to smile at Foster.

"Want to come up for a bit?"

"You're not too tired?" He asks, and I shake my head.

Tired is not what I'm feeling right now. I want to jump his bones. That same feeling from dinner is back and growing inside of me. All I can think about is being with Foster. I know that he would make my first time special, that he would make sure that I got off. Now that's all I can think about.

Maybe inviting my best friend up wasn't the best idea...

It's too late now, though. He's already out of the car and opening my door for me.

"Thanks."

We head up to my apartment in silence, and I unlock the door, letting us in.

"Are you thirsty or anything? All that I have is water," I tell him.

"I'm good."

He heads over to the couch, and my eyes lock on my design pad. An idea starts to form inside of me and I take a steady breath before turning to him.

"Want to see some of my designs now?" I ask him, and he nods.

"Sure."

"I haven't unpacked them yet, but there's one that I can show you," I tell him as I tug my shirt over my head.

He's looking around the apartment so he doesn't notice me stripping behind him. I feel bold and sexy even as I step out of my yoga pants and kick my shoes to the side. Standing in just a bra and thong, I smile as I walk closer to him.

"This is my latest design," I tell him, and I smile as his eyes lock on me and his mouth drops open.

SEVEN



Foster

SHE'S WEARING... *fuck me.*

She's wearing something designed to drive a man wild. Strips of ribbon start at the sides of her breasts and curve over the swell of her breasts to join in a pretty bow right between her breasts.

Her panties are the same, with the ribbons criss-crossing over her round hips and the soft curve of her stomach to tie somewhere in the back. As she walks towards me, I see that the little bow is right about her ass, and I groan.

"Fuck, Lilliana. You look..." I trail off, at a loss for words.

Part of me wonders if I'm not dreaming right now. I mean, no way my best friend just stripped in front of me and is walking towards me, offering me everything that I've ever wanted in my life.

"Good?" She asks with a shy smile.

"Perfect. You look like every man's fantasy. You're so freaking talented. You're going to be such a success," I tell her, and she blushes at my praise.

"Thanks," she says softly.

I nod, unable to tear my eyes off of her. I've been jerking off to images of Lilliana since my very first time. She is all that I've ever thought about, all that I've ever wanted. Even in

my imagination, though, I never did her justice. I'm seeing that now.

I stare at her, trying to burn this image of her into my brain in case I need it later.

Lilliana walks closer to me, and I shift on the couch, watching her approach.

“Did you want to see my bedroom?” She asks, and I'm on my feet before either of us can so much as blink.

“Sure.”

She blushes, and I reach out, taking her hand in mine and squeezing it reassuringly. I want to tell her that we don't have to do anything if that's even what's about to happen, but before I can, she turns and pulls me after her into the room to the left of the living room.

Her bedroom is bare, with a few boxes stacked up in the closet and a suitcase open with clothes spilling out next to the closet door.

She walks over to the bed and turns to face me. There's something different in her expression. She looks vulnerable, and I wonder if she thinks that I'm going to turn her down or reject her.

As if that would ever happen.

“Lilliana,” I breathe, and she steps towards me, pressing her body against mine.

“I want you,” she whispers, staring up at me with those green eyes of hers.

Fuck. I've waited so long to hear her say those words.

I close my eyes, replaying her saying them over and over in my head.

Then I dip my head and for the first time in my life, I kiss my best friend.

Her lips are soft but firm against mine, and I slip my hands into her hair, holding her in place as our lips meet over and over again.

She presses against me, and I nearly come just from feeling all of her curves against me.

“Foster,” she moans against my lips, and my fingers tighten in her hair.

I kiss her until my lips are swollen and I finally feel like I’ve made up for all of the kisses I’ve wanted to give her over the last twelve years.

Lilliana pulls back and I reluctantly let her go. When I blink my eyes open, she’s watching me, her face flushed. That damn lingerie is driving me wild, and all I want to do is tear it off and bury my tongue, fingers, and cock inside of her until she screams.

My hands slide up her sides and around until I find the clasp of her bra. She shivers, arching against me as I unhook it and slide the straps down her arms.

“Goddamn,” I groan as her tits spill free.

I drop the bra at our feet and reach for her breasts, cupping the soft mounds in my hands. They fit perfectly, and I roll the stiff peaks of her nipples between my thumbs and forefingers until she gasps and arches into my touch.

“Don’t stop,” she begs, and I smirk.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I tell her.

Her head tilts back and her eyes fall to half-mast as I continue to tease her nipples between my fingers.

“Foster,” she sighs, and my cock weeps in my pants at the sound of my name coming from her lips like that.

“Love hearing you say my name,” I whisper as I bow my head and trail kisses up and down her neck.

I back us up a step and then another, until the back of her legs hits the bed, and we both go tumbling down onto the mattress.

Her fingers tug on the hem of my shirt, and I happily oblige by pulling my shirt off and tossing it somewhere behind me. Her hands are on the button of my jeans, and together, we

get them undone and pull them off next. My boxers go with them, and my cock points right at where it wants to be most.

“Whoa,” she breathes, her eyes locked on my dick.

Seeing her reaction is the biggest ego boost that I’ve ever had. I try to think of something to say back to that, maybe reassure her that she can take me, but before I can, she’s reaching for me.

Lilliana moans as her hand wraps around my length, and I hiss out a breath from between my teeth as she gives my cock one tentative pump.

“Fuck me,” I groan, and she giggles.

“I’m trying to.”

I grin and cup her face with one hand, pulling her mouth towards mine. Our lips meet, and she opens for me right away, letting me slip my tongue into her mouth. Her tongue flicks against the tip of mine, and I growl, my hand sliding around to the back of her head, and I hold her in place as our tongues battle together.

Her hand finds its way back to my dick, and I nip at her bottom lip, rolling her onto her back beneath me.

“I need a taste,” I say against her lips, and she nods excitedly.

My lips trail down her neck and over the swell of one breast. I lavish attention on the plump mound and suck her nipple into my mouth, biting down gently. When she gasps, I release her and switch to the other breast, giving it the same attention.

Her hips are restless beneath me, and I drop mine down, pinning her to the bed. She whines in protest, and I grin against her soft, pale skin as I make my way lower.

She spreads her legs wide for me in invitation, and I settle between her curvy thighs. Her pretty pink pussy is glistening in the low light, and my mouth waters at the sight.

I can’t wait any longer and I dive in, burying my face in her slick folds. I moan at her sweet flavor. She tastes like

honey and something that is totally Lilliana.

“Foster!” She shouts, her legs clamping down on either side of my head as I find that pearl between her legs and lick it over and over again.

I moan as more of her juices spill out of her, and she cries out again as I slip one finger inside her snug channel.

“Oh! Foster! OH!” She screams, and I feel her core tightening already.

I can’t believe that my best friend is about to come all over my face.

It’s about freaking time.

I add a second finger, stretching her and getting her ready for my cock. I twist, curving my fingers up to rub against the special spot deep inside of her. I suck her clit into my mouth at the same time, and just like that, she flies over the edge and comes for me.

I lick up her juices, greedy for every drop. She twitches against me, and I smile, getting ready to lick her to another orgasm when she reaches down and tugs on my hair.

I give her one last lick before I crawl up her body and kiss her. She moans as she tastes herself on my lips, and I rock against her, my cock slipping easily against her pussy.

“I want to do you,” she says, sounding like a siren.

“You don’t have to,” I start, and she shakes her head.

“I want to. Let me taste you now,” she begs, and Jesus, I never thought that I would hear Lilliana beg me to let her suck my cock.

I roll us so that I’m on my back and she’s over me. Her curves jiggle as she sits up, and then she shuffles down my body and settles in between my legs. She lays down so that she’s level with my cock, and I grit my teeth to keep from coming already.

“Lilliana,” I start, unsure of what I’m even going to say.

She wraps her fingers around my length, and I hiss out a curse.

“I might be terrible at this,” she warns me, and I swallow.

“You’re already the best that I’ve ever had.”

She smiles, emboldened by my words, and I watch, lying still as a statue, as she bends her head and wraps her lips around the tip of my cock.

“So fucking hot,” I groan, and her tongue flicks against the tip of my dick.

Her head starts to bob up and down my length, and I curse under my breath. I’m not going to last long, but I’m determined to let her explore me as much as she wants.

“Shit, Lilliana,” I moan, and she hums in pleasure around me. “Fuck, I’m going to come, baby. You have to stop.”

She sucks harder, and I swear in earnest now.

“Let me fuck you, baby,” I plead, and that gets her attention.

She lets go of my cock with a pop, and I look down to see her saliva coating me. That sight and the way that she’s looking up at me from beneath her eyelashes almost has me coming all over her face.

“Come here,” I order, reaching for her.

I pull her up and roll her under me, tugging her back when we both almost roll off of her full-size bed.

I can’t wait to have her in my king-size bed. Then we can really spread out.

I reach up, pinching one of her nipples, and she gasps, arching up off of the bed. My cock nudges at her opening, and we both seem to hold our breaths as I push in an inch and then another.

Her breath lets out in a whoosh as I thrust into her fully, popping her cherry and marking her as mine.

Part of me can't believe that this is happening. She's so tight, so hot and silky smooth, wrapped around my cock. She's squeezing me like a fist and I have to close my eyes and grit my teeth to stop from coming instantly.

"Foster," she moans, and I bury my face in her neck, breathing in her vanilla scent.

"You feel so good," I tell her, and she nods.

"So much better than I imagined," she agrees.

My heart skips a beat at her words. Has she been imagining being with me?

I start to move in and out of her in a slow, steady rhythm that appears to be driving both of us crazy. Lilliana's hips move against mine in perfect sync, and I bite the inside of my lip until I taste blood, trying to hold off my impending orgasm.

I know that I won't be able to last much longer so I reach between us, finding her clit and rubbing my thumb over it in tight circles. Her pussy tightens around me even more, and I grind my teeth together.

"So good. Best damn thing that I've ever felt," I tell her, and she moans, her fingers digging into my biceps.

I can tell that she's close, too, and I watch her face as I pound into her. Her eyes start to glaze over slightly and her mouth opens on a silent scream as her thighs squeeze my hips.

"Foster!" She chokes out, and hearing her say my name as she comes is too much for me.

I follow her over the edge, coming inside of her as I bury my face in her neck.

We both remain still, trying to catch our breath as we come down from our peaks. I kiss her neck softly as I gently pull out of her. I head to the bathroom to get a washcloth to clean her up, and when I return, I find Lilliana fast asleep.

I smile to myself, cleaning up between her legs and tucking her under the covers before I slide in on the other side and pull her into my arms.

I want to tell her that I love her, that I've always loved her, but I guess that will have to wait for the morning.

I fall asleep that night with my best friend in my arms and a smile on my face.

EIGHT



Lilliana

WAKING up next to Foster the next morning is surreal. I've dreamed about this happening so many times that when I first wake up, I wonder if I'm dreaming. I reach out, running my fingers over his arm.

He stirs, blinking blue eyes at me sleepily, and I smile.

"Morning," he rasps, and I clear my throat.

"Morning."

I can feel my face heating with a blush, but Foster doesn't seem to notice. He's busy stretching and trying to rub the sleep from his eyes. Seeing him like this feels so intimate. He looks younger when he's just woken up or maybe it's just that he doesn't look like his usual grumpy self right now.

"Are you hungry?" He asks, and my stomach growls.

"I never went grocery shopping yesterday," I tell him, and he nods.

"I'll go down to the bakery and be right back."

I nod, watching as he climbs out of my bed and pulls on his clothes. He's acting like nothing happened last night, like us sleeping together is totally normal, and I'm not sure if that's a good sign for me or not.

"Be right back," he says as he heads out, and I wait until I hear the front door close before I let out the breath that I had

been holding.

What am I supposed to do here? Should I just pretend like it never happened? Act like I'm totally fine sleeping with my best friend and that I haven't been dreaming about doing that for years?

Does he regret sleeping with me? Did we just ruin our friendship? And right when I had just moved back here. Things will be so awkward between us now, and I know that I'll never be able to avoid him. Not in this small town.

I climb out of bed and head into the bathroom before I can really start to spiral out. My eyes lock on my reflection in the mirror, and I gasp when I see the marks all over my body. There are a few fingerprint bruises forming on my hips and legs, and my body heats as I remember the way that he had taken control last night.

Red spots dot my breasts and chest, probably from his mouth. My hair is a tousled mess from having his hands in it, and I sigh as I start to untangle the strands.

I look like I've been well-loved.

I *was* well-loved. I just wish that I knew what I was supposed to do now.

He brought up the marriage pact last night. Sure, it might have been a joke, but maybe not. Plus, there's no denying that he liked what he saw last night. I mean, he thoroughly ravaged me when he saw me in my lingerie. I know that I'm a good designer, but it felt like more than that. It was like he wanted me, had to have me.

The front door opens as I'm pulling on a shirt and a pair of yoga pants. I grab both of our phones as I go out to greet him.

He looks gorgeous as he sets the bakery bag and two coffees on the counter.

"I got a bit of everything," he tells me, and I could swear that he seems nervous.

I start to relax, when his phone buzzes in my hand and I frown when I look down and see that he has six missed calls

from Ford and a new text telling Foster to call him back ASAP.

“Ford’s been trying to get ahold of you,” I say, passing him his phone.

“I’ll call him back in a minute,” he tells me.

His phone starts to buzz again, this time with a call, and he sighs, giving me an apologetic look.

“Go ahead. I’ll just be here eating all of the good pastries.”

He grins at that and heads into the living room as he accepts the call.

“What?” He answers, and I roll my eyes at his way with words.

I open the bag, pull out a coffee cake, and break off a piece.

“What?” He asks, quieter this time, and I can tell right away that something is wrong.

I drop the baked goods and take a step towards him when he turns, his eyes locking with mine.

“I’ll be there in ten.”

He hangs up, and I walk towards him.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“My dad... he was in a car accident early this morning,” he says, and my stomach drops.

“Is he...” I ask, not able to finish that sentence.

“He’s still alive, but he’s unconscious. Ford is with him at the hospital.”

“Let’s go,” I tell him, already stuffing my feet into my sneakers.

I grab my keys, and we jog down the stairs and over to my car. Foster tries to open the passenger door for me, but I shake my head.

“I’ll drive you.”

I hurry over to the other side of the car and climb in, cranking the engine and pulling out onto the street. The hospital is only a few minutes away and we ride there in tense silence.

“He’s going to be fine,” I try to reassure Foster, and he nods.

He reaches out, taking my hand in his and squeezing. I squeeze him back.

“I’ll drop you off at the door and then go park,” I tell him, but he shakes his head stubbornly.

“There’s a spot there.”

I follow where he points, and we park, both hopping out at the same time. As soon as we’re headed to the front doors, he grabs my hand again.

Foster is normally the calm, level headed one, but I can feel him panicking right now. I don’t blame him. The Miller boys are all close. I don’t know what Foster or Ford would do if their dad passed away.

“We’re looking for Frank Miller,” I tell the receptionist at the front desk.

“Room three hundred and two,” she says after a minute of typing on her computer.

“Thanks.”

We head towards the elevator and ride up to the third floor in silence.

“I’m here for you guys, okay? Just tell me what you need,” I whisper as we walk onto the third floor.

“I just need you.”

I squeeze his hand and take a deep breath as we walk into the hospital room.

NINE



Foster

FORD ELBOWS me in the side as he shifts on the couch next to me. Lilliana is tucked under my other arm, and I grumble as I turn towards her more.

I had just managed to fall asleep too. The three of us had sat around Dad's hospital bed all day. He woke up a few hours ago, but he had been really out of it. He fell back asleep not long after, and that was when Ford and I had first started fighting over who got to sleep on the couch versus the uncomfortable chairs.

I close my eyes, trying to go back to sleep, but the constant beeping of the machines is too hard to block out. I take a few deep breaths, reminding myself that those beeps mean that he's still alive.

"Hey," Lilliana whispers, scooting away from my side.

I frown, my grip on her hip tightening.

"Welcome home," my dad whispers to her, and I blink my eyes open, sitting up at the same time as Ford.

"Dad," we say together, and he smiles.

"You scared the shit out of us," Ford tells him as he sits on the edge of the couch and drags his hands down his face.

"Sorry about that."

“Should I get the doctor or a nurse?” Lilliana asks, and Dad nods.

“Please.”

She stands, squeezing my shoulder as she heads for the door and I watch her go.

“Should we get the priest too? Or are you two planning more of a church wedding?” Dad asks me, and I scrub my hands down my face.

“We’re not getting married...yet,” I finish, and he sighs.

“At least tell me that you’ve told her that you love her,” he says, and I shake my head.

“Not yet.”

“What the hell are you waiting for?” He scolds me.

“Lay off him, Dad. You know that he’s still waiting on his balls,” Ford says, and I elbow him in the side.

“Shut up. I was going to tell her, but then you called and interrupted us.”

“Don’t blame me too much. You’ve had literal years to get the nerve to tell her,” Ford says, and I roll my eyes.

I know that he’s right.

“I still remember the day,” my dad reminisces, and I frown.

“What day?”

“The day that you fell in love with her. You looked like you had been hit by something,” he says with a laugh.

“Cupid’s arrow, maybe,” Ford mumbles next to me.

“You just stood in our yard, staring at her. Your mom was trying to get you to come in and get washed up for dinner, but she was all that you could focus on. I remember your mom laughing and saying that we should go greet the new neighbors since we were going to be in-laws with them someday.”

“She did?” I whisper, and he nods, smiling at the memory.

“She loved Lilliana. She always wanted you two to end up together.”

“We all do. We just need Foster to get it together and tell her already,” Ford says.

“Cameron thinks that Ransom is hot,” I inform him, and I smirk when I see his hands tighten into fists.

Looks like I'm not the only one who needs to man up and go after his girl, I think and I know that Ford is aware of my train of thought.

His jaw clenches and he looks away from me. Dad sighs, and I lean back on the couch, trying to sort through my thoughts.

I think back to last night and how it had felt to be with her, to take her virginity and make her mine. It was a literal dream come true.

I should have told her last night. I should have told her before she left for college. I should have done a lot of things differently, but I can't go back and change any of that. All I can do is try to make up for lost time now.

Lilliana comes back into the room, a nurse and doctor right behind her.

“You still look at her the same way,” my dad whispers, and I swallow hard.

How could I not? She's the most beautiful woman that I've ever seen in my life. She's so talented and smart, so kind to everyone.

Ford and I stand and greet the doctor and nurse. Lilliana stands back by the foot of the bed, watching as they check his chart and some of the machines. I hold my hand out to her, and she comes to stand between Ford and me. She takes our hands in hers and squeezes as the doctor starts to ask Dad some questions.

As I watch, I know that I need to tell her. None of us are guaranteed time here. I need to stop wasting mine with her.

TEN



Lilliana

“AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?” Cameron asks me, sipping her glass of wine.

She’s curled up on the opposite end of the couch from me, and it hits me then just how much I missed this and her. I had a few friends in college, but design is a cutthroat industry. We’re all trying to stand out, to be seen. That didn’t really make for a friendly environment.

It’s nice to be relaxed with Cameron. I know that she only wants me to be happy, that she’s always rooting for me, just like I am for her.

“Then Ford called and told him about his dad.”

“I was sorry to hear about him being in the hospital. I’m glad that he’s on the mend.”

“Me too. I don’t know what they would have done if he wasn’t.”

“I was thinking about asking Ford if he needed any help at the diner. I could use the money, and he would be able to spend more time with his dad then.”

I notice that she looks a little tired. There are dark circles under her eyes that concealer isn’t covering, and when I glance at her hands, I can see that she’s been chewing on her

fingernails. She used to do that before our exams when she was worried that she wouldn't do well.

"I think that's a great idea!" I encourage her.

I'm guessing that money must be tighter than she let on if she's trying to work as a waitress. She tried that in high school, we both did. We didn't last very long. Both of us would get inspired by something and end up in the back room sketching instead of working.

"Hopefully he thinks so too. I'm pretty sure that he knows about us being fired from Fireside Café our senior year," she says, and I giggle.

"Maybe not," I lie.

I want to tell her that I think that Ford would say yes to anything she asked, but I've never been great about reading people and I'd hate to be wrong. I don't want to tell her that Ford is in love with her and then have it turn out that he was just being nice to her. Besides, if Ford hasn't told Cameron that he wants her yet, then maybe he doesn't. Maybe he really is just being friendly with her.

Maybe I could ask Foster. He might know how Ford feels about Cameron.

"What did you say about your night together then?" She asks me.

She came over tonight with a bottle of cheap wine and the town gossip that she promised me that first night that I moved in here. Things got delayed with Mr. Miller being in the hospital. When she had shown up, I had blurted out that I slept with Foster and we've pretty much been talking about that ever since.

"Nothing. We were at the hospital and then he was worried about his dad. Asking if he wanted to do it again didn't seem appropriate," I tell her, and she sighs.

"Okay, but what about now?" She presses.

"Now... I'm worried that he regrets it," I admit.

"He doesn't."

“He might. Things are kind of awkward between us lately.”

“Because you’re all in your head and making a big deal out of nothing?” She asks, and I shrug.

“Maybe. Or maybe he regrets sleeping with me, and now he’s worried about having to break that news to me when his dad is still recovering.”

“When are you going to talk to him next?”

“I don’t know. His dad went home today, so maybe I’ll see him tomorrow.”

“Okay, ask him then.”

I take a sip of my wine, and she groans.

“Promise that you’ll ask him the next time that you see him,” she demands.

“I promise.”

She changes the subject then to what everyone has been up to while I was away. I try to follow along, but all I can think about is seeing Foster again.

“I should get home. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, though,” she says, hugging me tightly.

“Okay. Text me when you get home so that I know that you made it there safe.”

“I will.”

She waves as she heads out the door, and I lock it behind her. I clean up our wine glasses and then stare at my mostly bare apartment.

Maybe work will help distract me.

I grab my notepad and curl up on the couch. Normally, I’m inspired whenever I come up with a new design. I can get lost in drawing and lose track of the world. Not tonight, though. All I can think about tonight is Foster.

I’m trying to sketch when there’s a knock on my door, and I hurry to answer it. I know that it has to be Foster since

Cameron just left. I'm surprised that he's stopping by. I know that he was bringing his dad home today. I had almost offered to help them with that, but I figured that the brothers would want some time alone with their dad.

I'm surprised that Foster came over. I know that he's exhausted after spending the last few days at the hospital. He and Ford took turns sleeping there and visiting him. I've been bringing them food and anything else that they might need.

"Hey, is everything alright?" I ask him as soon as I open the door.

"Yeah. Dad is at home, settling in. Ford is going to stay with him tonight."

"I'm sure your dad appreciates that," I say, closing the door behind him.

"He hates it," he says plainly, and I snort a laugh. "He keeps yelling at us to go back to our own lives."

"So, he's an easy patient then," I joke, and Foster laughs.

"Sure. I think that he's just not used to being fussed over so much. It's getting on his nerves."

"I think that I'd hate it too," I admit, and he nods.

"Same. I still don't think that I'd be as bad as him, though. I mean, he tried to help me fix his car this afternoon. I had to physically hold him back from crawling under the hood."

I laugh at the image of Mr. Miller in his cast trying to fix his car while Foster and Ford tried to hold him back. Both brothers got their work ethic from him, that's for sure.

I smile, and then we just stare at each other for a minute. That awkwardness that I was telling Cameron about hangs heavy between us, and I swallow, wishing that I hadn't messed things up. I wish that we could go back to the way things were between us.

"I'm sorry," I blurt when the tension becomes too much.

"For what?" he asks with a frown.

“For messing things up. Can we just go back to the way things were before... the other night,” I finish.

I don't have it in me to say before we slept together. The truth is that I know that I won't be able to forget about our night together.

I know that I'm taking the coward's way out. I should just finally admit to my best friend that I've always loved him and wanted to be with him. I can't though. I need Foster in my life, and I don't want to make things awkward between us or to lose him. If I can only have him as my best friend, then that will have to be enough.

He doesn't answer me, and my stomach and heart both drop.

This is it. I've messed everything up, and now I'm about to lose my best friend forever.

I can feel tears starting to sting the back of my eyes, and I swallow hard, trying to force them back.

“Can we both just forget that it ever happened? Please?” I whisper.

ELEVEN



Foster

JUST FORGET *that it ever happened?*

No fucking chance. That night has been burned into my brain. I've been replaying it every chance I can. All that has been keeping me going these last few days has been the thought that we would do it again.

"No, we can't just forget. Or I can't anyway," I tell her truthfully.

She looks stricken at my words, and my stomach starts to churn with doubts. It's clear that she regrets our night together.

I had thought that we were finally on the same page, that we were going to move to the next level. I guess I was wrong about that, and now everything is messed up between us.

I debate for a second what to do. Should I try to let what could have been between us go? Or should I man up and finally tell her how I feel about her, how I've always felt about her?

"Lilliana, Snow," I start, and she blinks those green eyes up at me. "I don't want to forget our night together. I want to do it again, but if you don't, then we can try to go back to being just friends. We'll forget about the marriage pact and the other night. We'll just be friends," I tell her, trying not to show my disappointment.

She looks shocked, her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open slightly.

“The truth is that I don’t want to though. I love you, Lilliana. I have since we were little kids. I’ve always wanted you; I just didn’t know how to tell you that when we were younger.”

“You have?” She asks quietly, and I nod.

“Yeah, I have. I tried to tell you once before you left for college,” I tell her, moving closer to her.

“When?” She asks.

“Remember that party we went to right before you left for college?” I ask, and she nods. “We were sitting on the porch swing in the backyard, and I thought that we were about to kiss, but then you—”

“You pulled back,” she says, surprising me.

“Wait, *I* pulled back?” I ask her, and she nods.

“Yeah. I thought that we were going to kiss too. I remember leaning forward, but then you pulled back so I did too.”

“I didn’t pull back. *You* did,” I argue.

“No, you did.”

We stare at each other for a moment, and I try to think back to that night. I don’t remember pulling back first, but I was so scared to ruin things between us that I think I would have panicked and bailed on the kiss at the slightest sign that she wasn’t into it.

“We both pulled back,” she says, and I nod.

“I have regretted it every day since.”

“Me too,” she admits.

“When I suggested the marriage pact, it was like my last ditch effort to try to have some future with you.”

“I agreed because of the same reason,” she tells me.

“I don’t want to wait another two years to make this official,” I tell her as I drop to one knee in front of her and pull out the ring box in my pocket.

“My sweet Snow,” I start, and she smiles at the old nickname. “I love you. I’ve loved you since before I even knew what love was, since we were kids. I’m tired of living without you, of pretending that we’re only friends when you’ve been my whole world for years.”

She smiles, tears welling in her eyes.

“I love you, Lilliana. It’s only ever been you for me. Will you marry me?” I finish, and she nods, tears spilling over onto her cheeks.

“Yes,” she chokes out, and I grin, relief flooding me as I push to my feet and slide the ring onto her finger.

We both admire the way the diamond glints in the light on her finger and then I’m pulling her against me and sealing her lips with mine.

As soon as our lips connect, a sense of peace fills me. Lilliana is my home; wherever she’s at is where I’m meant to be.

Her mouth melts against mine and I pull her tighter against me. Tingles race down my spine as her fingers dig into my arm. She holds onto me, trying to pull me closer to her, and I smile when I realize that she wants me just as much as I want her.

Lilliana opens for me and I slip my tongue past her lips to tangle with hers. I want to taste her, to hear her moan, and feel her cling to me tighter as I devour her mouth. Her tongue twists against mine and I growl low in my throat and push her back a step, closer to the couch.

“I need you,” I say against her lips, and she nods.

My hands slip into her long black hair and tangle in the strands. I grip a handful of the strands and tug so that she tilts her head back more and I can deepen the kiss. I can feel her pressing her thighs together and I know that she must be wet for me.

I can't wait to taste her again.

With that thought in mind, I break the kiss and push Lilliana down onto the couch. She stares up at me with heated green eyes and I smirk down at her as my hands reach for my belt.

TWELVE



Lilliana

SEEING FOSTER'S BIG, strong body above me has my core clenching, and I bite my bottom lip as I wait to see what he'll do next. He undoes his belt, pulling it from the loops slowly.

"I love you," he tells me, and I smile.

"I love you too. So much."

He comes down over me on the couch then, and I wrap my arms and legs around him as his lips land on mine. His hands move over me and I arch against him as he palms my breast. I'm in my pajamas, and he slips his hand under my loose shirt to play with my nipples.

"More," I beg him, and he grins.

"So needy," he murmurs as he kneels by the side of the couch and reaches for my clothes.

I help him pull my shirt off, and then he's tugging my pants down my legs. My panties quickly follow after them.

"You're turn," I say, greedy to feel his skin against mine.

He stands as he reaches behind his neck with one hand, and I bite my lip as he pulls the shirt off and tosses it to the side. His hands undo the button of his jeans, and then he's naked in front of me.

His cock is just as perfect as I remember. I still can't believe that I had that whole thing inside of me. He's so big, so

thick.

My mouth waters, and before he can stop me, I lean forward and take him into my mouth. My hand wraps around the remaining inches that won't fit, and I work in sync to drive him crazy.

“Fuck, Lilliana,” he groans, his head tilting back.

I look up, admiring the strong column of his throat as my hand continues to stroke him. My hand twists slightly, and his knees almost buckle at the action so I do it again and then again. When I add my mouth to the mix, I feel powerful, like a siren or a seductress.

“Damn, that mouth, baby,” he praises, and I moan.

His fingers thread through my hair and I know that he's about to pull me off of his cock. I suck harder, hollowing out my cheeks, and he curses loudly. He tugs at my hair and I let him go, looking up at him as he stands before me on the couch.

“Need you,” he grunts, and I nod.

“I need you too.”

He pushes me back down onto the couch and pulls me to the edge so that my legs dangle off the side. Then he's dropping to his knees and burying his face in my pussy.

“F-f-foster!” I gasp, and he licks me like I'm the best thing that he's ever tasted.

His hands pin me in place so that I can't do anything but lay there and let him have his way with me.

I come quickly, my thighs shaking on either side of his head as he licks up my release and then stands and comes down over me.

His lips find mine, and my hands slide over his back, pulling him closer. I want to feel his weight on me. I want to feel every inch of him against me, in me. He smiles, kissing me once more before he shifts lower, lining his dick up with my dripping opening.

We're both so on edge after not being together in a few days, and I know that this first time is going to be hard and quick.

My core clenches at the thought, and I brace my feet on the armrest of the couch and push up against him.

"So needy. I love it," he says as he thrusts into me, giving both of us what we need.

"OH!" I cry out as Foster grips my thigh and tugs it higher against him.

He starts to pound into me, over and over again, relentlessly. His thrusts push me up the couch little by little, and I stretch my arms out, trying to brace myself against the other armrest.

"We need bigger furniture," Foster tells me as he shifts to sit back on his knees.

"Or to just have sex in bigger spaces," I agree.

"I was just so desperate to have you. Fuck, baby. I'm always desperate for you. I have been forever."

"Me too," I tell him, my core starting to tighten around him.

I'm close. So close.

"I love you. So much. More than anything," he tells me, dipping his head to kiss me.

As soon as his lips meet mine, I come. I cry out his name against his mouth, and he groans as he finds his own release deep inside of me.

We're both covered in sweat and out of breath as we try to cuddle together on the couch. It doesn't last long before Foster is cursing and lifting me up in his arms. He stomps into my bedroom, and I giggle as he sets me down gently in the middle of the bed.

"That's better... slightly," he grumbles, and I smile up at him.

"What now?" I ask him.

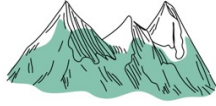
“Now, we do that again,” he says, already sinking inside of me. “And then again.”

I like the sound of that.

Scratch that.

I love the sound of that.

THIRTEEN



Foster

FIVE YEARS LATER...

“I DON’T THINK that I forgot anything, but if I did, you have a key to our place,” I tell my dad as I set the kids’ backpacks down on the kitchen table.

“I’ve got it. Now, get out of here. I’ve got the kids,” my dad assures me, and I smile at him as I head for the door.

“Be good for Grandpa,” I tell my kids as I bend down to kiss them goodbye.

“We’re going to have a sleepover,” Miley tells me excitedly, and I laugh.

She’s been so excited for her sleepover with Grandpa. It’s all she’s talked about all week.

“I know. You guys have fun, okay?”

“Okay,” Ryan says distractedly, already heading over to play with the toys that my dad keeps at his place for the kids.

“Thanks again for watching them,” I say, and my dad waves me off.

“Of course. I love spending time with them. Tell Lilliana that I said hi.”

“I will. We’ll see you guys tomorrow,” I call, and the kids wave goodbye as I head out to my truck.

Today is our anniversary, and Lilliana and I have big plans for tonight. I’m taking her to a new steakhouse that just opened up in Rose River, a town about half an hour from here. Then I’m going to take her to a hotel for the night and hopefully make love to her until we’re both too tired to move.

I drive through town and pass by Lilliana’s old apartment. She only spent a few nights in that place. She hadn’t even unpacked everything before we admitted that we loved each other and got engaged. That made it easy to move her into my house, at least.

During the last five years, she’s made it into our home. She’s left her mark on every room, and now that she’s there, I finally look forward to going home after work every night.

I’ve hired a few more people to work at the shop with me. That way, I’m able to get home to Lilliana and the kids at a reasonable time every day.

Lilliana’s lingerie line has really taken off in the last few years, too. She’s built a whole company over the years and now has deals for her lingerie to be in several department stores. Her website has grown, too. I couldn’t be prouder of her, and I know that she loves her job and loves helping plus size women feel sexy and beautiful in their own bodies.

The two of us got married a month after she moved back to town and I proposed. Neither one of us could wait any longer. I think that our friends and families thought the same thing because when we told them that we were engaged and were getting married in four weeks, they all had the same thing to say; “It’s about damn time!”

I had to agree with them. I was just glad that I didn’t have to wait until it was time for our marriage pact and that I was getting to make her my wife at last.

Our wedding was held right here in Wolf Valley. There’s this spot in the woods that Lilliana and I used to hike to when

we were younger. We chose that spot for our wedding and it was perfect.

Our wedding was pretty small, with just our family and friends there. We had joked then that Ransom and Ruby or Ford and Cameron were going to be next to get married, and surprisingly, we were right. Both couples had only been together for a few weeks or days at that time, and both couples were married within the next three months.

We found out that we were expecting right after we got back from our honeymoon in Hawaii. Then, after Miley was born, it was only about five months later that we found out that she was pregnant with Ryan.

Having two kids so close together has been great in so many ways. The kids love playing together, and we were able to pass down toys and some other baby items right away. Having two toddlers under three, though, was rough, and after Ryan, we decided that we were done growing our family.

I pull into the driveway and grin when I see that Lilliana is home already. I climb out of my SUV and hurry through the cold and up to the front door.

“Welcome home,” Lilliana greets me as I come through the door, and I freeze in my tracks when I see my wife.

“Holy shit,” I blurt out as I take her in.

“You like?” She asks with a smirk, and I can only nod.

She’s standing by the stairs in a pair of heels and what must be a new one of her designs. Lace and satin are wrapped around her curves, making her look like a present.

My present.

“You look beautiful,” I tell her as I close the gap between us.

“Thanks. I thought that you might like to open your anniversary present before dinner,” she says, and I nod, my eyes devouring the sight of her before me.

“Yes, I want that,” I agree, barely able to focus on her words.

She pulls out an envelope from behind her back and hands it to me.

“What’s this?” I ask, looking up at her.

“Your gift.”

“I thought that you were my present,” I say, trying not to pout.

“I am, but this is too.”

I tear open the envelope and read the papers inside.

“We’re going back to Hawaii?” I ask her with a grin, and she nods.

“Yeah. We’ve both been working so much. I thought that we could get away for a bit. The kids are so excited. I’m surprised that they didn’t tell you before I could,” she says, and I grin.

“They were too excited for the sleepover,” I tell her, stuffing the papers back into the envelope. “This is perfect, Snow. Thank you.”

She turns her face up for a kiss, and I happily oblige.

“Are you ready for your other gift now?” She whispers, and I nod.

“So ready.”

Her arms wrap around my neck and her legs go around my waist as I lift her into my arms. Her gift is packed in my suitcase and I can’t wait for her to open it later. Right now, though, I want to unwrap my wife.

“We’ll have to be fast,” she warns me, and I shake my head.

“I’ll call on the way and push the reservation back,” I promise her.

I set her down on our bed and she lays back, letting me take her all in.

“Breathtaking,” I tell her, and she smiles, holding her hand out towards me.

“Love you,” she says as I start to pull off my clothes.

“I love you,” I tell her as I join her on the bed.

Then, I spend the next hour showing her just how much I do.

Want more of Lilliana and Foster’s story? Then check out this [bonus scene](#) of their engagement party!

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