



*Brother's
Best Friends* **FOR**
CHRISTMAS

a secret pregnancy, reverse harem christmas romance

LISA CULLEN

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A SECRET PREGNANCY, REVERSE HAREM
CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

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CONTENTS

Description

1. Louise
2. Louise
3. Isaac
4. Dylan
5. Louise
6. Louise
7. Ren
8. Louise
9. Louise
10. Isaac
11. Carter
12. Louise
13. Louise
14. Ren
15. Louise
16. Louise
17. Ren
18. Louise
19. Louise
20. Louise
21. Louise
22. Isaac
23. Louise
24. Louise
25. Ren
26. Louise
27. Louise
28. Louise
29. Carter
30. Louise
31. Louise
32. Isaac

33. [Ren](#)

34. [Louise](#)

35. [Dylan](#)

36. [Louise](#)

37. [Louise](#)

38. [Louise](#)

39. [Louise](#)

40. [Louise](#)

[A Nanny for Christmas \(Preview\)](#)

[About the Author](#)

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DESCRIPTION

*Louise wants a baby. We want a family.
And this Christmas, we're giving her both.*

CARTER

I know better than to develop feelings for Louise, but I seem to be stuck in the same lovestruck frenzy as my three best friends. The only solution is sharing the woman who has captured our attention...

REN

I offer myself up as a donor on Louise's quest to get pregnant... but I have ulterior motives. My crush on her makes me lose my mind because I would do anything to keep my precious girl happy.

ISAAC

When I'm assigned a new patient for fertility treatments, I reluctantly accept... but Louise Romain is my best friend's little sister, and he's way too protective. Probably because he knows how much I want his stunning, curvy sister in my bed...

DYLAN

I've been taking care of adorable Louise's sweet dog, but there's a lot more I want from the gorgeous girl. Little does Louise know, her pooch is an excuse so I can spend more time with her.

LOUISE

“Happy Birthday!”

Having spent three hours melting over the stove, another hour waiting for the cake to cool, and two more decorating Dylan’s birthday cake, it was difficult to remain satisfied as I cast a critical eye over where it sat dead center on the staff room table. The perfectionist in me constantly saw things I could change.

No matter how many years I poured into baking, I could never be satisfied with the final product. The curse of creativity.

Dylan Beckett, one of my brother’s oldest friends, stood in the doorway with his white coat askew across his shoulders and red hair ruffled from far too many restless fingers. With his eyes wide and mouth agape, I stepped forward and spread my arms open once more, shaking out my fingers.

“Happy Birthday?! Shit... do I have the wrong day?” Dropping my arms, I returned to the table covered in various finger foods and hunted for my bag.

“No.” Dylan declared finally with a laugh. “I just didn’t expect anything, Louise. This is amazing!”

“Oh, thank goodness,” I chuckled, abandoning the search for my bag as the nest of alarmed snakes in my gut calmed down. “You worried me for a second there.”

“Sorry, it’s just been a long day, y’know?” Dylan swept forward and bundled me up into his strong arms.

“Ah, lots of bones to break?”

Standing a full head and shoulders taller than me, I was often dwarfed by his hugs, but deep down, part of me has enjoyed that ever since my brother came home from medical school with Dylan in tow all those years ago. Never had he been so excited to make a friend.

I pulled back from the hug when Dylan’s hand slid down my back and he flashed me a bright smile.

“Louise, you know my job as an orthopedic surgeon is to *fix* the bones, right? Not break them.”

“Sure, but you have to do a little breaking sometimes, right?” I grinned up at him and ducked sharply as Dylan’s hand rose to ruffle through my hair. “Hey! Watch the curls!”

“You know she *hates* it when you mess with her hair,” came another voice from the doorway. Dylan laughed and approached the table, immediately tackling the mini sausage rolls while I turned and greeted Ren Adams with a warm smile.

“He never learns!” I darted forward and threw myself into Ren’s arms as he entered the staff room.

“Purple?” Ren asked, catching some of my curls between his tanned fingers. “Last time I saw you, your hair was green.”

“Well, if you’d shown up to dinner last month like I asked, you would have seen it,” I remarked, shaking my hair free of his light touch. Ren laughed as he squeezed my shoulders with one arm. My heart soared; his smile always made his almond-shaped eyes crinkle cutely at the corners, and for as long as I’d known him, the smallest crush had bubbled just under the surface.

A girl could dream.

“You’ll do all this for my birthday, right?” Ren chuckled, moving to where Dylan was on his fourth mini sausage roll and going strong.

“I do it for everyone’s birthday; why would your next one be any different?”

“Just making sure. A cake this good? I keep telling you, post this stuff online, and soon you’ll be too famous to make cakes for our birthdays.”

“Well,” I scoffed lightly, “better make the most of it while you can.”

“Don’t say that,” Dylan whined, “your buttercream is to die for.”

“And what better place to do that than here,” came a third voice. I turned and Carter entered, his white coat draped over one arm and dark circles shadowed under his eyes. My heart went out to them each time I saw any of them. Being a surgeon couldn’t be easy, and if I could soothe their stress with cakes then that’s what I would do.

“Carter! You’re late; you said you’d help me set up,” I scolded gently. Carter offered a soft smile—being the attending pediatric surgeon, Carter carried a little more weight on his shoulders than the others, and I couldn’t at all fathom the pressure of conducting surgery on *children*.

“Sorry, Louise, surgery ran late and then I was just...” Carter dragged a hand through his shoulder-length blond hair and puffed his cheeks out, unable to word what turmoil lay beneath the surface.

“Eat a sausage roll,” Dylan remarked with his mouth full. “Everything feels better.”

“It’s true,” I agreed. Carter passed me by, pressing a kiss to my cheek as he did so.

“Is this another of your amazing creations?” Carter asked, and he chuckled while leaning close. “How fast are we going to eat this one?”

“Hands off!” Dylan snapped. “It’s mine. It’s my birthday.”

“Technically your birthday was two days ago.” My brother, Todd, swept through the door flanked by the fifth member of their medical group, Isaac.

“Todd!”

“Hey, sis. No problems setting up, I trust?”

“Nah, Nancy was pretty excited actually. I paid her in French Fancies and she left me to it.” With a warm smile, I hugged my brother tightly and kissed his cheek, then moved on to Isaac who chuckled when our hug bumped his glasses and sent them slightly skewed across his nose.

“Hey, it’s good to see you.” Isaac’s smile was lighter than the others. He always carried himself with a much more serious air, and even when he was having a good time, he always seemed ready to slip back to *responsible* mode at the drop of a hat.

“I brought those mini veggie quiches that you like so much.” Pointing at the table, half the food was hidden by the four other bodies scoffing down their first meal in likely hours. Isaac lightly patted my lower back.

“You’re a good egg.” He grinned. “I like the purple.”

“Thank you.” Lifting my hands, I gently crimped the bottom of my curls. “Goes with my tights, don’t you think?”

“Rue the day Louise turns up without brightly colored tights,” Carter laughed around a mouthful of bread.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” One hand on my plump waist, I cocked a hip as laughter rose.

“All he’s saying is that your personality matches your tights.” Ren grinned at me, departing the table with a paper plate towering high. “No bright tights means you’re on the warpath.”

“That’s not true.” I paused, and warmth flooded my cheeks. “Is it?”

“You remember when Natalie insulted your cupcakes?” Todd asked, raising a brow. “Gray tights for two days straight.”

“And when you lost out on that job at Marz?” Carter added with a smirk. “Black tights for a week.”

My mouth opened and closed, seeking a way to counter their points, but now that it was laid out, they did have a point.

“Alright,” I chuckled, weaving between them to pick up a plastic cup filled with non-alcoholic bubbly. “I concede.”

“You roll over too quickly.” Ren winked at me, popping the remains of a cake pop into his mouth, then he moaned softly and the warmth previously in my cheeks swept rapidly south.

“Your cakes, Louise, fucking phenomenal.”

“Thank you!” Hopefully amidst the noise and laughter, no one caught the slight uptick in my tone, but Ren’s gaze lingered on me until Isaac stepped in the way with his phone in hand.

“I meant to text you,” Isaac said with a smile, “but Amy had her twins!”

My focus immediately honed in on his phone and a pulse of tension wove through my chest.

“Twins?! Oh my God, let me see!”

“Here we go,” Todd groaned from the couch. “Isaac, she’s already baby crazy. She doesn’t need any more fuel.”

“Fuck you, Todd,” I snapped quickly.

Isaac tapped through his phone and pictures of his sister flashed up on the screen rosy-faced and utterly beaming. In her arms were two of the cutest, tiniest babies I had ever seen in my life. The tension in my chest swept up to my throat, and I pressed my hands together, excited.

“Aww, they’re so cute!” I gasped. “How is she? How are they? Have they got names yet? Oh gosh, look at their little hands and their cute scrunchy faces!”

“See?” Todd scoffed, earning a sharp elbow from Carter. “What? She’s been baby crazy for years. It’s ridiculous.”

I glanced up from the phone and scowled at my brother. “You’re the one that’s been engaged for three years. If anyone should be baby crazy it’s you.”

“Natalie doesn’t want kids,” Todd replied but his words weren’t exactly filled with confidence. I rolled my eyes and

turned back to Isaac who waited patiently for my attention to return.

“Amy is doing fine. She’s happy and healthy. So are the twins. No names yet,” he recited, and I chuckled softly, nudging into his shoulder.

“Send her my love?”

“I will.”

Todd was right though; that was the annoying part about my brother. I had yearned for a baby for *years*. Family was the most important thing in my life ever since our parents passed and Todd had to take custody of me in my later teen years to prevent the foster system from snapping me up. The gratitude I felt for that was never-ending, and as the years ticked by, the urge for my own family had only continued to grow.

Baby fever had a grip on me and it wasn’t letting go.

“Aren’t you missing one important thing?” Ren asked, wiping his hands off on a napkin and checking his watch.

“Huh?” I glanced across the table, checking the demolished remains of the food after five men had stormed through it all like a hurricane. I’d included all their favorites, I was sure of it.

“For baby-making,” Ren continued. “Don’t you need a partner for that?”

I snorted softly and turned, pointing straight toward my brother who lifted his brow in faux innocence.

“I don’t *need* a partner. Besides, if Todd wasn’t so arrogantly overprotective, maybe someone I was interested in would last five minutes, but he always scares them away.”

“Bullshit,” Todd remarked as he chewed. “You just choose shitty guys.”

“You’ve hated *everyone* I’ve dated.”

“Exactly, you choose shitty guys.”

“See?” I turned back to Ren who chuckled behind his hand. “He’s impossible. Scares everyone away. Besides, I

don't need a man to be happy. Or to have a baby.”

“Sure helps though, right?” Ren smirked, but before I could respond his pager beeped into life. Glancing at his belt, his face twisted into a grimace. “Sorry, I gotta go.”

“Go, go!”

Ren was a lead trauma surgeon; when he had to go, he *really* had to go. A quick kiss on the cheek and Ren sprinted from the room.

And just like that, the few snatched minutes where everyone was in the same room sharing a meal and having a good time was over. Pagers beeped and phones rang, dragging my brother and each of his friends back into the rollercoaster of Silverwood General Hospital. Hugs were offered, cheeks were kissed, and goodbyes uttered until it was only Dylan and I left.

“Thank you for this,” Dylan smiled, squeezing my shoulder as I gathered up the plates.

“Of course. It's the least I can do when you're all working so hard to save lives,” I replied. “Your birthday is important.”

“No one ever celebrated it until you came alone,” he chuckled, and his lips pressed lightly to my cheek. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. Leftovers will be in the fridge, but I can't promise how long they will last without me to guard them.”

“Understood.”

Then Dylan was gone, leaving me to the silence of the staff room. It was almost deafening after the rush of noise and warmth from the guys, but I was more than used to it by now. Ever since my brother had gotten into medical school, this was his life. The people he met all shared his warmth and passion for life, and if I could contribute by making sure they felt celebrated and loved, then I was satisfied.

Cleaning up the table took less time than I expected, and as I stored the leftovers in the fridge, I hesitated with the cake. After a moment, I cut the cake into small squares and pressed

a few slices into each leftover tin foil container. Lids secured, I slipped the cake into each of their lockers, with extra slices for Dylan, and closed the doors with a satisfied smile.

That was the easiest way to ensure anyone scouring the fridge for a snack didn't take the best pieces.

Sending a text to Todd to let him know I was leaving, I left Silverwood General Hospital behind and took the bus back across town to my apartment. It wasn't the coziest of places; the building was a little rundown from the outside with some water damage along the top apartment that had never been fixed and continued to cause all residents issues every time it rained. There was no point bringing it up to the landlord though. He never listened.

No sooner had I slid my key into the lock than the love of my life made herself known on the other side of the door with a series of sharp barks and soft whines.

"Whiskey!" I called through the door. "Sit!"

The audible thump of her butt hitting the floor drew a bubble of laughter and I opened the door. Whiskey's gorgeous caramel and white face came into view, and she barked once more, her tail thumping furiously against the floor. Adopting a King Charles spaniel was the best decision I had ever made. With the door closed and the lock secured, I turned to her and dropped my bags.

"Whiskey!"

Whiskey launched herself at me, barking and yelping as I bundled her into my arms, tossed my keys on the shell holder by the door, and gathered my mail. Her frantic tail thumped against my stomach, and her over-eager tongue did an excellent job of removing the makeup on the left-hand side of my face.

"Okay girl, I wasn't gone for that long!" Not that I minded, and slowly I headed into the kitchen. Placing Whiskey on the counter, I flicked on the kettle for some tea and flipped through my mail with half an eye. Something caught my

attention between the takeout menus, advertisements, and credit card offers.

A letter with the Silverwood General logo on the top corner. Everything else faded into the background as I dropped all letters except this one. I ripped open the envelope as my heart started pounding.

All the light and warmth from the earlier party fizzled out in an instant, and a cold shroud descended over my shoulders as I read and re-read the letter.

It was from my ob-gyn.

And it wasn't good news.

LOUISE

“C omfortable?”

Such a question didn't seem to have an honest answer. Laid out on my back with my ankles in stirrups while Dr. Hilda Berry worked her magic between my legs; *comfortable* was not the word I would use. Being exposed in front of a stranger while she examined every inch of me was extremely *uncomfortable*. Still, to her credit, she was only doing her job.

I swallowed hard and re-mapped the light brown stain on the ceiling tile above me as chilled lubed fingers slid inside me.

“Louise?”

“Yes, yes. Everything is peachy,” I said, my voice strained.

The fingers were removed, and the speculum's cold, hard metal press followed. My hips reacted immediately, contracting away from the intrusion and a flurry of tension washed through all my muscles, ending in me clenching my teeth as my heart started to pound harder.

“Relax for me?” Hilda asked. I rolled my eyes, relieved she couldn't see me, and fought to relax my body against the cold intrusion, but it was an impossible task.

“This is me relaxed,” I tried, and the subsequent press of the speculum drew a surprised yelp from my throat as a sudden sharp pain stabbed through my core. “Ow!”

“That's why I need you to relax,” Hilda tutted softly.

“Oh, I’m sorry, being penetrated by a metallic *medieval* torture device is supposed to make me relaxed?” I laughed through clenched teeth. “My bad, let me just...” I grunted, adjusting myself on the table. Hilda chuckled and the sheet covering my modesty was pulled further down my thighs.

“I know, I’m sorry. One day someone will invent something that makes all this so much easier for those with vaginas, but until then, it’s medieval torture all the way.” Hilda shuffled on her stool and scooted around until she was next to me.

I rolled my head to look at her, studying her auburn curls as they draped over her freckled forehead and sat atop her glasses. Her head stayed down as she scribbled on the clipboard in front of her, and each scratch of her pen heightened the warm twist of anxiety in my chest.

“So... is everything looking good? Pussy all healthy?”

Hilda’s head snapped up as she laughed, her cheeks slightly pink. “Physically, yes, everything is good. You’re happy and healthy down there. But...” Her tongue tapped against her upper teeth, and her cheery smile suddenly melted into the soft, sad smile of bad news. I’d seen my brother make that face a thousand times.

I’d sat across from that face as it told me my parents had died in a car crash.

It was the face of *I’m sorry to tell you this*.

“Louise, your determination to get pregnant is admirable.”

Oh no.

“But your recent round of test results have come back, and I’m sorry to say—”

“I’m infertile?” I blurted out suddenly, cutting her off. Prickling heat washed across my shoulders and stole down my spine as my heart raced. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No,” Hilda shook her head, “not exactly. Your eggs are what we like to call sleepy, in that they require a lot more loving when it comes to combining with sperm. But not only

that... I'm afraid your egg count is incredibly low for a woman of your age."

Hilda was talking in slow motion, each word sinking painfully into my soul as the truth made itself known. She could give me a hundred reasons, but it wouldn't change the one glaring thing I was clinging to; pregnancy would be near impossible.

"I'm only twenty-eight," I finally said. "There has to be some kind of mistake."

"I know it's not easy to hear." Hilda kept up that sweet, sympathetic voice, but all it did was fuel the irritation in my gut. A restless warmth rose in me, making the paper sheet impossibly itchy against my bare thighs and the cool leather of the table suddenly incredibly hard.

"No, it's a mistake," I insisted. "You have to test me again."

"Louise, we've done the tests multiple times at your previous request and the results are the same. I'm *sorry*, but as it stands, you will not be able to achieve pregnancy through natural means, and the aid we provided in your last session hasn't changed that."

"It's impossible?" Tears gently filled my eyes, making my vision swim as Hilda reached over to take my hand.

"We don't like to use that word," Hilda said softly, "but unfortunately, the chances are so low that they are what we consider to be non-viable."

"Fuck." I let my head fall back onto the bed and turned my blurred vision back to the stain on the ceiling. "At least I can have a one-night stand without worrying, right?"

"I know this is a terrible disappointment," Hilda said gently, "but there are options. Your journey to have a baby doesn't necessarily have to stop here."

My head snapped up. "What?"

"You should take some time, process what I've told you today, and in a few weeks, maybe we can reconvene—"

“No, tell me now.” Hilda sat there and told me I barely had any eggs left, that my chances for a baby were *basically* zilch. I wasn’t going to let her go until she told me everything. “What other options?”

“Well...” Hilda set the clipboard on her knee and clasped her hands over the top. “There are other medically enhanced means in which you could try for a child, but these... these trials are very mentally and emotionally taxing for couples, not to mention that you are by yourself. But IVF is definitely an option for you in the long run.”

“IVF,” I repeated softly, “where you use the syringe and —” I mimicked the motion with my hands and pursed my lips together for a spurting sound, drawing a slight smile from Hilda.

“In a way, yes,” she nodded. “But Louise, these treatments are—”

“I want it.”

“You should take some time, go home, and process before you make any rash decisions. Full rounds of IVF are expensive —”

“This isn’t rash,” I snapped. “I’ve wanted a baby for *years*. I’ve had to face boyfriends and my brother and countless other people who act like I’m crazy for wanting a baby, for wanting to start a family. But I am twenty-eight and that urge hasn’t died down in years. Man or no man, this is what I want. I will be—” Emotion swelled suddenly and clogged my throat so I placed my hand on my sternum. “Believe me, I have thought about this.”

Hilda studied me over the top of her glasses for a few moments, and then she leaned behind herself and grabbed the box of tissues off the counter. Pulling a few free, she passed them to me and stood.

“We have an ob-gyn here that specializes in reproductive endocrinology and infertility. I’ll see if I can get them to speak to you,” she said, “but I must stress that time to process is important.”

“I know what I want,” I insisted, and Hilda smiled politely at me.

“Don’t go anywhere.”

“Where can I go?!” I indicated to my legs still raised in the stirrups and Hilda chuckled as she pulled the curtain around the bed, then quickly excused herself from the room.

Silence fell, and with it, my heart. The moment I had seen that letter, I’d known deep down in my gut that it was bad news. Everywhere I turned, I was faced with judgment and quiet mutters about how I didn’t know what I wanted or what I was doing. Those who judged me for my bigger size always presumed my desire for a child was due to my inability to get a man, but I had never had a problem in that area. I was beautiful and confident, and I took pride in my curvaceous figure. I *owned* it. Just like I owned my desire for a family that had burned deep inside me since my early twenties.

I was just tired of waiting for the perfect man. That and finding one Todd approved of was far too much effort.

Now, here I was with my ankles in the air facing the latest hurdle getting between me and my dream only this time it wasn’t judgment or whispers. It was biology. My own body was fighting against my desire.

Alone in the examination room, keeping the tears at bay was difficult. The image I painted of myself was often the truth, but when I’d become known as Todd’s bubbly, happy little sister, it was painful to let that mask slip in public. Not just because all of Todd’s friends were insanely attractive, but his over-protectiveness made it difficult for anyone to take me seriously as a woman.

And now the thing I yearned for the most was teetering on the verdict of this specialist and the minimal savings in my bank account.

The tears came hot and thick, and I tried to blink them away, staring upward and dabbing at my undereye with my pinky fingers to catch any stray ones. But as soon as one escaped down my cheek, the rest followed like lemmings, and

I sobbed softly into my hands. It didn't feel like a big ask to have a baby. I had a lot of love to give, and this taped-together family I had created with Todd and his friends had only spurred me on further to start a family of my own. A constant ache in my chest existed in the background most days like a shadow in the corner of my eye. On days like today, that shadow swelled and threatened to consume me.

I never asked for much. I couldn't. I put my head down, I worked hard at the beauty parlor, I took care of my dog and my brother, and I kept a smile on my face.

All I wanted was a baby.

The door clicked, followed by the subtle creak of the hinge and I gathered all the mascara-stained tissues and swamped them to my eyes, trying to catch all the leaking makeup and tears before I faced down the next doctor.

“Ma'am?” came a muffled voice on the other side of the curtain. “My apologies, normally I wouldn't speak with a patient without having booked an appointment, but Dr. Berry explained your situation and I have a few moments free for a consultation, if you agree?”

“Yes!” I called, sniffing fiercely and trying to wipe my face. “I agree.”

The curtain swept back, metallic rings scraping across the metal pole above, and the doctor stepped forward. He lifted his head, and I dropped my tissues, trying to fix a polite smile on my face when I caught the doctor's eye.

His cheeks flared red and my heart dropped right out of my ass.

“Isaac?!”

“Louise!”

ISAAC

The second I recognized Louise on the table, I slapped one hand over my eyes, glasses be damned. And yet, in my attempt to save Louise's modesty and keep my eyes from wandering, the sight of her spread out on the table filled my mind instantly.

Her red-rimmed eyes, her purple curls spread out on the pillow like some kind of glittering halo, her curvy figure stretched out and hips raised; it was a bright point in my mind and no matter how hard I willed it away, it stayed. I'd always had a soft spot for Louise; she was one of the kindest souls I had ever met, but I had never expected to see her here as a patient.

"Isaac!" Louise demanded hotly. "What—what are you doing here?"

"A consultation," I replied quickly, "but I think I might have the wrong room. I'm so sorry." I lowered my hand to glance at her. "Are you okay?" Then I replaced my hand and shook my head. "Nope, doesn't matter, I'm so sorry."

"Consultation... oh Isaac, I didn't know this was your specialty."

My heart, racing slightly from the shock of walking in on Louise, started to slow as her words sunk in. "Infertility?"

"Put your hand down," Louise scoffed lightly.

I obeyed immediately and straightened my glasses while Louise shifted on the bed and attempted to sit a little further up

on the table.

“You’re not here for that, are you?” A dumb question really, one I answered myself by lifting the file Dr. Berry had placed in my hand. Flipping the cover back, Louise’s name stared back at me in messy blue ink, and my heart sank slightly. I should have looked before entering but even then, the chances of meeting Louise while working was near impossible.

“Surprise.” Louise sniffled dejectedly and pressed a wad of tissue to her red eyes. “Barren Louise at your service.”

“Oh, *Louise.*” My heart went out to her, and I leaned across the counter grabbing the box of tissues left there. Offering them to her, I took a step back. “I’m sorry, but this—me and you, it’s a conflict of interest and I really shouldn’t...”

As Louise began to sob into a handful of fresh tissues, my words died in my throat as I clutched her file to my chest. This was wrong, this was really wrong, and the conflict of Louise being part of my personal life meant I couldn’t treat her.

I shouldn’t.

And yet, I was the only endocrinology specialist in Montana. Referring Louise would take weeks, and the thought of some out-of-town specialist taking care of her didn’t sit right with me. Not when she was in front of me, sobbing her little heart out so hard that her curls were shaking.

“I’m sorry,” Louise gasped around her tears. “I don’t even know why I’m crying!”

Slowly I sat in the stool next to her bed and opened her file properly. All her information was laid out before me, including her extremely low egg count and the unlikelihood she would ever conceive a child.

“Louise... I didn’t even know you were trying for a baby.”

“Doesn’t matter, does it?” She hiccuped, grabbing another wad of tissues. “I’m scorched earth.”

“That’s not true,” I replied immediately. “Does Todd know?”

“Of course not!” Louise lifted her head. “You’ve seen how he acts at just the mention of a baby, can you imagine how he’d flip if he found out I am trying? Well... *was* trying.”

Todd was certainly overprotective, sometimes even uncomfortably controlling over Louise, but I gave him a pass since he had been forced to assume the role of parent after the crash.

Louise dropped her hands to her lap and hiccuped once more, staring dejectedly at her palms as tears trailed down her apple cheeks. I was struck sharply by the desire to reach and stroke them away, but I was already crossing the line of unprofessionalism.

“It says here that you’ve had a round of hormones to try and boost things along but with no results.” I read off the sheet in front of me, skimming through the months of Louise’s appointments that had brought up the same result again and again. “Is there a *mister* that you’ve been trying with?”

“No,” Louise muttered, “you can’t really have that chat on the first date so I’ve just been...” She lifted her eyes to me, the tears making her green eyes glitter like emeralds. “Y’know, sleeping around.”

“Risky,” I remarked, then I held up one hand. “I’m sorry. No judgment.”

“It’s fine. It was useless anyway.”

The deep sadness in her eyes wasn’t something I had ever seen before. Louise was bright, full of life, and yet all this time she had been carrying this pain by herself. Guilt, warm and sickly, settled under my ribs. She hadn’t been able to talk to me and I badly wished she had.

“Dr. Berry, she said you were a specialist. That you could help me. Can you?” There was such hope in her voice, like a flickering flame fighting the elements just to stay ignited. With such a sweet, soft look on her face, how could I say no?

“It is my specialty, helping people have babies when nature gets in the way,” I nodded and lightly pushed my glasses up my nose. “Louise, what you’re asking for... a full

round of IVF? You must understand that it's emotionally and mentally taxing on someone *with* the support of another. Doing this alone is..." Searching for the word, I shifted my glasses once more. "It's tough."

"No," Louise replied softly. "What's tough is facing another hurdle everywhere I turn. What's tough is lying awake at night yearning for a family, and now my own body is getting in my way. I have the money and I have the desire, Dr. Berry said I was in good health... what's the issue?"

"It's more a concern for your well-being."

"As my doctor or as my friend?"

I paused and finally, a flicker of a smile flashed up on Louise's face as her tears slowed.

"Please?"

How could I resist? I wanted to, professionally I knew I should, but there was something about the sadness in Louise's eyes that I couldn't resist. I wanted to help her. I could help.

"Okay, it says here you've been trying for a baby for over a year?"

"Yes." Louise shifted where she lay and cleared her throat as her hooked ankles caught on the stirrups. "Can I... lower?"

"Oh, of course!" Setting her file aside, I stood and grasped her left ankle. Her skin was warm to the touch and a flurry of butterflies raced through my gut as I unstrapped her from the stirrup and let her leg come to rest back on the bed. Repeating the same with the right, I then retook my seat and shifted my glasses once more, clearing my throat.

It didn't escape me that she was naked under that sheet and I pushed that thought away. This was not the place.

"I've been trying for just under a year," Louise began, sitting up straight on the bed now with her legs still covered by the sheet. She played with the tissues in her hands, her gaze down as she spoke. "At first, I thought maybe I was just finding dud guys so I booked a check-up with Dr. Berry, and

after I explained everything, she started running tests. Sleepy eggs she said.”

As Louise talked, I scanned through her file matching appointments with her story and nodding every so often to show I was still listening.

“Then last month she decided to try a hormone treatment to try and spur my girls into action, y’know? But the tests after... that came back today and showed that the hormones didn’t work. Also, I have less girls than I thought.”

“A lot less,” I mused, my heart clenching. “And IVF is what you want to pursue?”

“Yes.”

Louise spoke so strongly that I lifted my head to find her staring straight at me.

“I don’t care what anyone says. I’ve wanted a baby for years. I want a family. I’ve been doing every exercise routine under the sun to try and maintain good core health. I’ve been drinking those awful raw vegetable smoothies and avoiding all the soft cheeses and pâté. I even had a week of that raw egg breakfast thing—”

I held up my hand immediately. “No raw eggs.”

“What? I read... I read that it was good for you, something about antioxidants that are good for reproductive health?”

“Louise... these fad diets and exercises are just that, fads. They prey on women desperate to do everything and anything to increase their chances of pregnancy, but nine times out of ten, they’re just a scam to take your money and make you feel even worse about yourself.”

Her entire face fell, and I scooted forward.

“They wouldn’t have made anything worse,” I reassured her, “but if we do this, we’re going to do it properly.”

She nodded, her purple curls bounding, and I offered her my most sympathetic smile.

“Now, do you know what’s involved in IVF?”

“A little.”

“First things first, I’ll prescribe you a medicine that will suppress your natural menstrual cycle. You need to take this for about two weeks. Then you’ll begin hormone treatments that will encourage your body to increase egg production. While this isn’t guaranteed, and even if it doesn’t work, we can still use the eggs you currently have. After another few weeks and some tests, we will collect your eggs, fertilize them, and then implant them into your womb.”

Louise watched me with rapt attention as I laid the procedure out.

“Then after two weeks, we run a pregnancy test, and the results will dictate what we do next.”

“I want it.”

I raised my hand again and smiled. “This is a big decision, Louise. You will also need to find a donor.”

“There are sperm donor centers,” Louise remarked, her voice growing more decisive as her tears all but vanished. “I’ve already thought about that.”

“The cost too—”

“I have savings.”

A soft laugh escaped me as I closed Louise’s file over on my lap. “I’m not trying to dissuade you, I’m just making sure you understand exactly what you’re asking for.”

“I understand,” Louise said softly. “I *want* a baby. Isaac, please. I want this.”

How could I resist?

“Alright.” I nodded once and stood. “But I want you to tell someone. Todd, or a friend, I don’t care who. You can’t do this alone.”

“I’ve got you,” Louise beamed up at me; her smile was infectious.

“You do. But I am also your doctor. You need someone who isn’t going to be stabbing you with needles.”

“Okay,” Louise sighed. “I can call Jenny.”

“Good. I’ll let you get dressed but don’t leave until you’ve spoken to me, okay?”

“Okay.”

I turned and stepped away, pulling the curtain back around her bed.

“Isaac?”

I paused and peeked back around.

“Thank you.”

“Of course.” With that, I left the room and stepped out into the hall, taking my first deep breath in what seemed like ages. Was I really doing this? Fuck... I was. But it was Louise and she deserved the best.

And I was the best.

Down at the nurse’s station, I scribbled out a prescription for the medicine Louise would need, and as I filled it in, my mind raced. Keeping secrets was written into the code of being a doctor, but I knew Todd would be furious when he found out. All I could do was encourage Louise to build her support system.

“Isaac?” She appeared at my elbow, fully dressed with bright yellow tights and a floral skirt cinched with a black belt that emphasized her voluptuous curves. It was difficult to stop my gaze from wandering.

“Here.” I passed her the prescription. “You’ll need to inject this every day for two weeks. If you find that it’s too much of a struggle, we can switch to a nasal spray, okay?”

“Yes, thank you.” She turned those gemstone eyes up to me and my heart clenched.

“Take care of yourself.”

Just as she nodded, Ren appeared out of the crowd and draped his arm over Louise’s shoulder.

“Louise! Fancy seeing you here, if you’re looking for Todd he’s just gone into surgery,” Ren said.

“Ren! No no, I wasn’t here for Todd, I was just...” With a bright smile on her face, she flashed me an uncertain look. “Sorry, I must be going, but Isaac, I’ll uh... I’ll get that done for the twins ASAP!”

“The twins?” Ren sent me a quizzical look, but as Louise pulled away, his dark eyes dropped to the prescription in her hand. “Louise...”

“Sorry, have to go. Love you!” She turned and hurried away, melting into the crowd and becoming nothing but a flash of color that blinked between people’s legs. Ren crossed his arms over his chest and fixed me with a steady look.

“She came to see you?”

“You know I can’t disclose anything,” I replied, sliding my pen into the upper pocket of my coat and turning away. Ren followed, falling into step beside me as we headed up the corridor.

“Sure you can’t, but I can guess.” His face twisted slightly in thought as we walked. “A prescription from you can mean only two things; painkillers or... babies.” Ren’s eyes widened as he grasped my arm, pulling me to a stop.

“Is she trying...?”

“Ren,” I warned sharply. “You know I can’t.”

“I know, I know.” A knowing smile slid onto his face, and he sighed dramatically as we resumed walking. “Todd will go ape when he finds out.”

“Then let’s hope he doesn’t until it’s too late,” I replied.

The last thing Louise needed was extra stress from her overbearing big brother.

DYLAN

Eighteen-hour shifts certainly weren't ideal, but there wasn't a lot I could do when a vehicle pile-up filled up the emergency room to bursting. Being the lead orthopedic surgeon, it was my job to patch all those people's bones back together and send them on their way to the ICU or wherever they needed to go for survival, usually under Ren's direction.

Surgeons typically didn't get to follow a patient from start to finish, so each person I had stitched back together was filed away in my mind with little to no chance of me finding out what happened next.

That part was exhausting.

Yawning so hard that my jaw clicked, I raked a hand through my hair and tossed my lanyard into my locker, ready for tomorrow. A glittering foil container full of cake winked at me, and Louise filled my mind as I took the container and shoved my locker closed.

"Dylan!" Ren half leaned in through the door, patting his hand against the bright orange wall. "What are you up to?"

"Nu-uh, I'm just off eighteen hours. I'm going *home*." Popping the lid, I broke off a piece of cake and popped it into my mouth. The sweet taste of vanilla and strawberry burst over my tongue. "Find someone else to operate with you."

"It's not that." Ren rolled his eyes. "I just passed Louise and Isaac in the hall and—" He hesitated, and his jet-black brows pulled together. "I'm just worried about her, that's all."

Thought since you were finished, you could swing by and check in?"

"Louise was here? In the hospital?"

Ren nodded.

I didn't need an excuse to go and see Louise, we always had a blast together, but Ren was clearly concerned and he wasn't one to shake easily.

"I'll swing by. I haven't walked Whiskey in a few weeks, so it'll be good to see her."

"Excellent, thank you!" With that, Ren was gone, and I was left to my sweet treat and a rush of confusing emotions. Louise being in the hospital wasn't all that strange considering Todd, but Ren's concern wasn't normal.

Packing the cake away for later, I grabbed my keys and headed out.

The drive to Louise's apartment was short and quiet. I drove slowly with some country music playing lightly on the radio as I mused over the source of Ren's concerns. Louise had seemed fine at the birthday surprise a few days ago, so I reasoned he simply felt she needed company.

That feeling grew as I turned onto her street and spotted Louise out in front of her building yelling herself hoarse at a man I recognized as her landlord. I'd met him a few times previously and was not impressed.

"You're insane! Absolutely insane. You can't just make shit up because you can't fathom how someone could love something other than themselves!" Louise screamed loudly.

"I warned you and I *warned* you," he snapped back. The second he pointed his fat finger at Louise, I slammed on the brakes and jumped from my car.

"Hey! What's going on here?"

"None of your business," the landlord snapped.

"Oh, Dylan." Louise spun to face me, tears streaming down her rosy cheeks. "He called animal control on

Whiskey!”

“What?!” I stepped between Louise and her landlord as anger, hot and acidic swept up my throat. Whiskey was an adorable dog, gentle and kind. “What the hell did you do that for?”

“I warned her,” he snapped at me, but it lacked the fire he had used on Louise. I was much taller and broader than him. “I told her I would call the city if she didn’t control that rat. She leaves it alone and it barks all day and night, driving me and other tenants crazy!”

“That’s not true!” Louise surged forward against my back, and I held out an arm to stop her passing me. “You’re lying; she’s the gentlest dog in the world! Sure, I leave her when I go to work, but I come home every lunchtime to care for her!”

“I don’t care,” her landlord snapped. “I told you if you didn’t take care of that rat, I would!”

Before I could say more, the portly man turned and hurried back up the steps to the apartment building and slammed the door. Turning to Louise, I lightly grasped her trembling shoulders and squeezed.

“Breathe, Louise. Breathe.”

“I am breathing,” she snapped sharply, lifting her fingers to her streaming eyes. “I can’t believe this, poor Whiskey. She must have been terrified, and I bet he won’t even pay for the damage done to my door!”

I pulled Louise against me and she sank into my arms with a shuddering sigh. My mind raced; if he called the city then Whiskey was likely taken to the local pound. That would be the best place to start and the only good solution since every other burning thought in my mind involved me kicking down the landlord’s door to see how he liked it.

“I know. I’m sorry, Louise. Let me drive you. We can head to the pound and get her back.”

“What about him?” Louise pulled back from my hug and glared at the building behind me.

“One step at a time. Let’s get Whiskey, and then we’ll look into what laws he’s broken, okay?”

“Okay,” Louise wept softly. I cupped her face and gently smoothed my thumb along the swell of her cheek. Heat burst across my palm and my arms suddenly ached with the urge to hold her close again. Resisting, I urged her toward my car.

“What are you even doing here?” Louise asked, sniffing sharply and dabbing at her eyes. “Not that I’m not glad, I just wasn’t expecting to see anyone.”

Telling her Ren’s concerns wasn’t the wisest thing to do right now, so I simply shrugged and slid into the car after her.

“I hadn’t walked Whiskey with you in a few weeks, so I thought I would drop by since my shift ended at a humane time and not four in the morning,” I explained. “I’m glad I did.”

“Me too.” With her tears under control, Louise settled back into the seat and pulled out her phone while I started the car.

“Any idea where the closest pound is?”

“He wouldn’t call the closest,” Louise muttered, tapping her phone. “He’s too vindictive.”

“Okay. You give me an address and we’ll go.” Not what I had pictured on my drive over but I was more than happy to help. If that asshole had been pressuring her about Whiskey, it was easy for me to presume that this was the source of Ren’s concerns, although I wasn’t entirely sure why he wouldn’t just tell me if that was the case.

“Okay, found one.” Louise leaned forward and tapped the address into my GPS, then she settled back, and a deep, grainy sigh escaped her. “This fucking sucks.”

“I know,” I soothed, “but we’ll get her back. I promise.”

The drive to the first pound was short and I found myself sneaking glances at Louise as we drove. Her bright outfit seemed somewhat washed out without that familiar, warm smile on her face, and each time she sniffled or I caught her

rubbing her eyes, the urge to comfort her grew exponentially in my chest.

Louise had been in my life for a long time, and the thought of anyone hurting her *infuriated* me to the point that the leather seams of the steering wheel began cutting into my hands.

Pulling up to the first place, I barely had the engine off before Louise was out of the car and rushing inside. The door swung closed after her while I slid from the car, locked the door, and followed. As I entered, my heart sank as I caught the conversation Louise was having.

“She’s a King Charles spaniel, caramel and white with a pink collar, and she’s only—”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” interrupted the man behind the counter. “We haven’t collected any dogs today.”

“Well can I check? In case one came in that you don’t know about?”

“I have to catalog all rescues,” he sighed. “I would know if a dog here matched that.”

“Couldn’t hurt to let us look though, could it?” I leaned on the counter next to Louise and looked the guy up and down. He was scrawny, couldn’t be that long out of high school, but I was fully prepared to tackle him if I had to.

“It could,” he replied in a bored tone.

“But is it worth your job?” I toyed with the name placard on the counter while Louise anxiously bounced next to me, chewing on her lower lip. The guy looked between the two of us, then sighed dramatically and hit the buzzer on the wall.

“Take a look.”

Unfortunately, the guy was telling the truth. Louise and I poured over each cage, but none of them held Whiskey and we were forced to leave. The boy behind the counter popped gum between his teeth as we walked past, and it took all my restraint not to lean over the counter and pop the next bubble for him.

“Right, we try the next one,” Louise declared as we climbed back into my car. “I’m not giving up.”

“Of course you’re not,” I smiled affectionately over to her but her nose was buried back into her phone seeking the next address. “Whiskey is lucky to have you.”

Louise mumbled under her breath as we resumed our search through the city for Whiskey. Our path took us to three other pounds until finally, through an exhausted, desperate stroke of luck, we found her at the fourth one as they were closing for the night.

“We got a call about an abandoned dog,” the clerk said as she led us down the rows of cages, clipboard in hand. “Had to kick down the door to get to the poor soul, but the landlord insisted no one had been home in *weeks*.”

“Look at her,” I sighed when we reached Whiskey’s cage. “Does she look like she’s been left for weeks?”

Louise dropped to her knees and pressed her fingers through the bars. Whiskey exploded into a flurry of barks and whines as she jumped at the bars, clearly excited to be reunited.

“No, I suppose not,” the clerk sighed. “I’ll need some paperwork signed.”

“I’ll do it,” I said. “I’ll sign whatever you need me to.”

She clicked her fingers, attracting the attention of the nearby handler who then hurried over to unlock Whiskey while the clerk led me back to the front office.

“Due to the circumstances of the dog’s retrieval, we will insist on two random welfare checks over the next six weeks, you understand.”

“Absolutely.” I signed my name on each dotted line placed in front of me and shot the clerk a strong smile even as her face remained impassive. I reasoned you needed a strong soul to work in a place like this. “Trust me, Whiskey is adored.”

As if on cue, Louise appeared with Whiskey in her arms; the dog was still bounding around, over-excited and visibly

happy.

“You’re all set,” the clerk said dryly, taking the papers from me. “I hope we never cross paths again.”

“Me too.” I tossed the pen down and pressed a hand to Louise’s back, guiding her out of the building and into the late day sunshine.

“I can’t believe we found her,” Louise gasped, and she spun to face me as we walked. “Thank you, Dylan, seriously I can’t... I can’t thank you enough.”

“Don’t mention it,” I assured her, opening the back door so she could slide in with Whiskey.

“She’s all I have, I don’t know what I would do if I lost her.”

Louise’s words stuck with me all the way back to her apartment. Todd had Natalie, and I often told myself that Louise had me and the other guys, but the more I dwelled on it, the more I realized how secluded Louise’s life was. She worked, came home, and occasionally she got to see us when our schedules allowed it, but all in all, Whiskey was her sole constant.

My anger toward the landlord surged, and it reached its boiling point when we arrived back home and he held up an arm, refusing to let Louise back on the premises.

“Not with that!” He pointed sharply at Whiskey who sat calmly in Louise’s arms, reassured from the car ride.

“You can’t deny a paying tenant access to their property,” I snapped, one hand curling tightly.

“I’m not,” he sneered, “Louise can come and go as she pleases, but *that* rat is not allowed.”

“You can’t be serious,” Louise replied furiously.

“New policy. No pets.” A cold smirk spread across his thin lips and he fixed me with a beady stare. “I looked it up. Legally, I can do what I like with pets and no notice is required. So, no pets. And if you bring her in, I have grounds to kick you out!”

“No!”

“You’re a weaselly little asshole, you know that?!” Anger surged and I threw myself forward, catching the portly landlord by the collar, but before I could land a well-deserved blow, Louise’s hand landed on my arm.

“Dylan! Stop!”

She tugged at my elbow, and even as the greasy man quivered under my grasp, I knew she was right. I released him with a growl, and he stumbled back inside yelling, “No dog!”

“Dylan—”

“Fuck, Louise, I’m sorry. I don’t know if he’s right, but I can call a lawyer to see if we can’t get this sorted.”

“I can’t afford a lawyer,” Louise said sadly, slowly petting Whiskey’s head. Her lower lip trembled while she fought back tears.

“We can’t give up. I won’t give up.”

“I’m not asking you to, I just...” Louise glanced up at me, her eyes shining. “I can’t afford a lawyer and I can’t afford to move so I... what do I do? I can’t lose her, but I can’t...” A sob rose, catching in Louise’s throat, and in that instant, I made a decision.

“I’ll take her.”

“What?”

“I’ll take her. She already knows me and she adores me. There’s plenty of space at my place and Isaac and I usually have different shifts so there’s going to be someone home more often than not. And you can visit whenever you like.”

“Oh, Dylan!” Louise surged forward, squashing Whiskey between us as she threw an arm around my neck and peppered kisses over my cheek. “Thank you, thank you!”

“Of course,” I laughed softly and cuddled her back, drawing her warmth into me. It was a bandage to a bigger problem, but until we could sort this out, at least Louise wouldn’t lose her dog.

And I was not against a concrete reason for her to visit me;
that was certain.

LOUISE

The next couple of weeks passed in a blur. My apartment was cold and empty without Whiskey to keep me company, and it took four days to get my door fixed after it was kicked in by animal control, but one silver lining had risen from the entire incident.

Being alone in my apartment secured my determination more than ever to have a baby.

To have a family that couldn't be taken from me just because my landlord was an asshole. Every day like clockwork, I injected myself with the medicine Isaac prescribed to me, and before long, we moved from the menstrual suppression medicine to the fertility hormone designed to stimulate egg growth. Isaac was an absolute gem in terms of taking care of me, and he booked all my scans and blood tests with the utmost secrecy.

No one knew except for Jenny, my best friend, and I intended to keep it that way. Life was stressful enough without everyone around me knowing my business and adding to the weight on my shoulders, although as time went on and the treatments continued, I grew more excited to finally be able to reveal the good news to everyone. Not yet though.

“Louise?”

Jenny's voice trickled through the fog, pulling me from my thoughts, and I tightened my grip on Whiskey's leash as Dylan and Isaac's apartment came into view.

“Sorry, I was miles away,” I chuckled into the phone. “I have a busy day.”

“Your appointment is today, right?” Jenny asked. “Are you nervous?”

“Very. I’ve been throwing myself into planning Christmas to try and distract myself, but all I can think of is how everything is lining up. Can you imagine if I had a Christmas baby?”

“A little angel,” Jenny cooed. “How sweet. Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you? Didn’t you say Isaac was on you about a support circle?”

“He is, but I’ll be okay. Plus, he said I need to rest after the procedure so if you could cover my shift at work...?” I trailed off teasingly.

“Is that the real reason you called me?!”

“Of course not!” I laughed loudly and Whiskey barked happily at my feet. “I wanted you to calm me down; my anxiety is running overtime right now. I really want this to work.”

“Oh, babe.” Jenny sighed and clicked her tongue. “It’s egg harvesting today, right? Collecting all your girls?”

“Yes. At my last scan, Isaac said there had been a spurt in egg growth, so it’s best to harvest them now,” I explained. “He said it’s a simple procedure, I guess I’m just... nervous because it could go wrong. What if, as soon as they’re harvested, they just die?”

“Oh God, imagine,” Jenny chuckled softly. “Listen, they do this all the time, right? IVF is super popular and super common so they’ll have all sorts of safety things in place to help keep your girls alive and healthy. Isaac is one of the best in the business, right? He’ll take care of you.”

“Yes,” I replied, slightly soothed by her reasoning. “He is taking care of me.”

“And Dylan is taking care of Whiskey. You’re a lucky girl.” The telltale purr in Jenny’s voice caught my attention

immediately and warmth rushed up to my cheeks.

“Jenny, you know it’s not like that. We’re all just friends.”

“Mm-hmm,” she sang in my ear, then laughed. “I’m just saying, Martin wouldn’t do any of that shit for me.”

“That’s because your boyfriend is a lazy fucker.”

“And yet his dick makes me forget all of his red flags.”

We dissolved into peals of laughter, and I had to grasp the railing up the stairs to Dylan’s place just to keep myself steady. True to her nature, Jenny had done an excellent job of calming the worry mill in my mind.

“Jenny, I love you but I have to go.”

“Keep me updated, babe.”

“Will do.”

“Love you!”

My heart remained light as I ended the call and let myself into Dylan’s apartment. Whiskey made a beeline for the couch, and it warmed me to see how well she had settled in here, despite how desperately I missed her. With everything surrounding IVF, I hadn’t had much time to look for a new place.

Couldn’t afford one.

“Mommy loves you!” I cooed, peppering her face with kisses. She whined sadly like she did every time I left, and that sound followed me all the way to the hospital. Jenny was right about one thing—I was terribly lucky to have men like Dylan and Isaac in my life.

Weaving through the hospital, I tried to avoid my usual path to minimize the chance of running into anyone I knew. I wasn’t ashamed of my appointment, but it would be easier to avoid any and all questions. Unfortunately, I wasn’t so lucky. Turning a corner, I ran slap-bang into Carter.

“Louise!” He lightly grasped my shoulders and beamed down at me, his bright blue eyes twinkling. “I didn’t know you were dropping by today.”

My appointment time repeated in the back of my mind as I smiled up at him. “You know me, always dropping by when I get the chance.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

“Nope!” I replied, perhaps too cheerily. “I mean, I’m just here to see if I can butter up Nancy about Christmas schedules, you know how it is.”

“Ah, of course. How could I forget your most favorite time of the year,” Carter chuckled. “If you manage to sweet talk her, tell her I’d love a full week off.”

“Of course. Sorry, I have to go before... y’know...” Running out of excuses, I pulled away from Carter, but I didn’t miss the flicker of a frown that crossed his face.

“See you later?” Carter called after me as I hurried down the corridor. I waved a hand and darted through some double doors. By the time I reached Isaac, I was sweating and slightly out of breath. Isaac sat behind his desk and pushed his glasses up his nose as he regarded me with wide eyes.

“Louise? My goodness, are you alright?”

“Yes.” I nodded quickly. “I just ran into Carter and—oh God, I’m going to have to go see Nancy.”

“Why?”

“Long story.”

“Well sit down, catch your breath,” Isaac chuckled softly. “How are you feeling?”

“Nervous,” I replied, lowering into the chair in front of his desk. “I was calm before I got here, but now I feel like butterflies are breeding in my gut.”

“It’s okay to be nervous,” Isaac soothed in a voice I was sure had calmed many patients over the years. “The procedure is simple and we can get started when you’re ready.”

“Will... will Todd find out?” Keeping this from him did feel wrong, at least a little. He was my brother and we were close, but his overbearing tendencies and his judgement

whenever I mentioned children was something I was desperate to avoid.

“No,” Isaac stated firmly. “Doctor-patient confidentiality is strict, and he would only find out if something serious happened that required me to contact next of kin or there was a medical reason to consult him. But I don’t see either of those things happening.”

My eyes widened and my calming heart started to race again. “Next of kin?!”

“Only in the most extreme situations would that be required,” Isaac explained hurriedly, “but I don’t see that happening with us. Trust me.”

“I do.” I laughed nervously. “I think I’m just... I’m scared. I want this so badly and I... if it doesn’t work...”

“We’ll tackle that when we get to it, okay?” Isaac smiled warmly and stood. “Let’s get you prepped.”

I followed Isaac from his office and into the treatment room where he left me alone with a nurse for a few minutes in order to get changed. Settling on the bed, I clasped my hands on my lap as I waited for him to return.

“Hey, you all settled?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded, nervously patting my curls down with one hand. “So, what’s next?”

“Nurse Adams is going to administer a sedative, then I’m going to use ultrasound guidance to insert a needle into your vagina, and through that, we will extract your eggs.”

“Oh my God.” My stomach dropped at the thought and I pressed my thighs together. “Does it hurt?”

“It’s as minimally invasive as we can be,” Isaac said with a warm smile. “You may experience some cramps or a small amount of vaginal bleeding which is why I advised you to clear your day. The procedure will only take about fifteen to twenty minutes and then you’ll be good to go.”

I forced a few calming breaths and nodded. “Okay. Okay. My day is clear, Jenny is covering for me at work so I can... I

can go home and rest.”

Isaac reached across suddenly and grasped my hand. “You’ll be okay, but if you’re having doubts, maybe we can —”

“No,” I cut him off quickly. “No doubts. I’m scared but it’s... it’s a good fear. Let’s do this.”

“Okay.”

Isaac’s smile stayed with me as the mask was placed over my face and darkness consumed me before I had even counted backwards from ten.

In a blink, I was back in the bed all tucked up with the sheets warm around me, and Isaac was by my bedside reading a book with his glasses balancing on the tip of his nose. Strands of his brown hair had slipped free from his well-kept hair and draped down, making his face look ten times softer. I watched him for a few minutes as the grogginess faded, then I shifted my hand on the bed.

“All done?”

Isaac’s head snapped up. He straightened his glasses and smiled. “All done. How do you feel?”

“A little sore,” I admitted as I shifted on the bed and a slight twinge shot through my core. “But good.”

“The procedure was a success, and we got a few eggs so I’m very happy in that regard. You were the perfect patient.”

“Thank you.” I smiled at him and blinked slowly, shaking off the last lingering pull of the sedative. “What happens now?”

“Well, you’re free to go when you’re ready, but I want you to rest for the remainder of the day. Then we’ll take your requested route of an anonymous donor, fertilize the eggs, and you will come back here for another procedure to have them implanted. Then we’re a go.”

I settled back on the bed and beamed up at the ceiling as my heart skipped a beat and warmth blossomed in my chest.

“Awesome.”

Isaac stayed with me for ten more minutes, checking me over and offering his support until he was called away to help with another patient. I dressed and slipped from the room, taking a slow path through the hospital so I didn't run into anyone. Thankfully, luck was on my side this time.

Outside, the watery, winter sun glazed down. I squinted in the light as I sought out my phone and dialed Jenny's number.

“Hey girl!” Jenny cheered when she answered. “Is it done? How was it? Do you feel lighter, like you're missing something?”

“No,” I laughed, heading for the bus stop. “It went smoothly, Isaac was really happy, and I feel fine. A little sore but no more than I'm used to, y'know? He's sent me home to rest.”

“Oh, this is exciting.” Jenny giggled. “You're one step closer to having a baby!”

“A real step this time.” I couldn't keep the smile from my face, and as Jenny dissolved into asking a hundred questions about what happened next, I was walking on air.

Things were finally starting to look up.

LOUISE

Isaac had warned me time and time again not to get too excited, but I couldn't stop myself.

Within a couple of days of having my eggs harvested, I chose an anonymous sperm donor and sent the information off to Isaac. He performed his magic and within a week, I had another surgery that implanted the fertilized egg into my womb. Waking up from that surgery was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences in my entire life, but the look on Isaac's face when he told me the operation had been a success stuck with me like a prayer.

Then it was the waiting game. Christmas was creeping closer, the world was turning colder, and each night I would curl up with a steaming hot chocolate and lightly rub my belly, talking to the little baby I was certain was growing inside me. The year had been hard, disappointment after disappointment, and deep down in my soul I *knew* this was the time.

In order to obey Isaac's request not to dwell over the course of the next few weeks, I threw myself into organizing Christmas surprises for my brother and each of the guys. This year was a small affair, much like Thanksgiving, as they all drew the short straw when it came to shifts. Those who gave up their time to work over Christmas were paid more and were, in theory, guaranteed Christmas off the following year but that didn't stop my heart from flooding with disappointment when Todd informed me my dream of a Christmas dinner was in the trash.

“Sorry sis,” he had said, ruffling my curls. “We’ll do something next year.”

Christmas was my favorite time of the year. The crisp chill in the air, the warm scents of chocolate and cinnamon, the sparkling lights, Christmas trees lining the malls and the hospital foyer, and the crunch of snow underfoot each time I took Whiskey on a walk; to me it was all heaven. As the days ticked by, I organized presents to be delivered, decorated a small tree in my apartment, and sent fruit cake and more Christmas surprises to the hospital, with plans on setting up a mini festive dinner in the staff room on Christmas Eve.

That was tomorrow and this year the timing was *amazing*. My little Christmas Miracle was on her way.

Or so I thought.

Isaac warned me that the test would be the most nerve-racking part, but I wasn’t prepared for this. My gut twisted like a nest of snakes, my skin was clammy, and hot sweat slid down my spine each time I shifted against the counter. In front of me sat two pregnancy tests, two because I was uncertain if the first would even work, and behind me in the cabinet sat ten more.

I needed to be sure.

Each second on my phone timer passed excruciatingly slowly and I paced back and forth in my bathroom repeatedly. The pink tiles were beginning to look a little gray. Then the stop alarm burst into life and my heart froze in my chest.

“Well?” came Isaac’s voice from my phone. “Louise, what does it say?”

“I don’t know,” I gasped out, every nerve quivering under my skin. “I’m too scared to look.”

“Louise.” Isaac’s voice was soft. “You have to look. I know it’s scary but whatever the outcome, we’ll take steps, okay?”

“I know what it will say,” I said breathlessly, “I’m just not ready.”

“Louise.”

I could hear the warning in his voice, the caution to not get ahead of myself without any concrete proof, but I was so certain things had worked out that it was difficult not to lean into that foolish hope.

“Okay, okay. I’m looking. I’m looking.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I turned around and leaned over the counter to stare down at the two tests.

A single line on each test stared back at me.

A single line.

Not pregnant.

My heart beat once and dropped down to my gut, consumed by the feral snakes writhing there. My hot sweats turned to a chill and my throat ran dry like sandpaper.

“What’s the verdict?” Isaac’s voice filtered through cotton and I swallowed dryly.

“It’s um—” The words caught and I cleared my throat. “Negative.”

“What? I’m sorry, I couldn’t catch that.”

“It’s *negative*.”

My Christmas miracle baby was... not. The floor wobbled and my world tipped, my chest restricted as it took all my remaining effort to sink down onto the toilet.

“Louise, I’m so *sorry*. We knew this came with risks. We knew that.”

“I thought—I really thought...” Tears welled in my eyes, hot and fat and I didn’t have the strength to keep them at bay. The baby I had been *convinced* was on its way was nothing but a dream. A false promise I had tricked myself with.

“I know. Take some time, Louise. I know this will be a rough blow but after Christmas, we can have a talk and discuss your options,” said Isaac.

I weakly wiped at my tears, staring down at the floor, and as Isaac spoke, his comforting words only served to irritate me more than soothe me. Lifting my head, I glared across at my phone.

“I already know my next step. We will try again.”

“Louise, while that is an option, I don’t think it’s something we should rush into. The toll on you already, physically and mentally—”

“Isaac.” I stood quickly, the tears drying as I ran through things in my mind.

Yes, this failed. My miracle Christmas baby was not in the cards, but that didn’t mean I was giving up. I still wanted a family more than anything in the world and this... this was just another hiccup. It had to be.

“Isaac, I’m going to try again. I—this is just a—” Hastily wiping my tears, I began cleaning up the tests and tossing them into the trash. “This is just a setback, that’s all. First time nerves. Next time... next time I’ll be more careful, okay?”

“Louise, I hear you and I understand but we need to approach this carefully.”

“I am careful,” I sniffed. “We failed. That’s fine. I’ll try again.”

“Maybe this is a moment to pause,” Isaac said. “I mean, are you really sure you want to go ahead with this, having a baby with a stranger?”

“I don’t care if it’s a stranger,” I snapped, snatching my phone from the counter and storming out of the bathroom. “I thought you understood, I thought you knew how important this was to me, Isaac. You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“Louise, I am on your side.”

“As my doctor? Because you’re shitty about that.”

“As your doctor and your friend.”

“Well, you’re being a shitty friend too.”

“Louise, please—”

I hung up before I could hear any more and came to a stop in the living room where my small, twinkling tree glittered at me with bright, multi-colored lights.

I wasn't pregnant and now Isaac was speaking to me as if I didn't know what I was doing. The disappointment was *crushing*, and the longer I stood there, the more I knew I didn't want to be alone. Jenny was out of the question, she was busy with family since Christmas was so close, and with everyone else I knew working, the only option I had was to go out by myself.

"Fuck it," I muttered to myself. "If I'm not pregnant, then I can drink."

Grabbing my purse, my phone, and my keys, I headed out of my apartment with little thought as to where I would end up. All I knew was that I wanted to drink and distract myself from how quickly my life had nosedived once again.

My travels eventually took me to McLarens, a local bar just down the street from the hospital. It was busy, full of life, and in full swing with Christmas festivities—meaning alcohol was flowing, lights were twinkling, and streamers poured over every new patron that walked through the door.

Seated at the bar, two tequilas deep, I didn't notice Ren until he was right next to me, his hand on my arm and his dark chocolate eyes staring into mine.

"Louise? Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"What?" I blinked twice and Ren's face didn't dissipate. He was really here. "Ren!"

"Yeah," he laughed softly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing! Can I buy you a drink?" Raising a hand, I lifted slightly in my stool trying to catch the bartender's attention.

"Then why are you crying?"

"What?" I paused, my heart skipping a beat, and when I pressed my other hand to my cheek, it came away damp. "Oh, fuck."

“Louise, Isaac called me,” Ren said carefully. “He knew I finished early today, and he said you might need someone. Wasn’t hard to track you down.”

“Oh, because he knows what’s best,” I scoffed sharply. The bartender finally came over and raised a brow. “Two vodka cokes please.”

“Gotcha.” He left as quickly as he came.

“Isaac cares about you,” Ren said, leaning one elbow on the bar. His entire body was turned toward me, and it was difficult not to peek at the sliver of olive skin that teased out at his collar. “We all do.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “He just thinks he knows everything when he knows nothing.”

“Then explain it to me,” Ren asked softly. “Please?”

The bartender set down our drinks and I grabbed mine, taking two gulps and wincing at the burn. Then I swiveled to face Ren.

“He thinks he can tell me what to do, that he thinks he knows best. Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted a baby? This isn’t some spur-of-the-moment thing that will pass in a few months. I’ve wanted a baby for years and I know it looks weird to some people that I’m single and want something like that, but it’s the truth. It’s my truth!”

Ren nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving me.

“I have put up with Todd being all over me about every little thing in my life. I work a shitty job and stay in a shitty apartment, and I lost my dog because of my asshole of a landlord. This thing—IVF—was supposed to be my answer, and instead of a cute Christmas baby, what do I get instead?” Draining my glass, I slammed it down on the bar. “I get painful disappointment and crushing loneliness and Isaac trying to tell me that having an IVF baby with a stranger is a mistake.”

I huffed out a breath and dragged one hand through my curls.

“He doesn’t understand. I know he thinks that having a baby with a stranger and not having enough of a support circle are major issues, but I have done everything else *by myself*. I dealt with my parents’ death *by myself*, I dealt with all those years alone while Todd was in medical school *by myself*, and I dealt with every rejection by every weak man that couldn’t accept my love... *all by myself*. I just...” Words caught in my throat and I hiccuped, tears once again stinging behind my eyelids. “I just want this one thing to go my way.”

“Let me,” Ren said quietly. I glanced up at him, wiping my thumb over my lower lip.

“What?”

“Let me help. Let me be your donor. Then, at least... you’re not having a baby with a stranger.”

REN

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. I could tell myself it was the alcohol, but deep down I knew that was a lie. I've adored Louise with all my heart for years, and listening to her pour out her pain and struggles to have a child was heartbreaking. Offering myself up to help in *any way* was the least I could do to bring a smile back onto her beautiful face, although I wasn't sure it was working.

Louise stared at me with wide eyes, her plush lips parted slightly in shock. Rather than back down, I urged myself forward.

"If... if Isaac is worried about your lack of emotional connection being a factor then we've been friends for years so that isn't an issue. I adore you, Louise, I always have. I'm fit and healthy, if you couldn't tell. I work out three times a week, and I eat as well as I can. At least until you bring cakes around, then I'm like a kid in a candy store."

Louise continued to stare at me, unblinking and unmoving.

"Plus, I'm Asian, so I've got the smarts," I joked, tapping my temple in an attempt to draw a reaction from Louise. Maybe this was a bad idea. Suggesting such a thing was dangerous, especially when my crush on Louise had burned quietly in my soul for a few years and was kept at bay only by Todd's overprotective nature.

"That was a joke by the way," I teased, "the kid will need to work on the smarts part."

Suddenly, Louise surged forward against me. Her hands landed on my thighs and her sweet mouth immediately crashed into mine. Every nerve in my body jumped alert, and I sat frozen for half a second as she threw herself into the kiss.

Logically, I knew I should resist; she'd been drinking and our feelings were likely different, and yet at this moment every desire and fantasy for Louise was coming true, and I was too weak to resist.

I softly cupped the side of her face, caressed her cheek with my thumb, and gently kissed her back. The sweet taste of her lip gloss and the tart sting of alcohol passed between us when her lips parted, and she allowed me a few seconds to lick teasingly into her mouth. Then she pulled back and my hand dropped away.

Her eyes were sparkling and her cheeks were flushed rosy as she studied me, then her pink tongue darted out to wet her lips.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I'd love that. I'd love to have a baby with you.”

Not words I ever expected to hear from a girl I wasn't dating, never mind from Louise, but my heart soared regardless. She was struggling and I could give her this. I could make her happy, at least to the point that we'd be doing everything medically and emotionally possible to support her.

Louise pressed her lips together and smiled warmly. “Want to get out of here?”

Logic told me no. Sense warned me against giving in to this burning desire.

My heart ignored all of that.

“Yes,” I replied.

How we made it back to my apartment in one piece was anyone's guess, but the moment the door closed behind us, I crowded around Louise and pressed her up against the wall. Her sweet perfume filled my lungs as I kissed her deeply. Her arms draped around my shoulders and the sweetest, softest moan slipped from her lips when I broke the kiss and began to

pepper slow kisses down her jaw. Heat flushed through me like lava, and I stroked my hands down Louise's curvaceous sides to the belt holding her skirt up.

"Please," Louise gasped out into the darkness surrounding us. I was *weak* for her. Just hearing her plea had me sinking to my knees and disappearing under her skirt. My lips traced the curves of her thick thighs and her stance rocked back against the wall, her hands coming to clutch at my head through her skirt.

"Ren!" she gasped, "I—"

Her voice trembled and I grazed my teeth lightly up her thigh.

"Can I?" I asked, my voice muffled in the heat building under her skirt. Regardless of what I desired to do, consent was important and I wanted to hear her.

"Yes," Louise gasped above me. "Oh God, yes!"

I grasped her thighs with both hands and pressed my mouth to her panties, breathing softly onto her pussy as she whimpered softly, her legs trembling in my grasp. Years I had fantasized about everything I would do to Louise if I ever got the chance, and my heart raced, my soul giddy with excitement to finally have a taste.

Pressing my tongue flat against her clothed pussy, I licked slowly over her panties to tease her, and she gasped, her grip shifting on the material around my head. Moving up to the hem of her panties, I grasped the edge with my teeth and slowly pulled them down with the help of my hands. With the wall to support her, Louise's stance shifted and her legs moved, widening her stance and giving me easier access to her beautiful pussy.

My goal.

I pressed my mouth against her pussy and slid my tongue teasingly through her heated folds. Sweet slickness immediately coated my tongue, telling me Louise was just as turned on as I was, so I focused on lapping through her folds. With long, flat strokes of my tongue, I tasted every inch of her

right to her clit. Louise yelped when I sealed my lips around that little pleasure nub and suckled gently. Her hands pressed down on my head, her hips rocked into my mouth, and her thighs began to tremble harder against my shoulders.

That was clearly something she liked, so I leaned into it and teasing her clit became my focus, broken by the occasional flick of my tongue back and forth through her slick folds. Above me, Louise's heavy panting dissolved into soft, desperate moans, and the harder I pressed against her, the harder I *suckled*, the sweeter she moaned.

"Ren," Louise gasped as she quickly gathered up her skirt and slid her fingers into my short hair. I didn't need anything else from her. I doubled my efforts and Louise's moans rose. Suddenly she tensed up around me and cried out. For a moment, we were suspended in that bubble, and I caressed her thigh as she came hard on my tongue. Louise's body rippled and her thighs flexed repeatedly while wave after wave of pleasure washed through her. Her grip tightened in my hair, sending a sharp spark of pleasure straight down to my own hardening cock, and I continued to lick softly at her pussy as her juices flowed and her orgasm eased.

Only when her thighs stopped shaking did I stand up. Louise was pressed against the wall, her chest heaving and her face flushed even in the darkness of the hallway. She was beautiful.

"Ren," Louise panted softly. "Take me to bed."

I didn't need to be told twice.

Laughter spilled as we battled our way down the hall toward my bedroom, kissing each other desperately and tearing off each other's clothes. I didn't care where anything landed, I would deal with it tomorrow. Right now, my focus was Louise. By the time we made it to the bedroom, I was down to my boxers and Louise only had her bra left. I kissed her deeply, teasing my tongue into her mouth and mapping out every delicious inch while I stroked her back searching for the clasp.

It wasn't until she pushed me back with a chuckle that I stopped.

"It's a front clasp," Louise laughed, showing me the clasp. "Better for the back when you have large breasts."

"Makes sense," I grinned, unclasping the material. I discarded her bra onto the floor, but my entire world stuttered to a halt when Louise slid her hand inside my boxers and grasped my aching cock. I'd been hard since the bar, and eating her out had only served to increase the tightness in my gut, but her hand was almost the last straw.

My breath shuddered and I stumbled slightly as Louise stroked me once, base to tip.

"I want you to fuck me," she purred against my lips, then she released me and draped herself back onto my bed. God damn that woman was a tease.

"Gladly."

I threw myself on top of her, her laughter ringing in my ears as we bounced together on the bed. I claimed her smile in an eager kiss. My body burned hot, every point of contact with Louise sending tingles of excitement through me from head to toe. I kissed her until I had no air left in my lungs, groped at her large breasts, and lightly pinched her nipples to draw gasps of desire from her lips. I kissed her neck, trailed down to her breasts, and teased those hardening nubs into stiff peaks with my tongue, and only when Louise was moaning with every single breath did I finally enter her.

Lining my cock up with her soaked pussy, I held myself over her and nudged the tip against her folds. Louise's eyes flashed at me and her hands slid over my shoulders, one rising into my hair. She pulled at my strands and a pulse of pleasure shot through my gut, coiling down in my core.

"Fuck," I gasped and Louise grinned up at me.

"*Fuck* me, Ren," she demanded, and who was I to resist?

I plunged inside her in one swift move, sinking deep into her heat, and my head tipped back as a long, low moan tore from my throat. Her slick walls closed around my cock like a

velvet pocket and my arms trembled as every inch of her stroked every inch of me.

“Holy shit,” I gasped hoarsely. Louise arched off the bed and into me, soft moans still falling from her lips like a gentle song, and I was in utter heaven. Fueled by desire—and her request—I started to fuck her *hard*. Short, fast thrusts deep inside her, chasing our mutual pleasure while I kissed her desperately and ran my hand over her heated skin. From the silky soft hollow of her throat to the warm swell of her large breasts, I stroked and teased every inch I could reach while I pounded into her. Louise’s legs hooked around my waist as she moaned openly with every thrust, her eyes closed and her face warped with pleasure.

I was in love.

Pleasure swelled quickly in my core and my balls ached with each thrust into Louise. Her body molded perfectly to mine and I never wanted to stop, never wanted to leave. My orgasm was fast approaching and Louise’s legs were firm around my hips, guiding each thrust with eager rocks of her hips.

“Please,” Louise gasped against my lips when the kiss broke for air. “I’m so close, *please*.”

“I know,” I gasped hoarsely. I kept up the same rhythm and force, making sure not to change a thing as we rocked together, Louise’s face suddenly lit up and her pussy gripped my cock like a vice as she came. My hips stuttered and her legs tightened around them, drawing me in, and it was all I needed, all I could handle before I came too.

My orgasm hit hard, lighting up every nerve in my body and my breath caught in my throat. Warmth washed through me and my cock pulsed, twitching deep inside of Louise as I filled her with my seed and she rocked through her rolling waves of pleasure. Her nails dug into my shoulders and I sagged down into her grip, panting as we locked together, shared the same air, and came together.

Yes.

I was definitely in love.

LOUISE

Pressure shifted between my legs, drawing me slowly out of my deep slumber. The pressure increased and with it, a warm curl of pleasure burst lazily through my core. I shifted my arms, stretching them above my head while a low groan escaped my throat as the pressure between my legs grew more insistent.

As I slowly trickled back to my senses, I realized the pressure was actually the careful stroke of Ren's strong tongue. My eyes snapped open, and I raised up onto my elbows to see him buried between my legs, his mouth pressed firmly against my pussy.

Right. We slept together.

As the memory of the night before wove into my mind, Ren's tongue flicked over my clit and sent a sudden, heated pulse of pleasure straight through my core. I moaned softly and sank back down onto the pillows as my core flexed and pleasure coursed lazily through my body.

"Good morning," Ren murmured against me, his breath tickling my over-sensitive skin and I moaned again, shifting my hips to entice his mouth back to my core. He obeyed immediately and a warm smile bloomed across my lips. What an amazing way to wake up.

"Good morning indeed," I moaned and my eyes closed, my mind filling with all the best tidbits of the night before as Ren continued to eat me out with that devilishly talented tongue of his. God, he was amazing, and he was an excellent kisser too,

but all of that paled in comparison to how good his cock had felt pounding me last night. I haven't been fucked like that in months and God, I had missed it. Replaying that sensation over in my head, I grasped at my breasts and tweaked my nipples into stiff peaks as Ren's mouth paid close attention to my clit. Pleasure, hot and sudden, exploded through my core and instinct had me pulling away from the intense sensation, but Ren tightened his grip and kept my pussy pressed against his mouth.

"Ren!" I yelled, writhing against the rapidly building ecstasy, but I had nowhere to go. Just when the heat became unbearable, my orgasm burst through me like a firework and my vision turned white for a split second. I cried out, twisting in Ren's grip as he licked and suckled me through an amazing orgasm. He only released me after every rippling wave of pleasure had calmed through my body.

"Holy... shit," I gasped, sagging down onto the bed, panting. Ren crawled over me, and a cheeky smirk sat on his handsome face as we came face-to-face.

"I'll make breakfast," he grinned, pressing a light kiss to my nose. With that, he was gone, leaving me to the warm silence of his bedroom and the tingling afterglow of a morning orgasm.

Holy shit.

What had I done to deserve this? It had never even crossed my mind that Ren would be interested in me in this way, and yet when the urge to kiss him had risen last night I'd been unable to hold back. The fact he kissed me back felt like a dream. I played the night over in my head until the mouthwatering scent of bacon drifted through the door and only then did I rise from bed.

Bundling myself into his robe—and I didn't miss how his sheer muscular size meant it fit over my curvy figure with ease—I padded into the kitchen. Dressed in only boxers, Ren was over the stove frying some bacon and the coffee pot bubbled just to his right.

"Isn't that dangerous?" I said softly.

Ren cast a glance over his shoulder. “What is?”

“Frying while naked. Your poor nipples.”

Ren laughed heartily as I slid into the stool next to the island counter. From here I could see red scratches across his shoulder, scratches I had left behind.

Fuck.

I’d really slept with him. I felt amazing.

“My nipples are fine,” Ren chuckled. “I’m well practiced in bacon frying. You could call it my vice.”

“You mean you don’t have kale smoothies every morning? What kind of health professional are you?”

“The hot kind,” Ren winked at me. “How are you feeling?”

“Good.” An honest answer. My body was a little sore, but my heart was less heavy and the afterglow of sex was warming my soul. “Really good. You?”

“The same,” Ren replied. He scooped some of the bacon onto a waiting buttered roll, then slid it over to me, “Coffee?”

“Please.”

The first bite sent my heart soaring and I suddenly realized how hungry I was. The bacon was perfectly crispy and the butter had melted from the heat making the roll extra sweet. It was amazing.

“So,” I said after a few bites. “Last night...”

“Do you regret it?” The way Ren looked at me as he fried his own bacon reminded me of a sad puppy dog and I shook my head quickly.

“No, not at all. I loved that. It was amazing.”

“Best start to Christmas Eve, don’t you think?” Ren grinned.

“Oh!” Of course. It was Christmas Eve, and I was having breakfast in Ren’s apartment after a night of sex. Definitely didn’t have that on my Christmas list. “Maybe you’ve given

me my little Christmas Miracle.” I joked softly. “But... I was thinking more about what you said at the bar. About... being my donor.”

Ren’s entire stance immediately relaxed and he smiled wildly. “Oh yes. I meant it. I still do.”

“Really?” My heart lifted slightly and the hunger pangs in my gut suddenly twisted into nerves. “You were serious?”

“Of course!” Ren lowered the heat and turned back to me, stepping closer. “I wouldn’t have suggested it if I wasn’t serious. I know how important this is to you.”

“But what about the rules?” Now that my mind had started to run with worry, it was difficult to derail it. “Our history and our prior relations and everything, doesn’t that break some sort of code of conduct?”

“The same code that Isaac is breaking,” Ren pointed out gently. “What can I say, you’re worth it.”

“Oh stop,” I laughed softly. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I.” Ren fixed me with a steady stare. “I mean it, Louise. I care about you a lot. And it kills me to see the pain you’re putting yourself through. Everything you told me last night, about how badly you’ve wanted this for so long, I want to help you. Anything I can do, I’m here for you. Besides, I’m not your doctor, the rules aren’t as linear.”

His words were strong and honest, his gaze unwavering and a lump formed in my throat.

“I—I don’t know what to say,” I admitted softly. “This is a lot. It’s all amazing but it’s a lot. I didn’t know you felt that way.”

“Bet you also didn’t know how many years I’ve wanted to sleep with you,” Ren grinned, returning to his pan. “I was just too shy. Thought you’d never be interested in someone like me. That and...”

“Todd?” I offered with a chuckle.

Ren nodded. “Todd.”

Ren had crushed on me? Someone as gorgeous as that crushing on me? That blew my mind. I had been convinced for so long that none of the guys saw me as anything other than Todd's little sister and now here Ren was admitting to a crush.

Younger me was over the moon.

"I've had a crush on you too, if you must know," I admitted, my cheeks flushing. "But I thought you and the others just saw me as Todd's little sister."

"Oh, Louise." Ren plated up his own bacon and came to sit next to me. "We haven't seen you like that in years."

The lump in my throat swept down, nestling into my ribs as my cheeks flared.

"Cool."

"Cool?" Ren laughed, nudging his shoulder into mine. "Sure, it is cool."

"I had a really good time last night," I said, returning to my bacon roll.

"Me too," Ren grinned. "And I mean it. I want to be your donor."

"It's a lot," I warned. "Blood tests and needles in places you don't want needles and then so much waiting. It's killer."

"Well as you experienced last night, I have a healthy amount of swimmers," Ren teased. "Whatever you need, just let me know and I'll be there. I can even go for a full physical if that would make you feel better."

"I trust you," I replied between mouthfuls. "Though maybe we'll get lucky and last night will have helped things along."

"Much more fun that way," Ren grinned, "but in all seriousness. I know what this entails. And I know how important this is to you. Forgetting everything else like the rules, the waiting, and everything, I want to try and give this to you if you'll have me."

I rubbed my fingertips together, freeing them of breadcrumbs, and swiveled on my stool to face Ren properly.

“Do you promise to come with me to my appointments?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll accept all my complaints no matter what?”

“Yes.”

“And you won’t breathe a word to Todd?”

“Not a word,” Ren laughed. “I’d rather keep my head, thanks.”

I studied his handsome face for a few moments longer, then I leaned over and pressed an excited kiss to his cheek.

“Okay, let’s do this. You sir, are going to be my baby daddy.” While yesterday’s disappointment had been crushing, this new opportunity with Ren was *amazing*.

I just hoped Isaac would share in that excitement.

LOUISE

“**Y**ou did *what?!*” Jenny’s shrill cry echoed through Dylan’s kitchen. I couldn’t hold in my laughter as I carefully poured cake batter into the muffin trays before me.

“I slept with Ren.”

“I can’t—I’m in shock, utter shock. Tell me everything! First of all, tell me why it took you so long to tell me!”

“I didn’t mean to,” I explained, glancing over at the video call. Jenny’s rosy face stared back at me, her red lips slightly smudged from the glass of champagne in her hand. “I was drunk, I was sad about the failed IVF, and kissing him seemed like the best thing to do at the time. I would have told you straight away, but yesterday was Christmas Eve and I had to host that party in the staff room, and then I was exhausted when I got home.”

“Hmm, well I do love juicy stories, so I suppose as presents go, this one is pretty amazing,” Jenny replied, sipping her drink. Behind her, the happy sounds of her family celebrating Christmas Day trickled through. “So, how was he? Was he good?”

“So fucking good,” I groaned as the memory of his talented tongue and thick cock swept through my mind. A heated throb rose in my core, and I bit my lower lip as I poured the last of the batter into the tray. “The things he can do with his tongue? I’ve slept with guys before, but somehow Ren was...” There wasn’t a word I could find to truly explain

how satisfying the sex had been. “It felt easy, y’know? Like we were already in sync.”

“My God,” Jenny chuckled. “Well, I’m happy for you. With this *and* him being your donor, he’s got it bad for you.”

“Don’t be silly,” I scoffed lightly, turning and sliding the tray into the oven. “He admitted having a crush, but I hardly think it’s anything more than that.”

“Oh sure, most guy friends I have would totally throw themselves at my feet to give me a baby and great sex if they found me crying in a bar,” Jenny mocked in a light tone.

The oven closed softly so I grabbed a cloth and began cleaning the excess batter off my fingers as I returned to the phone. “That’s a little bitchy even for you.”

“Maybe.” Jenny drained her glass and leaned closer to the camera. “I’m just saying, whatever it is that spurred him on, it’s more than a crush. Especially with the *pain of death* aura from your brother.”

“That is true,” I laughed. Before I could say more, Jenny’s boyfriend Martin slid into the frame pressing a messy kiss to her rosy cheek. I fought a curl of disgust at the sight of him. He wasn’t the greatest guy, but Jenny appreciated his dick too much to cast him aside yet.

“Hey, Louise.”

“Hi, Martin.”

Martin started to whine into Jenny’s ear and she rolled her eyes. “Sorry babe, I gotta go. But we’ll talk about this again later!”

“Absolutely.”

“Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas.”

The call ended and silence descended like a soft blanket over the kitchen, broken routinely by the sound of Whiskey snoring in her basket by the door. It was a far cry from my dream Christmas. Everyone I cared about was currently

working at the hospital, leaving me to do what I could to soften the blow of having to work on Christmas Day. In my experience, the best way to do that was with baked goods.

As I set the timer and left the kitchen to shower, Jenny's words stayed with me and wove repeatedly around my mind. Did Ren care about me more than he was letting on? A crush was a crush, and my feelings for him had simmered under the surface for a long time, but it had always been a daydream, a fantasy. All of my brother's friends had been because I was convinced they saw me as an extension of Todd, not my own person.

But Jenny was right. What Ren was doing for me was *incredible*. In the rush of excitement and adoration for his offer, I hadn't stopped to really think about how huge it was. People didn't offer to father babies over a simple crush. The thought warmed me through my entire shower, and by the time I was dried off and dressed, the apartment was filled with the scent of warm cake and my heart was full.

Both Isaac and Ren were going out of their way to help me get what I wanted, and that, above all, was the best Christmas present I could get.

Leaving Whiskey to sleep after peppering her fuzzy face with a thousand kisses, I called an Uber to the hospital. I arrived with my arms laden with gifts and treats for my brother and the others.

The hospital was as busy as any other day of the year, with the few Christmas trees in the lobby being the only indication that it was the most festive day of the year. Limp tinsel clung to the egg-white walls, and every so often, a handmade Christmas wreath would cling on for dear life to the door of wards and hospital rooms, adding what little festive cheer could be given to those sick and in need.

As I headed down the corridor, a soft tap on my shoulder made me jump and drew a squeak from my throat.

"Oh shit," Carter laughed, appearing at my elbow. "I didn't mean to scare you."

“Carter! You know, most people say hi when they approach people,” I chuckled, angling myself toward him as we walked.

“I’m not most people,” he smirked, then his striking blue eyes dropped to the bundles in my arms. “What’s all this?”

“What do you think it is? Food and some presents for you lot.”

“Oh, Louise,” Carter beamed, “what would we do without you?”

“You’d starve,” I replied. “Really, you all would waste away.”

“It’s true.” He nodded and raked a hand slowly through his fluffy blond hair.

“It’s the least I could do since it’s Christmas and my sweet talking with Nancy didn’t free any of you today. Being stuck here on this day has to be the worst.”

“It has its moments,” Carter winked at me and my heart skipped a quick beat. Then his face sobered up. “As bad as it is for us, it’s worse for the patients.”

“Oh, of course.” Carter’s work with children meant he had to see a sea of small faces unable to be home with their families for Christmas, and just that thought pulled my heart painfully south. “Did you do the honors this year? Dressed up as Santa?”

“No,” Carter laughed softly and pulled one of the smaller tubs off the stack in my arms. “Reggie was Santa this year. It’s not a competition but I just can’t beat that voice he does.”

“It’s the beard,” I replied. “Hey! Those aren’t for you.”

“Are you sure?” Carter pried open the lid, revealing a selection of cake pops I had decorated to look like snowmen. He picked one out and popped it into his mouth. “Because they sure taste like they’re for me.” After a moment, he moaned softly. “God, these are fucking amazing. You’re wasted baking for us, I swear.”

“I enjoy it,” I snapped good-naturedly and balanced the containers to snatch back the stolen box. “Your present this year is a new scarf by the way.”

“Thanks,” Carter smiled warmly and leaned down, pressing a light kiss to my cheek that caused warmth to bloom through my cheeks. “You’re the best.”

“Oh, I know.”

Carter’s pager beeped into life and we parted ways at the forked corridor, leaving me to his promise to not eat all the snowmen before Dylan got a chance to. I didn’t believe him.

Near the nurses’ station, I bumped into Dylan who greeted me with a wide smile and a hug that sent the containers in my arms into a precarious position. Luckily none of them fell, and Dylan gathered a few of them into his own arms.

“You baked all of these today?”

“And partly last night,” I admitted as we headed toward the staff room. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Something on your mind?” His dark brows creased together above his nose and it was adorable. I chuckled and warmth flushed my cheeks as I shook my head.

“No, I just... I get too excited for Christmas and can’t sleep, so I got up to bake,” I admitted.

“That’s fucking cute,” Dylan grinned as he gently nudged his shoulder into mine. “You’re cute.”

“Fuck off,” I laughed, but the compliment warmed my chest like the spread of a hot drink on a cold day. Ren wasn’t the only one I had crushed on over the years, and when Dylan came to the rescue with Whiskey, it wasn’t hard for those feelings to spike.

“I’m serious,” Dylan grinned, using his ass to open the staff room door. As I passed him, I caught a subtle scent of cedar and vanilla underneath the sharp bite of antiseptic.

“So am I,” I chuckled, making a beeline for the table. Once there, I set down all the containers and picked up the one containing the snowmen. “Here.”

Dylan set down his own containers and when he opened the box, his handsome face lit up like a star. “Holy shit, I love these. Look at their little scarfs!” One snowman was carefully admired before it was tossed into the cavern of Dylan’s mouth and lost forever. He groaned low in his throat, a thrumming sound that sent a pulse of delight through me, and my cheeks flushed as he grabbed two more.

“I have to go,” he murmured apologetically through his mouthful as his phone buzzed. “But this is amazing, and you are amazing!”

A slightly crummy affectionate kiss was pressed to my cheek and Dylan vanished, leaving me to my thoughts. What was wrong with me? Maybe it was the fact it was Christmas and I adored everything about the day, or maybe it was because being with Ren had unlocked a new appreciation for the fact that my brother’s best friends saw me as my *own* person, but something felt different.

Like the gentle flirting and affection was more than just me reading into things. I tried to put it out of my mind as I set up the table with all the sweet treats I had baked, and I fought to ignore it as I filled each of their lockers with the gifts I had bought for them. My strength to ignore those thoughts died, however, when I bumped into Ren in the elevator, and he smiled at me in such a dazzling way that my knees knocked together.

“Hey, Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas,” I smiled warmly up at him. “I’ve set up the staff room when you get a chance.”

“Of course you did,” Ren teased. “Our little mother hen.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned, “that makes me seem old.”

“No!” Ren gasped. “I meant it more in an adorable, caring kind of way.”

“I know, I’m just teasing.” I nudged him with my elbow and Ren rolled his eyes. “Are you on your way to surgery?”

“Yeah. You looking for Todd?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Careful, Natalie’s around somewhere.”

I groaned softly. “Of course.”

As the elevator began to slow, Ren suddenly turned to me and grasped my chin gently with his thumb and forefinger. His soft lips pressed to mine, and his head tilted to the left, sweeping his tongue over the seam of my mouth. Instantly my lips parted for him and his tongue swept into my mouth, deepening the kiss for a few seconds. Then he pulled back just in time for the doors to open, leaving me stunned and breathless.

“Merry Christmas,” he smirked. I was unable to retort, unable to react as he left the elevator and three nurses filled his space.

Holy shit. What a dick!

He’d just kissed me, right in an empty elevator with seemingly no thought to who could have been on the other side of those doors—right here, in the hospital when we were seconds away from being caught! Yet, the brief pulse of irritation faded within moments, leaving me giddy as my heart beat fast and my lips tingled from the contact.

Jenny’s words popped into my mind once more and stayed there, blaring like a siren as I left the elevator in search of my brother. It was just my luck that instead of him, I found Natalie, and her thin, sharp face twisted slightly as she spotted me.

Todd and Natalie had met at McLaren’s, the bar where she worked and where we often frequented. They had hit it off straight away and despite Natalie’s cool nature, Todd seemed to adore her. Only, their relationship hadn’t really progressed in the three years they had been together, but that was none of my business.

“Natalie.” I forced a smile. Todd loved her, so I was polite but her catty remarks and underlying mean attitude made her difficult for me to like. “Merry Christmas.”

“Hmm.” She tossed her head and her long blonde hair draped over her left shoulder like a wave. “I’m surprised to see you here on Christmas.”

“I brought food for everyone, like I do every year.”

“Oh, you’re still doing that little baking thing?” Natalie waggled her long, green-painted nails and pursed her lips.

“Yes,” I replied tightly, “I’m still doing that baking thing.”

“I could never.” She laughed suddenly, a tinkling sound that somehow lacked all warmth. “Surrounded by all that cake and sugar, I would end up *ballooning*. You know how it is.” Her narrow eyes dropped down and lingered on my waistline, and a familiar, shameful heat swept up my spine. I loved how I looked; it had taken me a long time to love who I was, and I knew worth didn’t come from how curvy or skinny someone was, but Natalie held herself—and her stick-thin figure—in high regard. This was clear at every family gathering.

“Sure,” I smiled, pressing my lips together. “Well, another Christmas rolls around. Any chance we’ll *finally* be hearing wedding bells?” I raised a brow as Natalie’s cheeks flushed light pink. She wasn’t the only one who could be catty, and I never took an insult from her lying down.

“Perhaps,” she replied, then she suddenly became terribly interested in her phone, signaling the end of our conversation.

“Where’s Todd?” I asked, but before Natalie could give me some snarky reply, Isaac answered from behind me.

“He’s just gone into surgery,” Isaac said. I spun around to face him. Isaac’s gaze slid down me, slow enough that heat flushed down my body following his gaze. “Love the tights.”

I glanced down at my green tights, dotted with red holly berries. “Thanks! Do you know when he’ll be out?”

“A few hours I’m afraid.”

“Hmm. Okay, I’ll head back down. Bye, Natalie.” I cast a glance back at her, but she had turned her back on us, leaning against the wall.

Isaac fell into step with me on the way back to the elevator. Once we were out of Natalie's earshot, he started to speak.

"Louise, I wanted to apologize for what I said on the phone. I didn't mean to imply that you hadn't thought about things. I know this is important to you, and I just want to look out for you. You've been trying for so long and disappointment can be... tough."

"Oh, Isaac." I had almost forgotten about that call since my thoughts had been overshadowed by my time with Ren. "I know. I reacted harshly because I think I was more upset than I wanted to admit. But it's okay. I thought about what you said."

"You did?" His brow lifted and he adjusted his glasses as we reached the elevator.

"Yes. And I've found a donor. One that isn't a stranger. Someone that I can connect with and will be there for me."

Isaac's face was openly surprised, and I patted his arm as I passed through the open doors into the elevator.

"That's great! Better than great!"

"Thank you," I beamed. "And I'll wait. We'll make an appointment after the New Year. If that works for you?"

Isaac adjusted his glasses once more and nodded. "Absolutely. Merry Christmas, Louise."

"Merry Christmas."

Yet, as the doors slid closed, I was struck with a sudden coldness in my chest.

Would Isaac still hold the same happiness for me when he learned exactly who my donor was?

ISAAC

“Thank you, thank you so much!”

“You’re more than welcome, Mrs. Trask. If you head down that corridor and take the elevator down to the first floor, the pharmacy is all the way at the end so you can get your prescription filled there.”

“Thank you! And happy New Year!” Mrs. Trask finally released my hands and scurried off down the corridor.

“Happy New Year!”

The first few weeks after the New Year were always strange. I found them more stressful than actually having to work through Christmas since the New Year usually inspired the majority of couples to start having children. My office would fill to the brim with women seeking to ensure they were healthy enough to do just that, and it was always nice to be able to deliver good news.

Glancing at my watch, I ran a quick calculation in my head and headed down to the staff room. Louise would be here in an hour for her IVF appointment, and she informed me that I would finally meet the mysterious donor who had provided the semen for her latest round of fertilization. I was curious and slightly apprehensive as to who it could be, and deep down, there was a darker part of me that was jealous too.

Louise hadn’t mentioned any men in her life, so to learn someone was close enough to do this for her, my jealousy had sparked the moment I envisioned Louise with another man, and that sensation hadn’t shifted. My feelings for her have

always been complicated, usually stagnated by my own concerns about her brother—my best friend—Todd, or my assumed belief that she saw me as nothing more than her brother’s annoying friend.

Deep down, I yearned for more.

“Earth to Isaac.”

“Hmm?” Spoon in hand and a half-made coffee in front of me, I hadn’t even noticed Ren was seated in the staff room halfway through a salad until a cherry tomato smacked me on the shoulder. “Ren! Sorry, I was miles away.”

“Yeah, I could tell,” Ren chuckled around a forkful of lettuce. “Bad day?”

“Nah, just... thinking about Louise. She has her appointment in an hour, and I was just mulling over something she told me.”

Ren’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. “Care to share?”

“She...” I paused, absently stirring my coffee as I weighed the pros and cons of confiding in Ren. “She found a donor. One that isn’t random and I’m happy for her. It was just unexpected.”

“Oh.” Ren cleared his throat. “Well, you know how she is. She makes friends everywhere she goes. It isn’t hard to believe that she found someone.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “I don’t have a problem with that. If she’s sleeping with someone, then as long as it’s her donor, that won’t be a problem, but I just...” I paused, and for a moment, the profession fell away and I was Isaac confiding in my friend. “There’s a part of me that’s frustrated that there is someone else. I don’t know why, and I understand why she’d keep it a secret because of how Todd has been in the past, but with everything she’s going through, to think that some random guy off the street or from the bar is enough to make her think that counts as an emotional attachment, it frustrates me.”

Ren lowered his fork. “You sound jealous.”

“Jealous?” My head snapped up and heat prickled sharply at the back of my neck from the accusation. “I’m not jealous, I’m just *concerned*.”

“Well, there’s no need to be,” Ren said as he stabbed at some pepper. “Because it’s me,”

“What?” The world suddenly went silent, the business of the hospital beyond the staff room door fell into the background as Ren lifted his dark eyes and fixed me with a nervous look.

“I’m her donor.”

A rush of emotions exploded through my mind, twisting together into a noise I couldn’t decipher for a few long seconds. Relief that it wasn’t a random guy that was helping Louise with this, frustration and jealousy that Ren got to do this and not me, then anger that Ren was putting his reputation on the line and breaking a whole host of ethics rules.

Same as me.

“Are you serious?!” I couldn’t stop the anger from bleeding into my tone, and Ren’s eyes immediately narrowed.

“We only slept together once, but yes. I’m serious. I offered to be her donor and she said yes.”

“Do you have any idea how unethical this is?” Coffee abandoned, I stalked toward Ren’s table. “You could get into so much fucking trouble.”

“Not as much as you,” Ren countered. “She’s your patient. My lines are fuzzier than yours.”

“I’m the only specialist within a hundred miles that can help her. It’s not the same,” I snapped. To my frustration, Ren merely smirked.

“I knew it. You are jealous. That’s why you can bend the rules for her without a second thought, but when someone else does it, it gets you heated, right?”

“I—” He could read me like a book, and I pressed my lips together firmly. “It’s more than how I feel, Ren. This is important to her, more than you can know. I’m trying to help

her, and if this fails, do you think you will even be able to face her?”

“I know how important it is,” Ren replied calmly. “We talked about it. A lot. And *you* were the one that told her an emotional bond can help, so sue me for seeing a way to help her and taking it. You’re just mad I got to taste her first.”

There was a challenge in Ren’s tone, a challenge to deny his implication that my feelings for Louise were more than that of a concerned friend and doctor. My mouth opened and closed a few times before defeat swept across my shoulders like a lukewarm caress, and I sighed deeply.

“How did you know?”

“That you liked her?” Ren licked his fork. “When you feel the same, it’s easy to spot.”

I placed a hand on my hip and pushed up my glasses with my other hand, rubbing at the bridge of my nose. “Todd will kill us.”

“Oh, definitely. But he’d have to kill all of us.”

My hand paused. “All of us?”

“You really are blind,” Ren chuckled. “We’re not the only ones that can’t keep their eyes off her.”

“Off who?”

My head snapped up to see Louise standing in the doorway, her light blue dress offset by a stark pair of red tights that immediately drew a smile to my face. Ren, meanwhile, inhaled some salad and began coughing his lungs up onto the table.

“Sandra in HR,” I lied smoothly. “She has a new hairstyle and it’s caught the attention of a few orderlies.”

“Oh, how cute!” Louise beamed, then her brow furrowed in concern as Ren continued to hack at the table. “Ren, are you okay?”

“Peachy,” he croaked, holding up a hand. “Went the wrong way.”

“Dummy,” she chuckled.

I cast a glance at my half-made coffee, trying to keep up the guise that we hadn’t just been discussing her, and smoothed one hand down my tie. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Louise nodded. “Actually...” Her hands clasped together in front of her black belt, and she chewed on her full lower lip. For a split second, I wanted her lip between my teeth—I couldn’t believe Ren had tasted her. Kissed her. Made love to her.

“Ren,” Louise began. “Would it... would it be okay if you came with me? For support?”

“It’s okay,” Ren replied hoarsely. “Isaac knows.”

“Oh!” Louise’s gaze darted back and forth between the two of us and pink dusted over her cheekbones. “Is that—am I in trouble?”

Whatever thoughts I had against Ren being Louise’s donor—for his career safety or otherwise—melted away when Louise stood there looking like a deer caught in headlights. How could she think she was in trouble when we were the ones twisting the rules for her? Her compassion really knew no bounds.

“No,” I assured her quickly as I stepped forward. “You’re not in trouble, I won’t lie; I was surprised, but Ren and I talked about it.” I glanced at him over my shoulder. Ren stood and shot me a smile.

“Are you sure?” Louise asked softly. “I don’t want to get anyone into any trouble.”

“You won’t,” I smiled as Ren joined me at my elbow.

“Trust us,” Ren said. “And I’ll happily be there.”

At his words, Louise’s face lit up and my heart swelled.

Todd really was going to kill us.

“Alright,” I declared, straightening my glasses. “Let’s put a baby in you.”

CARTER

January. The grayest month on the earth. Seated by the window, the hubbub of the hospital barely made it past the sound of the downpour splattering against the staff room windows. Armed with a mug of soup, I soaked up warmth from the porcelain and enjoyed my few moments of peace while watching raindrops race each other down the glass.

I loved storms in my youth. Something about the chill rain and the fierceness of the wind had always appealed to me, but over the years, that love faded. I suspected it was due to facing down sick children, day after day. It took all my strength to face that kind of pain, yet on days like today, storms would bring a little rain cloud over the pediatric ward and every child would yearn to be outside and feel the rain.

Some hadn't been outside in *months*. That had painfully dampened my enjoyment of storms. However, I could still snatch a few moments of enjoyment like today, huddled in my chair with soup for company and twenty minutes left on my lunch break—barring any emergencies.

Suddenly, the door flung open and I jumped, narrowly avoiding spilling any soup as Louise rushed inside and came to a stop a foot away from the door. She was a warm streak of color, dressed in a bright orange blouse and a black skirt over bright orange tights. Seeing her immediately made me smile, and I glanced up at her flushed face and wild purple curls.

“Afternoon.”

“Carter!” Louise gathered herself, pressing the back of one hand to her rosy flushed cheeks as she licked her lips. “I’m sorry. Is Ren around?” She cast her eyes around the empty room before settling back on me, and I shook my head.

“Sorry, I haven’t seen him. Last I heard he was heading into surgery with your brother.”

“Damn,” Louise muttered, and she rocked back and forth onto her heels. “Do you know how long he’ll be?”

“Sorry, I don’t.” I took a slow sip of my soup and then paused as a sharp thought lanced through my mind. A few nights ago, Ren had confided in me about the IVF situation with minimal detail. He had only let me in on the secret because he wanted to gently increase Louise’s support circle.

“Are you okay?” I asked, concerned that perhaps she was seeking Ren out for a baby-related issue.

“Oh yes!” Louise smiled brightly but it didn’t make her eyes sparkle like usual. In fact, there was something dark about her usually vibrant blue eyes, so I set my soup down and slid to the end of my seat.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Louise replied, and her hands clutched at her bag strap, fiddling with the metal lock on the edge of the leather. “I just...” Her brow pinched together, and I settled on a decision. Rising, I pointed to the sofa.

“Sit,” I instructed sternly. To my surprise, Louise followed that command immediately. Flicking on the kettle, I popped a tea bag into one cup and then settled on the sofa next to Louise.

“Is something wrong?” This close, the sweetness of her tickled my nose and I breathed deeply.

“No, whatever would be wrong?”

“Louise, you come here for two reasons,” I said, trying to give her an opening to confide in me. “Either you’re here to feed us or you’re here to see Todd. But you’re looking for Ren.”

“I come here for other reasons,” Louise replied hotly. “I just... I need Ren’s help with—with something.” Her cheeks flushed darker. Was she ashamed to tell me?

“Is it about the IVF?” I asked, biting the bullet.

Louise’s eyes flew wide and she gasped, scooting a half-inch away from me. “What?! How... how do you know about that?”

“Ren told me,” I replied honestly as the kettle bubbled away behind us. “He wanted to make sure that someone else knew in the event that you needed support and he was unavailable. Which, if I’m being honest, that’s what this feels like.”

“Oh, God.” Louise’s cheeks flared a deeper shade of red as she raised one hand to her mouth. “You can’t tell Todd.”

“I value my head on my shoulders, thank you,” I smiled warmly. Todd did indeed have the intimidating, protective brother act down to the point that I had barely gotten to know any of Louise’s boyfriends before Todd scared them away.

“But you’re his best friend,” Louise said quietly. “When it was just Ren, it was easy, but I don’t—I don’t want to end up coming between you and him, y’know?”

“Louise, if there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that we’re all adults capable of making our own decisions, and I can see that this—you and Ren—is the right decision for you. And I care about you too, so you have my support. Who knows, when your little darling comes along, maybe Todd will finally accept that you’ve grown into a beautiful woman.”

“Oh, don’t,” Louise laughed, ducking her head behind her curls. “Besides, we don’t know that anything has happened yet. It’s too early to know, y’know?”

That was also the reason my simmering attraction to Louise had always been exactly that, just simmering beneath the surface. She was warm and kind, full of life, and even on my darkest days, she found a way to make me smile.

Todd would never forgive me if I ever made a move, and I liked Ren alive, so this secret would stay with me to the grave.

“So, what’s happened?”

“It’s not what you think,” Louise said quietly, finally lifting her gaze to meet mine. “I mean, it’s not a bad thing that I need Ren, I’m not in any pain or anything like that.”

“You can talk to me,” I assured her quietly, trying to ignore how my mind ran with all sorts of painful scenarios that could have put Louise in such a heightened state.

“Well...”

Her cheeks were a deep red now, so I reached out and clasped her warm hand in mine, patiently listening.

“I had my IVF treatment over a week or so ago and Isaac... he explained that there would be some side effects to the hormones.” Louise glanced away from me. “I was feeling um... I just needed Ren because...” She paused, then the next words flew out of her in a rush. “Isaac said sex should only be with my donor, and I was hoping Ren was around to further things along because I am really fucking horny.”

Oh.

Oh.

Louise wasn’t angry or upset or distressed. She was *turned on*. The revelation sent a pulse of unexpected warmth straight through my chest and settled in my gut, nestling lower as I became acutely aware of how Louise’s hand felt between mine. No wonder her cheeks were so dark; she was embarrassed.

“So, I am okay, I just needed Ren for selfish reasons, I suppose.” Louise sighed, and a small smile crept onto her lips. “Sorry if that grosses you out.”

“Quite the contrary,” I chuckled as my throat ran dry. I couldn’t deny that part of me was envious that Ren had been able to get into bed with Louise. That was some kind of filthy fantasy I would recreate in my mind. “Sadly, he’ll be busy for the next few hours, if you can wait?”

Rising from the couch, I patted her shoulder gently and returned to the kettle to pour her tea.

“Just my luck,” Louise sighed. “I could take care of it myself of course, I just... the extra *oomph* would help, y’know?”

“There’s logic there,” I chuckled, adding her usual two sugars and a splash of milk. “Honestly, sounds like you need more than one reliable dick to keep you going, given a surgeon’s schedule.”

The joke was past my lips before I could give it enough thought, and a pulse of tension burst across my back. The last thing I wanted was for Louise to think I was implying she slept around. I turned immediately, ready to elaborate on the joke, but she beat me to it.

“Are you offering?” Louise asked in a serious tone tinged with heat. My heart leaped up into my throat, and the answer escaped me in a voice that almost didn’t sound like mine.

“Yes.”

LOUISE

Never in my wildest dreams did I expect Carter to say yes, never mind him actually making good on his offer.

Isaac had warned me that the hormones were going to affect my emotions and sex drive, but what I hadn't expected was the surge of horniness that felt all-consuming when faced with the possibility of not getting to see Ren.

Ren remained a warm thought in my mind as Carter's lips crashed hard against mine and his tongue pressed into my mouth with a demanding forcefulness that made my knees weak and my core throb with desire. Warmth pooled between my thighs as Carter pressed me down onto the on-call bed, and my heart started to race while heat flushed through my body from head to toe. I grazed my hands across his shoulders and raked my fingers up into his soft hair. The strands wound like silk around my fingertips, and I gripped tightly when Carter's teeth nipped sharply at my lower lip, pulling a sudden gasp from the depths of my throat.

"What," I whispered as the kiss broke and we panted in the same space. "What if someone walks in?"

Carter's blue eyes glittered in the low light and his thin lips pulled into a wide smile. "They won't."

"Are you sure?" Carter kissed me again and his short facial hair scraped lightly against my chin.

"Trust me."

"I do," I assured him softly. Whatever worries remained lingering in my mind promptly vanished when Carter's mouth

descended on my neck and his lips latched onto my fluttering pulse. He sucked hard, both his hands fondling my breasts through my blouse, and I bit back a louder moan as each point of contact sent tingling sensations right down to my core.

My panties were soaked against my skin, and my body ached for more.

“Please,” I gasped, “I need it. I need you.”

“You need me to fuck you?” Carter growled softly against my throat.

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“Fuck me,” I gasped, “please fuck me.”

“I kinda like it when you beg.” Carter’s face floated above me once more and he pressed a firm kiss to my lips; then he was gone from view and his strong, skilled fingers began pulling at my clothes. Each time his fingers grazed my sensitive skin, I followed his touch with rolls of my body as my blouse and bra were stripped and discarded to join his own clothes on the floor. My skirt was ripped down and I moaned, only to pause when Carter grasped the hem of my tights.

Bolting upright, I caught his wrist.

“Be careful. These tights are expensive.”

Carter laughed and his lips pressed hot against my cheek. “Understood.”

My tights were removed with much more care, but when it came to my panties, Carter paused. With one hand he pressed me back down onto the bed and with the other, he teased one finger across my clothed pussy.

“My God, you’re soaked,” he murmured under his breath. “All this for me?”

“It’s just the hormones,” I teased and Carter chuckled again. Suddenly my panties were jerked aside and two rough fingers were thrust deep into my pussy. I arched off the bed in

shock, and my cry was smothered as Carter's other hand pressed over my mouth to quiet me.

"What about now?" he asked above me. "Still the hormones?"

I could scarcely breathe. Every nerve in my body was on high alert and every pleasure sensor in my pussy was screaming from friction. I needed those strong fingers to move, to stroke me, fuck me, *anything* that would save me from the sudden edge I found myself on. Sliding one hand around his wrist, I nodded against his hand while lightly stroking my fingertips down his sculpted torso. After a moment, his palm slid from my mouth and I wet my lips.

"That all you got?" I taunted with a whisper. Carter's soft laugh warmed my soul, and I pressed my hips down onto his motionless fingers buried inside me.

"Remember, you asked for this." In the same breath, Carter pulled his fingers free from my pussy and pulled so hard on my panties that the material was dragged briefly over my swollen clit. The touch made me gasp loudly as the elastic snapped, and Carter grasped my hips firmly. He flipped me onto my stomach, rolling me as if I was weightless and before I could even take my next breath, he pulled me onto my knees and placed one large hand between my shoulder blades, keeping my chest down on the bed.

"Carter," I whined as his hand slid into my hair. With an iron grasp, he wound his fingers into my hair and shoved my face into the pillow, but before I could even fathom why he would do that, his thick, fat cock suddenly thrust hard into my pussy, spearing right to my core and I *screamed*.

A scream that was thankfully muffled by the pillow. My eyes rolled back into my head, and being unable to see, all my focus was pulled to my heated core and Carter's cock as he started to fuck me. His grip on my hair and hip was unrelenting, his hips pounding forward at a hard, feverish pace that fucked all the air from my body and sensation from my thighs. Our hips slapped together, his balls striking against my

clit with every powerful thrust sending sparks of lightning behind my eyelids and pure liquid ecstasy through my body.

I couldn't move, could barely breathe. I was powerless to the onslaught of his fucking, and I loved every single minute of it. Both my hands curled into the bedsheet, and my nails tore into the fabric as each thrust punched carnal noises right out of my throat. I had never been more turned on in my life, and I craved Carter more and more after every thrust. His cock spread me wide, his cock longer than Ren's, and as he pounded into me, he reached deeper than even my favorite toy.

"Fuck," I gasped against the pillow as I tilted my head to drag in some cool air. "Fuck, fuck!"

Carter's grip remained steadfast in my hair, keeping me pinned, and the lava-like heat in my core began to build uncontrollably. The slick sounds of our fucking filled the air and, blind, I was consumed by everything Carter. The taste of him on my lips, his scent filling my lungs, his cock pounding into me without losing rhythm. It was everything I needed and more.

And I was close. I was so close to orgasm that there was no longer a sane thought in my mind. My focus was purely on my core and the building wave that was swelling inside me, and Carter seemed to be feeling the same as his hips began to pound into me faster and harder than before.

"I'm gonna—" Carter growled above me. "Gonna come, Louise. Gonna fill you up—fuck!"

"Yes!" I cried, tugging harder at the sheets with all my strength. "Yes!" My loud moan, muffled by cotton, suddenly tapered off as on Carter's next powerful thrust, my entire body locked up and every nerve and sense exploded with light. Incredible heat burst through my body like a wave and I came with a hoarse cry as my pussy locked around Carter's cock like a vice. His pleasure cry above me was like music, and suddenly heat rushed inside me as Carter came within a second of me. Everything was still and silent in my mind while waves upon waves of pleasure flowed through me and

my pussy rippled and pulsed. This was fucking heaven, and I was in love.

After what seemed like an eternity, Carter started to thrust once more at a slower pace, and his hand retracted from my hair. Draping over me like an over-heated blanket, Carter peppered soft kisses to my cheek as he coaxed my head around.

“Good?” he asked breathlessly. “Too much?”

“Perfect.” I groaned as the orgasm haze started to fade, but desire still burned hot in my veins. “Can we... go again?”

“I can’t,” Carter replied, kissing me softly. “But we have a visitor.”

Carter pulled away, and when I blinked, Isaac’s face swam into view. “Isaac? How did you...?”

“I texted him,” Carter said as his hips stilled. “Wanted to make sure us doing this wouldn’t fuck up your IVF.”

“Aren’t you delectable,” Isaac said softly, and I groaned low as Carter’s cock slid from my pussy. I could only imagine what I must look like, but arousal still wove through me, teasing at the end of my psyche.

“I have to get back to work,” Carter said from somewhere I couldn’t see. “But Isaac can take care of you.”

“Can I?” Isaac asked, and his kind eyes crinkled at the corners.

“Yes,” I agreed softly. “Please.” Whining on the last word, I was soothed by Isaac leaning forward and pressing his butter-soft lips to my own. Then he was gone and for a moment, I blearily wondered if that part was a dream.

Then strong hands caressed my body and I rolled onto my side when prompted by increased pressure. When Isaac kissed me, everything faded away to the background. The pleasant ache in my core, the heat on my face from muffling my sounds, the pounding of my heart, and the prickling of my skin; it all became silent as Isaac kissed me like I was the most precious thing he had ever touched. My heart jumped and I

moaned softly against his lips. His tongue teased along my lower lip, tracing the full swell, so I parted my lips and invited him in. As his tongue delved into my mouth, his thick cock slowly pressed into my pussy, and I arched into his strong body with a long, low groan. He swallowed down my sound, one hand grasping at my right breast and pinching lightly at the nipple while his other hand caressed over my stomach.

The moment his fingertips lightly pinched my swollen clit, I saw stars. Untouched by Carter, my clit was aching and sensitive. Isaac played into that with long, slow strokes of his fingers over my most sensitive nub. I whined in the back of my throat and clutched at his shoulders while muscle rippled under my palms, and he toyed with my stiff nipples like he knew exactly how to control me.

Then he started to fuck me, and I melted into a puddle of bliss. His thrusts were short and fast while the teasing squeeze, stroke, and pull of his fingers were careful and calculated. Each stroke of my clit had my thighs quivering and my breath hitching in my chest; each pull and squeeze of my nipples had my body rolling against his own, so I lifted my legs to wrap around his waist, wanting to pull him deeper.

Isaac stopped me, his hand leaving my nipple to catch my left knee and pressed my leg back onto the bed, angled to the side.

“I want you open for me,” Isaac said huskily, his glasses abandoned somewhere safe. “I want to see you.” He held me like that, open and on display as he fucked me hard, and with the kiss broken, he was free to lean up and tower over me as his hips increased their pace. Each thrust deep inside me forced a gasp from my throat, and I clutched at my own breasts for something to hold onto. He was *stunning*, leaning over me at a slant as his hips thrust into me and made me forget each thought that trickled into my mind. The constant attention to my clit while pressing gently on my knee to the side; he was playing me like some kind of musical instrument, and I was hurtling toward another orgasm with no respite.

“Carter fucked you good, huh?” Isaac smirked down at me, and I could only moan in response. “Such a good girl, aren’t

you? You've no idea how good you feel around my cock, how long I've wanted to fuck you. God—" Isaac's voice cracked with pleasure, and for a man usually so refined and in control, it was amazing to see.

I was doing that. I was breaking his perfect stance.

My eyes rolled back once more while Isaac's thumb stroked poetry over my clit, and every muscle and nerve that ached from my previous orgasm spurred to life once more. My breath became soft, short pants. Isaac's touch on my knee seared into my overheated skin, and my world became nothing but the deep, powerful drive of his cock. My lips parted, and a noiseless scream fled my mouth as I came for the second time, just as powerful as the one before. I was suspended for a long moment in nothing but pleasure and heat while Isaac's thumb continued to tease me, milking my desire for all it was worth.

When I finally crashed back to earth, Isaac came inside me in a pulsing hot rush, and his lips found mine in a deep, gentle kiss.

Fucking hell.

I was spoiled to all hell.

And I didn't regret a single thing.

LOUISE

Yesterday seemed like a dream. Lying in bed, I stared up at the ceiling and replayed the events that had left my body *aching* from attention. Even as I retraced the marks left by teeth with my fingertips, it didn't feel real.

Had I really slept with Carter and Isaac? It was like some sexual beast had overtaken me, and I'd been powerless to resist their warmth or their dicks. I had left the hospital so completely satisfied that when I'd come back home, I immediately crashed to sleep with little thought as to what this would mean.

I've now slept with three of my brother's friends. Baby or no baby, how would I ever explain this to Todd if he found out? He would surely disown me, and Natalie would have a *field* day with the catty remarks.

And yet, as much as worry sat at the forefront of my mind, there was a deep sense of satisfaction that settled warmly into my soul. They had thoroughly fucked me yesterday, and even the slightest movement sent a reminder twinge through my hips. If I closed my eyes and focused for only a few minutes, I could still feel Carter's hand in my hair and Isaac's mouth on my neck. It was bliss.

"Fuck, Louise. What are you doing?"

I sighed deeply and propped myself up onto one elbow as I reached for my phone. As mind-blowing as that sex had been, there was one thing I had to do. I had to tell Ren. As soon as his handsome face popped into my mind, a complicated nest of

guilt followed and churned through my gut. We weren't *technically* a couple, but he was working so hard for me that I had to tell him what I had done. As I dialed his number, I quietly rehearsed what to say in my head.

Ren unfortunately didn't answer. I tried again three times before putting a pin in my guilty confession and retiring to the shower to wash away my sins. The pleasant burn of the hot water didn't dampen anything. Instead, the impact of droplets on bruises and marks left behind by Carter and Isaac only served to keep my thoughts firmly focused on how amazing the orgasms they pulled from me had been.

Once clean, I headed through my cold apartment. As I passed the small table holding my keys, laden with overdue bills and other important letters I had been putting off, my heart pulled south slightly at the sight of Whiskey's empty basket. That pain never got easier.

I paused for a moment and ran my fingers over a few of the envelopes marked urgent. I hadn't lied when I told Isaac back in November that I had savings; the only problem was I didn't have *that* much. Two rounds of IVF had swallowed up everything I had, and then some. The treatments and days of rest required had also cut into my work time, meaning I was earning even less. Still, I told myself over and over that it would even out by the end of January. I just had to make it there.

That was looking less and less likely.

My worries about money vanished when my phone blared into life, and I glanced at the screen as I headed into the kitchen. It was Ren.

"Hey!" he exclaimed the moment I answered. "Sorry I missed your calls. Is everything alright? Are you alright?" Concern bled heavily into his tone and my heart clenched painfully. He was one of the sweetest people I had ever met, and here I was about to tell him that I had cheated on him. If it could even be called that, the lines were so fuzzy that I wasn't even sure if this counted.

“I’m okay,” I replied, balancing the phone between my ear and shoulder as I searched the bare fridge for some breakfast. “There’s just something I need to talk to you about.”

“Oh? Is it about...” Ren paused, and his voice lowered to a whisper. “The you know what?”

“No,” I chuckled, picturing him hiding in a corner to whisper the secret down the phone. “I mean it’s related, just not in the way you think.”

“Okay, shoot.”

The limp packet of bacon, half-empty milk, and sad-looking block of cheese that lived in my fridge was painfully unappealing. I closed the door with a sigh. My gut churned hot, and acid prickled at the back of my throat. If Ren reacted badly, where would that leave me with the IVF?

“Louise?” Ren prompted as my silence dragged on.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” I said as I slid onto the kitchen bar stool. Fuck it. Honesty is best. “Yesterday, I came to the hospital looking for you because I was really aroused, I think because of the hormones, and I... I ended up sleeping with Carter and Isaac.”

Silence fell, not a sound to be heard other than the occasional hum of a vehicle outside the building. Ren didn’t say anything, and the silence started to drag on, winding its cool fingers around my throat and making speech impossible. My heart pounded painfully in my chest, rattling my ribs as my stomach twisted itself into knots.

Fuck.

“I’m surprised,” Ren said finally, and his tone was light. “But that’s okay.”

“What?”

“It’s okay. Carter and Isaac, they’re good people and they’re my friends. If you needed to sleep with anyone to get that out of your system, I’m glad it was them.”

I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

“You’re not mad?”

“Mad?” Ren chuckled softly. “Louise, we’re not an official item. Not that I’m against that, but we never laid down any kind of rules like that, and honestly, if we can all help you in that regard, then I’m happy. I think...” He paused, and a rush of noise swelled from the phone before he continued. “If I’m honest, I think if it had been anyone *but* them, then I’d feel different but we’re all close for a reason, y’know? We’re all single and sex is fun. Honestly, I’m more surprised it took you this long to realize how many of us like you.”

“You’re not serious,” I replied, my cheeks warming as we talked. “No way you’re serious.”

“Oh, I am,” Ren chuckled. “All of us. Just... discreetly because we’d all prefer not to be on the receiving end of Todd.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned and slumped forward onto the counter. “He’ll keep me a spinster, I swear.” Slowly, my pounding heart began to calm and I took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before releasing it.

“So, you’re really okay with it?” I asked softly.

“Yes, Louise,” Ren replied. “I’m really okay with it. I’m presuming since Isaac got involved, it won’t affect your IVF; and let’s be honest, the more help, the better, right?”

I laughed softly and straightened up. “You’re probably right. Thank you, I was worried.”

“Why?”

“Well... I care about you, Ren. A lot. And I care about your feelings, so y’know, I had to make sure.”

“You’re too sweet, Louise. Remember, we love you too. Do you want to have dinner later? My treat.”

I was about to respond when a sharp knock at my front door pulled me from the cozy bubble of Ren’s conversation and I glanced down the hallway.

“Yeah, dinner sounds good,” I smiled, sliding from my stool and heading toward the door. “Where do you want to

go?”

“Well, I was thinking, there’s a new Italian place that just opened on the corner of Oak that I’ve been wanting to try—”

Ren’s voice faded to the background when I opened the door and came face-to-face with my landlord flanked by two burly men. They each had their arms crossed over their broad chests, muscles bulging enough to be threatening.

“I’m sorry, Ren,” I said quietly, “I’ll have to call you back.” Hanging up before I could hear his reply, I fixed my landlord with a steady stare. “Can I help you?”

“Pack your things,” my landlord snapped. “You’re out.”

“What?” My heart stilled in my chest and a pulse of heat washed over my back. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Two months,” he barked at me. “You’re two months behind on rent, and I won’t wait for it to be three. I warned you.”

“Wait, wait—” He was right; deep down I knew he was right. November and December I had poured my funds along with my savings into IVF, but this month was going to be different, this month I was going to square away what was owed. “I almost have what I owe, you can’t just kick me out!”

“I can, and I am.” His beady eyes narrowed at me. “Did you not see the sign?”

“What?”

Reaching up, my landlord snatched a small piece of paper off the front of my door. I hadn’t even noticed it when I’d arrived home last night, too caught up in the daze of a good night. He turned it in his hands and thrust it against my chest. Catching it, I stared down at the red eviction notice letters until my eyes blurred.

Behind me, the unread mail and overdue warnings suddenly weighed more than I could ever imagine.

“Please.” I lifted my gaze to him once more. “In a week I’ll get paid from work and you’ll be the first person I pay. I

promise I'm good for it, you know I am! I've lived here for five years and never missed a payment."

"Until now," he muttered bitterly.

"Please—"

"No!" His lips pressed together in a thin line, and there was a cruel, amused glint in his eye. "I gave you a grace period over Christmas, but maybe if you'd answered a letter once in a while, you wouldn't be in this mess. You're out. Right now, and these lovely lads are here to make sure you leave without a fuss."

"You can't!" My voice pitched, and the stillness inside my chest cracked wide open, sending my heart into a frantic flutter. "Please, you can't kick me out. Where will I go? It's freezing; how can you send me out with nowhere to live? Please, if you just give me one more week I—"

"No," he barked at me once more. "Be fucking thankful I didn't call the police."

My heart sank to the darkest depths of my gut, and warmth surged behind my eyes, emotion prickling behind my eyelids as it took all my strength not to cry. What the fuck?

I had become so caught up with Christmas, IVF, and the guys that I had squandered what little time I had. Now... I was homeless.

"Let me make a call," I said hoarsely, but when I tried to close the door, one of the stoic, burly men stepped forward and stopped me with a raise of his arm.

"Door stays open," he said in a voice so deep it rattled right through me.

"Right..." I turned my back on them and walked down the hall, pausing when that voice rattled out once more.

"Stay where we can see you."

"Jesus," I muttered. My hands trembled as I scrolled through my phone, seeking out the only person I could guarantee would help me out of this mess. Only one person that I could call without feeling like a burden.

My brother.

His phone rang eight times before he answered.

“Louise? What’s wrong?”

We were close, but I rarely called him, usually preferring to visit the hospital and speak to him in person. As soon as I heard his voice, the strength I had not to cry completely crumbled and tears flooded my eyes.

“Todd, I need help.”

“What? What is it, what’s happened?” Each note of concern in his voice only made my chest crack harder.

“I fucked up. I got behind on rent payments and my landlord—he’s kicking me out.”

“What? Louise, how could you be so irresponsible?”

“Things just got on top of me! I’m two months behind and he won’t accept anything else.”

“Do you need money?”

I glanced down the hallway to where my landlord stood staring at me and slowly shook my head.

“I tried that, he won’t take it. I need—I need a place to stay.”

“Okay.” Todd sighed softly. “Okay, that’s fine. You can stay with me. I won’t have much room for your stuff, but we can sort something out.”

“Thank you, thank you,” I gasped and the tears finally fell. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s—it’s fine,” Todd replied. “What is family for, right?”

“Thank you.”

“I can come and pick you up in an hour. Is that alright?”

“Yes, yes,” I replied hurriedly. “That’s fine, thank you so much. I love you.”

“I know.”

The call ended, and with the silence came a twisted spiral of dread in my gut. This was my fault. I became too caught up in the excitement that important things had slipped to the wayside, but it wasn't the unpaid bills or loss of the apartment that fueled the dread in my gut.

How the hell was I going to keep hiding my IVF from Todd when we lived under the same roof?

REN

Rare was the occasion that I was able to follow a patient from start to finish, but tonight was one of the exceptions. My patient, Francis, had been full of humor and anecdotes when treating him earlier in the day, only for him to collapse and end up on the surgery table below now in the hands of Isaac and Carter.

Guilt was a powerful tool.

“You don’t have to be here,” came Isaac’s voice through the intercom. I stretched out my legs and shifted my numb ass in the plastic chair, resting uncomfortably in the gallery while watching them operate.

“I do,” I replied.

“We’ve already established that this wasn’t your fault,” Carter replied. “No one would have caught this.”

“Still,” I muttered. “He put his trust in me, and I failed him.”

“Bullshit,” Carter replied as he glanced up from the table. Even from up here, his striking blue eyes cut clearly through his goggles. “We all would have done the exact same thing.”

“Except me,” Isaac chuckled. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a chance to be in a real surgery like this.”

“The joys of staffing cuts,” I chuckled dryly. “No babies in dire need of your attention?”

“Not tonight,” Isaac and Carter replied in unison, and they both chuckled, resuming their work. Years ago, the sight of blood and gore like this, had made me extremely squeamish, and my desire to be a trauma surgeon had balanced on a thread. Now I barely batted an eye.

“Speaking of babies,” I began, seeking a distraction from the misplaced guilt in my gut. “I heard there was an influx of candidates in the bakery.”

Isaac coughed suddenly and burst out laughing. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

“Huh?” Carter glanced up at me, then back at Isaac. For a moment, there was just silence on the intercom as Isaac leaned into Carter to explain to him what I meant out of earshot of the nurses.

“Oh!” Carter rolled his shoulder. “Alright, alright.”

“Is it a problem?” Isaac glanced up at me. “That we visited the bakery?”

It wasn’t for me to judge, as I’d told Louise we’re all single and adults but that didn’t stop my curiosity.

“What if it was?” I asked. “What would you do?”

“Settle it in the parking lot the old-fashioned way,” Isaac replied without missing a beat.

“Fist fights at dawn,” Carter added.

“Is that really what we need to do?” Isaac asked.

“No,” I reassured him. “At least not from my side.”

“Must be one hell of a bakery,” one of the scrub nurses commented, and all three of us burst out laughing. Oh, if only they knew the truth.

I watched the surgery for a few more minutes, and when they started to wrap up, I retreated back to the staff room, safe in the knowledge that my patient would be okay. Isaac’s reassurance that no one would have caught the aneurysm repeated through my mind. By the time Isaac and Carter

appeared in the staff room with a tired Dylan trailing behind them, the guilt was a little less sharp.

“How’s Francis?” I asked, draping myself over the couch.

“He’ll be fine,” Isaac replied, heading for the kettle and starting to make four very strong coffees.

“In and out, the best kind,” Carter agreed, raiding the fridge.

“So,” Dylan declared as he dropped into the chair opposite me. “Y’all weren’t going to tell me that you guys and Louise were having some fun?”

My eyes narrowed slightly. “How did you know?”

“I walked past the operating room gallery earlier, and I know you weren’t talking about a real bakery,” Dylan pointed out. “I know how you all sound when talking about a girl.”

“She’s more than a girl,” Isaac remarked over the bubbling kettle.

“So true,” Carter agreed, piling meat and condiments into his arm for what looked like it would be one hell of a sandwich.

“And?” Dylan’s elbows rested on his knees. “How did this happen?”

I sat up and leaned forward. “Do you swear that you won’t breathe a word to Todd?”

Dylan nodded.

“On the pain of if you do, I’ll tell Nurse Windsor exactly whose dick ended up on the photocopier two Christmas parties ago?”

“Oh, God,” Dylan groaned and hung his head. “Yes, I swear.”

“Louise started IVF a few months ago,” Isaac explained. “She came to me, somewhat by accident because her egg count was low, and we worked out a plan, but the first round failed. With the second, she sought out someone closer to home.”

“I offered and she said yes,” I added. “And we slept together. Not exactly related but we’d been drinking and it just happened.”

“Holy shit,” Dylan breathed, lifting his head back up in time to accept a coffee from Isaac.

“Then a few days ago, thanks to her hormones and things, she was in need of assistance, and Carter and I...” Isaac trailed off and smirked as Carter twirled a knife in his hand, chopping deftly at some cucumbers.

“We showed her how we would take care of her,” Carter grinned. “And it was fucking amazing.”

“No wonder you don’t want Todd finding out,” Dylan laughed softly. “I’m amazed.”

“And so, we were just making sure there were no crossed wires on what exactly this would mean for all of us,” I finished.

“And what does it mean?” Dylan asked, taking a sip while Isaac sat down next to him.

I glanced around the room, taking in Isaac, then Carter, and finally Dylan as he ruffled his red hair.

“I think it’s safe to say that we’ve all felt something for her over the years, and whatever that may be, our friendship with Todd has held us back,” I decided. “That and not wanting to do anything that would end up ruining our relationship with her too. And I think now that she’s expressed interest, I see no harm in us taking care of her in whatever way she needs.”

“I agree,” Carter piped up as he created his sandwich monstrosity. “I don’t mean it in disrespect to Todd, I still love the guy, but I’ve found Louise attractive for years. Never imagined she’d feel anything back, but when she asked if I was offering to sleep with her, I jumped at the chance like some sort of teenager. I think we can take care of her, in all the ways she needs, however she needs.”

“And what she wants is what we do,” Isaac agreed quietly. “I feel jealous, but only if I picture her with someone like Duncan.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned, “he’s the only ex I’m glad Todd scared away.”

“Asshole,” Dylan agreed.

“But when I think of you guys, you’re my best friends and it doesn’t bring the same possessiveness because I know she’s in good hands. I know you’re all good guys,” Isaac continued. “And if she’s happy, then I’m happy. We all love her, adored her for years, and honestly, this feels like the next natural step with her.”

“I’ve never been one for commitment,” Carter said, finally settling down next to me. “But for her? I want to give her the world if I can. Is that weird?”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “She’s special.”

“Fuck,” Dylan groaned. “I feel left out. Not that I’m owed anything, I just...” His face fell as he searched for the right words. “If she wanted me, I’d be there.”

“There’s no harm in asking,” I shrugged. “As long as we’re all in agreement that this will be for her. I love you guys and I don’t want to end up in a situation where someone gets jealous.”

“No, that won’t happen,” Carter said with his mouthful.

“So, we’re agreed,” Isaac said over the rim of his cup. “If she wants us, any of us, excellent. And if she doesn’t, then we respect it.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. Carter and Dylan offered their own agreement, and the rope of tension that had been resting on my shoulders suddenly faded away. I hadn’t realized I was worried about how this discussion would go, but now we were all safe in the knowledge that we adored her, and caring for her as a group—as much as she would let us—was the best way to go.

“What about Todd?” Dylan drained his cup and set it down. “What if he finds out?”

“He won’t,” Isaac stated.

“You sure? She’s living with him now.”

“What?” I surged forward in my seat, frowning. “Since when?”

“Two days ago. She got kicked out of her apartment, missed rent payments or something, but she’s having to stay with him. I found out when she came over to walk Whiskey yesterday.”

Louise couldn’t pay her rent and didn’t tell me? Didn’t tell any of us? My stomach flipped slightly and I glanced across to Isaac, who wore the same concerned look on his face that I felt deep inside.

“I had no idea,” Isaac said quietly.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Carter declared between licks of mayo off his fingers. “It’ll still be a secret until the time when she decides to tell him, if ever. Just gotta make sure we keep to her decisions. Although, if the IVF works, that might be sooner rather than later.”

“I agree,” I chuckled dryly. “Todd... will understand, I think. We’ve been friends for *years*; surely, he’d take that into consideration?”

Isaac shot me a look of quiet disbelief.

“I just mean that... he knows us all inside and out. It’s not like Louise is bringing home a stranger that turns out to be an asshole,” I clarified.

“Whatever we might think,” Isaac said, slumping back in his seat. “That is also Louise’s decision. He’s her family and until she’s ready, we treat this with respect and secrecy until she’s ready. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” came the unified response.

As break ended and each of my friends slowly trickled back to work, one thing remained lingering in my mind.

She was one of the most responsible people I knew; missing bills didn’t seem like her. If she was unable to make her rent payments, I prayed this wouldn’t spell the end of her IVF treatments.

That would crush her.

LOUISE

I knew the rules of hospitality. Being a guest in my brother's home meant that it wasn't my place to comment on what he and Natalie discussed, including their numerous arguments. Still, it was harder to bite my tongue when the argument would spill into the same room I occupied.

No matter how hard I stared at the kettle, the water wouldn't boil any faster, and my plan to make coffee and escape the kitchen before Todd and Natalie arrived ended up in the dust. The door swung open and Todd strolled in, attaching a tie to his neck as Natalie followed hot on his heels.

"All I'm saying is I don't want to stay here forever," Natalie snapped. Some of the fire in her words dulled the moment she spotted me, and despite keeping my gaze down on the counter, I could feel her eyes boring into the side of my neck.

"I've told you a million times," Todd remarked, irritated. "I don't want to move to the city!"

"Do you have any idea the kind of opportunities there would be out there for the both of us? I could get my *own* bar, and you could have amazing career prospects if you weren't tied to Silverwood. Our *future* is out there!"

Dishes clattered behind me as the kettle finally boiled and I quickly poured the water into my cup.

"I like my life here," Todd snapped. "I don't want to go anywhere. I like my job, I'm *good* at my job."

“Don’t you want to be better? Instead of wallowing here like some sort of hippo in the mud?”

I bit back a snicker.

“There’s nothing for you here,” Natalie continued, “I don’t understand why we have to cling to this place!”

My ears burned at her comment, a lump forming slightly in my throat. Nothing for Todd here? His family and friends were here, but that didn’t seem to be enough for Natalie. I was acutely aware that my presence in the house was against Natalie’s wishes, and with that in mind, I kept my mouth shut. Far be it for me to look a gift horse in the mouth.

It was, however, my cue to escape, and I quickly grabbed my cup and poured the coffee down the sink.

“Something wrong with the beans?” Natalie asked tightly as I turned to face them.

“Not at all,” I assured with a tight smile. “I just remembered that Dylan and I are getting coffee so... don’t want to spoil my taste.” Excusing myself, I sent Todd a sympathetic smile as he raised his brow at me, and I slipped from the kitchen. The door barely closed behind me when Natalie started up again.

“And just how long is she planning to stay here? We’re not a charity, Todd. I don’t care that she’s your sister—”

Isaac had emphasized how stress could affect my attempts to get pregnant, but this situation was my own doing. Grabbing my phone and slipping on a coat, I hurried from the house and began to text Dylan to see if he was available. I hadn’t seen Whiskey in over a week, and I was aching for some familiar contact. Halfway through the text, my phone rang.

Shit.

My work.

“Hello?”

“Louise!” My boss’s cheery tones spilled down the line and my stomach immediately tightened as I hurried down the

street.

“Camilla! I’m so sorry, I won’t be in today. I don’t know if you heard but—”

“Yes, yes. Jenny told me that you lost your apartment. Honestly Louise, I’m beginning to forget you even work for us, I haven’t seen you in so long.”

“Well, I had some sick days and holidays, you know how it is over Christmas.”

“I do,” Camilla replied tartly. “But it’s simply too much to keep asking Jenny to pick up your slack. I would have thought losing your apartment would have kicked you back into gear and taking as many clients as you could handle.”

“I will. I want to! I just... I have a lot on my mind.” My job as a hairdresser had never paid well, but it was a *job*, and in this day and age, that was a luxury. Camila ran a salon that allowed staff to work for themselves, getting their own clients, etc. And for me, that had been a dream. Beauty wasn’t my passion, but it paid the bills. The only problem was, the longer I stayed away, the more risk there was of my clients booking with another stylist.

“Louise, let me be frank with you. You’ve already lost six clients. They’ve signed up with other stylists due to your absence, and trust me, the other girls here love the extra cash. But I can’t employ a stylist that doesn’t earn her keep, do you understand me?”

“I do, trust me I do. I’ve just been swamped with health and a lot of stuff. I’ll pick up more clients, I promise.”

“You have a week,” Camilla stated. “One week to show me you mean business, or I’m sorry but I’ll have to let you go.”

Camilla’s words stayed with me all the way to Dylan’s apartment. That salon was my only income, and if this round of IVF failed, then I would be in very hot water. It didn’t fully sink in though; I might not enjoy it but I was good at my job, and Camilla would see that she couldn’t afford to lose me.

Whiskey's barking erupted on the other side of the door seconds after I knocked, and when Dylan opened the door dressed in a light blue t-shirt and jeans, Whiskey came barreling down the hall with her claws clicking on the wooden floor.

"Baby!" I crouched in time for Whiskey to throw herself into my arms, and I was swamped with her excited kisses and licks.

"I'm so sorry," Dylan said softly, stepping aside so I could enter. "If I'd known you wanted to see her, I would have waited to walk her."

"She's been out already?"

"Yeah, sorry."

"That's okay," I smiled over her flopping ears. "I just needed to see her."

"Is everything okay?" Dylan closed the door behind me, and we headed through to the large living room. Two sofas lined the walls with a large television in the corner showing a cooking show.

"Yeah. Todd and Natalie were arguing, like they seem to do every time they're in the same room, and I had to get out of there. That and I got a call from my boss who is on my ass about picking up more shifts." I sighed deeply and dropped into the deep leather seat. Whiskey spilled out of my arms to the floor and flopped over one of my boots.

"Is that... a worry?" Dylan asked carefully as he perched on the armrest next to me. "With everything else going on, the IVF and losing your apartment, are you okay financially?"

I narrowed my eyes and squinted up at Dylan. "How do you know about that?" I knew the answer as soon as it left me and rolled my shoulders. "Of course, you know about that."

"Sorry," Dylan murmured, "things sort of spilled out when I was letting Ren know about your apartment."

Surprisingly, I wasn't annoyed. After my session with Carter and Isaac, it wasn't hard to picture Dylan in the mix.

Although his line of questioning teetered too close to my internal stubborn reassurance that everything was fine. The last thing I needed was for Isaac to pull the plug if he learned how bare my bank account was.

“Everything is fine. I’m fine, my money is fine, I just didn’t want to listen to their arguing. Natalie’s dead set on leaving for the city it seems.”

“Todd mentioned that,” Dylan sighed, sliding off the armrest to settle onto a seat. “Apparently, Natalie is convinced they can move to New York or something like that and become huge. Todd, on the other hand, doesn’t want to let go of a good thing.”

“How do you find the middle ground in that?”

“I have no clue,” he scoffed lightly. “I don’t think there is one.”

“I try not to get involved, I’m lucky Todd even let me stay there. It would be much easier if I had this rascal with me!” Leaning down, I ran my fingers through Whiskey’s fur, and she barked happily, her tail thumping on the floor.

“Oh fuck, can you imagine?” Dylan laughed. “Natalie would flip her shit if a dog lived in her house. The dog hair, the food, the smell!”

We both collapsed into hearty laughter at the thought of Natalie having to care for an animal, and for the rest of the afternoon, things felt easy. My worries about work, my IVF treatments, my apartment, and Todd all vanished as Dylan cycled through his movie collection and we ordered a pizza to share.

As the credits rolled on yet another action thriller, I stretched my arms above my head and yawned. At some point, I had come to rest against Dylan with his arm around my shoulders. The warmth radiating from his torso was incredibly soothing.

“I liked that one,” I declared with a yawn and his arm tightened a fraction around me.

“One of my favorites,” he said softly.

Glancing at my phone, I groaned softly. “Fuck, it got so late. Time flies when you’re having fun, huh?”

“Doesn’t have to stop here,” Dylan replied. There was something deeper about his voice, an edge I hadn’t heard before, so I turned to look up at him. The moment I did, his soft lips pressed lightly to mine in a fleeting kiss that was barely more than a brush of our mouths. It was gentle and enough to send a lazy spark of warmth down to my core.

“Sorry,” Dylan murmured, his cheeks flared the same color as his hair. “I’ve been wanting to do that for a long time.”

I placed one hand on his chest and pushed myself up slightly, studying his eyes as I ran through how this could go in my head. I wasn’t against it, not at all. Dylan was just as hot as the others and his attentiveness had always warmed me.

“Don’t apologize,” I said finally. “I’m not sorry about that.”

“Really?” There was a somewhat puppy dog look to Dylan as he smiled at me, and my heart fluttered. He was softer than the others, more shy in some regards, and just the thought of him busy between my legs created an ache between my thighs that throbbed in time to my heartbeat. Curious how far he would go, I slowly licked my lips.

“Nope. Although, if you call that a kiss, I might have some doubts.”

“Can I try again?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

Dylan’s cheeks flushed darker and I smirked faintly. “Asking is hot,” I clarified, “but you’ve already kissed me once. Show me you mean it.”

Dylan licked his lips once more and half a second later, he leaned in. His warm hand caressed my cheek, sliding slightly into my hairline as his soft lips pressed against mine. The pressure was firmer this time, and heat warmed across my cheeks when he tilted his head and his teeth lightly grazed my lower lip. Opening my mouth slowly, Dylan lapped inside my mouth with strong strokes of his tongue as he pressed firmly

into the kiss. My heart started to pound in my chest and the throb between my thighs increased.

When our kiss finally broke, Dylan's cheeks were flushed, and my lips tingled with the ghost of his presence. It was one hell of a kiss, and my eyes fluttered closed for a moment.

Fucking hell.

"Well?" Dylan asked, slightly breathless. I opened my eyes, meeting his eager puppy look with a warm smile.

"That was good." I grinned. "Definitely unexpected. You're a fantastic kisser."

"Thanks."

Dylan seemed to perk up at the praise so I shifted back against the plush cushions. I had enjoyed the other's taking control but here, with Dylan, he was different. Curiosity burned with fire in my veins, and I tilted my head slightly.

"What if I asked you to put that mouth to good use elsewhere?"

Dylan's gaze flicked down to my lap, then back up. "I'd be honored."

"Honored?" Raising one brow, I grasped my skirt and slowly began to tug it up over my knees. "Show me how honored."

I landed on my back and Dylan pressed another kiss to my lips; then he vanished under my skirt and his warm, teasing breath ghosted over my thighs.

Holy shit.

Gentle fingers caressed my thighs, parting them so that one leg ended up on the back of the couch and the other rested on the floor. My panties were pulled down and then Dylan's fingers slid through my slick folds with the same attention he had given in the kiss. Already slick from the kiss—and the prospect of Dylan's mouth—I flushed when I heard his soft gasp.

“You’re *soaked*,” Dylan breathed, and his breath swept over the silky skin of my inner thigh.

“Just from your kiss,” I moaned softly. “Bet that’s great for the ego.”

“You have no idea,” Dylan groaned. His fingers continued to stroke through me, and on the third pass over my clit, he gently pressed a digit inside me. I arched up with a moan, biting my lower lip as he sank into my depths.

“I said your mouth,” I reminded him. “Don’t disappoint me.” I’d never seen myself as much of a dominating presence in bed, but something about Dylan made it easy. Variety is the spice of life, so they say.

Suddenly Dylan’s mouth pressed against my pussy, and his talented tongue stroked through my slick folds with enough pressure that my legs trembled. I grasped at the nearest pillow with one hand. I clutched at one of my breasts with the other, massaging my nipple through the fabric of my t-shirt as Dylan licked over me.

He paid attention to each lip, stroked and suckled over my clit, drawing so many deep sounds out of me that I had never heard before. My hips moved on their own, chasing his lips and tongue each time he shifted for a breath, and I was completely lost to his attention. His fingers inside me curled, and without warning, pleasure exploded through me like an electric charge, sending my heart racing and my pussy gripping down on his fingers.

“Holy shit,” I gasped, and no longer was I in control. I was floating at the mercy of his tongue and fingers as he massaged my G-spot, suckled on my clit, and ate me up like the sweetest treat. Nothing could stop my impending orgasm as it swelled faster than I could even acknowledge.

It hit like a freight train, turning all my muscles into jelly as I quivered in time to the rippling muscles pulling through my core. I cried out so loudly I was sure his neighbors would complain. Dylan continued sucking against me for a few more minutes, then he appeared back out from my skirt with the happiest grin on his face.

“Good?” he asked, his voice slightly strained.

I glanced down at him through my lashes and over the rise of my chest as I panted, limbs still twitching.

“I didn’t tell you to stop, did I?” I managed to say. Dylan laughed softly and disappeared back under my skirt.

Holy shit, I was in heaven and never wanted to leave.

LOUISE

I'd heard it all before, but that didn't stop each of Isaac's quiet words sending needles of disappointment and upset straight into my heart.

"I'm sorry, Louise. It didn't take. I'm so sorry."

His voice faded into nothing as I sat there, the hard plastic chair turning my ass numb and my heart beating painfully slowly in my ears. It didn't take. I wasn't pregnant.

Again.

I had been drifting in faux certainty these past few weeks; brushing off work, money troubles, and my lack of an apartment with the ridiculously arrogant presumption that it wouldn't matter because this time I would be pregnant, and it would all be worth it.

Reality was a harsh mistress.

"Louise?" Isaac's face appeared in front of me as I blinked slowly and tilted my head up at him.

"Shame all that sex didn't help," I joked in a voice that didn't quite sound like my own. Isaac frowned and his glasses slid a fraction down his nose.

"Louise, I think you should take a break. These disappointments and the toll on your body, I'm not sure that proceeding immediately is the best course of action."

"Fine."

His brow lifted sharply. “Really? Honestly, I expected some pushback.” A short, nervous laugh escaped him, but it was muted like we were in different rooms.

“If you think it’s best.” A cavernous ache opened in my chest, a hollowness that throbbed constantly, and I swallowed around the restriction it created around my throat. “A break sounds good.”

“I also think it would be a good idea for you to talk to someone, a therapist that can help you process whatever you’re feeling.”

“I’m fine.”

“Louise, you’re not fi—”

“Isaac,” I interrupted. “I’m fine.” Snatching up my bag, I stood abruptly, and Isaac rocked back a step. “I have to go, I’m late for work.”

“Okay, well if you need anything,” Isaac said slowly, but I couldn’t even look at him. I knew if I did, I would crumble.

“I know. I know where you are.” Turning, I swiftly left the room before Isaac could say anything that would persuade me to stay or press against the thin walls I had forced up to keep myself together.

Another failure. I really was not destined to be a mother. No matter how badly I wanted to be, no matter how strongly I craved it, or how many years I had ached for a child; it wasn’t in my future.

It hurt more than I ever imagined, and I wandered through the hospital in a daze. People said my name so I forced pleasant smiles onto my face, but everyone passed like faceless mannequins, figments that couldn’t breach the grief flooding the emptiness inside me.

At reception, I collected Whiskey and thanked the receptionist for watching her, then I wandered out of the hospital and into the crisp early February air. Shards of cold invaded my lungs with every breath, and the wind pinched at my cheeks while we walked through the parking lot, and my mind remained fixed on the one thing I could not have. My

bank account was filled with mothballs, I didn't have a home to call my own, and I didn't have a baby.

Crawling back to Todd's to rot was my only option.

It took several seconds for me to register the buzzing in my pocket. Peeling a glove off with my teeth, I hunted out my phone and answered it without checking the number. The second I heard Camilla's voice, my stomach dropped.

"Louise! Where are you?"

Fuck.

"I'm sorry," I said softly, "I got caught up at the hospital."

"Is everything okay?" There seemed to be real concern in her voice for a moment, but telling her the truth was not an option.

"Yes, everything is fine. I was just... just checking on my brother."

"Louise, this was your last chance. I gave you a week and I've seen you once. If you were ill or *dying*, then maybe I would have been more lenient, but I'm losing money here. This can't go on."

"What are you saying?" I asked distantly, despite the implication being clear in her tone.

"You're a great stylist, Louise," Camilla began. Was she actually trying to soften the blow? As if she hadn't spent years riding my ass about my lack of *passion* for hair styling. "And I'm sure you'll go on to great things, but it won't be here."

"I don't understand." I did. I came to a stop on the side of the road. Whiskey was wrapped up in a tartan coat for warmth and settled by my ankle.

"I'm letting you go, Louise. Your clients have moved on in your absence, and... so am I."

I didn't even hear the rest. Her voice dissolved into fuzziness, and a buzzing swept through my mind, blocking out her voice, the sounds of traffic, and even Whiskey's insistent whines that it was too cold to stop in the middle of the street.

Fired.

Homeless.

Baby-less.

What the fuck has my life become?

Then the tears came. Thick and fat, they flooded my eyes faster than I could stop them and blurred the frosty world around me. At some point, I hung up on Camilla and whatever else she was saying while the tears spilled over. Hot droplets became icicles by the time they reached my chin, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. As I stood there, crying in the street, a painful sob swept up from the cavern in my chest and escaped my lips in a strangled gasp. Whiskey's warm weight shifted against my leg, and my heart pounded painfully in my chest.

What the fuck was I going to do? How had I become so tunnel-visioned that my life had become such a mess?

Gasping for air, I continued to sob openly until Whiskey's claws sank into my calf. Gasping in shock, the pain spread right through my leg and I stumbled slightly.

"Whiskey!" I gasped. "What the hell?!"

She looked up at me with big sad brown eyes and my heart clenched painfully. Moving alerted me to how cold I had become in the few minutes of standing there, so I quickly wiped at my frozen cheeks to try to stop the tear flow and slowly started to walk again.

As we moved, I dialed Jenny's number.

"Babe!" she exclaimed the second she answered. "I just got a call from Camilla, I'm so sorry!"

"Oh, Jenny," I sobbed while her comforting voice washed over me. "I've fucked up. I don't even know how it's happened, but I've fucked up, and everything—everything is a mess."

"Oh love." Her voice dripped with sympathy, and I ached to crawl through the phone and into her arms. "Listen, I know it sucks but you didn't like working here anyway, right?"

Maybe this is a blessing in disguise, y’know? To urge you onto better and brighter things!”

“It’s not just that,” I wept. “How can I get a new apartment if I don’t have a job?”

“Okay, that does present some hurdles, but you have a roof over your head and that’s all you need,” Jenny assured me firmly. “People around here *love* you; getting another job is going to be easy, you’ll see!”

“Assuming Natalie doesn’t kick me out.”

“Todd would never allow that,” Jenny snorted. “That dude is too protective over you to allow that to happen. Scarily so sometimes.”

She was doing her best to find a light in my darkness, to guide me through with her warm advice, but none of it even breached my pain because no matter what she said, my future was still barren.

“IVF didn’t work,” I sobbed. “Again.”

“Oh. Fuck.” Jenny fell silent for a moment and when she spoke again, her voice was deeper and much more reserved. “Louise, I’m so sorry. I know how much you wanted this.”

“How have I failed at everything? Having a home and a job and a baby is like... it’s like the fucking basics of a human life, and I’ve screwed up all three. How? How have I done this?”

“Hey now, you haven’t screwed up. People lose homes and jobs all the time, and if anything, that’s part of the natural cycle of life. It can be *fixed*.”

“But I can’t be,” I wept bitterly, wiping at my eyes. The wind was picking up and Whiskey started to complain more frequently about the cold.

“You’re not broken,” Jenny snapped lovingly. “You just need an extra helping hand and that’s okay. Plus, look at the people around you; Ren and Isaac and Carter and Dylan. Four gorgeous men who drop their pants for you the moment you need them. Sure, everything else might be shit, but you can’t

discount the good. And that's just proof of how easy you are to love, which means your next job is going to be *fire*, and then everything else will slot into place. And for your baby..."

Jenny paused and I stopped on the sidewalk, waiting for whatever amazing advice she could concoct. It wouldn't be enough though, because this pain was going nowhere.

"Don't give up," Jenny declared. "This has been the most important thing driving you for *years*, so don't give up. I know the disappointment must be crushing, but if you can afford it and Ren is still willing, then don't you dare give up, you hear me?"

She spoke with such strength that my tears slowly started to fade. Affording it barely mattered, not when it came to my desire to have a child, but if I took the time to secure a new job and started saving again, IVF could be back on the table.

"What if it fails again?" I asked hoarsely.

"Let's be honest Louise, you're pretty much at rock bottom. The only way is up. Next time for sure."

"Fuck you," I chuckled wetly, the rush of amusement catching me by surprise.

"In your dreams. But I heard you laugh, ergo I'm talking sense. Why don't you come over? We can have a drink, you can have a full *my-life-is-over* cry, and then tomorrow, we'll start fresh and get you back on track."

"I—" My first thought was to reject her but when faced with the alternative of going home to Todd and Natalie and trying to grieve in peace, there was only one clear answer. "Okay. I'll be over soon."

"I'll get some wine. See you soon, babe."

"Okay."

"And remember, it's never as bad as it feels."

Wise words, but deep down I knew she was wrong, at least in this regard. The hollowness in my chest was unlike anything I had ever felt before, and the crushing despair weighed down

my shoulders like a vice. Drinking a few bottles of wine and crying did sound like the perfect cure.

“I’m sorry baby,” I sniffled and crouched to scoop Whiskey into my arms. She thrust her cold nose against my cheek and began licking up the salty tears. “Let’s go see Auntie Jenny.”

Changing direction, I headed for the bus stop and arrived just in time. Climbing aboard, the driver didn’t give my tear-stained face a second look, and I settled into a seat by the window with Whiskey in my lap. The nauseating pattern on the seats kept drawing my eyes, so I forced my gaze out the fogged window and tried to ignore the warm musk that tickled my nose on every breath. I should have taken an Uber but the bus was cheaper, and I needed the cheap options at the moment.

Whiskey curled up in my lap, and I used one gloved finger to draw patterns into the fogged-up windows. Jenny’s plan was ideal, but rather than tackling a job first, I would need to work out how to tell Todd. It was hard enough to lie to him about where my savings had gone and why I couldn’t afford a new apartment right away—he lived in a different tax bracket thanks to his work, and each discussion just proved to me that he couldn’t fathom living on less.

Telling him I’d lost my job? That was going to be harder, especially since Natalie frequented that salon. I’d need to be as honest as I could.

“Fuck,” I groaned softly and ruffled Whiskey’s ears. “What are we going to do, huh?”

Then it occurred to me that Dylan needed to know where Whiskey would be tonight, so I dug out my phone again and pulled up the texts.

My fingers never hit the keyboard, though.

In a sudden, violent lurch, I was launched out of my seat and into the air as the bus crashed into something in front of us. The impact sent the scream of metal through the air, mingling with the terrified screams of passengers as we were

flung up like rag dolls. For a split second, I was simply floating, desperately trying to keep a hold of Whiskey.

Another sickening crunch of metal and a screech of brakes, and I crashed onto my shoulder, landing on a cracked window as the bus rolled and I was flung up again. Too terrified to scream, my last thought was of Whiskey as something crashed into my forehead, and my world abruptly went black.

REN

Times like this, surgeons were really put to the test, but it was the kind of situation I thrived in. The adrenaline of knowing multiple people were injured and in need of help, the rush of darting from patient to patient, and diagnosing as quickly as possible to ensure everyone received swift treatment within a time limit that was almost too small to comprehend. That dance between life and death had drawn me to trauma, and I hadn't ever had a boring day.

Today was no different. A bus driver had passed out at the wheel and sent his bus crashing into several cars parked at a red light, resulting in more injuries than I could even count. People on the bus, people in the car, and pedestrians on the sidewalk had all fallen victim to the carnage, and it was down to me as the lead trauma surgeon to ensure everyone was taken care of.

I darted about the emergency room like a man possessed, performing life-saving CPR, staunching blood flow, and sending people off to surgery with just a glance at their chart. Injured people, crying and screaming from shock and fear for loved ones, swarmed around me and it became like a complicated dance to ensure everyone was seen to while avoiding relatives who milled about anxiously, eager for news of their loved ones.

The hours flew by and I scarcely had a moment to stop and think, and through it all, my heart pounded fiercely to keep the adrenaline flowing. I lost count of how often I had to change gowns and gloves, lost count of how many emergency sutures

I had to perform, or how many times I asked the same questions.

Can you feel this? What about this? Can you see this? Someone call down for more blood! Get out of my way! Page cardio!

Halfway through the shift, I was informed that the driver had suffered a heart attack, which was the cause of his loss of consciousness. I had a pang of sympathy for the man when he woke up and had to face what happened; it would be a terrible pill to swallow. Darting from one ward to the next, my first moment of respite came when I crashed into Dylan in the corridor, and he grabbed my shoulders to keep me steady.

“Ren! Easy, I swear you act like a kid in a candy store when a big trauma like this comes in,” he chuckled, patting my shoulder.

“What can I say? I excel under pressure,” I grinned.

“Fair. Did you see the board? We’ve got a surgery in twenty minutes.”

“What?” I spun around, trying to locate the board, only to realize we were in the wrong corridor. “I’m swamped. Can’t someone else take it?”

“*Everyone* is swamped; we’re the only two available. Bad bone break and internal hemorrhaging, from what I read. We gotta work side by side for time since the operating rooms are flooded with people.”

“Alright.” I raked a hand through my hair and nodded. “Twenty minutes. I’ll be there.”

“Excellent.”

Dylan vanished down the corridor, and I raced back to the emergency room to ensure no one had fallen into an emergent state in my absence. Luckily it seemed in the past few hours, we’d made it through all the victims of the crash, and the only patients that remained in the beds were people who had suffered non-life threatening injuries.

With a happy heart and a relieved breath, I signed out of the ward and raced off to the surgery wing, where I met Dylan in prep, up to his elbows in soap.

“Hey. Shit, when was the last time we operated together?” I asked, grabbing the soap and using my elbow to turn on the tap.

“Months, I think?” Dylan replied with a smile. “That crushing case, the dude who fell into the metal crusher at the scrapyard?”

“Oh yeah! Goopy insides and nearly every bone broken, Fuck, what a mess that was. I wonder how he’s doing now?”

“Last I heard he was excelling in physical therapy.” Dylan rinsed the soap off his hands and arms. “Do you know what happened with this?”

“Driver had a heart attack at the wheel, crashed into cars stopped at a red light, and hit some people on the sidewalk,” I explained. “Poor guy. When he wakes up and learns all this?”

“Damn,” Dylan breathed. A nurse entered and began helping Dylan with his gown and gloves. “I can’t imagine carrying the weight of that.”

“Same.” Finishing up, it was my turn to be gowned, and I glanced through the glass to the unknown patient on the operating table. “What do we know here?”

“Female, twenty-eight,” the nurse recited. “Traveling alone, so she’s still to be identified. Came in with a dog, I think. Her arm snapped in two places, but we were unable to set it because she kept coding. Blunt force trauma to the abdomen resulted in heavy internal bleeding, so we rushed her straight here.”

“Thanks, Mary.” Following Dylan through into the theater, I flexed my fingers in gloves so tight they were like a second skin. No matter how long I had worked here, I still couldn’t get used to the sterile smell when it came to operating. When mixed with the iron scent of blood, it was an unusual combination that I could never wrap my head around.

“Time to get busy,” Dylan grinned, only he came to a sudden stop in front of me, and I threw my hands up to stop my gloves coming in contact with his gown.

“The hell, dude?” I snapped. “Nearly touched you.”

Dylan didn’t move. I sighed and stepped around him, my focus on how pale his skin looked under the bright surgical lights. His eyes were wide, fixed on the patient.

“Getting cold feet?” I remarked with a snort, then I glanced at the table and the same chill stole over me, freezing my joints and locking me in place.

Purple curls spread out on the pillow around the patient’s head, some smeared with dark red blood.

Purple curls I would know *anywhere*.

“Louise?!”

The next few hours passed in a haze. Never in my life had I been more careful, nor had I been more terrified of a slip-up. I knew the rules, we shouldn’t have been operating on Louise with how close we were, but after a disaster like this, where surgeons were stretched thin, there was just no choice. Every move I made was meticulous, and we worked mostly in silence. I suspected Dylan was having the same thoughts as me.

Just a few hours ago, life had been normal. Now, some freak accident landed Louise on my table, and my sympathy for the driver went up in smoke. Louise was... *everything*. I hadn’t fully acknowledged that during our time together since Christmas, but she was everything. My everything. What we had, what we shared with the others, was something I had never contemplated the end of, and now it was glaring me down like a rabid wolf, ready to ensnare me the second I made a mistake.

It was the longest surgery of my *life*, and it was, thankfully, a success.

Only when Louise was wheeled away by the nurses did I let my feelings fully come forth, and by the time I pulled my gloves off, my hands were shaking violently.

“Um Mary, sorry—” I caught her attention as she passed. “Can you make sure someone tells Todd, Todd Romain, that his sister is here. He needs to know.”

“Oh! Of course!” Mary nodded so vigorously that her carefully pinned hair nearly fell loose, then she scurried away, leaving Dylan and I to wash up once more.

“Shit,” Dylan muttered under his breath. “What the fuck.”

“You alright?” I sent him a sidelong glance as I placed my trembling hands under the hot water.

“Seeing her... like that,” Dylan murmured. “Fucking hell. I thought—I thought she Ubered everywhere. I’ve never...” His half-sentences came to a stop, and he thrust his hands under the water. “I never thought I’d see her like that.”

“Me neither,” I replied quietly, trying to shake the image of her bleeding profusely under my hands out of my mind. “It...” Words failed me as I grabbed the scrubbing brush, scrubbing against my skin firmer than normal.

“You know...” Dylan lifted his head and looked at me with shining eyes. “You know when they say that disaster helps put things in perspective?”

“Yes.”

“I... I don’t think I knew just how right that was.” Holding his hands under the water, his skin began to turn red as he spoke. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Like what?” I asked as if I wasn’t feeling the exact same way.

“Like my heart is about to explode out of my chest, or like... like I’ll end up choking on my own breath because she was... she was...”

She was lying on an operating table, bleeding so much that death was a scary likelihood, I finished for him in my head.

“I know,” I said instead, turning off my tap and flicking Dylan’s off as well before he scalded his hands. “I know. It’s because you care about her. More than... more than I think any of us were even prepared to acknowledge.” It was my

honest truth. What I felt for Louise, how my feelings had grown since Christmas, I hadn't given it a name because as soon as I did, I would be opening myself up to the possibility that she wouldn't want me forever.

But... I loved her.

And I could see that truth as clear as day in Dylan's shining eyes.

"We did good work," I said firmly, claspng his shoulder. "Both of us. She's alive and she'll recover because we're fucking good at our jobs. We'll just be a little scared until then."

"Fuck." Dylan sniffed deeply and blinked his tears away. "Fuck."

"I know."

Informing Isaac and Carter of Louise's condition revealed that Dylan and I weren't the only ones wrestling with feelings deeper than we were prepared for. I'd never seen Isaac move so fast when we told him where Louise was resting, and I followed after him with my mind twisted. Today had started on such a high, but now guilt had replaced my excitement at having so much work to do, now that Louise was part of the injured.

Dylan collected Whiskey at the end of his shift and gave her a once over, she seemed fine, but he settled her in the staff room with a promise to take her to a veterinarian after checking on Louise; then we all convened in Louise's room some hours later to gain some reassurance that she was okay.

Reassurance that came with a limit since Todd was seated by his sister's side, his face pinched with worry.

"You shouldn't have operated," he said tightly the moment I stepped inside. "There are rules."

"Those rules don't matter when there's a disaster like this," Isaac countered. "There was no one else free. It was them or..."

The *or* hung in the air like a smothering secret, the possibility of what would have happened if Louise had been made to wait for different surgeons. Todd didn't move and his expression didn't change.

"Sure," he said finally.

Isaac sent me a loaded glance full of the other secret we shared. A secret that was supposed to be no-strings-attached fun to help Louise with what she desired the most. Now we were all wrestling with stronger feelings and unable to express them because Todd would surely make things almost unbearable for all of us if he found out.

Strangely, that didn't scare me as much as it used to. With Louise unconscious and pale, all I wanted to do was take her hand and whisper love into her ear without a care about what Todd would think. Carter suddenly placed his hand on my arm, indicating that my thoughts were likely written all over my face.

"I'm surprised you all came," Todd remarked, finally lifting his head from Louise. "You're all more attached than I am."

"She's family," Dylan said smoothly, audibly swallowing. "Plus, we had to operate."

"Dylan's right, she's family, and so are you," Isaac replied. "This is the only place any of us should be."

"Agreed," Carter added.

Todd glanced between us all, then nodded and turned his attention back to Louise. Then he half rose out of his chair.

"Louise? Louise!"

On the bed, Louise's eyelashes fluttered and her lips slowly pressed together. Then, after a beat of anxious silence, she finally opened her eyes.

"Louise!" Todd gave a watery smile and clutched at her hand. Louise blinked sluggishly and slowly licked her lips, then her dark brows pulled south slightly.

“Where—” she croaked softly, and we all collectively leaned forward as if being closer would save her voice in some way.

“Where’s Ren?” she croaked, and a sudden explosion of heat washed over me from head to toe, freezing me in place as Todd looked up at me.

“Where—I want Ren... I want... please.”

LOUISE

The world was fuzzy. Light from the window on my right bled through the air like a flashlight hidden under a pile of cotton. My tongue sat heavy in my mouth, and dryness swept like the scrape of sandpaper down my throat as I spoke.

“Ren—”

My first thought upon opening my eyes was of him. His warm, chocolate eyes, his bright smile, and the softness that sat on the edge of his words each time he spoke to me after our time together. He was my first thought, the thing that I yearned for as consciousness and sense trickled back into my drugged-up body.

I blinked slowly, and the light still streaked across the room, dancing around shadows that seemed to move in waves. I opened my mouth again to try and call out to him, but the words didn't come. Instead, I coughed, and once I started, I couldn't stop. A hand brushed against my face and stroked around to my hair, where suddenly I became aware of a dull throb at the back of my skull. My head was supported and something cool and solid slid past my lips.

“Drink,” instructed a familiar voice and, unable to question anything, I obeyed. Cool water washed through my mouth and soothed my throat like an oasis sprouting in the desert, and I groaned in relief. As I drank, the cool water served to ground me as the world around me grew sharper with each swallow. The shadows melted into men I knew and loved; Ren, Carter,

Isaac, and Dylan. The voice next to me was Todd, and I blinked blearily up at him when he removed the straw.

“Louise?” he asked softly, his brow furrowing. “Ren is here. Why... why do you need him?”

“I...” I started to say because, to me, it was the most obvious thing in the world. I wanted Ren because I was in pain, and I loved him.

“She’s high,” Carter laughed suddenly, cutting me off. “You know what patients are like when they just wake up.”

“They’ll ask for anything,” Isaac agreed. “He’s probably the first person she saw.”

“But—” Todd started to say, then he shook his head and seemed to think better of it. “Louise, do you know where you are?”

I stared up at him and pressed my lips together, trying to sort through the sluggish thoughts in my head. Glancing from him to the others, then the glaring white walls and sickening off-white ceiling, I nodded.

“Hospital?”

“Yes,” Todd confirmed. “Louise, you were in an accident.”

“What?” No, no, that couldn’t be right. There was no way!

I surged forward suddenly but was unable to get far thanks to Todd’s quick placement of his hands on my shoulders. “No, I was... I was...”

What was I doing? How did I get here? The last thing I remembered was... was...

It was fog. Gray fog swirled around my mind with noiseless snippets of things I couldn’t place.

“The bus you were on, it crashed,” Todd explained gently. “Right into a pile of cars and some people. You went flying, and you had some intense injuries when they brought you here.”

“Your arm is broken,” Dylan spoke up gently.

“And you had some heavy internal bleeding,” Ren added.

“But the guys, they patched you up,” Todd finished, and I turned my gaze back to his worried eyes. “You’re going to be okay. You’re safe and on the mend, and there’s nothing to worry about.”

As they spoke, pieces of the accident began to clear in my mind. The bus lurching, the sensation of floating when my seat disappeared from me. The yelp from Whiskey as I landed—

“Whiskey!” I gasped, glancing at anyone who would look my way. “Is she okay? Did she get hurt?”

“No, she’s fine,” Dylan assured me. “She escaped with barely a scratch. Impressive really, I’m taking her to the veterinarian later just in case, but she looks all good.”

“Oh,” I murmured, slowly settling back into my pillows. “That’s okay then.”

A bus crash. I didn’t have that on my card of fucked up things to happen to me, but here we were.

“Someone—someone will need to call Jenny, I was supposed to meet her...”

“Is that why you were on the bus?” Todd asked, taking my hand in his. “Why you weren’t at work?”

“Work?” I had blissfully forgotten about the phone call firing me, but that couldn’t stay hidden for long. As much as I willed it to return to the dark recess of my mind, it lingered painfully. “I was...” My brain ached, my skull throbbed, and when I lifted my hand to brush my hair away from my eyes, I finally registered Dylan’s words about a broken arm. The glaring white cast stared back at me, and my stomach twisted.

“Louise?” Todd prompted, giving my hand a light squeeze. “You weren’t at work.”

“No,” I replied slowly, seeking anything that could keep the reason hidden for a while longer. “I uh... client canceled, so I finished early.”

“And you were going to see Jenny?” Isaac asked.

I met his stunning blue eyes easily and nodded. “Yeah.”

“That client could have cost you your life,” Todd muttered suddenly, and my gaze snapped back to him.

“They couldn’t have known,” Carter scoffed lightly, moving behind my brother. “There’s no one to blame here. It’s just a terrible accident.”

“One that could have killed my sister,” Todd snapped, his grip tightening on my free hand.

“Yes, but it didn’t,” Carter reassured him firmly. “A few bumps and bruises and an internal smoothie but she’s fine. Look at her Todd; she’s fine.”

Todd nodded just once and glanced at me. When our eyes met, I offered him my strongest smile, which lasted for a few seconds before he stood and sighed.

“I have to get back to work.” As his hand slipped from my fingers, he flashed me a brief smile. “Love you, sis.”

“Love you too,” I croaked.

“Take care of her?” Todd asked, and then he swept out of the room.

“I’ll keep an eye on him,” Carter said, following him quickly.

“Todd looked ready to hunt down the driver and strangle him,” Dylan scoffed. “Poor guy.”

“He probably feels overprotective,” Isaac said, moving to balance on the side of my bed. “Probably scared him.”

“No chance we’ll tell him about us and Louise then, huh?” Ren snorted.

“Y’all talkin’ about me like I’m not even here,” I muttered, blinking slowly to try and further clear my vision.

“You’re so high, you’re not really here,” Ren chuckled, and he took Todd’s vacated seat. “Gave us quite the scare.”

“Double the scare,” Dylan added. “But you got the very best care this hospital can provide.”

“Thank you.” Lifting my arm, I eyed the cast again, and tears prickled like pins behind my eyelids. “Fuck.”

“No hairstyling for you,” Isaac said with a chuckle.

“Because she loves that *so* much,” Dylan replied. He had often been my ear for work complaints while walking Whiskey.

“I barely have a job,” I whined softly, lowering my arm. “I lied. Todd is going to be so mad!”

“Louise? What do you mean?” Ren’s hand slipped into mine with warmth that immediately seeped through the haze keeping my panic at bay. Unfortunately, not my tears, and they welled thick and fast. I couldn’t tell them the truth, not the whole truth.

“I’m losing clients. For not being there and not doing good enough, and I—I’ve lost everything,” I sobbed recklessly. “My home and my—my bed and my job is wobbly, and now I have to live with Todd and I—”

I hiccuped and wailed, then pulled my hand from Ren’s to place it on my stomach.

“At least I might have a baby.”

Silence fell, broken only by my muffled sobs, and then Isaac slid forward and took my hand.

“Louise, do you not remember?”

“Of course, she doesn’t,” Ren hissed. “She’s just been in a terrible accident and doped up on drugs.”

“Remember what?” I gasped, glancing between all three of them. Try as I might, the cracked pieces of the work call and the crash were the only shards bringing clarity to my mind. “Is... is my baby okay? Did something happen?”

“Louise, honey,” Isaac started to say softly as his face turned grim, his lips pressed together. “Remember, you were never pregnant. The IVF... it didn’t take this time.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when I remembered our conversation. All that pain and hopelessness

came rushing back like someone had just dumped a sack of bricks onto my chest, and I could scarcely breathe. Isaac clasped my hand, and Ren tried to comfort me by placing his hand on the blanket, just above my knee, but none of it really reached me.

“Of course,” was all I could think to say, and I was reminded of the cavernous hole inside of me and the tears dripped silently.

Of course, I had no child.

I’d forgotten. And those few moments had been bliss.

But now, I was scraping by with scarcely my life.

And it just wasn’t enough.

LOUISE

Two weeks after the accident, I was out of the hospital and trying to navigate life with only one arm and healing stitches across my abdomen. I was well aware of how the rules had been bent when Ren and Dylan operated on me, but if I'd had a choice, they would have been my first picks. The entire accident replayed in my mind daily, like a fever dream I simply couldn't shake, and the drive home from the hospital had been the most nerve-wracking of my life. To his credit, Todd drove slowly. We didn't exactly talk about the accident, but it was like he knew how scared I was to be in a vehicle once more.

There was some guilt too, on my part. Guilt that I was sleeping with his friends. Guilt that hearing about me had likely dragged up all sorts of memories about the death of our parents. Again, we didn't talk about it, but Todd took a couple of days off work to try and help me get settled, and even Natalie was pleasant to me.

That lasted exactly two days until I told Todd I was losing clients, and then it was back to being business as usual—complete with disappointed looks from my brother. Telling him the whole truth wasn't an option.

“What happened to you, Louise? You used to be so responsible! Your life is in shambles, I feel like I don't even know you anymore.”

Telling him about my IVF treatments still hadn't seemed like the right time, so I let him get his frustration out while I

focused on recovery. The accident had heightened my need to be around Whiskey, so while everyone else was out saving lives and working, I went to Dylan's place and threw my heart and soul into baking for Valentine's Day.

With one arm.

"Any chance you'll wake up and suddenly know how to cook?" I called softly to Whiskey, who had curled up in her basket the moment I started baking, and promptly fell asleep. She answered me with a snore, and I chuckled.

"Never mind." Turning back to the task at hand, I chewed on my lower lip and studied the baking tray in front of me laden with heart-shaped cookies. Getting them from the tray and onto the board for decoration was difficult with one hand, especially since they were still incredibly hot, and some had stuck to the parchment paper. In the oven behind me, several pink cupcakes rose to life, and on the counter to my left sat a carefully constructed sponge cake ready to be shakily decorated by my non-dominant hand.

My back ached from the imbalance of movement, but I was having fun. More fun than I'd had in a long time. It had been too long since I'd thrown myself into a proper baking fest, and it was the best therapy I could ask for.

Picking up the tray with my oven mitt, I placed it over the board and took a breath as an idea popped into my mind. This was going to either go very well *or* very badly. In one choppy motion, I flipped the tray over and landed it on top of the board. The clatter of metal onto wood woke Whiskey from her nap, and she barked softly, but my risk had been a success.

Either gravity or the cooling process would gradually deposit those cookies onto the board, and then all I would need to do is turn them over and decorate. Voila.

Whiskey barked once more and stretched her front legs out, her head tilted in concern.

"It's okay, baby," I soothed softly. "Go back to sleep."

She took my words literally, and within thirty seconds, she was fast asleep, curled up once more. I abandoned the oven

mitt and crouched at the oven, checking on the state of my cupcakes. Thank God for electric mixers; that's all I'm saying. They were rising but still needed some time. Another ten minutes and they'd be perfect.

Ten minutes I would spend with the cake.

Baking with one hand was a challenge, but decorating was a whole other ball game. There were so many details that required the finesse of two hands, but I made do with one and my elbow when I really needed it. Spreading the raspberry jam over the lower tier of cake was easy. I even managed to pipe the whipped cream on top without making too much of a mess; pressing the piping bag against the cast really helped to get the last few squeezes of cream out. Setting the upper tier of cake on top of the filling was much more of a challenge.

No matter which way I looked at it, something was getting squashed by my fingers and the filling would shift. I stood back, face flushed from the heat of baking, and ran my hand around the back of my bare neck. Having scooped my hair up into a messy bun, I was spared the extra heat of having my hair down while the kitchen temperature climbed.

“Fuck it.” No one would mind some squashed cream, right? I gently picked up the top tier of sponge, and as gently as I could with one hand, dropped it onto the cake. As predicted, my thumb ended up scooping out some of the filling when I pulled it free, but a quick dab of a butter knife and the damage was minimal.

I had just enough time to wash my hands, then the cupcakes were removed from the oven, and it was on to wrestling with the marzipan.

By the time the front door creaked, signaling someone's arrival, the two-tiered cake was wrapped in pink marzipan, brushed in edible glitter, and topped with six hand-rolled marzipan roses nestled among a nest of chocolate swirls.

“What on *earth* smells so amazing?” Dylan strode into the kitchen, dark shadows under his eyes, and immediately beamed when our eyes met.

“Welcome home,” I grinned, wiping my forehead with the back of my wrist. “Care to help?”

“I’ve only got an hour,” Dylan explained as he dumped his bag by the door and crouched to receive love from an excited Whiskey. “What do you need?”

“I need a coffee,” I chuckled. “And if you could lift that tray and see if the cookies have separated from the parchment? Also, I need the jam from that bowl scooped into those cupcakes and see the tops that I’ve cut off? I need those cut in half and placed into the Jam to look like Angel wings.”

“Just as well I brought help then, huh?” Dylan laughed as he stood. Carter appeared just behind Dylan and moaned softly.

“Hey Louise, how are you doing?”

“Carter! I’m good thanks. What brings you here?”

“Dylan and Isaac live closer than me and I needed a quick shower,” Carter explained, “and we were worried about you. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“And that you hadn’t burned the place down,” Dylan teased as he admired the cake. “Holy shit, you must be exhausted.”

“I am,” I agreed with a wide smile. “But it’s a good kind of tired. So, can you help?”

Dylan and Carter both held their hands up. “Direct us,” they chuckled.

“Okay, Dylan if you can do the cookies, then the cupcakes. Carter?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Go shower.”

“On it.”

Carter departed and Dylan sidled up to me with a sweet smile. “You’ve got a little something...”

“Oh?” A different heat flushed up my neck and I swallowed. “Where?”

“Right... here...” Leaning in, Dylan pressed a soft, lingering kiss to the apple of my cheek, and then he pulled back just a fraction and kissed me right on the mouth. His lips were sweet, a familiar press that sent an ache spiraling right through me. I hadn’t been touched since my accident because of my stitches, but I was clamoring for the day they were removed.

“Missed you,” Dylan whispered against my lips.

“Me too.”

With Dylan’s help, all the cookies came unstuck from the tray and he laid them out neatly on the board and then moved on to piping in the cupcakes. I added a final rose to the cake, then moved onto melting some more chocolate. The sugar cookies were golden perfection, and by the time Carter reappeared, freshly showered, the cookies were half dipped in chocolate, sprinkled with glitter, and cooling by the open window. The chill from the snow outside was most welcome in the heat of the kitchen.

“Where do you need me?” Carter asked.

“Right here,” I smirked, tapping my lower lip. Carter’s dazzling smile warmed my heart, and his deep kiss—with his hand on my neck and his tongue lazily mapping out my mouth until I was breathless—bred butterflies in my stomach.

“Thank you,” I murmured when the kiss broke, and Carter kissed the tip of my nose.

“Anytime.”

He teamed up with Dylan to cut the cake tops and create the wings needed to insert into the jam. While they were busy, I carefully cut up strips of edible lace and lined the edge of the cake with it as neatly as I could, then I returned to the cookies and used icing pens to write cheesy romantic messages like *Be Mine* and *Kiss Me*.

“So, how does this work,” Dylan asked, peering over my shoulder. “Because you know we’d all give these to you.”

“Oh, stop,” I laughed. “Think of these as... an anonymous gift to you all. No one will know except us.”

“Beautiful,” Dylan whispered, pressing a light kiss to the back of my neck. “The cookies aren’t so bad either.”

“Mm-hmm, if you say so.” I rolled my eyes but leaned into the warmth that blossomed inside of me. Not once had Dylan, or any of the other guys judged me. They all offered their support with living arrangements, job advice, and more, but these mistakes were mine to fix.

“Have you ever posted these online?”

I turned to Carter who was admiring the cake from a safe distance.

“Online?”

“Yeah, like Instagram or something. I swear, your talents are wasted baking just for us and the hospital. Don’t get me wrong, it’s amazing but people would pay good money for stuff like this.”

As Carter moved away and picked up the plastic containers I had set aside for travel, an idea began to grow in my mind. Too often, I had put my own passion aside for other people’s expectations about my job or career, namely Todd and his constant pressure for me to be financially secure. Maybe losing my job at the beauty parlor wasn’t as bad as I’d feared.

“Maybe,” I said softly while my mind started to run like a hamster on a wheel. Dylan carefully placed each cupcake into one box while Carter loaded up the cookies, but not before I snapped a few decent pictures of both things.

The hour had flown by, and it was already time for Dylan and Carter to return to work.

“Enjoy the cakes,” I smiled, kissing them both goodbye.

“They’re gonna be more jealous that we got kisses,” Dylan smirked, earning a light shove from Carter. “What? It’s true.”

“It is,” Carter laughed, “but don’t get cocky.”

“When will you be back?” I asked Dylan as he kissed Whiskey goodbye.

“Early morning,” Dylan sighed. “You can crash here, though, if you like. Isaac should be home by midnight.”

“I might.” The thought of going back to Todd and Natalie’s did not sit well.

After they left, a subtle silence fell over the apartment, but I welcomed it as I began to filter my thoughts into a real, concrete idea. I snapped several artistic photos of my cake, complete with a slice that didn’t look too awful after being cut with one hand. I opened a new Instagram account under Louise’s Luxury Bakes and uploaded pictures of all the desserts I had created today, with as many hashtags as I could manage.

Then I sent the links to Jenny and the guys with a request for them to share with as many people as possible. Last text sent, I headed for a bath and melted into the hot water, careful to keep my cast dry. Selling my cakes had always been a distant dream, something I kept storing away for later down the line, but now I had nothing to lose. It was a risk, but getting my name out there was a start. As I soaked, I ran through all the people I could contact about hiring me. The hospital for bake sales, the local fire station for a charity drive, and bake sales at the school; the possibilities exploding through my mind were endless.

It was the first shining light at the end of a long, dark tunnel filled with the remains of my home, my job, and my failed IVF.

By the time I climbed out of the bath, the scent of baking had faded from the apartment due to the open window in the kitchen. Slamming it closed, I found Whiskey stretched out on the sofa and gently rubbed her belly as I sat next to her and reached for my phone.

“Should we order pizza?” I asked her sweetly. Whiskey barked twice and cuddled into my side.

However, when I unlocked my phone, all thoughts of pizza vanished from my mind. There were hundreds and *hundreds* of notifications from Instagram, and my mouth fell open in shock when I opened the app to see what was going on.

My account had been flooded with followers and my posts were filled with messages of love and support. There were the starter comments from friends and then more from people at the hospital that my brother and the guys worked with. Then came stories and statements from staff and patients who had all enjoyed my baking over the years. The more people commented, the more the posts spread, reaching new people I never could have imagined.

“Holy shit,” I gasped. My inbox was full of people asking if I did private catering for functions as my cake had looked amazing, and I read as many as I could until my eyes blurred from tears of emotion. People liked them.

They liked them enough to want to *buy* them.

It wouldn't fix everything, but it was a start. A good start toward income, regaining control, and throwing my energy into something I *loved*. I couldn't ask for much more than that.

And yet, even now, a little voice taunted me in the back of my mind.

Baking won't give you a baby.

It was true, but Todd had been right about one thing. I had let things slip, become too reckless. I had to get my life stable once more; then, and only then would I re-entertain the idea of a baby.

Maybe.

LOUISE

“**A**lrigh, listen up. Does everyone know what they’re doing? Any questions?”

Standing in Dylan’s kitchen, all four of my heart’s affections stood in front of me, sleeves rolled up and ready to work. Ren was in charge of whipping cream and mixing buttercream, Isaac was in charge of combining ingredients into a smooth batter to fill the numerous cake tins laid out on the island counter, Carter’s job was to mold marzipan, and Dylan was to mix Rice Krispies into chocolate, spoon them into cases while keeping an eye on the two dozen cupcakes already rising in the oven.

I was confident I had explained myself clearly enough, but I wasn’t taking any risks. This order was *huge*.

“Yes, ma’am,” all four men agreed in unison.

“Excellent!” I clasped my hand against my cast and smiled. “On with it then!”

“I didn’t know anyone around here cared so much about Easter,” Dylan remarked.

“You’re kidding, right?” Ren chuckled. “Even I know not to mock Jesus around this time of year. Although most people look at me and assume there’s nothing American in my blood.”

“That’s because they’re assholes,” Carter replied.

“Until they need me to patch them up,” Ren laughed.

“My question is, who needs fifty-eight Easter cupcakes and thirty-five chocolate Krispie treats,” Isaac said. “There’s some definite treat imbalance there.”

“I think it’s for a children’s party,” I replied, leaning over the counter and focusing hard on decorating the mini chocolate eggs in front of me. “When I asked for details, they kind of danced around the subject, but as long as I get paid, I don’t care.”

“Maybe it’s for a church gathering,” Isaac mused.

“OMG,” Dylan laughed softly. “Maybe it’s not a church at all. Maybe it’s a cult. That’s why they were shady.”

“Do cults even celebrate Easter?” Carter asked.

“Maybe in an ironic way?” Dylan offered. “Feels like a cultish thing to do, making people choose between a cupcake and a Krispie treat if there isn’t enough to go around.”

The kitchen dissolved into laughter, and the smile fixated on my face was brighter than ever. Ever since Valentine’s Day, I had thrown myself into baking while accepting orders through Instagram like a proper little business. It was hard work, especially with my arm still in a cast for at least another two weeks, and I was more tired than I had ever been, but I enjoyed it. Constantly surrounded by the warmth of baking and being able to show off my creative talents with whatever was requested; for the first time in my life, I was really doing something I could be proud of.

Today was an added bonus. Everyone’s off time had magically lined up, and with a huge order to fill for Easter, I’d roped them all in to help. The invitation was extended to Todd and Natalie, but they were *busy*, and secretly I was relieved.

It had been too long since I had my favorite people all to myself.

The afternoon passed swiftly with only minor incidents—Ren exploded a bag of icing sugar, and several cupcakes looked far too squashed to be attractive, but I worked my magic. Only one pot of melted chocolate burned.

By the time the first round of cakes were decorated and placed away to set and cool, and the second batch was safely in the oven, everyone was visibly tired.

“God, I’m starving,” Dylan groaned, leaning back against the counter. “I don’t know how you do it, Louise. Working with this all day, I’d be tempted to eat it all.”

“Well, there’s a reason I’m so curvy,” I joked, swiping a cleaning cloth down the island counter. “But no, honestly, you get used to it.”

“I don’t understand how. I’d just eat them all day,” Dylan whined.

“Curvy indeed,” Ren remarked, his voice a fraction lower than normal. Hearing that from him sent a flurry of giddiness right through me, and just when I thought my smile couldn’t get any wider, Ren appeared in front of me with icing sugar dusting his nose and cheek.

“Oh, Ren,” I laughed, straightening up. “You’ve got a little…” I touched my nose and Ren scrunched up his own in response. “Here, let me.”

As I reached forward to lightly brush the sugar away, Ren grasped my wrist and pulled the cleaning cloth from my fingers, then he jerked me forward hard enough that I stumbled right into him. He dipped his head, and his plush, soft lips landed firmly on mine, drawing a squeak of surprise from my throat.

“You’re the only dessert I’d want to eat all day.” The lingering warmth from working in an oven-heated room was immediately replaced by a rush of hot arousal, and when the kiss broke, my face flushed hard and Ren’s dark eyes watched me, unblinking.

“That a promise?” I asked breathlessly, wondering how we could sneak away for that when suddenly, solid warmth pressed against my back. I tilted my head back to see Isaac. He lifted his hand, smeared a soft dollop of whipped cream over my lower lip, then he cupped my chin and held my head in place while he claimed me in a deep, sugar-sweet kiss.

Immediately, I reached out for Ren to steady myself, and he stepped forward, pressing against my front to sandwich me between him and Isaac.

Oh my God.

For a moment, between the two of them, my mind short-circuited and all thoughts fled. The kiss broke and I gasped. Above me, Isaac licked his lips with a soft moan, and then Ren was kissing me again, his tongue dragging across my lips and tasting the leftover cream that hadn't been consumed in Isaac's kiss.

"I think we can all agree," Isaac said softly, "that there's one treat we'd all love to taste."

"What do you say, Louise?" Ren asked as he broke the kiss and cupped my cheek. "You've bossed us around all morning. I'd say it's our turn."

My eyes widened. Dylan and Carter appeared on either side of Ren, their cheeks rosy and eyes sparkling.

All of them?

Fuck. Just that thought caused a throb through my core, and my heart started to race.

"Yes," I gasped.

As soon as the word was out of my mouth, I was lifted by too many hands to count and set down on the island counter. For a voluptuous girl like me, being manhandled like this was a distant fantasy, but they did it with ease. There was scarcely any time to register as Dylan crawled over the top of me and pressed me flat on the counter, swiping another dollop of cream over my lips, and kissed me hard. The sweetness of the cream mingled between us, and I eagerly allowed his tongue access to my mouth.

As we kissed, hands pulled at my pink tights and swept them free of my legs. Kisses were peppered over my calves and up my thighs toward my throbbing core. Hands pulled at my skirt, tugging it free, and Dylan grasped the hem of my shirt and tugged forcefully. He ripped my shirt open, sending buttons flying in all directions, and he moaned deeply.

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” he said after the kiss. I glimpsed more cream on his fingers, and he smeared it down my chest toward my breasts, then he began following that path with his lips and tongue. Isaac appeared on the other side of the counter, leaning over me upside down, and he cupped my face and tilted my head toward him.

“Hey, sweet thing,” he grinned.

“Hey,” I moaned breathlessly, then I lurched as someone’s hot mouth suddenly buried between my thighs and pressed up against my clothed pussy.

Isaac leaned down and kissed me upside down, it was a curious sensation when our lips mismatched, but I was too lost to care. Dylan’s hot mouth continued to kiss down to my breasts, then he pulled my bra down and groaned low.

“Fuck, your tits are marvelous,” he said, and I half chuckled into Isaac’s kiss. Lifting my hand, I caressed Isaac’s neck and moaned as the mouth against my pussy lapped eagerly at my panties as if they could lick straight through the fabric to my core. A chill shot through me as more cream was smeared over my breasts and nipples, and then two enticing mouths latched on to lick it off. Breaking the kiss briefly with Isaac, I glanced down to see Dylan and Carter following their own paths of cream over my breasts, which confirmed Ren was busy between my legs.

I tipped my head back, panting desperately as my body was assaulted with sensations, and I had no idea where to focus. When I glanced back up at Isaac, his shirt was gone and he stood over me, stroking his gorgeously thick cock. My mouth watered, and with no thoughts, I opened my mouth obediently.

Isaac smiled down at me, and just as he slid his hard cock between my lips, Ren finally pulled my panties down and pressed his devilish mouth against my pussy. The first stroke of his tongue through my folds was *incredible*, and a roll of pleasure burst through me. I jerked, moaning around Isaac’s cock as he gently thrust into my mouth. Dylan and Carter continued to cover my breasts in cream, licking it off slowly

and paying special attention to my stiff nipples. Ren's tongue dipped into my core, stroking around my thick walls and tasting me deeply; then he replaced his tongue with two fingers, and I arched off the table with a cry of delight.

"Good girl," Isaac coaxed, gently stroking my cheek. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he began to thrust deeper into my mouth and my eyes fluttered closed, releasing me into a sea of sensation. I clutched at Carter and Dylan where I could reach, ground my hips down onto Ren's face, and relaxed my throat the best I could around Isaac's cock. My body was on fire, every nerve alert to the slightest brush of contact. My heart raced like a rabbit escaping a trap, and my stomach clenched like a pit of snakes. Every stroke of his tongue, deep press of fingers, and affectionate caress over my over-sensitive skin sent me higher and higher, and I was powerless at their touch.

I came so hard around Ren's fingers that my vision sparked to white, and my breath was trapped in my lungs as my body seized up for a few long seconds. Isaac pulled his cock from my lips and only thrust home again after I had taken a few breaths. My body quivered like a leaf, and my core milked Ren's fingers for all they were worth as he continued to thrust deep inside me. Then his mouth left my dripping pussy, and the soft brush of Carter's hair and mouth vanished from my right breast.

As Isaac thrust deep into my throat, Dylan's firm hand grasped and massaged my breast as one mouth descended on my pussy from the angle of my stomach and another grasped my thighs, lifting them higher and exposing my ass to a hot, wandering mouth.

The moment a tongue swiped over my puckered hole, I jerked with a sharp moan of surprise, and Isaac drowned out the sound by coming hard in my mouth. His cock pulsed rapidly, sending pulse after pulse of cum flooding into my mouth and down my throat while he whimpered above me.

His whimper was honestly one of the best sounds I had ever fucking heard.

I swallowed the best I could, desperate to show him that I could, and when he finally pulled his cock free, I gasped for air.

“Good girl,” Isaac smiled, his face swimming into view, but I could barely focus on him. Two tongues were caressing my most intimate areas, and just that contact sent my heart into frantic beats in my chest.

“Fuck,” I croaked. “Fuck, fuck!”

Dylan swiped cool cream across my lips and when he kissed me, this time I thrust my tongue into his mouth and slid my hand tight into his hair, holding him in place. I was trying to anchor myself as Carter’s tongue soothed my pussy and stroked me toward another orgasm, and Ren lapped at my ass, softening me up for what was coming.

I lost track of time and whose mouth was where, and as another orgasm exploded through me like a firework, I didn’t care. I was in heaven, touched and caressed in every direction and with love on every kiss that was pressed to my lips. As I came down from my second high, hands grasped at my body, and I was rolled over. A soft moan of surprise escaped me when I realized I had been rolled on top of Ren, and instinct had me trying to get my knees underneath me for support.

But my limbs were jelly, and the grip these men had on me meant I didn’t have to do a thing.

“Ready?” Ren asked, cupping my flushed face and stroking his thumb across my jaw. I nodded eagerly, hair catching on my sweaty neck from the heat that had built between us, although I wasn’t sure what I should be ready for.

I needn’t have worried. Lifted up, Ren’s cock sank deep into my pussy with aching familiarity, and I threw my head back, pressing my hand to his muscular abdomen to keep myself up. His cock sank deep, filling me to the brim, and nothing could stop the carnal noises of pleasure escaping the both of us.

Until Carter climbed up behind me, wrapped one around my waist, and gently pressed me down onto Ren’s body.

“Take a breath, baby,” Carter whispered.

No matter what came next, I was ready and eager.

LOUISE

As instructed, I did and suddenly Ren's work on my ass became clear. Carter's thick cock pressed into my ass, slicked up with something cool, and I cried out as muscles stretched and complained at the intrusion. It was far from painful—I'd done anal with an ex before, but it was nothing like this.

Carter pressed deep into me, draped over my back and sandwiching me between him and Ren. He whispered coaxing encouragement into my ear as he slid deeper and deeper until his hips were pressed against my ass and I was stuffed full by two men I adored.

"Holy... shit," I gasped out, my voice strained.

"Good?" Ren asked, cupping my cheek and studying my face with his dark eyes.

"So good," I croaked.

"I can feel your cock," Carter chuckled down at Ren, who huffed out a laugh. A silent conversation must have passed between them because suddenly, they started to thrust into me in a tandem that ensured I was constantly filled. As Carter pulled out, Ren thrust deep into my pussy, and as he retreated, Carter filled my ass with deep, powerful strokes. I was mindless, rocking between them as they fucked into me, and I could no longer silence myself.

Not until Carter pulled me up against his chest, the half-sitting position somehow driving their cocks deeper into me, and in a blink, Dylan was kneeling beside me with his hard,

pink cock jutting out for attention. I opened my mouth and gave it gladly. He thrust deep, choking me, and when my body clenched in a ripple, Ren and Carter cried out around me and began to fuck me harder. I didn't even realize my third orgasm was fast approaching until it hit with the power of a freight train, and my pussy locked down around Ren's cock as if begging him to never leave. Lava-hot waves of ecstasy rolled through my body, and we rocked in tandem, a slicked-up mess of desire.

As Dylan thrust deep, I reached out for something to hold onto while Carter kept one hand on my arm cast as if to protect it. I found Isaac, who had settled on my other side, and his mouth latched onto my breasts. There was a beat of sweetness when he took my hand and laced our fingers together. I gripped on for dear life as Ren and Carter fucked into me with seemingly every ounce of strength they had.

I was being molded to them, and they were slotting into me as if this was where they were always meant to be.

I loved it.

Dylan came in my mouth with the sweetest cry I had ever heard, and I did my best to swallow all of his cum. Due to being rocked back and forth by Ren and Carter, some slipped out of my mouth as Dylan pulled free, so he cupped my face and gently fed it back into my mouth with his fingers. I moaned softly, and when I had swallowed it all, he peppered kisses all over my damp face.

Then there was nothing but Carter and Ren. Their cock's continued to pound into me, but Carter was losing rhythm and he groaned against my ear.

"Fuck," he gasped. "How are you so fucking perfect?"

I had no words to answer or thoughts to create a coherent sentence, and I could only moan. Three thrusts later, Carter came hard in my ass and sank his teeth hard into my shoulder as he did so. Liquid heat flooded through me, and I gasped as the sensation morphed into the slowly building tightness of another orgasm. My clit was overstimulated from being pressed against Ren's pelvis from our positions; scratch that,

my entire body was overstimulated as Carter continued to fuck into me. Ren suddenly arched off the table and clasped my neck.

He pulled me into a deep, desperate kiss as he came inside me, letting me taste his moan as he flooded my core with his cum. It was addicting. As Ren's cock twitched inside me, I gasped out my growing pleasure. Suddenly, Carter and Ren grasped my hips and began to fuck into me with renewed energy. A hand thrust between our bodies, and I was too delirious to see who it belonged to. Deft fingers pressed against my clit and began to stroke rapidly, punching a scream from my throat as sharp sensations exploded through me.

It was too much and not enough all at once.

“Oh, fuck!” I screamed and I threw my head back as my fourth orgasm swept through me like a tidal wave. Every muscle tensed up, every frazzled nerve lit up, and a sensual heat swept through my quivering thighs and core. They were lava, and I was the fucking volcano.

It was unclear how long I was suspended at that moment. Eventually, I sagged forward completely boneless, and settled my head on Ren's chest where his fluttering heart could be heard underneath.

“Fuck,” I croaked. “That was... I fucking love you guys.”

Their responses barely breached the fog I found myself in, and exhaustion, deep and bone-aching, consumed me.

They stayed with me throughout the night after our orgy. Isaac and Dylan took care of the cakes while Carter and Ren ran me a bath and took care of me. They soaked me, massaged me where I could cope with their touch, and peppered me with kisses when they bundled me in a fluffy towel and tucked me into Isaac's bed. It was bliss and I drifted off to sleep, convinced I had just experienced the most intense dream of my life.

Waking the next morning, the aches in my body proved that it was a delicious slice of reality. It took a good twenty minutes to work my way out of bed with how deeply my pussy

was throbbing, and my ass ached. In the bathroom, my face was still flushed, but I smiled when I caught sight of Carter's bite mark on my shoulder. In the best way, I felt owned. I trudged slowly through the apartment and arrived at the kitchen, where Ren, Carter, and Isaac all sat around the island counter.

"I'm just saying," Ren said, "I think my procedure will be—Louise!"

They all spun to face me, and Ren flew out of his seat to take my arm as I approached. "Are you okay? I was going to give you breakfast in bed when you woke."

"Is that a pun for more sex?" I asked with a chuckle. "Because I don't think I can take that right now."

"No, no," Ren laughed, helping me to sit down. "Real breakfast."

The moment I sat down, my face pinched, and I let out a soft groan as the ache in my core increased.

"Louise, are you okay?" Isaac asked seriously. I glanced up and his brow was knit, his face concerned. "Were we too hard on you?"

"Oh God no," I assured quickly and smiled brightly. "I'm just really sensitive right now, that's all."

"Anything we can do?" Carter asked as Ren placed a mug of hot coffee in front of me.

"Maybe an ice pillow for my pussy?" I joked, accepting the cup.

"I'll find one," Carter nodded, and I burst out laughing.

"Please do. Where's Dylan?"

"He had the early shift," Isaac explained. "We all do, but I wanted to be here when you woke up."

"We needed to make sure you were okay," Ren added.

I sipped my coffee and frowned. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

“Last night was a lot,” Carter said softly. “A lot with not a lot of time to prepare, and we just wanted to make sure that...” He paused and glanced at the others.

“Aftercare isn’t just for the night; it’s for the day after, too,” Ren filled in. “And we wanted to ensure you were physically and emotionally okay.”

To my surprise, emotion prickled behind my eyes like tiny needles and I swallowed hard. “Oh. That’s... that’s so sweet. I —” Cotton suddenly clogged my throat, and my vision blurred.

Ren was instantly concerned. “Louise, whatever it is, we can talk about it. If it was too much, if there was something you’ve realized you didn’t like, whatever it is—”

“No,” I interrupted quickly, dabbing at my eyes. “I had a fantastic time. I just didn’t... didn’t expect you all to care to this degree, that’s all. I’m used to a dine-and-dash, y’know? It’s odd—nice, but odd to have the care afterward. Trust me, I adored everything.”

“Are you sure?” Ren’s face was still concerned even as Isaac swept me up in a tight hug.

“Yes,” I replied firmly. “I’m just... I’m just thankful.”

“We really mean it when we say we care about you,” Isaac said softly. “You have no idea how much.”

It was a struggle to keep the next wave of tears at bay. They stayed with me until pagers beeped and phones rang, calling them back to work, and Isaac assured me I could stay here for as long as I needed. With the cakes to finish decorating, I took him up on that, and with a full heart—and aching body—I settled back into my work.

It wasn’t until I was adding fondant chicks to the cupcakes that a memory from the night before hit me like a ton of bricks.

I had told them I *loved* them.

And I couldn’t remember what they had said in return.

I stood there, chick in one hand, and stared at the counter.

“Fuck.”

ISAAC

It had been a week since that baking night, and I could not get Louise out of my head. Everything reminded me of her, especially when she'd gone back to Todd's and the scent of her baking had lingered in our apartment. She was incredible, I'd always know that, but the more I got to know her, and the more time I spent with her, the more I was sure I was falling in love.

So, when she came to visit me with the exciting news that she would be getting her cast off the following week, I couldn't keep my hands off her.

"I can't believe it," Louise groaned. "It's been a long eleven weeks."

"One more and you'll be free," I assured her, leaning slanted against my desk with Louise standing between my spread feet. "It'll feel weird to go back to two arms, I'm sure."

"I dunno," Louise smirked, looking up at me through her dark lashes. "There's been some perks to only having one arm."

"Oh, really?" I teasingly raised a brow. "Like what?"

"Well," Louise purred, leaning close and sliding a hand down my buttoned shirt. "People hold the door open for me more than usual. Ubers drive slower. People keep buying me dinner."

"Anything else?" I leaned in slowly and pressed a light, lingering kiss to her plush, sparkling pink lips. We were safe in

my office, where no one could see.

“Ohh.” She tilted her head, sending purple curls cascading over one shoulder. “A couple of guys have been treatin’ me kinda special.”

“They sound like good guys.”

“They’re alright. Fancy people with fancy jobs.”

“How awful,” I chuckled softly, kissing her again. She pressed into my hold, and I was struck with the urge to throw her down and ravage her right here. I wanted her flowery scent in every pore, I wanted her taste on my tongue all day long, and I wanted a pair of those colorful tights locked in my drawer as a reminder of how many times I could make her come. If I didn’t have surgery...

“So awful,” Louise groaned into the slow kiss. “They fucked me real good, actually, didn’t think I could take them all at once.”

“Look at you go.” I gently cupped her cheek, studying the soft curves of her face as she nodded. Then her lower lip disappeared into her mouth, and I was jealous of her teeth. I wanted to bite her lip. I wanted her to be with me as much as I craved.

“Actually,” Louise began, leaning up to kiss me once more. “I wanted to ask you something about that night.”

“I’m an open book.”

“Well, after we finished, and I was—”

Louise didn’t get to finish her question. The door flew open and Todd’s girlfriend, Natalie, burst in without so much as a knock.

“Isaac, Todd wanted me to let you know that the surgery was moved up and—oh my God!”

Louise and I couldn’t spring apart fast enough. A pulse of alarm swept through me from head to toe, and out of the corner of my eye, Louise was as pale as a sheet.

“Natalie—” she began, but Natalie held up a hand and her thin lips curled in disgust.

“You absolute *wretch*,” she spat, then she turned on her pointed heels and fled the room.

“Oh no,” Louise gasped, lifting a trembling hand to her lips. When she glanced at me, her eyes were liquid glass. “Isaac...”

The heartbroken way she croaked my name, I flew into action and lurched out of my office, sprinting after the tell-tale clack of Natalie’s heels.

Fuck.

Of all the fucking people to barge in without knocking, it had to be the one rat of a person who wouldn’t even stop to listen to reason. I didn’t need to guess where she was going. She was on her way to Todd, and I had to think on my feet as I ran.

What excuse could I give to explain why Louise and I were locking lips? What tale could I spin to salvage this desperately kept secret? As I ran, a darker part of me didn’t want to. I didn’t want this to be a secret anymore because I wanted to love Louise proudly and openly, but it was against her wishes, and that was more important to me than my own selfish desires.

Natalie was faster than I gave her credit for, and as I skidded around a corner toward the nurses’ station, my pounding heart sank into a dark pit. Natalie was already at Todd, animatedly describing something I couldn’t hear, and Todd’s face melted from confused to *furious* in half a second. It was like an entire storm had swept across his brow, and his face twisted in anger.

To my alarm, instead of flying down the corridor in a rage toward me, he turned and rugby-tackled Ren, who was on the phone at the other end of the station. They clattered down out of sight as a nurse screamed and scrambled out of the way. Spurred into action, I sprinted down the corridor as fast as I could, and eventually, Todd’s fury reached my ears.

“How could you?!” Todd roared. “Sleeping with my sister? You fucking scumbag. I knew, I fucking *knew* it when she asked for you after the accident. What kind of friend are you, huh? You’re a fucking traitor, I’m going to fucking kill you!”

Suddenly, Todd skidded out from behind the nurses’ station, and Ren stood, panting heavily with blood pouring from a split on his brow.

“Fuck you, Todd,” Ren snarled. “I’m not ashamed of it. I fucking love her. Yeah, that’s right, I love her, and you, you don’t fucking deserve to have her as your sister. You treat her like some child, your property to control—”

Todd roared and launched himself back at Ren, sending them crumpling to the ground just as I reached them.

Fuck. Todd had the wrong guy.

Well, the right guy.

But the wrong guy.

“Todd!” I yelled, throwing myself forward. I latched onto one of his flailing fists and hauled him off of Ren, but just as I got them apart, Ren threw himself at Todd and crashed him into the wall.

“Fuck you!” Todd screamed. “I fucking hate you; you’re a fucking scumbag, you hear me?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ren snarled.

“Todd, no!” Natalie yelled, huddled up against the nurse’s desk. “It was *Isaac* I saw kissing her, not Ren!”

Bitch.

Todd violently shoved Ren away and turned to me, his eyes dark and wild and his chest heaving.

“*What?*”

I squared my shoulders and swallowed hard, then glanced at Ren, who was panting heavily a few feet away.

“You... kissed my sister?” Todd snarled. He turned and pointed a vibrating finger at Ren. “Then why the fuck did you

confess?”

Ren glanced at me, his left eye half closed, and he sniffed deeply. The wheels were turning behind Todd’s eyes, and it clicked in his mind just as a frantic, gasping Louise sprinted up to my elbow.

“Todd,” she gasped, her face crimson. “Todd, please.”

Todd’s eyes darkened further as he turned his accusatory finger to Louise. “Just how many of my friends are you *fucking*?” he snarled.

“All of them?!” Natalie barked shrilly.

“Shut the fuck up,” I snapped at her, and her eyes widened, promptly snapping her mouth shut.

“Todd, it’s not what you think—”

“Don’t give me that,” Todd spat. “Why? Why *my* friends? You could have gone and fucked any other guy!”

“It’s not like that!” Louise gasped, tears pouring unchecked down her cheeks. The crowd around us melted into nothing, and at her upset, Ren moved around the desk to stand on the other side of her. At least he had the sense not to touch her.

“Bullshit,” Todd seethed.

“You scare everyone away,” Louise tried, “but that—it doesn’t matter. Please, can we go somewhere and—”

“How many?” Todd snarled. “Is it just the two? Is it all of them? How much of a whore is my little sister?”

“Todd, please—”

“Come on, how many?!”

“Todd—”

“How many?!”

“If you’d let her speak,” I growled, stepping forward, “then maybe you’d understand.”

“Shut up,” Todd barked. “Don’t you speak, don’t you fucking speak! My sister? My fucking sister?!” He started to

pace, raking his hands through his hair and scoffed wetly. “All of you. That’s why you were all in her room after the crash. Why she spends so much time at your place.

“No,” Louise wept, “Whiskey—”

“I don’t want to hear another word out of your mouth.”

“Please!” Louise surged forward desperately. “It just happened, okay? It wasn’t planned. I was looking for company, and I’ve been trying so hard to have a baby, and they’ve all been so supportive—if you’d just let me explain!”

She reached Todd, but when she touched him, he jerked his hand away and raised a fist. In a flash, Ren was between the two, and I darted forward, shoving Todd away with all my might.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I snarled.

“A baby?” Todd released a twisted laugh when he came to a stop, and when he lifted his head, there was nothing but fury in his eyes. “I don’t know what’s worse; my sister whoring herself out for a baby or my best friends betraying me.”

“This isn’t a betrayal,” I tried but it didn’t matter. Todd simply did not care.

“She’s a slut,” Natalie spat from behind us.

“I want you out,” Todd said flatly. “Get your shit and get the fuck out of my house.”

“What?” Louise gasped wetly, her hand curled into the back of Ren’s shirt as he continued to stand in front of her. “Where... where am I supposed to go?”

“You’re a whore, I’m sure you’ll manage,” Todd spat. “I don’t want you anywhere near me.”

Todd turned and began stalking back up the hall.

“You’re no sister of mine.”

LOUISE

A somber silence settled over our table, hidden away in a dark corner of the bar, as the weight of what had happened sunk in deep. Ren nursed an ice pack to his brow and stared down at his glass while Carter spun a coaster between his fingers, staring off into the crowd.

Isaac and Dylan sat on either side of me, nursing their drinks, and I gripped my own glass until the groove had left its pattern in my palms.

Todd knew.

He knew, and he'd kicked me out of his place, out of his life. I'd never seen him so angry, never tasted such fury in the air, and underneath the shock and upset was guilt. Heavy, iron guilt that Ren had been on the receiving end of those blows, and now all of them had lost a friend.

Because of me.

I kept that pain under control until a snuffle drew everyone's attention to me.

"Louise," Ren began softly. "I'm sorry for what happened."

"What?" Lifting my gaze from the lemon wedge in my drink, I eyed him across the table. There was no way he was blaming himself, surely?

"No, I'm sorry," Isaac said, taking my attention. "I should have been more careful in the hospital. If Natalie hadn't caught us, none of this would have happened."

“It’s not like we could have kept it a secret forever,” Carter replied. “Honestly, how logical was that?”

“We kept it a secret because Louise wanted us to,” Dylan snapped. “And because Todd is fucking crazy.”

“He’s over-protective,” I offered weakly, although any defense for my brother was a straw argument now that we had seen his true colors. Even if he was overprotective because of how our parents died and how he’d been forced to take on the role of parent at a young age, he still went too far.

Most people would be happy to see family and friends mingle.

“He’s an asshole,” Ren muttered, dabbing the ice pack to his brow. “They both are.”

“He was just looking for an excuse,” Carter murmured. “Ever since he got serious with Natalie, he’d been different, but we’ve put up with it because that’s what supportive friends do. He was happy, he loved her, so we supported him. And he can’t fucking show us the same courtesy.”

Whore rang out in my mind, savagely yelled by my brother, and a lump formed in my throat. If this was the time for confessions, I needed to lay out the whole truth.

“He was right about one thing. I don’t have my life together at all.”

“Who does?” Dylan scoffed lightly. “Losing an apartment is just temporary.”

“It’s not just that.” I glanced at him, and my eyes filled with slight unshed tears. “I don’t have a job either.”

“What? But... you said you’d just lost a couple of clients.” Isaac frowned and adjusted his glasses, causing my heart to lurch. If Isaac—or any of them—were about to get angry that I had lied, my heart couldn’t take it.

“That’s true.” I nodded quickly. “But it’s not the whole truth.” Taking a deep breath and flooding my lungs with the scent of alcohol and lingering bar snacks, I confessed. “I lost my job. Or rather, I was fired because... because all my time

and all my focus was going into hospital appointments and tracking my cycle and making sure to meet with you guys. I wasn't as attentive at the parlor as I should have been. Jenny was covering for me a lot, but Camilla... it was the last straw for her before the accident. I'd lost too many clients and was a liability to her so..."

Silence fell, and I studied my glass, unable to look at any of them.

"That's why I was on the bus that day. And I didn't want to tell anyone... because I didn't want to face how bad I'd been at making decisions, and how much money I'd sunk into IVF. And I knew Todd would be furious with me, but that hardly matters now."

Another beat of silence and my body tensed up, ready for the onslaught of disappointment from each of them. Only, it didn't come. The silence dragged on for a moment more, then Isaac spoke.

"Louise, I'm sorry. That's a terrible thing to carry alone, especially with everything else that's happened."

I lifted my gaze to him. "You're not going to yell at me?"

He frowned. "Why would I yell at you?"

"I dunno. For making bad decisions, for lying to you all." The list went on.

"From everything you've said," Carter pointed out, "it sounds like you're already aware you made some bad decisions."

"Your desire for a baby is admirable," Isaac said softly. "But it cannot overrule your life. You need to be careful with yourself and your livelihood before any baby, but as Carter said, it sounds like you already know this."

"I'm a little sad you felt like you couldn't tell us," Ren said with a soft smile. "But I understand. I wouldn't want to tell Todd I'd lost my job either."

"I just... I can't explain how badly I want a baby, and when it became a real chance, with the IVF and everything, it

was all I could think about. Everything else fell to the wayside and..." I shrugged and gently rolled my glass between my palms. "It felt like everything that was going wrong would be okay once I had a baby, and now... now everything is just wrong."

"It is," Dylan murmured, "but some of it is right, too. You've got us. As much as a consolation that could be."

"Indeed," Isaac smiled. "But let's not forget that you weren't unemployed for long. Your baking is taking off online, and that's providing you with an income, right?"

I nodded quickly. "Definitely." I had earned enough so that I could start looking for an apartment, one I could commit to. Now, sadly, a requirement since Todd was kicking me out.

"The way I see it," Isaac continued, "you've already berated yourself enough. We're all here to care for you and support you, not grind you down for things you already feel bad about. Yes, I think you need to manage your priorities a little better and be more responsible if you want to bring a child into the world, but you're already picking yourself back up."

"I was," I laughed dryly. "Until Todd decided to kick me out. Fuck..." I shook my head and lifted my glass, about to drain it before I changed my mind and set it aside. "Now I need to find another place to live."

"Stay with us," Dylan said immediately.

"I couldn't," I replied quickly. "I already imposed with Whiskey, and I couldn't impose any further."

"You don't impose," Isaac chuckled, "but Dylan is right. We have the bigger apartment, Whiskey is already there, and we have plenty of space."

"It's true," Carter chuckled, "my place is a shoe box in comparison."

"Are you sure?" I glanced between Isaac and Dylan, who both shared a look and then nodded.

"Absolutely," they replied.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes,” Ren prompted with a smile.

“Okay, yes! Thank you so much. I just...” A sudden sob hiccuped out of my chest and I sighed as my eyes stung. “Fuck. You’re all so nice to me.”

“You talk as if we shouldn’t be,” Dylan said, draining his drink.

“I just... it’s just nice, that’s all.”

Really nice.

We stayed at the bar until just before closing, talking quietly about how to approach Todd, but we only came to one conclusion. It would be best to give him space and let him cool down before anyone approached trying to explain what our relationship was. I hated the idea of not being able to talk to my brother, but if he needed time, I would give it.

Isaac eventually slid from the booth to pay the check, and Dylan and Carter vanished to the bathroom, leaving Ren and me alone.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured, pointing to his melted ice pack. “I never thought he would get violent.”

“Not your fault,” Ren assured me quickly.

“And I’m sorry I lied. About my job.”

“That... okay, that is on you,” Ren chuckled. “But I understand it. When there’s a lot going on, it can be tough to face some things. But you’re doing it and I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I smiled warmly and slid from the booth, Ren following. As he stood, he caught my elbow and turned me to face him.

“The silver lining is I can do this now.” Ren leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips, sharing the lingering tang of his alcohol, and my stomach twisted. Alarm shot through me as I was too used to this being a secret. A kiss out in public?

It was nice.

“Thank you,” I murmured as the kiss broke, and I licked my lower lip, chasing the press of his lips.

“You don’t need to thank me,” Ren said with a soft nudge.

“Sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize either.” Ren’s brow pulled south and he glanced me up and down. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I nodded quickly. “I just feel a bit... raw after all that with Todd.”

“Makes sense,” he mused softly. “It’ll be okay.”

“I hope so.”

The group reconvened at the door and goodbyes were shared in all directions. Carter and Ren left in one Uber while Isaac hailed another for us to take home. When I was settled in between them in the car, surrounded by warm air and the occasional flash of street lights passing by in the night, I came to a quiet decision.

Isaac and the others were right. I did need to be more responsible, and I was on a good path to do so, but these past months I had become obsessive. I needed to re-evaluate, otherwise, I would lose myself.

I would save my money, focus on finding an apartment, and then I would do one more round of IVF. It would take the last of my funds, but it would be worth it.

My chances of having a baby would rest on this final treatment, and the result would be my answer.

It would be my last chance.

LOUISE

Visiting the hospital was different now.

News of the fight had spread like wildfire, and both Todd and Ren had received suspensions. The guilt hadn't shifted, no matter how Ren had tried to reassure me, but thankfully the suspensions were only for a couple of days, so life settled into a new normal.

A week after the fight, my cast was removed, and I immediately signed up for physical therapy to help regain mobility in my arm after it had been held in one position for so long. My elbow was incredibly stiff, but my doctor was lovely, and she took me through daily step-by-step exercises to regain my range of motion. It was after one of these appointments, a week later, that I had another appointment booked with Isaac.

Heading from one department to another meant traversing the halls with people looking and whispering all around. The details of the fight were still somewhat kept under wraps, but it was common knowledge that I was the cause, so curious looks followed me every step of the way. I did my best to ignore it, these people meant nothing to me, but I found myself hoping to run into Todd in the corridor.

He hadn't spoken a word to me since the fight, and he'd sent all my belongings to Dylan and Isaac's place via courier so that we wouldn't have to see each other. My understanding of Todd's reaction was beginning to fade. My life was my own, we were all adults, and he didn't control any of us. His disrespect for who I wanted to spend time with and his

disrespect of his friends was something that slowly began to consume my thoughts more than guilt. So, I did hope, after each session, that I would run into him and force him to talk to me.

No such luck.

“Isaac?” I knocked lightly on the door of the treatment room and peeked inside to see Isaac sitting on the chair next to an empty bed, clipboard in hand. When he lifted his head, he smiled the moment he saw me, and my heart fluttered.

“Louise! I was surprised to see you on my list of patients for today, is everything alright?”

“Yes, of course.” I stepped inside and closed the door. “I’m here for a round of tests.”

“Tests?” Isaac flipped a few sheets on the clipboard as I took a seat on the bed, and I saw his brow dip the moment he got to the section about why I was really here. “You are preparing for another round of IVF.” When he lifted his head, I could see the apprehension lingering in his eyes.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I said, shrugging off my coat. “But this is the last try. This is my very last attempt and whatever happens, whatever the results, I will accept them.”

Isaac drummed his fingers on the clipboard. “Louise—”

“I know what you’re going to say.” I held up a hand. “But I have thought about this. I’ve talked it over with Ren and Jenny, even my physical therapy doctor. I know the risks, I know the impact, and I am in a good state of mind, despite everything. I want to try one more time, that’s all. Just once and then...”

I trailed off and shrugged. If it failed, then I would accept that, and my mothballed bank account would certainly be happy.

“Are you sure?” Isaac asked me firmly. There was something a little different about his tone this time, a more serious edge that seemed more final than any other question he had asked previously.

“Yes.” I nodded once, and Isaac smiled.

Testing was relatively quick. Isaac took my blood and a few other samples since it had been so long since my last treatment, then he booked me in for another session within a week, assuming all the results came back clear, then we would proceed with the next—and last—round of IVF. Hearing him confirm it reignited the embers of excitement in my chest, and I pressed happy kisses to his lips as we said goodbye.

The past couple of months had been darker than I had been prepared for, but light was finally at the end of the tunnel. My online bakery was booming, keeping me busy and providing good movement training for my healing arm. The cast was off, and I was back to having two hands, and IVF was in my future once more.

Things were looking up.

Leaving the hospital, it was a short walk to a nearby cafe where I was meeting Ren for lunch. We’d organized it after I’d secured my appointment with Isaac so we could discuss all things baby, and so I had something to look forward to in case Isaac refused.

Entering the cafe, I was hit immediately by the scent of coffee and warm bread, the sweetness of pastries, and the warmth of oven-baked goodies. It was *heaven* and one of my favorite places to visit when life wasn’t so hectic. I’d even contemplated a job here once upon a time, but dealing with this many customers demanding food would result in me quickly snapping at an asshole and losing my job.

Greeting the woman behind the counter, I took my usual seat behind the counter and used an app to order my usual sub sandwich and Ren’s favorite salad, then I settled in to wait. Soft music drifted around me, lulling me into a warm, comfortable bubble while I toyed with the edge of the powder blue tablecloth and watched the world pass outside. So many people in their own heads, living their own lives and working through their own problems; it was a little daunting to think about sometimes.

I crossed my ankles under the table and closed my eyes briefly, letting my mind drift as I absorbed the scents and sounds. It had been too long since I'd taken a moment to come here and just exist without a single thought in my mind.

“You look peaceful,” came Ren’s voice, and I snapped open my eyes. Upon seeing my eyes open, he pulled the seat back, leaned in and pressed a sweet, soft kiss to my cheek. “You okay?”

“Mm-hmm. Just enjoying the ambience I guess. I ordered your salad—oh!”

Right on cue, the waitress brought over our lunch with a bright smile and, after setting down our drinks, vanished in a flurry of skirts.

“I’m *starving*,” Ren groaned, and he began devouring the meal as if he hadn’t eaten in days. I chuckled and took a sip of my own water.

“Busy day?”

“Crazy.” Ren aggressively stabbed large forkfuls and shoved them into his mouth for a few minutes before he was sated enough to actually talk. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re good.”

“How was it with Isaac?”

“It was good.” I toyed with my sub, deciding which end I wanted to start with. “He was apprehensive, but it’s understandable. I was straight with him though. Told him this was the last time, and he understood. He took some blood and gave me a check-up; if everything comes back good, we’re set for next week.”

“And you’re sure about this?” Ren eyed me over his water.

“Positive.”

“Excellent,” Ren smirked as he popped a cherry tomato into his mouth. “Excited?”

“Oh my God,” I laughed, “I’m so fucking excited. I know to keep my hopes at a reasonable level, but it’s just too hard.”

I'm going to be super careful this time, and let's be honest, nothing is a secret anymore. That took so much weight off my shoulders."

"That's true," Ren agreed. "You don't have to hide anything anymore."

"Such a relief." I tore off a small part of the bread and popped it into my mouth, but the moment it touched my tongue, it suddenly hit me that I wasn't hungry. At least not for my favorite sandwich.

Strange.

"Speaking of," I mused cautiously. "Have you seen Todd?"

Ren glanced up at me and pressed his lips together. "A little."

"Has he spoken to you? Apologized?" I glanced up at the ghost of a bruise still on Ren's temple.

"Nope. He remains professional; we all do but it's really fucking awkward. Surgery together is quieter than the grave, and if we have to consult patients together, he just goes ahead and does it without me."

"Shit."

"It's fine." Ren waved a hand. "He's doing it with everyone so, whatever. Not much I can do about his stinking attitude."

"I've tried to call him. More times than I probably should have, but it just goes to voicemail. I shouldn't be surprised, but I didn't expect it to go on for so long."

"I understand that he might be hurt," Ren said, finishing his food in record time. "Since it was a secret, but the way he reacted? I've put up with his shit for long enough, and frankly, this is on him to fix. We worked hard to protect his feelings, but he doesn't give a shit. If he wasn't so fucking hot-headed in the first place, we probably would have told him from the beginning."

"Yeah," I agreed absently. "If he wasn't so hard to talk to."

This was important, and I wanted to listen to everything Ren had to say but something about the deeper way he was talking, the lick of heat at his words, was distracting me to the point that my gaze was wandering all over him. From the way his jaw tensed, the flash of annoyance in his eyes, and the way a few strands of dark hair flopped forward as he talked animatedly.

It was *hot*.

Fuck, was I horny? Did I mix up appetites, or was it just Ren's effect on me?

I shifted in my seat and swallowed hard as prickly heat washed down my arms and coiled slowly down my spine.

"The amount of times I've had to clean up his fucking messes," Ren continued, oblivious. "And the way he talked about you like you were an object and not a person, I just... Louise?"

"Hmm?" Dragging my gaze away from the triangle of skin peeking out from the collar of his shirt, I smiled brightly and fought to ignore the throb in my core. Ren was being so *protective*, and for some reason, it was really affecting me.

"Are you alright? You look a little flushed."

"Oh."

Fuck.

"I uh..." Shaking my head, I bit my lower lip as I debated how likely it would be for Ren to take me up on the insane idea that had flooded my mind as he spoke. He straightened up and leaned across the table, causing the fabric of his shirt to cling to the definition of his tensing muscles.

I was lost.

"You wanna come with me to the bathroom?"

"Huh?" Ren's dark eyes widened, and then, very slowly, he smirked.

REN

Sex in a public place with the risk of being caught was new for me, but I wasn't going to pass up the chance to spend time with Louise. I nodded once and she abruptly stood up, smoothed out her skirt, and hurried away through the tables toward the bathroom. Her purple curls were easy to track through the crowd—and I started to count in my head.

How long was long enough? When would my moving look suspicious, or would anyone even care? I couldn't decide, and within thirty seconds, I was on my feet, weaving the same path past crowded tables and happily eating people.

The second I stepped through the door, Louise was in my arms. Her mouth crashed to mine in a desperate kiss, and all other thoughts fled my mind. The door closed in time for me to stumble back into it, and I wrapped my arms around her waist, drawing her into the kiss. Her hands slid into my short hair and tugged sharply while her teeth snagged on my lower lip. A sudden, sharp burst of hot pain zapped through my lip, and I jerked away to see Louise smirking at me, her eyes wide and hopeful.

Fuck.

Using my height against her, I pushed Louise back with the bulk of my body and resumed kissing her as desperately as I needed air. Together, we stumbled into one of the stalls, and I just managed to get the door closed before I was utterly consumed by my desire for her. Her lips, sweet to the taste, urged me on, so I slid my tongue into her mouth, cupped the

side of her neck with one hand, and thrust my other hand down the waistband of her skirt and into her panties.

The heat of her pussy warmed my core instantly, and she poured a low moan into my mouth as I coated my fingers in her slickness. Whatever had brought this on, I was utterly thankful. My gut tightened, and warmth pooled south, swelling my cock against the confines of my boxers. Louise's hands slid down to my shoulders, pulling frantically at my shirt. When buttons popped and she ripped my shirt open, I broke the kiss with a gasp. Her head dipped and she started pressing numerous, eager kisses along my chest until I pressed her back against the stall wall and claimed her mouth in another messy kiss.

Her fingers raked over my torso, eaving trails of raw heat in their path, and I shoved myself forward while I guided my fingers deeper through her slick folds and into the liquid heat of her core. Louise yelped softly, throwing her head back against the wall as I entered her with two fingers. Kissing around her mouth, I mapped down to her neck and grasped a handful of her breasts with my other hand, pumping my fingers into her with fevered desire as my hips subtly rocked back and forth. Grinding against the restriction of my pants, I wasn't going to last long at this point.

Each time Louise made a noise, I silenced her with a kiss to the point that we were breathing the same air, a desperate cycle of pants and gasps, trying to keep each other quiet. I continued to pump my fingers into her, twisting my hand when I could, so the heel of my hand would thrust against her clit. Every time I did, the sweetest, sharpest moan poured from her lips, and I drank them down like a man starved.

I was utterly addicted and completely consumed by her.

"Fuck," Louise gasped, rocking up onto her tiptoes. The scrape of air in her throat was telltale, as was how her pussy began rhythmically clenching around my fingers. She was close.

But I couldn't allow that, not yet.

Suddenly I pulled my hand free, and Louise cut off her moans, slumping back against the wall, panting.

“What?” she gasped, her eyes running desperately over me.

“You want me to fuck you,” I said in a hushed whisper. “You gotta slick me up.”

Her eyes darkened as her pupils bloomed wider, and I stepped back, hurriedly undoing my belt. I’d barely shoved my pants past my hips before Louise was on her knees with her hands around my aching cock.

“Ah—fuck,” I gasped, cutting off the following moan that was sure to be too loud. “What’s got you so riled up, huh?”

“You,” Louise replied, glancing up through her lashes. “The way you spoke, the way you are—just you.” Then she sank forward and swallowed my cock down in one smooth move. My stomach lurched and my hips jerked forward, deeper into the inviting heat of her mouth. Placing one hand on her head for touch, I braced myself against the wall with the other and kept one ear open for anyone stumbling upon our activities.

The threat of being caught added an excited patter to my racing heart, and I was even more eager to get inside her before it was too late. Louise’s head bobbed back and forth with delicious ease, her lips massaging my cock, and her tongue pressing and stroking against the shaft like I was something she hungered for. The way she was acting, it definitely seemed that way. Watching her, my heart skipped a beat. She was fucking beautiful, always had been, but in this moment, there was something different. I wanted to consume her in the same way she had taken over me.

A few more thrusts into her mouth, and I was too impatient to wait anymore. I caught her chin and grasped her hand, guiding her back onto her feet. Then I spun her around to face the wall, lifted her skirt, shoved her tights and panties aside, and thrust into her pussy in one swift, solid move.

The second Louise started to cry out, I placed one hand over her mouth and draped my body over her back, trapping her against the wall as I started to fuck her.

“Remember,” I panted hotly in her ear. “Shh.”

She moaned against my fingers and placed her hands against the tiles, scraping her nails across the floral design as I fucked into her from behind. With short, sharp thrusts, I pounded into her, fueled by the desire to make her feel good and the desperation to fill her up before we could be interrupted. Her pussy rippled around me, pulling me deeper into her silken heat, and within moments I knew I wouldn't be able to hold off for long.

I was far too turned on.

Louise appeared to be in the same boat judging by the sounds escaping past my fingers, so I increased the pace of my thrusts to the point that the wall started to squeak in time to our fucking.

That's what it was. Raw and carnal, chasing pleasure more than anything else. Sliding my other arm around Louise's waist, I held her against me as my hips pistoned hard, trying to carve myself a home deeper inside her. Then, suddenly, she came with a cry that locked in her throat and whined past my fingers. Her pussy gripped my cock like a vice and I gasped, having to bury my face in her hair to muffle the noise. A thrust later, my orgasm crashed over me like a bowling ball, sweeping from head to toe, and I maintained my frantic pace for a few seconds more until the over-sensitive head of my cock begged me to pause.

Only then, once I was sure I had milked Louise through her pleasure, did I slow my thrusts and then come to a stop. Lowering my hand, I cupped her chin and tilted her head around, then I pressed a lingering sweet kiss to her lips.

“Good?”

“So good,” Louise groaned. “Thank you.”

“Anytime,” I chuckled softly. Pulling myself out of her, I stepped back half a step and she turned slowly. Her face was

flushed and her eyes sparkled while she sorted her clothes, and when she straightened up, I lingered on her kiss-swollen lips.

“Best you’ve ever had?” I smirked, tucking my cock back into my pants and quietly enjoying how the feel of her would follow me for the rest of the day.

“Now, that would be telling,” Louise winked.

“C’mon, out of the four of us, I’m the best, right?”

“So cocky,” Louise remarked, and she opened the stall door. Thankfully, the bathroom was still empty as we stepped out, and she moved to the sink. “You all bring me something unique; I couldn’t possibly choose.”

“Cop out,” I teased, watching her splash water on her rosy cheeks and smooth down her hair as I buttoned up my shirt.

“It’s the truth.” Louise turned to me, quickly drying her hands, then she wandered close and batted my hands out of the way. Taking over the buttoning, she worked swiftly and gently, then lightly patted my chest.

“This was good,” she smiled brightly and leaned up, pressing a sweet kiss to my lips. Then she left and I lingered, casting a glance at myself in the mirror. That was amazing, but as I came down from the high and waited the appropriate amount of time to leave, one thing hadn’t slipped my notice.

Louise was wearing gray tights, so maybe the sex was an attempt to cheer herself up. Either way, I was here for her but as I left the bathroom and headed back to her table, I made a quick mental note.

I didn’t care what Todd thought about me, but I wasn’t going to let him destroy his relationship with her.

Louise deserved to be surrounded by people who loved her, family included.

I would make sure of that.

LOUISE

“On the list of things I never expected you to do,” said Jenny, her voice filled with laughter. “That was definitely in the top ten.”

I stuck my tongue out at the iPad where her face was displayed and chuckled, tightening my grip slightly on the mixing bowl in my hands.

“I know. It was... it was incredible and exhilarating and also, I was a little concerned because I’ve never been turned on that quickly before, but I was in a good mood. A really good mood in fact.” As I talked, I worked the wooden spoon around the collection of ingredients mixing together inside.

“Sex in a public bathroom,” Jenny sighed as she leaned back from the camera. “Wow. More than wow. How was he after?”

“Ren was really sweet. Honestly, I was surprised he went for it, but he was so...” I paused, searching for the right word. “He was so in control and firm, it was fucking hot.”

“Is he the best?”

“They’re all great.”

“Bullshit,” Jenny scoffed as she lifted her cup to her lips, the floral print reflecting the light.

“No, I’m serious.” Panting slightly, I set the bowl down and shifted my grip on the spoon. “They’re all different, in really good ways, and I don’t know if it’s because they’re older or what, but they really know what they’re doing. Ren is

really firm, like—I feel so safe in his arms. And Carter, he’s really powerful. I swear he rearranged my insides in the on-call room, and I was ready to beg for more. And Isaac, he’s firm but gentler, almost like he wants to give instructions as he coaxes me into things. And Dylan? He’s soft and eager to please, and it just makes me melt, y’know?”

“No,” Jenny laughed. “I have no idea what it’s like to have four men hungry for me.”

“Fair,” I chuckled, tossing my head to knock some curls away from my face. “But they’ve all made me come. Sometimes multiple times, and it’s just... easy. I don’t feel any pressure; there’s no jealousy, demands, or anything like that. And...” I paused and glanced up at the camera with a soft smirk. “Being a curvier girl, you sort of settle for less, y’know? Like I try and tell myself not to, but it happens sometimes. And with them, it’s not an issue. They don’t treat me differently. They’ve never commented on it, and the way they can throw me around...” I trailed off as just the thought sent heat flushing through my chest.

“Alright girl,” Jenny grinned. “You’re making me jealous.”

“Sorry. It’s just so, I don’t even know. It’s perfect for me, and at the same time...”

“You want more?”

I paused my mixing and studied Jenny, running the idea through my mind. “Sort of? Living here now with Dylan and Isaac, getting to enjoy some of the mundane things like morning coffee and making dinner for each other, or just sitting on the sofa reading... I guess I kind of do miss that part of a relationship. The sex is great and all, and I feel supported and cared for, but I guess I’m feeling...” Sighing, I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. Love isn’t in the cards.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. And them. It’s all supposed to be fun, no strings attached.”

“Sure, maybe back in December when y’all were just fucking, but it’s April now, Louise. You’re all still together. I

don't think it's bad to wonder about feelings that might be cropping up on either side.”

“Sure.” I resumed my mixing. “But what if I feel something for them that only one or two of them feel for me? I don't want to lose anyone or alienate anyone. Especially not after Todd.”

“Ugh.” Jenny scoffed and straightened up. “Todd is a special case. He never took off his parenting hat.”

“Maybe.” We still hadn't spoken, and as far as I knew, he hadn't acknowledged anyone at the hospital other than on a strictly work basis. It was the longest I'd gone with no contact from my brother, and there was a very real, growing chance that there would be no resolving it. He was stubborn, like me, but somehow so much worse.

“Forget Todd for a minute,” Jenny said. “Think about it. So what if you fall in love with one of them. Or all of them. It doesn't mean the end of things if you all talk about it.”

“Loving one at the expense of losing the others—what am I saying? That sounds so greedy.” I began to mix even faster, and an ache swept down my arm.

“I mean, the whole situation could be greedy,” Jenny teased, “but I think they'd be fools not to love you back.” She paused as I mixed and then sighed deeply. “You already do, don't you?”

“What?” My head snapped up.

“Love them. Don't you?”

“I...” My hand paused once more as I groaned. “I don't know. Sometimes they're all I think about. All of them, all at once. When I see them, my chest lights up like someone's turned on a switch; I feel like a giddy teenager. But let's be honest, look at my dreams. They all signed up to be fuck buddies, not to be boyfriends or a parent to a child.”

“Ren did.”

“Technically, he offered to be a donor, not a father.”

“Okay true,” Jenny tutted as she traced her fingertips around the rim of the mug. “But from everything you’ve said, in my expert opinion—”

“You’re an expert?”

“Absolutely. And in my expert opinion, I think there’s more than just one crush here. I mean, most guys would ditch the girl for their friend, but they’ve all stuck with you, right?”

“That’s because Todd’s an asshole,” I muttered.

“Partly. But I don’t think that’s it. Not with everything that’s happened with the crash, encouraging your new business, taking care of your *dog*.” Jenny pursed her lips and squinted at me. “You’re just scared to lose them.”

“Damn, didn’t know I was on with therapist Jenny today,” I scoffed as she burst out laughing. Her words were cutting so close to the truth that I had no choice but to deflect, like an automated reaction. I did care for them all so deeply, but she was right. Nothing was worth the risk of losing them.

“Therapist Jenny is always here for you, hun,” Jenny chuckled. I shook my head and resumed mixing, but halfway through, an unpleasant scent caught my attention and I glanced down at the bowl.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know... I think maybe the eggs were off.”

“And you didn’t notice until now?”

“No.” Setting the bowl back down, I dabbed a finger into the cake mixture and swiped it over my tongue. Instead of the expected sweet vanilla spice batter I had created, all I could taste was something sour and unpleasant. Instantly I screwed up my face and gagged.

“Oh gross, definitely off eggs.”

“Damn,” Jenny groaned softly as I turned and began tossing the mixture down the sink. “Shame you didn’t smell it before.”

“Yeah, weird,” I grimaced. “I’ll have to pop out and buy some more.”

“Will that put you behind?”

“Nah. This order isn’t due until Thursday, so I’ve got time.”

“Sweet. Speaking of, since you’re now this terribly awesome freelance baker, I think it’s about time we took that holiday we’ve been putting off for years.”

Turning on the tap to rinse away the batter, I glanced over my shoulder. “I can’t afford a holiday.”

“Oh, come on! Summer is just around the corner. I’m sure the guys won’t mind you crashing there for a while longer, which means you don’t need money for an apartment, and you promised me like five years ago that we would take a girls’ trip to New York. Now is the perfect time!”

“It is?” Chuckling, I wiped my hands on a nearby towel and turned back to the camera. “Best I can give you is two days at a spa.”

“But New York,” Jenny whined.

“God, you sound like Natalie.”

“Bitch! Take that back.”

“Nu-uh,” I laughed, then paused when the soft tones of my phone ringing caught my attention. Isaac’s name flashed up on the screen and my heart leaped into my mouth.

“Sorry Jenny, I’ve got to go.”

“Aww,” Jenny whined. “Okay babe. Call me later?”

“Definitely. Love you!”

No sooner had she hung up than I answered Isaac’s call.

“Hello?”

“Louise!” Isaac tried to sound cheery but there was something slightly off about his voice, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on, and the lingering sour taste in my mouth turned to ash.

“How are you? How’s the baking going?”

“Oh, it’s alright,” I answered, leaning back against the counter and trying to ignore the skittering of my heart in my chest. “I think I bought some bad eggs, though, so I’ll have to pick up some later.”

“I can pick some up on the way home if you like?”

He was making small talk. I needed to know why.

“No, it’s okay. Is everything alright?”

“Yes.” Isaac paused for a second. “I wanted to call you personally because we have to cancel your IVF treatment tomorrow. I wanted to be the one to tell you rather than someone else.”

“Oh no.”

Oh no.

“Why?”

I prayed for an excuse, something like a scheduling conflict or there was some huge trauma or something that was getting in the way. Deep down, the dread started to build like rotten mulch sitting heavy in my gut.

“I got your test results back,” Isaac began slowly. “And what they showed has told me that another round of IVF will not be possible.”

“What?” The word slipped quietly and coldly from my lips.

“Louise, it’s not—”

“What do you mean?” I barked, the edges of my phone pressing painfully into my palm. “Did the eggs unfreeze? I have more, right? Did Ren’s sperm die? Because I know he has plenty. Is it my weight? I can diet. Is it my age? It can’t be that because I know I’m still good.”

“Louise, please—”

“Just tell me, Isaac, what do I need to do to make this happen? Just one last time, that’s all I wanted, please!”

“Louise!” Isaac yelled so loudly that I jumped, nearly dropping my phone in surprise. His bark was enough to cut through my rising panic, silencing my tirade. I couldn’t breathe; my heart didn’t even tremble as I waited for the news.

“Louise, listen to me. You can’t proceed with another round of IVF because you’re pregnant.”

My chest clenched and the world fell out of my gut.

“Louise, did you hear me? We can’t do IVF because you’re already pregnant. You’re going to have a baby!”

LOUISE

Every step through the hospital was as light as air. No pressure touched my shoulders, no sadness gripped my heart, and butterflies had been a constant in my stomach ever since Isaac had delivered that news yesterday.

I was pregnant.

My blood tests had come back showing that I was pregnant, and my world had shattered, only to be instantly remade looking completely different. The crisp April air was warmer than usual, the sun shone brighter, and colors seemed much clearer than before. Even the glaring white walls of the hospital didn't bother me as I all but skipped down the halls.

Isaac had me booked for an ultrasound, and although he'd only been home for a few hours last night, he and Dylan had been such good sports in managing my excitement. I'd been unable even to sleep, much to Isaac's disappointment, but how could I sleep when the thing I wanted for *years* was finally happening?

I was pregnant and I was ecstatic.

Until I headed down toward the elevator and ran into my brother, Todd, coming out of a patient's room with his brow pinched and his face drawn. I skidded to a stop and clasped my hands together in front of me. His presence silenced the excited butterflies and my heart, previously light, sank in my chest.

I hadn't seen him since the fight between him and Ren. He ignored all my texts and never returned any of my calls. Now,

here he was, in front of me and walking toward me as if he couldn't even see me. The coldness was chilling, and I could have carried on down the hall, given him the same treatment. Instead, I swallowed around the growing lump behind my tongue and spoke up.

“Todd.”

Todd stumbled a half step and glanced up. The second he saw me, his jaw hardened, and a shadow passed across his face. I didn't expect him to stop but he did, pausing in front of me a couple of feet away. The folders in his hands creased under his grip and I forced a smile.

“You haven't returned any of my calls.”

“I have nothing to say to you,” he replied tightly.

That was my cue to leave, but I ignored it. “How have you been?”

Todd glared at me. “I don't know, how do you think I've been? I've watched my sister whore herself out to my best friends, cutting me off in the process and making them lie to me. How do you *think* I'm doing?”

“Oh, grow up,” I snapped hotly. “Stop acting so dramatic. I'm not a *whore* and you're a fucker for saying so. Not once in your ranting little pity party have you ever stopped to ask me how I feel or ask any of your supposed friends how they feel, have you? Has it ever crossed your mind at all that there could be something genuine here, hmm?”

Todd's face widened, visibly taken aback by the outburst I didn't even know I was holding. Once I'd started, it was difficult.

“You know me. And you know them, you know how good and decent they are, and yet here you are trying to paint everyone as some sort of villain.” I pressed my lips together. “I'm ashamed of you. My brother is supposed to be better than this. Anyone would be happy to see me with men as decent as them except you.” I tilted my head up slightly, and Todd took a half step forward.

“What good could come from this?” he growled. “It’s disgusting. One I could maybe forgive but... but *four*?”

“Don’t be so boring,” I remarked. “This isn’t the dark ages. People can care for more than one person and can enjoy the company of more than one person. And the good?” I took a breath.

Would telling him make a difference? If he learned about the baby, would he finally understand that this isn’t some sort of crazy fling? What good really has come from this?

Before I could, Todd stomped forward and brushed past me.

“Todd—”

“No, Louise.” He spun around sharply and held up his pointed finger. “You don’t get to come here and tell me how I feel is wrong. That your sordid relationship is fine or normal. You’ve taken so much from me already; you don’t get to tell me how to feel.”

I stared him down, my heart hammering so hard that my hands trembled slightly, so I tightened my grip around my knuckles.

“You sound like Natalie,” I replied, gritting my teeth. Todd glanced me up and down, then turned on his heel and stormed away.

“You’re ruining this for yourself!” I called after him. “Your over-protective anger and your pigheadedness!”

Todd turned back, but the flash of something else—possibly doubt—on his face vanished when he looked past me. Only then did he leave for good. I stomped one foot slightly and groaned, then I turned and jumped as Ren was standing next to me.

“Holy shit,” I gasped, pressing a hand over my heart. “You scared me.”

“Sorry.” Ren smiled warmly and caressed my shoulder, then his dark gaze hardened slightly as he glanced up at Todd’s retreating back. “What was that all about?”

“I was trying to find some even ground,” I sighed dejectedly. “But no luck.”

“He’ll come around,” Ren replied confidently. “It just takes time.”

“Maybe.” I’d never imagined getting the news about a baby and not being able to share it with my brother. I clung to Ren’s words, hoping against hope that he was right.

“Forget about that right now.” Ren looped his arm around my shoulders. “You’ve got an appointment to get to.”

Ren walked with me all the way to Isaac’s treatment room and eagerly agreed to stay when I asked him to be with me. Isaac was nowhere to be seen when we entered but a lovely nurse helped me onto the bed and got me comfortable while we waited for Isaac to arrive. Every passing second dragged one. I swore I could count several seconds in between each tick of the third hand on the clock across the room from me. Having pushed Todd from my mind, the excitement was back in full force and Ren stayed by my side, seated and lightly bouncing one leg. He looked as nervous as my stomach felt.

Finally, Isaac walked through the door, and I let out a long groan as he pulled the curtain closed around us.

“About time,” I chided. “I was beginning to think you’d never make it.”

“Sorry, another patient ran later,” Isaac chuckled. He flashed Ren a smile and settled onto the stool by the bed. Next to him sat the ultrasound machine, and I was fighting not to look at it. Now I was here, ready to see the truth, and my mind started to run with crazy possibilities.

Maybe the blood had been mixed up in the lab, and it wasn’t me that was pregnant. Maybe the test was messed up in some way, or Isaac dialed the wrong number to deliver the baby news.

All sorts of frantic scenarios flooded through my mind, and it wasn’t until Ren audibly winced from my grip on his hand that I realized how crazy they were getting.

“Sorry,” I gasped, pulling my hand back. “My mind is flooding right now.”

“It’s alright,” he chuckled, flexing his hand to ease his knuckles. “I didn’t know you had such a strong grip.”

“It’s all the baking. The whisking and the beating, y’know.”

“A good grip is healthy,” Isaac said as he finished setting up the machine. “We like healthy signs of strength. Now, Louise.” Isaac eyed me over the top of his glasses. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I said firmly, despite how the tremble of my heart shook my voice.

“It’s painless, I promise.” Isaac stood over me and gently rolled up my t-shirt, then he pushed the hem of my skirt down. I immediately took Ren’s hand once more and he wrapped both hands around mine, gripping just as tightly.

“This will be cool,” Isaac murmured, and a second later cold spread over my lower abdomen as he spread around the gel. I leaned into the sensation because it brought me one step closer, yet the closer we got, the harder my heart started to pound.

It was too easy to convince myself there’d been a mistake.

Light pressure followed the gel when Isaac applied the ultrasound wand, and his attention turned to the screen I couldn’t see. Ren’s eyes were locked there too, fixated like a hawk as Isaac guided the wand around my abdomen in search of the sign he needed.

I couldn’t look. I stared hard across the room at the clock and watched the second hand take its lethargic path around the clock. It was losing steam, moving slower and slower by the second, and then, suddenly, time stopped altogether when Isaac’s hand paused, and Ren let out the softest *awe* I had ever heard. When I glanced at him, his eyes were incredibly wide and his lips parted in a soft O.

“Louise,” Isaac said softly. “Do you want to see?”

I did, and at the same time, I didn't. There had been so much disappointment, so much pain, so many letdowns; the fact that this could be real was almost too much to bear.

"Louise," Isaac tried again, and his warm fingertips brushed my wrist. "Take a look, please."

"Is it real?" I whispered to Ren, who finally looked away from the screen and to me instead. He nodded quickly and his hands tightened around my own.

Only then did I look at the screen.

Right there, amongst the gray fuzziness of my body, was the black hollow of my womb. And just inside, zoomed in so we could see, was the tiniest little bean shape. It was nothing, and at the same time, it was everything.

"That's the baby?" I asked softly as static swept up my chest and pressure built behind my eyes. "That's my... baby?"

"Yes," Isaac beamed. "I'd put you at about four weeks, four and a half, give or take."

The night we had all baked together popped into my head.

Suddenly, the static in my chest erupted and I burst into tears. My world blurred, and the pressure behind my eyes eased the second tears poured down my cheeks, then a desperate wail escaped my chest.

"I'm pregnant!"

"Yes!" Ren exclaimed, clambering onto the bed next to me and pulling me into his arms. "Yes, baby. Yes, you are."

I lost track of how long I cried for. The utter relief and excitement nearly smothered me, coupled with the deep pain of the constant disappointments. It all finally paid off and I was pregnant. I was actually pregnant. Ren held me through every sob and tear, and he dried my tears as the emotions started to calm, and I was able to breathe without hiccuping or sniffing.

I was having a baby.

When I'd finally calmed down, Isaac patted my hand and smiled warmly at me.

"Everything looks good, but given that this is likely a natural pregnancy, I'd like to take a few extra precautions. I need you to keep your stress levels down. I know it's been difficult with the crash and your apartment, your work, and Todd, but I need you to forget about them."

"How?" I croaked through my sniffles.

"Well, you're staying with Dylan and I, so you can keep staying with us. It allows me to keep an eye on you and removes the stress of apartment hunting. I know you have your business, and it's going well so that takes care of that. And as for Todd..."

He glanced at Ren and wrinkled his nose slightly.

"Ignore him," Ren stated. "He doesn't deserve you; frankly, this is more important."

"Agreed," Isaac sighed. "And I say this as a medical professional as well. I need you to take it easy from day one. Limit your stress."

"Really? I can stay with you? Okay," I nodded as a strange sense of numbness swept over me. "I think I'm in shock."

"You didn't believe the blood test?" Isaac asked.

"I was too scared it was another trick," I chuckled.

"You know what this means," Ren beamed as he slid from the bed and held out his hand for me to take.

"Your baby will be born in December. It's the Christmas miracle you asked for."

LOUISE

A baby shower was something I had played repeatedly in my mind over the years, constantly working out little details and daydreaming about what it would be like to have all the people I adored around me celebrating my baby. Jenny had thrown herself into action the moment I'd given her the good news, and she had worked even harder to keep it a secret.

That had been equally exciting and irritating all at the same time, and anytime I tried to ask a question or offer my thoughts, she immediately shut me down. The guys had remained tight-lipped too, and for good reason.

Returning from my two-month check-up with Ren and Isaac, my time away from the apartment had given Jenny, Dylan, and Carter enough time to whip the living room up into a glittering baby paradise. A table in the corner was laden with all my favorite food—minus cakes because, as Dylan put it, no one's cake could compare to mine. An egg piñata hung in the opposite corner, ready to spill forth baby treats, the walls were decorated in yellow tinsel and hand-made posters exclaiming excitement for my Christmas baby, and another table near the window was filled with activities.

“Jenny, you've outdone yourself!” I exclaimed, making a beeline for her and her partner. She pulled me into a tight hug, and I buried my face into her neck just for a moment. So much had happened in such a small amount of time, and she had been with me through the thick and the thin.

“Nonsense,” she chuckled as we broke apart. “You deserve it! Now the presents in the corner are from other friends at the hospital and the salon, people who couldn’t make it because they’re too busy.”

“But it’s a revolving door,” Dylan spoke up from the snack table. “So people will drop by if they have time.”

“Oh, it’s amazing!” Warmth throbbed behind my eyes, and within thirty seconds, I was tearing, laughing softly as I dabbed around my makeup. “I don’t know why I’m crying!”

“It’s because you’re pregnant,” Jenny chuckled as she brushed my arm. “Everything good in that department?”

“Oh yes,” I nodded vigorously.

“She’s in good hands,” Isaac said, approaching with two drinks in his hands. “Trust me.”

“Oh, I do,” Jenny grinned, “but it’s my job to double-check these things.”

Isaac passed me some squash and laughed. “Check away, my dear.”

True to Dylan’s words, the door was revolving. As the afternoon wore on and I threw myself into activities, members from the hospital and more dropped by to offer congratulations and share in the food and activities Jenny had set up. We decorated plain baby onesies with paint and glitter, painted eggs to try and guess the sex of the baby, and hit the piñata with too many swings to count, covering everyone in a shower of glitter and chocolate.

Still, more people dropped by and left, offering well wishes and more but in the back of my mind, there lingered a shadow.

Not even sitting on the sofa surrounded by the men I loved and friends I adored could shift that shadow. Carter, Isaac, Dylan, and Ren had all worked hard to get the afternoon clear for the day, and I was making the most of it as I tore into all the presents. Wrapping paper coated the floor as I opened baby toys, clothes for a variety of ages, coupons for the local health and beauty store, baby care items, and several pampering

products that Jenny pointedly exclaimed had to be used regularly.

The day was *fantastic*, and when evening rolled around, I was full of food and happy.

Mostly.

Jenny and her partner lingered with each other near the baby onesies, deep in conversation. Carter began lazily cleaning up glitter and wrapping paper while the others inhaled the rest of the food as if they had been starved. It was amusing to watch, and I hugged my glass to my chest with one hand, watching.

This was fantastic.

But it was missing one very important thing, one thing that had never been missing from any of my daydreams.

Jenny kissed her partner's cheek and crossed the room to me, patting my arm when she arrived.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm good. Just tired."

"Sure, but there's something else going on," Jenny replied. "I can tell."

I glanced at Ren and Dylan, who had burst out laughing over something while Isaac cuddled and rocked Whiskey to keep her away from the treat table.

"Did... did you invite Todd?"

"Yes." Jenny sighed and crossed her arms. "I sent him multiple invites, actually, and a very stern voicemail, but he never replied to any of them. I'm sorry, Louise."

"I never..." Emotion clogged my throat for a second and I swallowed. "I've never pictured this day without him, y'know? Anytime I was dreaming about finally having a baby and getting to celebrate, he was always here with me."

"I know," she soothed, reaching out and clasping my elbow.

“I’ve tried to talk to him, but he just won’t hear it. Is this what I have to face now?” I glanced back at the guys. “This is what my family looks like now, without my brother?”

“Do you regret it?” Jenny asked softly.

“Oh, God no.” I shook my head, eyes snapping back to her. “Not for a second. I just... I never thought I would get this far with any of them, so I never thought I would have to face him not being here. But he’s really not.”

“I think it’s his own fault,” Jenny snorted. “I mean, really, he knows his friends are great guys, so why wouldn’t he want people he trusted dating his sister?”

“He’s always been protective,” I replied. “Although Natalie never liked me. I can’t imagine she’s been saying nice things about me.”

“He should know you better than that.” Jenny frowned and pressed her palms flat together. “He should know *you* better than anyone.”

“We’re easily influenced when we’re upset, I guess.”

“Hey now, you shouldn’t try and justify or excuse his actions. If he doesn’t care, then that’s on him. You’ve done nothing wrong, and even with outside influence, he’s his own person capable of his own decision.”

“You’re right.” I straightened up and drained the last mouthful of my drink. “I think I’m just going to be sad about it for a little while.”

“That’s okay,” Jenny smiled. “Just not too sad, I hope.”

“Oh, definitely not,” I laughed, stroking a hand down over my stomach. “Anytime I even feel remotely down, I remember I’m pregnant and then I feel like I’m in a dream.”

“The best kind of dream,” Jenny agreed.

As the party came to a close, Jenny and her partner said goodnight; I was surprised by how quickly exhaustion swept over me. Carrying a few plates into the kitchen, they were immediately swiped from my hands by Isaac, who had soap suds up to his elbows.

“No,” he said sternly. “Go and rest, doctor’s orders.”

“It’s just some plates. I want to be helpful.”

“No,” repeated Dylan, his hands landing on my waist from behind and he guided me back a few steps. “Go and relax, we’ve got this.”

My heart fluttered slightly, and when I turned around, Dylan pressed a sweet kiss to my cheek, dissolving any further argument in my thoughts. Returning to the living room, I settled on the sofa, and Whiskey immediately launched herself up to settle by my legs. With one hand on her fur, my other scrolled through my phone, and I found my way to Todd’s messages. We hadn’t texted in months; all the messages were just me trying to reach out and getting nothing in return.

He was missing out on one of the most important parts of my life. I typed a text saying just that but couldn’t hit send. It sat in the text box as I read it over. After a deep sigh, I deleted it and closed the app.

Jenny was right. It was his choice not to be here.

That didn’t stop my heart from breaking, just a little, that my only remaining family hadn’t bothered to congratulate me.

Was this the end?

Todd gone... forever?

CARTER

“**D**octor Roswell to Room 319. Doctor Roswell to Room 319.”

The overhead announcement crackled to life again, and I hurried down the corridor, making a beeline for the required room. Despite being the pediatric attending, sometimes my expertise was required outside of my department. It was rather exciting for me. I liked involving myself in other cases to keep my surgery skills sharp. Hurrying into the room, I smiled politely at the woman in the bed even as my heart sank at the sight of Todd.

“Hi there, how can I help?”

“This is Mrs. Plushe. She had some questions about the care of her child after birth.”

“Of course!”

The next twenty minutes were spent answering all of Mrs. Plushe’s questions, from common concerns to the darker twists of an unsettled mind. It was always good to put a worried mind at ease but through it all, Todd’s presence was a thorn in my side. He hadn’t spoken a word to me—outside of professional courtesy—since his fight with Ren and Isaac, and it was incredibly frustrating that all these weeks had passed and he hadn’t done anything to make amends.

Missing Louise’s baby shower just added to that frustration.

When Mrs. Plushe was settled, I departed the room and bit back a groan as I headed down to the staff room. That was my last task of the day. It was time to go home, mull over things, and stew slightly over a beer. That was my plan until I walked into the staff room to see Todd had beaten me to it. I intended on keeping to myself until Todd slammed the locker hard enough to grate on my already irritated nerves.

“You’re acting like a real asshole, you know that right?” I bit out, keeping my focus on my locker. Todd paused at the corner of my eye.

“What?”

“You.” I turned to face him, unthreading my tie. “Your overreaction is reaching new heights, cutting me and the others out of your life. Cutting *Louise* out of your life.”

Todd’s gaze narrowed and his jaw clenched so hard there was an audible clack of teeth.

“What the fuck would you know about it?”

“What would I know? I’m one of the best friends you’re cutting out, you *ass*. It affects me just like all the others, and for what?”

“Friends?” Todd scoffed and reopened his locker, shoving his stethoscope inside. “I’m ashamed I ever called you *friends*.”

“Cry me a fucking river,” I laughed. “How childish can you be? What’s happened doesn’t erase years of friendship no matter how much you think it might. And even with all of that, did you ever forget the part where we’re adults?”

“Oh, really?” Todd wrestled out of his shirt, his movements tight and restrained.

“Yes. While you were throwing fists and tantrums, you forgot that we’re all adults capable of making our own decisions. And that decision happens to be making your sister happy. Which makes us— makes me happy. And instead of being happy for your friends and your sister, you’ve turned this into some sort of *end-of-the-world* disaster.”

“My sister was off limits,” Todd growled, slamming the locker with more force this time.

“She isn’t a piece of meat,” I snapped back. “You can’t decide that for her. I know you took on a lot of responsibility as her guardian, but she’s grown. She’s moved past that and is living her own life. You’re *missing* that because... why? Why is it such a bad thing that we have feelings for her?”

“It’s not right,” Todd snapped. “For one thing, she’s a lot younger than any of you, and for another, *all* of you? Not just one, but *all* of you decided to have a piece of her? How she managed to do that when she’s—”

Immediately my heart started to pound with restrained anger. “She’s what, Todd? Because she’s not a doctor? Because she’s plus-sized? Because she’s eager for a baby? What’s the reason huh?”

Todd glared at me, his jaw working but no words came out.

“Come on, what twisted argument from Natalie are you going to spew next? Because everything you’ve said so far sounds like her. It never used to be a problem because I never thought she could warp your own view that much, but for you to think those things about your own sister? The person that has been there for you through thick and thin?”

“*Natalie* has been there for me,” Todd barked angrily, but his sudden defensiveness over the topic told me otherwise. “And she’s right to be concerned. Louise is reckless, sleeping around and catching all sorts of diseases, and then wanting to bring a child into that when she can’t even hold down a job or a home? Never mind managing her weight!” Todd’s chest heaved when he finished and suddenly, unexpectedly, my anger melted away.

I laughed. Every word from Todd hardly sounded like his own, but he believed it enough to fuel his misplaced anger at us and Louise for just living our lives. Maybe that was his stance now, maybe not. Either way, this was a waste of my time.

“What’s so fucking funny?”

I closed my locker softly and sighed. “You know, just because you’re unhappy in your engagement, Todd, doesn’t mean you get to shit all over us. Sure, what’s happened between myself, Louise, and the others might not be conventional, but you know what?” I grabbed my jacket and slipped it on. “We’re happy. And honest with each other. There’s no judgment. We care about each other, and work as a team to make sure everyone is looked after.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Todd snapped, but he lacked some of the fire from before. In fact, his entire stance had wilted slightly. I think I hit the nail on the head. “I’m fine. I don’t need to fuck multiple people to be satisfied.”

“Maybe you should,” I snorted. “It’ll open you up a little. Can’t you see what you’re missing out on? All of us as friends, the nights at the bar? Movie nights? Sports tickets? The laughter that keeps us going through the death here? Your own sister’s baby shower? You’re missing it all and... why? What good reason can you actually give me to be so angry?”

“It’s wrong,” Todd snapped.

“Is it? Is it really?”

“Yes. Either she’ll realize she loves one more than the other and rip you all apart, or you’ll grow apart from her, break her heart, and then who will be there to pick up the pieces, huh?” Todd took a step forward and I raised a brow, daring him to give me the same treatment he’d given to poor Ren. “It’s not *right*.”

“No,” I sighed. “It’s just something that doesn’t fit into the conventional box that lives in your mind. You can’t see past your own experiences to even consider that maybe, just *maybe*, love exists as more than the rigid hetero-normative formula you think we should all live by.”

Todd remained silent, his eyes narrowed, and his body was a tense line.

Turning, I strode out of the locker room only to pause at the door with one hand on the wall. Then, I glanced back at

Todd.

“Todd... if you’re not careful, when you finally wake up and realize that Natalie is not for you because you have different viewpoints and want different things, you’ll find that you’re all alone with no one around you. You’re taking your misplaced anger out on the wrong people, and we’re not going to give you grace forever. Just think about it, before you end up alone.”

With that I left, leaving Todd to his thoughts and only a sliver of hope that anything I’d said would actually get through to him.

I’d tried, much to his pushback. For Louise, I had to try.

LOUISE

“M mm, a little harder, please,” I groaned softly, popping another juicy grape slathered in peanut butter into my mouth.

Stretched out on the couch, Dylan was settled on the other side, using his incredibly talented hands to massage my sore feet and swollen ankles. The late summer heat was doing a number on every part of my body, but I was incredibly lucky that all four of my men were eager to help.

“Like this?” Dylan asked, gently caressing my ankle and pressing firmly into the arch of my foot.

I groaned long and low. “Oh God, yes.”

“Better than sex, huh?” Dylan chuckled.

“So much better.”

“I’ll keep that in mind the next time you wake me up because you’re horny. The *I’m five months pregnant* excuse won’t work now.”

“Oh sure,” I moaned softly as the throbbing ache in my feet slowly began to ease. “Like you could resist me.”

“I absolutely could,” Dylan said firmly. I glanced down at him, and his adorable smile and pink cheeks told me the complete opposite.

“Okay, sure,” I teased. “We’ll see how well you resist me next time.” Placing a hand on my swollen belly, I hit play on the remote, and the *Mother’s Health* video resumed playing on

the television. Isaac had warned me to be careful of the media I consumed since there were a lot of professionals *claiming* to have the best advice for pregnant mothers, but these videos were the only thing that put my mind at ease. I wanted to learn everything so I could keep myself in good health and give my baby the best start in life.

Just like any mother wanted.

“Have you thought anymore about baby names?” Dylan asked. I popped another grape into my mouth and glanced away from the woman detailing what light exercises could help minimize back pain.

“Yes and no. I keep yo-yoing about whether it’ll be a boy or a girl, or whether I should pick something gender-neutral so they can have a good start without the pressure of gender norms, y’know? Let them be who they want to be.”

“That’s fair,” Dylan nodded. “A lot of names these days can fit into that category, I think. Look at mine, I knew two girls with my name growing up.”

“I do like your name.” I smiled softly. “Okay, so I’ve thought about Sarah, Catherine, or Natasha for a girl. And I like Jackson, Oliver, or Mark for a boy. Or there’s Rowan, Taylor, or Logan for in the middle.”

“Not Mark,” Dylan laughed, his cheeks turning rosy. “That kid’s going to be doing my taxes before they’re out of diapers.”

“Oh no, do you think so?” I groaned, tipping my head back. “I liked it because it was my Dad’s name.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry.” Dylan’s hands paused on my ankle, and my head snapped up with a smirk.

“Ha. Got you.”

“What?!” Dylan gasped and then laughed, joining me in the amusement as he tipped his head. “Touché.”

“Honestly, it’s so hard to pick a name. How do you choose something that will be used to label someone for the rest of their life? And I don’t want to pick something that they would

hate or get them bullied by other children or anything like that.”

“Louise, I think that whatever you choose, it will be beautiful because you will be doing everything you can to make this baby’s life beautiful. We all will.”

Immediately I started to tear up, and Whiskey, who had become super tuned to my emotions throughout the pregnancy, whined softly.

“You can’t say stuff like that,” I whimpered. “It sets me off.”

“Oh, love,” Dylan chuckled softly. “I’m sorry. It’s just the truth.”

A few minutes of sniffing, the wave of emotion faded just as the woman in the video started to discuss the importance of balancing responsibilities in a relationship.

“Louise?”

“Mm-hmm?”

“Do you think you will ever find out who the father is?” Dylan asked.

That had been on my mind frequently, especially the longer the pregnancy went on.

“I... is that something you’d want me to do?” I asked.

Dylan shook his head quickly, his fluffy red hair waving back and forth. “Not exactly. For me, I feel like it’s your choice.”

“I have no intentions of finding out,” I said softly. “As far as I’m concerned, right now, it feels like this little family we have will love and care for the baby regardless, and that’s all I want. However...” Pausing, I popped another grape into my mouth. “I would do it for medical reasons, so we know which family history might relate to the baby, but I don’t want to be told if that makes sense?”

“Yes,” Dylan murmured with a smile. “That makes perfect sense. Health reasons are a good reason to know that sort of

thing, especially with allergies and family illness.”

“Exactly. I want my baby to be loved, and it... it still kind of blows my mind how supportive everyone is. I just want to make sure this little one has a good, loving family.” As soon as those words left me, my heart dropped faintly as Todd entered my mind. He still refused to talk to me, and I’d learned from the others that they were slowly pulling back from him too.

It filled me with guilt to think of Todd losing his friends. It had left me completely distraught one night, but Ren had held me through it. He had been firm in stating that this was their choice. They all chose to be with me, to care for me, and while they wanted Todd’s blessing, his choices were his own.

“Louise?” Dylan slid a hand up my calf. “You okay?”

“Sorry, I was just... thinking about Todd.”

“Oh.” Dylan’s lips pressed together. “Still nothing?”

I shook my head. “And yet I still hope.”

“Understandable.”

Whiskey suddenly whined once more, rising from her basket and padding over to nose at my outstretched hand.

“Hey, sweetie, what’s wrong?”

Whiskey tilted her head, and a second later, my bladder clenched. I laughed and slowly sat up.

“I swear she’s more in tune with my body than I am.”

“Dogs are smart.” Dylan grinned. “I’ve read all sorts of things about how they tune into their owners and babies; it’s incredible.”

“At this point, she’s just a clock pointing out when I have to pee,” I laughed. Dylan stood and offered his hands out, helping me stand, and I pressed a chaste kiss to his lips.

“Be right back.”

With Whiskey hot on my heels, I headed off to the bathroom. She followed me closely, darting into the bathroom before me and settling in the corner by the bath. Whiskey had

grown as protective as the others, and it was infinitely more adorable with her, considering how small she was. Stroking her ears, I closed the door, pulled down my tights, and settled down to relieve myself.

Then, something dark caught my eye and my gaze dropped to my underwear. My panties were splattered with bright red blood and my heart froze in my chest. Instantly my first thought was my period, until my very pregnant belly twinged and reminded me of how impossible that was. An iron band sealed around my chest, and I snatched up some toilet paper, reaching between my legs to wipe.

The paper came back covered in crimson and a pulse of painful alarm shot through me from head to toe.

Oh no. No no no!

This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Not now. This had to be some sort of mistake. I tossed the tissue and grabbed more, wiping between my legs but each sheet came away soaked in blood and panic seized in my chest.

"Dylan!" I screamed, sending Whiskey up onto her feet in a flurry of barks. There was no pain I could register other than the pounding of my heart. With trembling hands and weak legs, I tried to find the strength to stand as the world around me blurred. My eyes flooded and the tang of acid crawled up my throat.

No, this had to be some sort of mistake. I couldn't be bleeding; I couldn't because that would mean—

Dylan came crashing into the bathroom, his eyes wide and his mouth parted as I cradled my stomach.

"Louise! What happened—" He stopped, his eyes dropping to the discarded bloody tissues.

"I'm bleeding," I sobbed, "Dylan, I'm bleeding!"

"Fuck! Louise, it's okay, it could be any number of things—fuck!"

He darted forward and touched my shoulder, then sprinted from the room and disappeared down the hall. I found myself

rocking slightly, staring down at the crimson-stained tissues and fighting against the numbness sweeping through my mind, followed by the dark, twisted thoughts that followed.

Did this mean what I feared it meant?

Dylan came sprinting back a minute later with the phone pressed to his ear.

“Come on, Louise. I’m taking you to the hospital.”

LOUISE

I was too cocky. I had grown too comfortable with the idea that this baby, this tiny, adorable baby, was going to actually be mine. It was foolish, and I should have known better.

I should have been more careful.

Those thoughts, and more, swirled around my mind like poison when Dylan drove me to the hospital, breaking a few rules of the road on the way. A cavernous pit of dread had opened up in my chest, muting the flutter of my heart and swallowing down every emotion other than a solid, sharp spear lodged in my gut.

What had I done? What had I done to my baby?

Dylan called everyone he could get his hands on when we reached the hospital, but with my other lovers tied up in various responsibilities, it was down to another doctor I had never met to deal with my care under Dylan's anxious eye.

I didn't cry. Tears couldn't form. All emotion had been sucked into the pit in my chest, and nothing existed other than an odd quietness broken briefly by bursts of my rampant, panicked thoughts. Those would fly around my mind for a few minutes before coming to the conclusion that I had done something wrong and was losing my baby.

Then the silence would return and numbness would spread. A nurse deposited me in a bed and sent for the on-call ob-gyn, then left the room. Dylan paced as frantically as my own thoughts.

“I like August,” Dylan said suddenly. “It’s one of my favorite months. The end of Summer, the start of the colder months. It’s fun. I like August.”

He was trying to distract me, or maybe himself; I couldn’t tell, but it certainly wasn’t working. His face was pale and pinched, making his red hair stand out even starker in the egg-white room. I watched him, wanting to tell him that everything was okay, and that urge to comfort him came with a sickening, quiet acceptance that everything with me was not okay.

My baby was not okay.

Seconds turned into years, slipping by like sludge, and I fixated on the ceiling, counting the tiles as I waited. The chill silence that kept creeping over me would send shivers down my spine, goosebumps up my arms, and then vanish.

Should I be crying? Should I be yelling and screaming? I didn’t know what to do in this situation, but any thoughts of pain were swallowed by the pit, and I was empty, in a sense.

My hands remained on my belly until the ob-gyn arrived, and she greeted me with a small, concerned smile.

“You’ve had some bleeding?” she asked, setting up the ultrasound and talking as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Yes,” I replied tightly.

Dylan finally stopped pacing and dropped onto the stool next to me, taking my hand. I didn’t grip his back; I couldn’t. None of my limbs worked the way I needed them to. I was too fixated on the doctor.

She moved in slow motion, making small talk with Dylan, but I couldn’t decipher what she was saying, as if the words weren’t even English. She pulled down the blanket, parted my clothes, and squeezed jelly onto my swollen belly. Then she pressed the wand against my skin and started to search.

I couldn’t look. My gaze remained fixated upward, tracking the movement of the wand over my skin, and yet the actual sensation was foreign. It was like I was aware of the touch, but the actual contact didn’t feel like anything. A

distant pressure in my mind rather than my body. Dylan's hands tightened around mine and I swallowed hard, waiting.

How would she tell me? All I could think about was how she would give me the same sad smile everyone gave me when my parents passed, or when Isaac had told me IVF hadn't worked. She'd pat my hand, tell me she was sorry, and I would exist in a world where I was truly unable to be a mother.

"Louise?" Dylan's voice cut through my thoughts, and his eyes, shining with unshed tears, came into view above me. "Louise?"

"Hm?" It was then I realized the doctor had been speaking to me, but since her words didn't sound like English, I hadn't registered what she was saying. I dared to glance over at her, and a pleasant, comforting smile rested on her lips.

"Louise, your baby is fine," she repeated, turning the ultrasound monitor toward me. "See? Alive and healthy."

I stared at the monitor. "What?"

"The baby's okay," Dylan repeated, rubbing one hand over my knuckles. "You're okay."

"My... baby?"

"I'm a little concerned about the bleeding. Do I have your permission to take a look?" The doctor stood, pulling on some gloves, and I nodded slowly, unable to take my eyes off the screenshot of my baby alive and well.

My baby was okay.

The doctor lifted my ankles into the stirrups and began her examination while I stared in numb shock at the screen. Every poisonous, twisted thought that had consumed my mind since I sat on that toilet had been a lie.

"Okay," the doctor hummed, and she straightened up. "You can lower your legs. Now, the bleeding isn't anything to be concerned about. I know it can look scary, but it seems you have a small tissue tear in your vagina. These are common in women of your stature having to deal with the extra weight from a growing baby."

I blinked and my eyes blurred.

“I’ll do some blood work since you’re here, but going forward, due to the nature of risk that comes with your pregnancy and what’s in your file, I’d like to reaffirm that you need to be resting as much as possible. You cannot push yourself, understand?”

Suddenly the door burst open and Ren, panting heavily, spilled into the room.

“Louise! Is everything okay?!”

The moment I saw him, I burst into tears. Terrible, harsh sobs ripped from my chest and fat tears poured down my cheeks. The cavernous pit in my chest swelled full and burst, causing a sudden rush of painful sensation through my body and pressure like a weight landed on my chest. Ren swept forward and gathered me to his chest, squinting over the bed.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “What’s wrong?”

“I—I—” Struggling to get the words out, Dylan spoke for me, still gently caressing my hand.

“She was bleeding a lot, and I thought—we thought there was something wrong with the baby.”

“There isn’t,” the doctor assured sweetly, snapping off her gloves. “But she does need to be more careful with how she handles things.”

I buried my face into Ren’s neck and clutched at his clothes like a lifeline until the tips of my fingers ached. Emotion, raw and painful, poured from me as I cried out all the fear and alarm I hadn’t dared to fully acknowledge, along with the sharp, clear relief that my baby was okay.

“How careful?” Ren asked above me, stroking a hand through my hair.

“Bed rest when possible, keeping her stress levels down, and if she is exercising, it must remain gentle. I know it will be hard, but this is all in her best interest.”

“Thank you,” Ren replied tightly, his impossibly firm grip becoming the only thing holding me together.

“I’d like to do some bloodwork too, but I can come back for that in a little while.”

“Appreciated,” Dylan said.

Ren held me close for a few long minutes, and then he pulled back. His warm hands stroked at my tear-stained face as I hiccuped and wept, and he gently removed hair from my face and dried tears with his thumbs.

“Hey, hey Louise, it’s okay. Everything is okay,” he soothed.

“You’re safe,” Dylan said softly. “And so is the baby.”

“I was—was so scared,” I wept. “I thought I’d ruined it all, and my baby was—was—” I sagged forward and Ren circled his arms around me, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

“I know,” he said tightly, emotion catching in his voice. “I know that was scary but you’re okay. Everything is okay. Your baby is happy and healthy, and we’ll enforce some new rules, okay?”

He pulled back and cupped my cheek, tilting my head up slightly.

“You’re not in this alone.”

“Not at all,” Dylan affirmed.

The tears kept coming slowly as I cried out my fear, relief filled its place, and my sobs began to die down.

I was safe. My baby was safe. And I had a support network around me, ready to hold me up when I didn’t have the strength.

However, I would need to be more careful. I didn’t want to face another scare like this ever again.

“And if you think about it,” Dylan chuckled softly. “Now you have another good reason to boss us all around.”

“Just what I need,” I croaked as I rested my head on Ren’s shoulder, closing my eyes.

“Let’s get you home,” Ren soothed.

ISAAC

I stood over Louise, a glass of water in my hand, and watched her sleep. Getting out of surgery to a voicemail from Dylan had been more terrifying than I was prepared to admit. Having spent months with Louise, witnessing her care and determination to have a baby, and then knowing she faced a few hours fearing the worst without being able to comfort her; it was tough. I'd rushed home and spent twenty minutes with her before her request for water.

She'd fallen asleep in the time it took me to return to her room. I studied her dark lashes resting on the soft rise of her cheek, the way her lips were slightly parted, and how her purple curls—kept a glorious shade thanks to Jenny—fanned out behind her. Every time I was near her, I never wanted to look away.

Placing the glass down on the bedside, I gently kissed her forehead and tucked the sheets up a little firmer around her shoulders. Moving the fabric caused Whiskey, who was curled at the bottom of the bed, to grumble, and I gave her an affectionate pat before I left the room.

What a day.

“How is she?” Carter asked as I entered the kitchen.

“Asleep, thankfully.”

“I was worried she wouldn't be calm enough to sleep,” Dylan sighed, his hands wrapped around a beer. Ren grunted his agreement, sitting on the counter with an untouched beer resting lightly against one knee.

“I think our presence helped.” I dropped onto a bar stool and groaned, rubbing my hands down my face. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there.”

“Don’t be,” Dylan said. “She was supported. Although I will admit, she did freak me out when she was all... emotionless and quiet. I was really worried something had snapped.”

“If she loses this baby...” Ren shook his head, popped the cap on his drink, and took a gulp.

“She won’t,” I replied firmly. “Not if I have anything to do with it.”

“She shouldn’t be alone.” Carter tipped his beer slightly from side to side. “Not after this. It’s lucky Dylan was here, but if this had happened and she was alone?”

“We can be thankful it didn’t,” I replied, “but I agree. I don’t want her alone either.”

“Schedules?” Dylan suggested, crossing to the fridge and beginning to rummage around for some food. “Mine is pretty set for the next month, so I can easily take Sunday to Tuesday. After that, it gets crazy.”

“I’m on late for the next few weeks, but I can take mornings if you don’t mind me crashing here,” Carter offered.

“I’m off night shift for a few weeks, so I can take nights.”

“Sounds like a start.” Pulling out my phone, I started typing out a chart that I linked to everyone else. “If you put your shifts in here when you get them, we can fill in time around that. It’ll auto-highlight when you’re available. I know I’m asking a lot—”

“No, you’re not,” Ren cut in, and he fixed me with a firm stare. “I won’t speak for the others, but I mean it when I say I will. I’ll give up every spare second I have for her. Anything to get her through this.”

“Same,” Dylan replied quietly.

“Me too,” Carter nodded.

Warmth bloomed in my chest as I nodded. “Alright. If there’s ever a point where schedules conflict, we need a backup plan.”

“Jenny?” Carter offered. “At the baby shower, she said she was desperate to help; we just had to let her know when and where.”

“Can you call her?” I asked.

“Sure, as soon as it’s not four a.m.,” he chuckled.

“Excellent. If we add her to this, we can call her to see if she’s free when things cross.” I shifted my glasses further up my nose and studied the table, then a paper plate with a slice of cold pizza landed in front of me from Dylan.

“Eat,” he instructed.

“I’m fine.”

“Bullshit. Eat it. You came straight here from your shift, and I know how you take your breaks. Eat it.”

I lifted my gaze to Dylan and he raised a brow, daring me to argue back. I relented quickly. “Fine.” My first bite betrayed how hungry I was, and the slice was finished in seconds.

“I think I’m in love with her,” Ren said suddenly. “Like... way more than I ever thought I could feel for anyone, y’know?” He glanced around at the rest of us, his darting eyes betraying his nerves. “I don’t want to make it weird for anyone, but I have to say it. It’s been chewing me up for weeks now. Months, even.”

Carter and I exchanged a look. Ren’s confession was hardly surprising considering what we all knew about one another and our previous discussions, but hearing him admit it so raw was admirable.

“Me too,” Dylan piped up. “I don’t mean that in a competitive way, it’s just... it’s like it’s always been there, and now it’s really obvious.”

“I know that feeling,” I admitted quietly.

“Same,” Carter agreed, and he glanced at Ren. “You’re not going to fight us for her, are you?”

“No,” Ren laughed, finishing his beer and accepting an offered pizza slice from Dylan. “That part hasn’t changed. I don’t feel... jealous at all. Only comforted that she has you guys, that she has all of us. It feels so natural.”

“Careful, you sound like you’re preparing for your Thanksgiving speech.” Carter teased.

“Oh, speaking of.” Dylan slid a slice to Carter and puffed out his cheeks. “We should plan that. Louise did it last year but this year, I think it should be us. If there’s a way we can get the time off this early in advance, we should take it.”

“All of us?” I asked. “Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to, but I’d rather have Christmas.”

“Speaking of Thanksgiving...”

All our attention turned to Carter.

“I overheard Todd and Natalie arguing in the on-call room today. Something about the holidays.”

Ren’s expression immediately darkened. “Fuck Todd.”

“He’s still her brother,” Dylan pointed out.

“So? It’s been months and the fucker hasn’t made any move to an apology. As far as I’m concerned, he can go and fuck himself.”

“You’re only saying that because he kicked your ass,” I smirked around my mouthful. Ren chucked his paper plate through the air, and I laughed. “No, in all seriousness, though, I agree. We’ve extended him every courtesy and tried to talk to him. He’s given us nothing. He isn’t invited. He’s all about Natalie and their engagement, so whatever.”

“Dude wouldn’t know commitment if it bit him on the ass,” Carter snorted.

“He’s still her brother, is all I’m saying,” Dylan said. “If he changes his mind, if he comes back, she’ll want him around.”

So maybe we should invite him because we know she'd want us to."

I glanced around at all of them, and my shoulders dropped. Dylan was right. For Louise, it was the right thing to do.

"Fine." I groaned. "But I'll ask Louise first. If she says no, then he's not getting an invite."

We fell into a sleepy silence, drinking the last of the beers and eating cold pizza until Dylan stood, his stool scraping back, and he placed both hands on his hips.

"So... I want to do something. I don't know what or how because there's four of us, and I don't even know how the logistics would work, but I want to do something."

"About?" I prompted with a laugh. Dylan's lack of detail left me confused.

"About Louise."

"Context is your friend here, buddy," Carted grinned, slumping against the table.

"I want to show her I'm here for her, really here for her. That we all are. And it's not like I can propose to her because fuck knows how that would work with all of us feeling the same," Dylan said.

It clicked suddenly in my sleep-addled mind, what he was trying to say, and I straightened up with a smile.

"That's actually an amazing idea."

"What could we do?" Carter asked from where his head came to rest on his elbow. "I mean, other than telling her over and over that we love her, we want her, and our family is going to be the best thing in existence."

I reached over and patted Carter's shoulder. "You're drunk."

"Lies," Carter snorted.

"A commitment ceremony," Ren said suddenly as he slid forward, elbows on the table. "It would be perfect for all of us

because conventional proposals and marriage, all of that won't fly. But that kind of ceremony?"

"What is it?" asked Dylan.

"It's... sort of like a wedding without all the legal stuff. We can sign an agreement, get dressed up, have rings and speeches to commit our love and promise, but it doesn't have all the pressure of a marriage. It just... shows Louise that we're here for her, that we're all committed to her while keeping it light like she's always asked for."

Murmurs of agreement swept around the table.

"When?" I asked. "If she says yes. When?"

"Christmas," Ren declared. "It's her favorite time of year, one year since we started trying to have a baby, and if it's after her baby is born, it'll be magical. Right?"

Honesty really did rise when alcohol was involved.

"Christmas it is," I agreed. "I'll start making some calls."

REN

“Nancy, have I ever told you that you look fabulous with a perm? Your bone structure is just *perfect* for it.”

Nancy looked at me over her wire spectacles and pursed her lips. “Where on earth did you get that from?”

“I watched *Legally Blonde* with Louise last night,” I explained with a chuckle. “I learned a lot.”

“Did you now?”

“I also learned how to make these.” Lifting the opaque container I had behind my back, I set it down next to the sign declaring Nancy’s full name and position within the administrative department. It was her magic that could secure me time off on Christmas Eve for the commitment ceremony.

Nancy took the box, arching a penciled brow as she opened it, and the moment she spotted the French Fancies inside, her pursed lips melted into a smile.

“You made these?”

“Technically. I was under Louise’s very strict instructions, so they are baked to perfection just for you.” It had been fun, if a little stressful. Who knew how terribly surgical skills could translate to baking.

Nancy lifted the box and breathed in the warm smell before she snapped the container shut and set it aside. “Okay, what are you bribing me for?”

“Christmas Eve.” I gave her my best puppy dog eyes and pressed my palms flat on the counter. “You should know why if the invite reached you?”

Nancy’s cheeks suddenly flushed pink, and she nodded. “I did! I wasn’t expecting an invite at all.”

“You’ve always made her feel welcome,” I replied. “But remember, it’s a secret.”

“Oh, of course.” Nancy nodded and turned to her computer. “Well, since you worked over Christmas last year, you are on the list to get this one off. I’ll put it through for you.”

“Thanks, Nancy, you’re a rockstar!” I pushed up off the counter and beamed. “Enjoy the cakes!”

No sooner had I left her office than the sound of the container snapping open reached my ears, and I chuckled to myself all the way down the hall. Planning a commitment ceremony in secret was a challenge, especially with Thanksgiving also creeping around the corner, but Jenny was my secret weapon. It was her job to find out which dress Louise would love, and what decorations she would adore without giving the game away.

I was so caught up in these thoughts that I didn’t notice Todd had joined me at the nurse’s station until he cleared his throat. I glanced up from the chart I was filling in, then quickly glanced around to see if I was in the way of something he needed. I couldn’t see anything, though, and immediately frowned as distaste swept through my gut.

“What?”

Todd glanced up from the files he spread out on the desk, his eyes darting about nervously.

“I uh... I saw you’d managed to book Christmas Eve off,” Todd said.

Was he actually trying to make conversation with me? I half expected another fist to fly.

“Yep.” I was not going to put in the effort here.

“The others, too,” he said after a beat. “All off for Christmas.”

“Yep.”

Silence fell.

“Is that... when Louise is due?”

I scribbled some details down on the file, letting the silence drag out a little longer, and then I shook my head. “No. She’s due at the end of November, the start of December depending.”

“Oh.” He returned to his files, and I continued filling in my charts. Why was he suddenly showing interest? Dylan’s words from before rang in my ears, that how I felt about Todd didn’t matter because he was Louise’s brother, and she had a huge heart. It wasn’t my place to dictate or influence their relationship in any way, but I certainly wasn’t going to give Todd information that he should get from Louise herself.

“Must be weird,” Todd spoke up again, rubbing his chin with his gaze down.

Fine, I’ll bite.

“What?”

“I said it must be weird.” Todd lifted his head and gave me a nervous glance. “All the baby stuff.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied shortly. “It’s not me that’s pregnant.”

“Yeah I...” Todd trailed off. “I heard Louise was in the hospital the other week.”

“She’s here pretty regularly, Todd, you know that,” I said coolly.

“An emergency, though, I heard.”

There it was. He was beating around the bush, looking for information on Louise for whatever reason. Maybe the news of her scare had reached him, and it had kick-started that protective, brotherly instinct that used to drive him, or he was seeking gossip. I couldn’t be sure; honestly, I wasn’t sure I

wanted to know either way. I signed my name at the bottom of the chart and snapped it closed.

“Todd, if you want to know how Louise is, then you should talk to her yourself, okay?” I handed the chart to the nurse, capped my pen, and fixed him with a cold look. “I’m not going to tell you anything. Anything you want to ask, anything you feel like you should know, should come from her. I won’t speak for her, and you’re perfectly capable of picking up the phone you’ve been ignoring for months.”

Then I turned and strode off down the corridor, intent on leaving my distaste behind, but Todd followed me, scurrying up like some kind of rodent. Then again, my feelings toward Todd had soured greatly since our fight.

“Ren... she won’t talk to me, she won’t take my calls.”

I stopped abruptly and turned to him in disbelief. “And? Can you *blame* her? What do you want from me, Todd? Louise not taking your calls is her business, and frankly, you deserve it after the way you treated her.”

“I know,” Todd said, his cheeks flushing slightly red. “I know. Things were—*are* fucked, and I just... I just wanted to talk to her.”

“She clearly doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Could you ask her—”

“No,” I stated immediately. “One, I don’t owe you shit. And two, I’m not going to grovel to her for you. If you want to talk to her, to see her, then *you* put in that work, Todd.” The irritation in my gut began to twist and flames of anger simmered with each breath. Did he really think I would bend so easily just with him talking to me?

In truth, I had in the past. Our group had been tight knit for years but Todd had definitely not been one of the more *dominant* members. He was never one to take the responsibility he needed to. Now though, my priorities had changed, and I would protect Louise from Todd right until she decided otherwise.

“I’m sorry, I...” Todd shifted back half a step and sighed deeply. “Natalie and I broke up.”

Oh. There it was. The reason he was trying to come back. A surprising pang of sorrow went through my heart hearing that. As much as I had disliked Natalie, I had respected that Todd loved her, and they had been engaged. Such a loss had to be painful regardless of circumstance.

“Oh. Sorry to hear that.”

“She uh... she wouldn’t give up on moving to New York. It became less of an option and more of a declaration. And with how things... dissolved between us and Louise, she kept pointing out that there was nothing keeping me here.” Todd raised a hand and ran it through his hair with a slight groan. “I was really angry and she fed into that. I considered going for a long time, but I just couldn’t, and she got tired of waiting.”

“She always seemed to know what she wanted,” I replied, the most sympathy I could give Todd at the moment. He was trying to reach out, I could see that, but I was still too angry, too hurt by his reaction not just to me, but to Louise and the others too.

“Yeah we uh, wanted different things.” Todd’s shoulders slumped and he thrust his hand into his pockets, as if trying to make himself smaller, and my irritation rose a level.

“Look, Todd. I’m sorry that happened, I really am, but it doesn’t change anything. How you acted, the shit you said to all of us, and how you treated Louise, even if Natalie was part of that, it was still you. If you want to talk to her, then you have to step up your game and make it happen, but I’m not going to help you. This is your mess to fix, with all of us.”

I turned slowly, fighting the urge to say anything hurtful. I wanted to show him I was better, at least in that regard.

“You made this bed, Todd. You have to lie in it.”

LOUISE

“**B**ut I’ve always planned Thanksgiving,” I groaned, easing myself out of Jenny’s car with the help of her partner, Martin. “It just feels weird to do nothing this year.”

Jenny approached from the trunk, bags in hand, and tutted softly. “I know, sweetie. But rules are rules. Everyone has been far too busy, and you’re not allowed on your feet for long. We’re already pushing it with this shopping trip.”

“You’re right,” I groaned softly, thanking Martin with a smile and cradling my very swollen belly. “Fuck, I need to pee.” Luckily, we were home. The past few months since my scare at the hospital, I had been so cared for. Someone was always by my side, either one of the guys or Jenny, and they constantly ensured I was never alone. Despite being mostly bedridden, they also did a fantastic job of keeping my spirits up as my due date crept closer and closer.

Another few weeks, and my sweet little Christmas miracle would be here.

“Let’s get you inside,” Martin chuckled, holding my arm and leading me up the steps.

“I’ll order some turkey if that will make you feel better,” Jenny joked.

“You know, it might,” I mused. I missed being able to cook and bake, missed the excitement of taking treats to the hospital when the guys couldn’t get time off to come and say hi. Just

like last year, their work was intense, only this time I had no cakes to take to them.

Jenny slid a key into the lock and opened the door to Isaac and Dylan's apartment—the place that had become like home to me—and as I stepped over the threshold, I was hit by the mouthwatering scent of roast turkey, sweet cranberries, and... roast potatoes?

“What...?” I glanced at Jenny, who simply smiled at me, completely innocent.

“Kitchen,” I instructed Martin, who continued to support me all the way up the hall. He nudged open the door, and inside, four familiar voices cheered.

“Surprise!”

Ren, Isaac, Dylan, and Carter all stood before me, surrounding a table decorated with festive trinkets and laden with food. I stared at them all in shock, taking in their handsome faces and how smart they all looked in shirts and slacks.

Then, I burst into tears.

“I have to pee,” I sobbed, unable to fully process that they were all here, and that Thanksgiving had been taken care of by them. My heart raced and my swollen ankles ached. Ren approached and took my hand from Martin, cupped my tear-soaked face, and pressed a light kiss to my forehead.

“Go pee,” he chuckled softly. “We’ll be here.”

Jenny stepped up, unloading her bags into Carter's arms. Then she took my hand and escorted me to the bathroom, where I continued to sob until I had relieved my bladder and washed my face.

“Is this why you took me shopping?” I asked Jenny while drying my hands.

“Yup,” Jenny grinned proudly. “Now come on, let's go see your men.”

The table was filled with food as far as I could see from my extra cozy seat. From the turkey and potatoes to the

greens, cranberry sauce, stuffing, and even a pumpkin pie nestled in the middle; it was amazing. With my pregnancy hormones continuously making it difficult to manage my emotions, tears kept filling my eyes after every bite. Even just observing everyone around the table laughing, talking, and joking about their days warmed my heart in overwhelming ways.

Never had I felt so loved.

“Are you okay?” Ren sat to my right, and he reached for my hand.

“I’m good,” I answered softly, blinking through tears. “I swear. I’m just... I can’t believe you all did this.”

“I can’t believe Isaac roasted a turkey,” Ren snorted. “We wanted to do this for you. We know how important these traditions are and it’s tough to do this while on bed rest, so... we stepped up.”

I whined softly and hurriedly wiped away a few tears while Ren’s face crumpled in sympathy, and he clutched my hand tightly.

“If I keep crying, maybe I won’t need to pee again in ten minutes,” I laughed as Ren grinned.

Food was consumed heartily, and I was warmed to see that no one consumed alcohol so I wasn’t left out. Carter stated that they only had a few hours before they needed to leave for work, but I soaked up those few hours with utter delight. As the meal slowly ended and I returned from peeing for the umpteenth time, slices of pumpkin pie had been passed around, and everyone started to share what they were thankful for.

“I’m thankful for Jenny,” Martin said, taking Jenny’s hand. “She believed in me when I was at my lowest, and she didn’t give up on me even when I wasn’t the nicest person to be around.”

Jenny’s cheeks flushed crimson as she dipped her head. “I’m thankful for you too.”

“I’m thankful for my hands,” Carter said, “and for strong friends.” His eyes landed on me. “And for Louise. For showing me that it’s okay to love who you love even if it’s not conventional.”

“I’m thankful for Louise,” Dylan said, “for keeping my spirits up with Whiskey walks and knowing exactly how to remind me that life is good. And I am thankful for my friends.”

“I’m thankful for work,” Isaac said, “and for you, Louise. You’ve shown me parts of myself I wasn’t sure existed, helped me relax, and showed me that when you really want something, you can go for it.”

“I’m thankful for you too,” Ren said, “because I love you. You’ve shown me kindness and compassion, made me laugh until my chest aches, and I think you’ve made me a stronger person when it comes to standing up to people.”

I stared around the table with my eyes filled with tears, and my lower lip wobbled. I hadn’t anticipated anything like this, yet here they all were, pouring out such love, and I almost couldn’t believe it.

“What the fuck, guys,” I croaked softly. Laughter rose up from the table, and Dylan on my left took my other hand. “I don’t know what to say.” Emotion clogged my throat and I swallowed hard a few times before continuing. “I’m so thankful for... for all of you. For not judging me. For being so kind and supporting me, for recognizing when I was making reckless decisions, and for supporting me back onto the right path. I’m thankful for how you’ve given me love, and a roof over my head, and, most of all... my little Christmas miracle. I wouldn’t have gotten this far without any of you.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the room, then Ren cleared his throat and shifted forward in his seat.

“Louise,” he said firmly, a slight tremble dancing through his words. “We—all of us, would like to propose something.”

My heart punched into my throat.

“We understand and respect your desire not to be tied down, and we share that. Marriage is complicated and far too tough to work through in our position, but... we love you. All of us. We love everything about you and have for...” Ren blew out his cheeks, tinged with pink and smiled. “For too long. So, we want to prove ourselves to you with a commitment ceremony. Just us and a few close friends, whenever you’re ready after the baby is born. If... if you will have us.”

A commitment ceremony. I’d read about those in various magazines during my countless hours of bed rest. I had entertained the idea, providing security and commitment without having to choose between which person I loved more, but I never imagined that they would feel the same.

“You love me?” I croaked, blinking furiously through more tears.

A unanimous *yes* rose from the table.

“I love you too,” I gasped and clutched fiercely at Ren and Dylan’s hands. “Yes. Yes! I would love that. Oh, God I would love that so fucking much. Fuck, you can’t spring things like that on me! Yes, yes, yes!”

Ren surged forward, and through tears and laughter, he kissed me deeply. All four rose from their chairs, and as I fought through sobs of excitement, relief, and overwhelming tight emotions in my chest, they surrounded me.

Warm hands on my shoulders, more kisses than I could keep track of and sweet whispers of love and adoration that made my heart soar right out of my chest. This couldn’t be real and yet it was. This was my life now.

Over the year, I had gone from struggling in a job I hated, single and childless, to running my own online bakery, surrounded by four men I loved, and with a baby on the way.

I was so swamped with love that I didn’t even hear the doorbell ring, nor did I notice Jenny leave the table to answer it.

“When?” I asked, pressing a tissue to my cheeks. “When would be good for you all?”

“After the baby,” Ren assured me. “You keep focused on that for now, okay? None of us are going anywhere. We just wanted to ask you before our little angel got here so you knew we were committed beyond just responsibility.”

“The commitment ceremony can take place when you’re ready,” Carter assured me from behind.

“Commitment ceremony?” Todd’s voice sliced through my bubble of tears and excitement. He stood in the doorway, a bottle of wine in his hand, his eyes wide. Jenny stood just behind him, her brow low and her eyes apologetic. A wave of tension surrounded me as Carter, Isaac, Ren, and Dylan all tensed.

“Todd,” Isaac said. “We didn’t expect to see you.”

Todd patted the bottle of wine and smiled tightly. “I... almost didn’t come. Didn’t expect an invite.”

“It was a courtesy for Louise,” Ren replied shortly. “You’re late. Not much food left.”

“I can’t stay long,” Todd said, shaking his head. “I just... wanted to stop by and—I’m sorry, a commitment ceremony?”

“Yes.” My mouth finally worked, still utterly shocked to see him. Other than glimpses in the hospital, I hadn’t seen him in months.

“You’re all... that serious?” Todd asked, glancing around.

“Yes,” Dylan replied.

“I...” Tension swelled as we all waited for Todd’s judgment. Would he fall back on familiar anger and reaffirm his dislike of our relationship?

“Congratulations,” Todd finally said with a small smile. “That’s amazing.”

“Oh, Todd,” I whimpered. I slowly pushed myself to my feet, cradling my stomach.

“Louise... I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I can’t even explain what I did or how I acted, but they were my actions

and my words that hurt you. I'm sorry. I called and called to tell you, but you never answered."

"I wanted you to know what it felt like," I managed as the pressure in my chest increased as too many emotions collided. "To want to explain but be denied."

"I know. I was an asshole. A dick. I'm so sorry. I just... I won't ask your forgiveness, not from any of you. I just ask for the chance to make it up to you."

I parted my lips to answer, but words failed me. The tension in my chest suddenly swept south and landed heavily in my belly as a strange deflating sensation swept through my core. Suddenly, damp seeped into my underwear and spread down my leggings, and a burning sensation swept up my throat.

Oh no.

Not now.

Managing one step forward, I shot out a hand and cradled my stomach as a sharp, molten hot band suddenly tightened around my abdomen, and a horse cry of pain escaped me.

"Louise?!" Ren caught my hand and slid an arm around my back as the pain tightened for an excruciating second, then eased off.

"Oh no," I gasped.

"Contractions?" Isaac asked and he appeared in front of me, his face pinched. I gasped and nodded.

"We have to get her to the hospital," Isaac snapped, taking my other arm as everything else was forgotten. "We have to get there now!"

DYLAN

Waiting wasn't the worst part. Knowing Louise was in pain and there was nothing I could do to help her, was.

Arriving at the hospital, Isaac had rushed Louise away to the delivery ward, leaving the rest of us to stare after her and hope that these early contractions weren't a bad sign. Louise wasn't due for another week or so, but with all the excitement of Thanksgiving, the commitment proposal, and Todd turning up, they had clearly been triggered.

We waited silently, in the staff room for an hour for news but nothing came. Even Todd stayed with us, but he remained quiet, keeping to himself until eventually work called us back to our normal shifts.

It was alien to wander around the hospital and tend to patients while knowing that Louise was in the hospital somewhere, in great pain and possibly having a baby. I wanted to be there for her. I wanted to hold her hand until my knuckles ached, feed her ice chips, and stroke her hair to try and comfort her. I even wanted her to yell at me to relieve some of the pain she was in.

Instead, all I could do was throw myself into my work and force my mind off the situation. None of my patients deserved to be treated by a distracted doctor, and it was down to me to give them the best care they deserved. So, I pushed down my feelings and turned my thoughts away from the woman I loved, and focused on the raw, clinical steps of my job.

I filled in charts until my fingers ached and caught up on paperwork to the point that Nancy joked about giving me more just because I was on a roll. I tended to patients in the trauma ward, including one who had decided deep frying a turkey in their backyard was the best thing to do. Burns were treatable, but unfortunately, the impact of the exploding canister meant the turkey had ended up breaking the guy's arm. Patching him up was a good distraction and gave me a fun story to pass on later.

As the hours ticked by, I bumped into Carter in the elevator, who looked as tense as I felt.

“Heard anything?”

“Only that she's still in labor,” Carter replied, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Isaac is with her, so she's not alone.”

“I want to be there,” I murmured, rocking back and forth on the balls of my feet.

“I know.” Carter groaned softly. “I keep fearing I'll see Isaac wheeling a baby toward me, y'know? That something's wrong, that we did this by doing too much at once.”

“I feel the same,” I admitted. “If we caused this, and something goes wrong...” I trailed off, not needing to vocalize what we were both thinking. If this was us, the stress of the meal and everything else, we could never forgive ourselves.

The elevator doors slid open, and Carter flashed me a tight smile, then left. I headed the other way, back to my ward and threw myself back into work once again. As a stroke of luck, I ended up with my own surgery, and it was a lot easier to put Louise out of my mind when I had someone open on the table with bone fragments needing to be collected and replaced. The surgery made the hours fly past, and when my successful surgery was over, I couldn't wait any longer.

I headed for the maternity ward.

Louise's screams of pain reached me before I'd even touched the door, and my heart sank as I stepped inside. Isaac was by the window, chart in hand and Ren was by her bedside,

holding her hand and repeating breathing instructions over and over.

“I am fucking breathing,” Louise roared as nurses milled around around her legs.

“Well, keep going,” Ren chuckled, and then he winced as her grip turned deathly on his hand. Isaac caught my eye and hurried over with a small smile.

“Is she okay?” I asked, not wanting to crowd her or be a distraction. Seeing her like this was painful, like needles in my heart, but there was relief too.

“As well as she can be,” Isaac nodded. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows, and the shadows under his eyes were slightly more prominent.

“Did we do this?” I asked softly.

“Huh?”

“The dinner and the proposal, all that excitement... did we do this?”

“Oh,” Isaac chuckled. “No. For once, this is only that little angel deciding they don’t want to stay inside for another few weeks. It’s just nature.”

Relief cascaded over my shoulders like a cold wave. Thank God.

“Is everything going well?”

“She’s dilating fast and vitals are perfect, hers and the baby’s,” Isaac said with a smile. “She’s strong and she’s in good hands.”

Louise screamed as another contraction ripped through her, and Ren joined her as his precious hands were squeezed. He had enough sense to pull his hands free and use his arm instead, and I couldn’t help but laugh at the twisted pain on his face.

Louise was healthy and she had people by her side. That was all I could ask for.

Unable to stay long, I gave my love to Louise—who told me to fuck off—and returned to my shift with lightness in my step. This was all-natural, her baby had simply decided it was time to be born, and nothing could stop that.

I sought out Carter in the pediatric ward to fill him in on what Isaac had told me, and he dragged me into an excited and relieved hug. Then I tracked down Todd, who was busy with a patient, so I lingered outside the door until he was done. As soon as he saw me, his brow dipped.

“Is she okay?” he asked immediately.

“Yes,” I replied. “For now. Isaac said everything is going well. She’s got strong vitals and the baby is doing well too. This is nothing but nature’s way of telling us the time is now.”

Todd rolled a pen back and forth in his hand as he listened, nodding slowly. “I was worried I’d...” He puffed out his cheeks and shook his head. “Fuck.”

“You chose one hell of a time to come back,” I remarked.

“I know. I almost didn’t, but I... I don’t know. I’ve wanted to for a while, but I couldn’t work up the courage. Thanksgiving felt... poetic.”

“It didn’t need to be poetic,” I remarked. “It just needed to be genuine.”

“It was.” Todd sucked in a deep breath and glanced at his watch. “And I meant it. I am sorry.”

“I know.” I didn’t doubt that, not from how sincere his apology had been. “It’s up to her if she forgives you though.”

“I’m sorry to you, too,” Todd said. “I was caught up in all the wrong things, and I know I hurt everyone. Ironically the only person I didn’t hurt was the one person who didn’t really care about me.”

“Natalie?”

Todd nodded. “But... Ren told me that only I can make attempts to make it up to everyone, so I’m going to try.”

I studied Todd for a moment, then smiled. “That’s a good plan.”

Work forced us to part ways once more, and I returned to surgery, throwing myself into caring for my patients with a lighter bounce in my step now I knew that Louise was on a good path. I trusted Ren and Isaac to take care of her and even picked up a few of Ren’s patients to ensure he could stay with her. I worked until the end of my shift at four a.m., then slowly trudged back to Louise’s room.

Outside the room, Carter was lingering with his hand hovering, and he glanced at me when he heard my footsteps.

“It’s quiet,” Carter said softly. “I’m too scared to...” He indicated to the door, and my previously calm heart began to pound.

Quiet. Quiet could mean good or bad.

My tongue sat heavy in my mouth, and my arm trembled as I moved past Carter, grasped the door handle, and slowly opened it.

Inside, the room was dark with pink light near the bed illuminating Louise’s sleeping face. She was clearly exhausted, and I immediately softened my footsteps so as not to wake her. Her curls were spread to one side of the pillow, her lips parted as she slept.

Ren was in the chair beside her, fast asleep while leaning onto the bed, and his hand was still entwined with hers. Isaac was there too, spread out and fast asleep on the couch by the window. Carter and I crept in, and then my heart leaped into my mouth.

At the bottom of Louise’s bed, encased in a small plastic cot, swathed in pink blankets, was a tiny, sleeping baby. Its face was scrunched and wrinkly, and it was the most beautiful child I had ever laid my eyes on.

“Oh my God,” I breathed out. When I glanced at Carter, his eyes shone, and he clutched at my elbow. I dipped my head and glanced at the information scrawled on the label attached to the cot.

“A girl,” I said in a voice barely a whisper. “She had a girl.”

Two minutes after midnight, Louise had brought her daughter into the world, and my heart soared.

Our family was complete.

LOUISE

“I like Sarah.”
“June?”

“You want to name her after a month? What about August?”

“A season, like Winter.”

“Marie?”

“Tilly!”

Carter, Ren, Isaac, and Dylan remained in deep discussions about baby names, spread out around the living room around me. I heard them, but their suggestions didn't breach beyond surface level because all of my attention was firmly fixated on the tiny baby in my arms.

Fresh from a feed, she was fast asleep, sleeping peacefully, and I couldn't stop staring at her. She'd been in my life a week, and I was obsessed. I memorized every single wrinkle around her eyes, every smile, and the differences in their meaning. She had a few black curls on top of her head, and I ran my fingers delicately over them again and again. I repeatedly counted her tiny fingers and toes, counted each crease per finger and toe, the swirls around her ears, and the dimple on her chin.

No matter how often I went over these details, it was never enough. The strong, protective urge in my chest was unlike anything I'd experienced before, as was the surge of love that continued to grow by each passing second.

How was it possible to love something so small, so intently?

She gurgled softly, and I gently dabbed a cloth against a milk droplet clinging to her lip, thankfully not disturbing her sleep. Then I cuddled her tighter and pressed a lingering, loving kiss to her forehead. Whiskey, curled at my feet, watched intently with her ears cocked. She had been an angel since I had come home, and I flashed her a warm smile.

“Louise?”

Glancing up, Ren crouched next to me and smiled. “Sorry, are we boring you?”

“Hm?” Oh, baby names. “No, no, I just... I keep getting distracted by her. Every detail.” In certain lights, I was sure Ren was the father. In others, I could see hints of each man in my life, and it pleased me. I didn’t care who the father was as long as they all loved her. This past week, I was certain. They had doted on me, switched shifts around so I was never alone, and allowed me plenty of rest.

With five parents on standby to attend to every need, my baby was *loved*.

“I like all the names,” I chuckled, my voice low. “But none of them match yet, if that makes sense?”

A murmur of agreement rose up around the room.

“We’ll keep looking,” Carter smiled, stretching his hands above his head. “I’ve got to get back to the hospital. Come on Dylan, I’ll give you a lift.”

“I should go too,” Ren groaned softly, and then he leaned close, capturing my lips in a gentle, loving kiss. “I’ll be back later tonight.”

Carter and Dylan both gave me loving kisses, whispered their goodbyes to my baby, and then left, leaving Isaac by my side.

“Can you take her?”

Isaac had been very strict in how much I was allowed to move and how much strain I could put on my body

postpartum, so he rose immediately and gently gathered my baby into his arms. Just as she settled, knuckles rapped on the living room door, and we glanced up to see Todd holding some flowers.

“Todd!” My brow lifted.

“Sorry, the door was open, so I let myself in,” he said with a small smile. “Can we talk?”

I glanced at Isaac, who gave me a clear *it's up to you* look, then I nodded.

“Isaac, could you put her down for me?”

“Of course.” Isaac carried her away to the next room, mostly ignoring Todd. The moment he was out of the room, Todd stepped in further.

“How are you?”

“Well, I shoved a watermelon out of my vagina a week ago so, y’know. Rough.”

“Course,” Todd winced. “I got you some...” He held out the sunflowers, and I bit back a smile. I did love bright flowers; he remembered that at least. After an awkward pause, I held my hand out, and he gave them to me. The sweet, floral scent tickled my nose as I breathed them in. Todd sat slowly down on the chair opposite.

“Louise... I want to apologize. I need to. How I acted, how I treated you... it was awful and unforgivable, and I am so, so sorry. I won't excuse any of it. I did it and I am so sorry. I was... I was jealous.” Todd pressed his palms flat together and stared down at the floor. “I felt like you were taking my friends from me, like you'd inserted yourself into a part of my life that was only for me.”

I shifted on the sofa and set the flowers down on my legs. Whiskey pulled herself closer to them, shoving her nose into the petals.

“I didn't take anyone from you,” I said quietly. “Everyone was still here. I was still here. They were still here. We were just... bonding in a different way. You pushed us all away.”

“You kept it a secret,” Todd bit back.

My eyes narrowed. “Because I wanted to. I was worried you would flip out, but also because I didn’t know what it was. There wasn’t anything to tell until I was ready to tell it.”

“I know. I do.” Todd sighed. “Sorry. I... Natalie was rubbing off on me. She was so insistent that what you were doing was wrong, and I listened. I’m not trying to blame her completely, but after the fight with Ren, when I was so angry and hurt... shocked really, she was saying what I wanted to hear, and I leaned into it. You were...”

Todd paused and I remained silent, watching him work out how to finish. I missed him, there was no denying that, and my emotions were still incredibly raw. With a baby now, my priorities had shifted, and I wanted my family to be whole. I wanted my brother back. It wouldn’t quite be the same given the cruel things he had said, but time was a healer. So was a baby.

“You were taking control of your life,” Todd said as he finally looked up at me. “You were working to have a baby, you were finding acceptance and love and I felt trapped. What I wanted didn’t matter to Natalie because she was so driven to leave for New York or someplace else. So seeing you getting what you wanted... all I had was Natalie, and she didn’t listen. So I blew up, and I... I ruined everything.”

“You and Natalie... is that why you broke up?” I asked softly.

Todd nodded and blinked away some tears. “I saw that you and the others were getting so close. You were pregnant and it was like a wake-up call. I love you, Louise. You’re my sister and not being there for you killed me. But Natalie... she wouldn’t let it go, and then one day it was just too much. I ended things, and as soon as I did, I realized I should have done it months ago for both our sakes.”

Todd raked a hand through his hair and sighed deeply, his shoulder sagging like he was deflating.

“So, I am sorry. Deeply, deeply sorry for how I acted, and I hope that you will let me make it up to you.”

His apology was far more sincere than I had expected, and with my emotions still going through a blender, it was impossible to fight the tears.

“Oh, Todd,” I wept. “You’re so fucking stupid, you know that? So stupid.”

“I know,” he murmured, his eyes shining. “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” I shifted against my pillows as Whiskey whined and rose. Todd stood and surged forward, landing in my open arms for a hug I had dearly ached for these past months. I cried, nothing could stop that, and at the sound of my sobs, Isaac appeared in the doorway and peeked in. He retreated quickly, leaving us to cry out our feelings, and by the time I had gathered myself, soft cries from my baby drifted through the air.

“I will forgive you,” I sniffled, wiping my eyes, “but I can’t speak for the others. You will need to mend that yourself and... Todd?”

“Yeah?” Todd stood before me, wiping his eyes and nodding.

“You have to rein in your over-protective tendencies. At least for me. Channel that toward my daughter instead.”

“Your daughter,” he said softly. “Okay. I will. I will work on it.”

The cries grew louder, and Isaac appeared in the doorway with my baby in his arms.

“I think,” I said softly, “I want to call her Hope.”

“Beautiful,” Isaac smiled. “I’m sorry, I think she’s hungry.” He lowered her gently into my arms, careful of her squirming and pressed a kiss to my forehead. As I prepared to feed, Isaac turned to Todd and cleared his throat.

“Coffee?” he asked, and my gaze snapped up to see a hopeful look flash across Todd’s face.

“Uh—yeah. Yeah, I’d like that a lot.”

LOUISE

“**L**ouise! Girly, where are you!” Jenny’s voice carried through the apartment like a song, and I bit back a laugh as Hope gurgled in my arms, chewing happily on a soft teething ring.

“Bedroom!” I called after covering Hope’s ears, just in case. Footsteps tracked through the apartment and a moment later, the bedroom door swung open. Jenny stood there, wrapped up warm with bags in one hand and a tray of Starbucks in the other.

“How is my favorite lady and baby?”

“We’re good, thanks,” I grinned, gently cooing at Hope. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You’re still on bed rest?”

“Isaac’s orders,” I groaned softly. “Two weeks, and he refuses even to let me walk without help. I had to direct Dylan when decorating the Christmas tree because I wasn’t allowed near it. It’s my favorite time of year and I can’t do anything.”

“That’s why I’m here!” Jenny set the Starbucks down on the nightstand and dropped the bags at the bottom of the bed, then seated herself beside it. “I have brought snacks, dresses, tinsel, lights, and a whole host of other goodies. I’ve brought Christmas to you, mostly. How is the angel?”

“She refuses to sleep through the night, and she’s bitten my nipple more times than I care to count, but... I love her,” I

grinned, smiling down at her adorable face. “But when there’s company, she’s as good as gold.”

“Kind of like you then,” Jenny chuckled.

A soft knock at the door, and Ren stuck his head in. “Hey. I’m on strict instructions from Jenny to take Hope and entertain her for a few hours while you have a girly afternoon.”

“Aww,” I whined immediately, not wanting to let Hope leave my arms, but in truth, it was a good thing to do. I had missed Jenny and breaks were important.

“Okay,” I grumbled. Ren swept in and scooped Hope gently into his arms. She gurgled happily, and my eyes didn’t leave her until he had taken her from the room; I missed her instantly.

“It’ll be worth it, trust me,” Jenny grinned. She scooted closer up the bed and handed me one of the hot chocolates. Wrapping my hands around the warm cup, I cradled it and took a sip, then moaned as the caramel flavor burst over my tongue.

“Oh my God, I love it,” I groaned.

“Excellent. Let’s get started!”

Twenty minutes later, Jenny had painted a different shade on each of my nails, covered my face in a face mask, and was standing at the bottom of my bed going through the clothes she had bought.

“Now, this jumpsuit has all the bright colors you love, plus the floral pattern, *and* it comes with a matching baby onesie!” She snatched up the onesie and held them together. “How cute is that?”

“I love it so much I won’t even care what people say,” I chuckled, flexing my drying fingertips.

“I also got it in orange, although I wasn’t sure what size you are now?” Jenny eyed me curiously.

“Well with the baby weight and swollen boobs, I think I’ve got up a size and a half,” I groaned softly. “Which, I don’t

mind at all, I love how I look, but yeah, there's definitely an extra inch."

"Orange one it is then!" Jenny tossed them back down onto the bed and shoved the floral one back into a bag. "How are your nails?"

"Drying." I curled my fingers and admired them. Jenny was incredibly talented in her designs, and each one was different, from webbing and color gradients to glitter and swirls.

"Got a favorite?"

I glance up at her. "Oh, um... I don't know, I like them all. They're all so beautiful."

"Come on," Jenny whined. "I have to showcase something from Christmas and since you're not at the salon anymore, I really need your advice."

I studied my nails, debating internally back and forth before I held up one finger. "This, the glitter and snowflakes. It's cute, sparkly, and very festive."

"Excellent," Jenny grinned. "I do miss you by the way. Working with you and everything. I know it's been a long time, but every so often, I catch myself looking for you."

"You could always quit," I teased. "Come work for me and we could do cakes and beauty. Everyone loves a gimmick, right?"

"True," Jenny chuckled. "Oh, I saw the sunflowers from your brother. I've never worked out how you can keep them alive for so long."

"Tender loving care," I teased. "Surprised he remembered really."

"And they're your favorite... right?"

"What? No, you know I love—" I stopped and narrowed my eyes at Jenny, whose cheeks immediately flushed pink. Dress sizes, nail color, and now flowers? What was going on?

"You love...?" Jenny prompted.

“Jenny.”

“Yes.”

“What’s going on?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

I eyed her sharply, chewing on my lower lip as she busied herself wrapping tinsel around the mirror in the corner.

“Jenny.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Look at me.”

“In a sec...”

I sipped my hot chocolate and tapped my fingers against the cup as my mind raced. All of the things she asked were about me, preferences that could tie into... what exactly? A party? A Christmas party?

A birthday?

A cerem—

No way.

The commitment ceremony?!

“Jenny!”

“Okay.” Jenny spun toward me and clasped her hands, then she darted forward to climb onto the bed. “You can’t say a word, okay? They’re trusting me and they really want it to be a surprise, and I told them I would crack but we hoped with your baby brain you wouldn’t notice.”

“My baby brain?” I couldn’t decide if I should be offended or not.”

“The brain that had you putting the diapers in the kitchen cupboard and almost wrapping Hope in a beach towel?” Jenny cocked a brow and I sniggered.

“Okay, fair.”

“Ren and the others... they’re planning the commitment ceremony. They want it to be a surprise, but they also want it

to be perfect, so I'm supposed to be getting the details from you without you... knowing..." Jenny trailed off and winced.

"Oh my God," I breathed. My heart fluttered as I leaned back into the pillows, unable to keep the smile from my face. "I never... I hadn't thought much about it since they asked because of Hope, but I think... I think part of me was afraid they would change their minds after they experienced how hard being a parent is."

"They definitely haven't changed their minds," Jenny scoffed lightly. "Those guys are so fucking in love with you."

"I can't believe it."

"Are you mad?" Jenny's eyes widened. "Oh God, you are, aren't you? It was just supposed to be a nice—"

"No!" I exclaimed with a laugh. "I'm not mad. Why would I be?"

"Because you like to plan things?"

"Oh no. No, I think this is really sweet, and just..." A flurry of excitement rushed through me from head to toe. "I love that they want to surprise me with this." I leaned forward and clasped Jenny's hand. "What do you need to know?"

"Everything."

From there it was easy to give Jenny all the information she needed now that she could ask questions openly. While she refused to give me details, she took measurements for dress size, we discussed hair and make-up, shoe style along with all other details about me and me only. Except for the flowers. The more colorful, the better was my opinion. Through it all, my mind ran with possibilities.

Christmas? New Year? Sometime after? I couldn't fathom a time when all of them would be off together long enough for us to do something like this, but even if it were just an hour, I would be ecstatic.

Soon, the ache in my chest indicated Hope was due a feeding, and we came to the end of the questions. Jenny helped

me up, and as we walked through to the living room, she whispered in my ear.

“Keep it a secret, remember?”

“I will.”

I greeted Ren with a happy smile, and he kissed me deeply, one hand on the rocker where Hope was fast asleep.

“So, how was it?” he asked with a grin. “Do you feel pampered and feminine?”

“Definitely,” I smiled warmly, leaning into his touch. “Almost like myself again.”

“I work magic, it’s true,” Jenny chuckled. “I better be going, Martin’s cooking tonight, but you take care of her, okay?” Jenny prodded Ren’s shoulder, and he chuckled.

“Better than myself,” he agreed. On cue, Hope woke up and began to whine. I had her in my arms instantly, rocking her back and forth.

“I’ll walk you out,” Ren smiled. Watching them leave together, my heart did a little flip, and excitement simmered in my gut. Jenny was surely filling him in on everything I had told her, without giving the game away of course.

Near the window, with Hope in my arms, I glanced over at the Christmas tree, and then out to the layer of snow coating the world outside.

My favorite time of year, with a baby in my arms, surrounded by my favorite people.

My life was finally something I was incredibly proud of, and with the *secret* commitment ceremony on the horizon, this Christmas was set to be the best one yet.

LOUISE

“**S**he is positively adorable!” Nancy stood over us, cooing down at Hope who was fast asleep in her stroller, wrapped up in multiple blankets. “Does she always sleep like this?”

“Oh no,” I laughed. “She rarely sleeps at all. You’d think with multiple people around, we’d all be able to catch up on sleep, but babies and surgeons don’t always match. I think she’s tired out from being outside, I went to see the town Christmas lights before coming here.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Nancy smiled warmly and clutched her hands to her chest. “Gosh, how precious.” Her gaze flicked up to me, and the corners of her eyes crinkled. “And how are you?”

“Tired, my body doesn’t quite feel like my own, and I still want to cry all the time, but... I’m good.” It was the most honest answer I could give. “Happy.”

“Mm yes, I can tell,” Nancy mused. “There’s a new light in you. I remember last year, you were so full of life, but now I can see just what was missing. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you, Nancy.” On cue, warmth stung behind my eyes.

“I do miss your gingerbread, though. Such a shame.”

“I haven’t had a chance to do any baking,” I whined softly. “I’m sorry. All my usual Christmas traditions have been

replaced with baby care. Getting to see the lights was about all I could do.”

“Oh, understandable!” Nancy exclaimed as she returned her attention to sleeping Hope.

It bothered me though, underneath the happiness of Hope and all the love that surged around me. I missed my usual routine, but even lingering on that brought up too many complicated feelings. How could I be sad about those when the alternative was no baby?

Those thoughts lingered even when Isaac called us through, and he gently woke Hope from her nap so he could check her over. I remained seated, watching as he checked her temperature and reactions to things, as well as checking her heart. The love in his eyes as he stared down at her made my heart swell with unshed tears.

Hope was going to be forever surrounded by love.

“Any concerns?” Isaac asked as he settled Hope back into her stroller.

“No. Other than my own milk production but I was with the nurse yesterday and the pain is just a blocked duct. Should clear up in a day or so, she said.”

“Excellent.” Isaac cooed down at Hope, then turned to me with a smile. Immediately his brow furrowed. “Louise? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head and tried to meet his gaze. “I’m fine.”

“I’ve known you long enough to know that’s not true.” Isaac took the seat next to me. “What’s going on?”

“I...” A deep sigh swept up my chest, and I curled my hands against my knees. “I haven’t been able to do any of my Christmas traditions because of Hope. No baking, none of the decorating, none of the trips to see you guys, or even a visit to my parent’s grave. And it makes me sad, but then I feel guilty for feeling sad because I have Hope, and that’s all that should matter.”

“Louise.” Isaac gently took my hand and stroked my knuckles. “This change is good, but it’s okay to feel sad about the things you’re missing. It’s only temporary, and next year you can tick all of those off with Hope by your side, but there’s nothing to feel guilty about. You can miss certain things while being happy about others. There’s nothing at all wrong with that.”

I blinked away some tears and clutched his hand back.

“It doesn’t make me ungrateful?”

“No, Louise, not even in the slightest,” Isaac chuckled softly. “It makes you human. Trust me, every parent goes through it. A baby is a *huge* change, no matter how long you’ve yearned for one, but you are absolutely not a bad person—or mother—for missing things you can’t do yet.”

“Thank you,” I chuckled through a soft sob. “It sounds so ridiculous now.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Isaac pressed a warm kiss to my cheek. “Talking about these things is healthy. Even if it sounds silly or repetitive, reach out to one of us, okay?”

I nodded hurriedly and smiled. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Hope is fine, perfectly healthy. Now it’s your turn.”

Discarding my jacket, I hopped onto the bed, and my check-up began. It was a relief to hear from Isaac that I was healing well thanks to his determined bed rest, and I left the hospital with a happy baby and the news that bed rest could be greatly reduced.

Maybe, if I was lucky, I could get some baking in after all.

Deciding against the bus, I took the scenic route home through the snowy streets. I wanted to embrace the festivities around me and soak up as much of the Christmas spirit as I could while enjoying the walk—now that my body had the all-clear. We passed people dressed up against the cold who offered their excitement at seeing a baby, dogs bundled up in Christmas sweaters, and even children running around in the snow.

That would be Hope next year. Despite missing out on my traditions this year, next year I will get to make more.

Hope's first snowman, her first decoration on the tree. Appreciation for her first stocking—this year didn't count since she had no understanding of Christmas. I could already see her bouncing around me while we baked together and played games, watched movies, and made our first snow angels together.

By the time I reached home, my spirits were lifted with the excitement of possibilities, and while I was still forlorn about what I was missing, it was no longer as heavy.

“Good walk?” Dylan opened the door with a smile and hurried down the steps to greet me.

“Amazing.” I gently scooped Hope into my arms while Dylan took over dismantling the stroller and carrying it with us up the stairs. The warmth of the apartment soothed my frost-bitten cheeks and nose, and I quickly removed one layer of blankets from Hope so that she wouldn't overheat.

“I'm going to put her down,” I said to Dylan, only I paused when the subtle changing of multicolored lights reflecting on the hallway mirror caught my eye. They changed from gold to green and then to red.

We hadn't put color-changing lights on the tree, had we? Instead of heading to the bedroom, I walked through to the living room and stopped in complete shock.

The living room, previously decorated with a single tree by my guiding hand, now had a tree in every corner, and they were lit up like the stars themselves had fallen right out of the sky. Streamers ran from corner to corner across the ceiling, weaving around other hanging decorations that glittered in the light. The walls were covered with Santa pictures, while snowmen and elves ran across the baseboard. In the middle of the living room, against the far wall, was a constructed faux fireplace that danced with the fluttering of fake flames, and across the mantle hung six stockings.

My name was next to Hope's, in the middle.

“What...?” I tried to speak but emotion ran my throat dry, and I swallowed hard. “What’s all this?”

“Well.” Dylan gently nudged my shoulder, and when I glanced at him, the colorful lights reflected in his eyes. “We know how important Christmas is to you, and how you haven’t been able to do a lot of what you are used to. So, we all talked about what we could do to help, and while I don’t quite know your traditions or how you like to decorate...” Dylan smiled softly as his eyes sparkled. “We wanted to do something special. A new tradition.”

“It’s beautiful,” I gasped hoarsely. “Like Santa himself threw up in here.”

“Wait until you see the rest of the apartment,” Dylan laughed. “Except for the bedroom. Other than here, we kept all of Hope’s areas safe and glitter-free. Isaac’s orders.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I gasped as Hope stirred in my arms. “Thank you. *Thank you.*”

“Anytime,” Dylan smiled.

Hope gurgled in my arms, a soft whine escaping her, and the tell-tale signs of a cry crept over her. I tightened my grip slightly, preparing myself for the outburst, but when Hope opened her eyes, not a sound left her. Instead, her massive dark eyes locked upward on the sparkling streamers while the lights from the trees danced across her adorable face.

The look of awe that crossed over her face filled my heart with joy, and I grasped Dylan by the arm.

“Look, she loves it,” I gasped.

Dylan leaned in and captured my lips in a gentle kiss, nudging our noses together as he parted.

“Of course she does. Christmas runs in your blood.”

Any lingering sadness left me as warmth enveloped my heart.

Christmas was a week away, and I had never been more excited.

LOUISE

“Hope is fast asleep,” Ren murmured in my ear, his arms circling around my waist from behind. He pressed up against my back and slowly began to rock from side to side. I smiled softly and squinted, applying the last candy star to the sugar cookies laid out before me.

“I just hope it lasts,” I replied, grabbing the red icing. “Want to give me a hand?”

“You trust me in decorating your Santa cookies?”

“Sure,” I chuckled. “Or maybe because Christmas is three days away, and I’m not sure I’ll have all of these finished in time.”

“It doesn’t matter what they look like,” Ren said gently, his chin coming to rest on my shoulder. “I’m sure they taste amazing.”

“I need them to *look* amazing. I’m the only online business who has done nothing for Christmas.”

“You had a baby a month ago,” Ren snorted. “I’m sure people understand. Didn’t Jenny make a post about it?”

“She did.” I started filling in Santa’s hat. “But I still want to post something so people know I’m not giving up.”

“You’re the most resilient woman I know,” Ren murmured as he turned his face into my neck, nuzzling into the warmth. “Giving up isn’t in your vocabulary.”

It was nice, more than nice actually, to have Ren's arms around me. All of the guys had been incredibly respectful of my boundaries since Hope was born, but with Ren pressed against me, I quickly realized how much I had missed the contact. There had been kisses here and there, but things like hugs had been off the table. It was difficult to feel close to another when your boobs were leaking, and your crotch ached.

"Come sit by the fire," Ren said huskily, his voice dropping an octave as he gently kissed my neck.

"I will," I promised as my heart fluttered. "I just need to finish these first."

"Let me help."

It took two minutes to show Ren how to add the bobble to the end of each Santa hat, and then we began to work in tandem with one another down the line of sugar cookies. I filled in the hat and Ren added the bobble. He even got creative with the sparkles, which I liked. By the time all thirty cookies had been decorated, my hands ached, and a hot pressure point in my lower back throbbed.

"They look almost too good to eat," Ren remarked.

"I just need them to dry and then I can start taking pictures."

"So... you have some free time?" Ren's eyes flashed at me, and his handsome face melted into a teasing smile. Laughing, I quickly washed my hands clean of icing.

"Yes, I have some free time."

"Excellent."

The second they were dry, Ren took my hand and tugged me gently into the living room. My eyes widened at the sight of Carter, Isaac, and Dylan all lounging in front of the faux fire, surrounded by pillows and blankets. The moment they spotted me, Carter patted the pillows situated between himself and Isaac. I crossed over and sank down into them with a low, satisfied groan. My head ended up on Dylan's stomach and Ren headed over to the stereo to turn the music up a little.

“I love it in here,” I said softly, staring up at the twinkling decorations and the pattern of light and color across the ceiling. “It feels so warm and cozy. If I had my way, we’d keep it like this all year round.”

“But then it won’t be special,” Isaac replied, trailing his hand down my left arm.

“And it wouldn’t be as exciting,” Carter said, stroking my right arm. Dylan’s gentle hands slid slowly into my hair, massaging into my scalp, and my heart skipped a beat. Surrounding me, they were so *nice*, and it was the first time since Hope had been born that all of us were alone and close like this. Ren selected a festive playlist and crossed over to us, but instead of joining us down on the pillows, he kneeled at my feet.

“Louise.”

“Ren?”

“How are you feeling?” He slowly leaned over me, planting his hands on either side of my waist and pausing when we were face-to-face. I swallowed hard and the warm ambiance of the room vanished, replaced by a skittering of apprehensive heat through my body.

“I’m okay,” I replied softly.

“Just okay?”

“Could be better, I guess.”

Ren’s eyes darkened and raked slowly down my body, then back up to my face. “I think I can do something about that.”

Hovering above me, he braced on one hand while the other lightly brushed over my knees and coaxed my legs up, then apart. I followed without a word, my heart fluttering at the base of my throat. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t thought about intimacy with them after Hope’s birth, but it had never seemed like the right time. There was always something to tend to, and even after the all-clear from Isaac, I was nervous.

Nervous that things would be different. Look different. Feel different.

Even now, as Ren's hands skimmed up my thigh and pushed my skirt up to my hips, those thoughts plagued me amongst the curious notes of what Ren had planned.

"Are you still okay?" Ren asked huskily.

"A little better," I replied breathlessly, "but I think more could be done."

Ren leaned down and his mouth claimed mine in a deep, sweet kiss. I had ached for such passion without realizing, and now that I was surrounded by those I loved, I *craved* it. Ren's lips moved smoothly against mine, enticing my mouth open, and when I granted him entry, his tongue slid alongside my own with a soft moan. Dylan's hands continued to stroke through my hair, petting me like I was precious while Carter and Isaac pressed multiple soft kisses to either side of my neck.

When the kiss finally broke and I gasped for air, cheeks warm and lips flushed, Ren had pushed my tights down to my knees. He caressed the soft, bare skin of my inner thigh, then he leaned away and removed my tights fully. My heart pounded, vibrating under my tongue when Ren reappeared, and I reached for him. I pulled him into another kiss and groaned softly while my thighs parted further for his teasing, wandering hand.

Then my word froze when his fingertips brushed the hem of my panties. I broke the kiss with a gasp.

"Wait..."

Everyone around me paused and Ren's brow dipped. "What's wrong?"

How could I word my fear? How could I explain in a way that they would understand?

"Talk to us," Isaac whispered in my ear.

"I... what if I'm... different," I managed to say, my cheeks flaring as if I'd been slapped. "And you don't like it."

"You're worried I won't like your pussy because you've had a baby?" Ren tilted his head as I nodded slowly. "Oh

sweetie.” He surged forward and claimed my lips once more in a deep, heartfelt kiss. My blood pounded in my ears as he leaned back up, a light smile gracing his handsome face.

“There is nothing in the world that could change how I feel about you in any capacity,” Ren said firmly. “You had a *baby*, which is an incredible, life-altering thing, and yes your body has likely changed, but I will only love it more. You carried and pushed out my daughter, Louise. Our daughter.”

A murmur of agreement rose up around me.

“From stretch marks to scars, whatever changes there are... you are and will always be the most beautiful woman to me.” Ren’s smile widened slightly. “But, if you don’t want me to, then I will respect it.”

It was a dream, surely. How could he say all these nice things, soothing worries and pain I barely understood myself. If he meant it, if he spoke from the heart, then I had nothing to fear.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” I said breathlessly. Ren kissed my nose, then he vanished from view and the warmth of his body settled against my thighs. Isaac cupped my face and turned me toward him, claiming my mouth in a deep kiss as my panties were removed, and my heart froze in anticipation.

Then, with a firm yet very gentle tongue, Ren’s mouth pressed against my pussy, and he licked slowly through my folds. His moan rang in my ears, kick-starting my heart back into life, and my body rolled in surprise at being touched once again.

Things were different in a way I couldn’t quite put my finger on. Ren’s mouth was pleasant and familiar against me, but at the same time, there was something different. After the changes my body had been through, I wasn’t too surprised, although there was immense relief that Ren hadn’t recoiled from me.

The fear that my body had been ruined was soothed.

I grasped at Carter's hand while Isaac kissed me deeply and Dylan stroked my hair. Ren was gently yet insistent as he lapped against me in long, sure strokes. One hand remained on my thigh, his thumb moving in circles as he buried against me and finally, a moan rose in my chest, escaping into Isaac's mouth.

Ren, upon hearing that sound, surged forward and buried his mouth firmer against me. I could track each stroke of his tongue in my mind's eye, each lick over my slick folds and each flick over my over-sensitive clit. Everything sang a little higher in my mind, and my body burned a little hotter as I was kissed, teased, and stroked like I was the most precious thing in the world.

In *their* world.

Carter's hand slid under my shirt and gently groped my breast through my bra while Isaac continued to kiss me over and over, gently caressing my neck. I was consumed by them, held and surrounded by men I adored, who had supported me through everything, and there was nowhere in the world I would rather be.

My hips took on a life of their own, slowly starting to rock into Ren's powerful mouth, and embers flared to flames in my core. Despite the intensity, Ren kept a slow pace. He was gentle but firm, slow but focused, and his tongue covered every inch of me. Then he focused on my clit, sealing his lips around my sensitive nerves and suckling firmly.

I gasped, arching up from the pillows as a powerful wave of pleasure crashed through me, tightening in my core. When I relaxed, two slick fingers pressed into my entrance and slowly buried knuckle deep. I groaned as even that intrusion felt different. Ren's fingers thrust gently inside of me, his fingertips curling and pressing against my G-spot. Stars exploded in front of my eyes, mixing with the colorful lights above, and no longer could I keep the moans from spilling past my lips.

Ren ate me out, Carter teased my sensitive breasts, Isaac kissed me breathless, and Dylan kept me comfortable with his

massaging hands. I was utterly at their mercy and had never been safer.

Muscles tightened around my core as a feverish warmth stole across my skin. I started to writhe, this way and that, against Ren's talented mouth and fingers and he followed my movements with ease. My breaths turned into short pants, and Isaac returned to lavishing kisses to my throat while I moaned openly. Liquid heat dripped through me, searing me from the inside as pleasure built deep inside me. I was being coaxed slowly toward an orgasm that grew in intensity with each passing second.

Suddenly, Ren thrust his fingers deep, pressed firmly on my G-spot and rapidly flicked his tongue over my clit. I was powerless to his attention, and pleasure surged through me like an explosion of power. All heat and sensation pulled south to my core and tightened there, casting me over the edge.

I arched off the floor with a cry, and came *hard*.

My body locked up, supported by the men around me, and Ren continued his attention to my pussy as my walls locked and rippled around his fingers, and my body rolled in time to the waves cascading through me. By the time I sank back down onto the pillows, I was breathless, and my body twitched from the aftershocks of pleasure. Ren finally pulled away, pressing a kiss to my vulva and leaning up.

"Good?" he asked, staring down at me with dark eyes.

"Yes," I croaked. "So good, thank you."

"See, I told you," Ren murmured. "You're amazing."

I was. I had never envisioned my life turning out like this, but here I was, in post-orgasm heaven, surrounded by four men I loved, nestled under a Christmas tree with my baby fast asleep in the next room.

My life was utter bliss.

And only one thing was missing.

LOUISE

Large, fluffy snowflakes drifted down from the sky above, landing like gentle kisses on the blue pastel canopies situated out in the garden. They covered two rows of wooden chairs that were each decorated with a white cushion and a bow of varying colors. The chairs lined an aisle marked by colorful flower petals scattered from the back door, all the way up to a makeshift altar stood like a marble statue between the four men I was preparing to commit my life to.

Carter Roswell, Isaac McWilliams, Ren Adams, and Dylan Beckett stood in the snow; their handsome faces turned upward to the gentle snowfall, and each one looked *incredible*. Dressed in steel silver suits, their shirts were each a different bright color, and it warmed my heart to see how much effort they had put into this entire thing.

Surprising me with the commitment ceremony on Christmas Eve, one year after Ren and I first slept together and started this incredible journey, had brought me to tears. Breakfast in bed, then a light afternoon of pampering from Jenny, and then it was time.

My stomach churned as I smoothed my hands down my floor-length dress. The plunging neckline clung to my shoulders, amplifying the swell of my chest, then the fabric bunched together for a cinched waistline before spilling out into a wide, loose skirt. Rainbow colors faded into one another from top to bottom and I almost couldn't take my eyes off of how beautiful the dress was.

Or how beautiful it made me look.

“Okay, spin once more for me?” Jenny stood beside me in a short red dress and waved her hand, indicating for me to spin. I did just that, and when we were face-to-face once more, she beamed. All morning she had worked on painting my nails with snowflakes, helped me with my makeup, and curled my hair into loose spirals that brushed my bare shoulders as I moved.

“You look... amazing.” She pressed one hand to her chest and sighed dreamily. “How do you feel?”

“Nervous,” I admitted quietly. “But not... scared. A little overwhelmed, but I also can’t believe this is happening.”

“It’s like a fairytale,” Jenny agreed, then she made a sharp sound when she caught me dabbing at my eyes. “No crying! You’ll ruin my artwork.”

“Sorry,” I chuckled, sniffing to try and battle the growing wave of emotion in my chest. “Can’t help it.”

“Are we ready?” Todd appeared in the doorway with Hope in his arms. She was babbling away happily, dressed in a bright green onesie and wrapped in numerous blankets. When Ren told me Todd would be there to support me, I almost couldn’t believe it. Our relationship was a work in progress, but it was very important to me that he was even here.

I glanced outside to where the seats had been filled with people from the hospital, like Nancy and a few other friends from the salon. The snow had finally stopped falling, leaving the fairy lights wound around each canopy stand to sparkle brightly in the late afternoon air.

Was I ready for this?

I took in each of my men as they shuffled and adjusted ties, then I nodded.

Hell yes I was.

Jenny scooped Hope out of Todd’s arms, and I looped my hand around his elbow.

With a deep breath, we started to walk down the aisle. I had chosen to go barefoot, and the cold barely even reached me as we walked outside and onto the path of flower petals. They were soft underfoot, like the kiss of silk, and yet a secondary thought when faced with the ones I loved mere feet away. Even the gasps of those around us and the gurgles from Hope didn't quite breach the world of quiet that descended over me.

All four sets of eyes were locked on me, and my heart began to race. A tremble rippled down my spine as my chest tightened faintly. Todd stopped in front of his friends, gently released my hand, and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

"I'm proud of you," he said quietly in my ear. "Truly."

I wanted to thank him, but the words didn't come. I was too focused on the others, and Todd melted from view, taking his seat behind me with Jenny and my daughter. Then, the officiant stepped up to the podium and held up her hands.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the celebration of love between Louise Romain, Ren Adams, Carter Roswell, Isaac McWilliams, and Dylan Beckett."

"You look beautiful," Ren whispered low in my ear as the officiant continued her greeting and reeled off her thanks to the crowd of witnesses behind us.

"So do you," I whispered back, and Ren's lips briefly grazed my cheek. They stood around me in a half-circle, and I couldn't tear my gaze away from any of them. Every smile, every crinkle of eyes, every shift in stance; it was all really happening.

My dreams were coming true. *All* of them.

"Committing to a lifetime together requires cooperation, mutual respect, honesty, and patience. And a little humor of course. Each person before you today is prepared to make that promise, as well as display the courage they offer their partner. The courage to grow and change, and the courage to tackle life together. We all know a good partner will be loving and caring, and each participant will stand before you and prove

their commitment to do exactly that.” The officiant smiled sweetly, her pink lips pulling wide.

“As per tradition, the men will speak first.” She bowed her head slightly, and suddenly, Carter stepped forward. His eyes were wide, and he licked his lips repeatedly before he spoke.

“Louise. You’ve been an immensely important presence in my life for more years than I can count. You are a trusted friend and an even more trusted lover. The first night you looked at me, I couldn’t believe I had made it into your orbit, and I would never change any of that for the world. Now we have Hope, and I’ve watched you grow into a fantastic woman and mother, and I stand here today, in the presence of all these witnesses... I offer you this ring.”

Carter paused and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a silver ring and stepped forward as I raised my hand. His warm fingers touched mine and as he slid the ring on, he continued to speak.

“I promise to be a true and faithful partner and support you in all life’s circumstances as we face them together. I choose to spend today, and all of my tomorrows, with you.”

My heart was ready to punch its way out of my chest as the ring nestled comfortably against my knuckle. Then Carter leaned forward and kissed me sweetly. Before I could speak, Isaac was next.

“Breaking the rules has never ended so well,” he smiled at me, then nervously pushed his glasses back up his nose. “I was honored the day you trusted me with your secret and even more honored the day you trusted me with your heart. I stand here today and promise to love and respect you as I have done in the past and to guide you through thorns unknown until we are old and gray.” Isaac reached into his pocket and pulled out a thin gold ring. He stepped forward and slid it onto the same finger.

“I give you this ring as a symbol of my commitment to you, and my promise to be a faithful partner and support you in all life’s circumstances as we face them together. I choose to spend today and all of my tomorrows with you. And only

you.” Isaac cupped my face, his palm warm and soft, and kissed me deeply.

Gone was my ability to talk. I scarcely registered my own heart flying beneath my chest as my knees wobbled slightly. Hearing all of this spoken out loud was mesmerizing, and when the kiss broke, I gasped. It was only as Isaac stepped back and Dylan stepped forward that I noticed Isaac’s ring slotted perfectly alongside Carter’s.

“From...” Dylan’s voice wobbled with nerves, and I gave him my strongest smile. He cleared his throat and tried again. “From dog walking to awful movie night binges, you’ve always had my heart, Louise. I hate to say that the day you lost Whiskey was the best day of my life, but it was. I gained a dog and I gained you, even if I didn’t fully know it yet. Now we’re here, and I can think of no better way to show you how much I love you.” His smile wobbled, and tears glistened when he next blinked.

“In front of these witnesses, I pledge my commitment to you and our life together. I love you, Louise.” Dylan uttered the same promise as the other two, and the blue ring he slid onto my finger connected immediately with the other two. His ring was blue and filled with sparkles, catching the light as I turned my hand to examine it.

Then, Ren cleared his throat.

“Louise.” He took my hand, and the tears I was fighting flooded my eyes.

“You were a dream. Just this warm, kind woman who would come and lift my spirits and warm my soul without even knowing it. I found myself looking forward to seeing you and disappointed when I missed you. I thought a dream was where you would stay. Then, you trusted me with the incredible honor of helping you have a baby, and from that moment, I was completely smitten. You’ve brought infinitely more love and light to my life than I ever could have imagined, and I stand here, yelling and declaring my commitment to spend every second of my life with you and my best friends. We’ll tackle what we need to tackle, we’ll

face it all; the good and the bad, and no matter what, we'll come out the other end with a smile. I love you, and I am here for you."

The tears fell as Ren slid the last ring onto my finger, a gold band with a glistening opal that reflected a hundred different colors at once. The gem slid across the other bands, locking the rings together as one, and when Ren kissed me, his sweet taste mingled with the salt from my tears. Then he stepped back, his own eyes damp, and I sucked in a deep, trembling breath.

"Wow," I gasped hoarsely. "How do I top that?"

A bubble of laughter rose around me.

"I... I honestly don't know what to say. When I first... when I would dream about having a baby, I was comfortable in that dream being just me and her. There was never anyone else, but now..." My gaze moved to each of their blurred faces. "I can't imagine life without any of you by my side. You have cared for me and supported me through countless things, from the loss of my apartment to the loss of my job. The *constant* disappointments with IVF, my bad spending habits, setting up my business, the *accident*..." I chuckled softly. "It's been one crazy year, and now we're here, and I love each of you dearly. And we have a daughter!"

On cue, Hope squealed, and the crowd murmured affectionately.

"So, in turn, I pledge my commitment to each of you. From here until the end, through every difficult day and tear-stained night. You have my friendship, my loyalty, my protectiveness, and you have my heart."

I choked slightly on the last word and pressed trembling fingers over my mouth. Then my lovers surged forward, and I was surrounded by warm arms and gentle kisses.

"Before your chosen witnesses, you have exchanged rings and declared your commitment to one another from this day until the end," the officiant spoke up, her voice soft. "It is my

pleasure to declare that you are now joined in love. You may now kiss each other!”

We were already one step ahead and between soft sobs, gasps, and happy laughter, I kissed each man I could reach as eagerly as I could.

“All that is left,” the officiant continued, “is your signatures.”

Ren departed first and stepped up to the podium, where he scrawled his name in black ink and then returned to my side. Each, in turn, did the same and when it was my turn, the pen trembled in my hand. Seeing their names laid out overwhelmed my chest with a bursting sensation, and I could only laugh, completely overwhelming my psyche. The outpouring of love was immense.

How was this my life?

I wrote my name below the signatures of my four lovers and a happy cheer rose up from our witnesses. Hands clapped together, and cheers soared as I stepped down from the podium and back into the arms of my lovers.

My partners.

“Picture?” Todd was on his feet, camera in hand, and after a glance at my men, I nodded. Around us, the air turned icy once more, and snow started to fall around us slowly. Jenny stepped up and slid Hope back into my arms, then she used a damp tissue to try and fix my makeup as the guys congratulated each other on their speeches.

“You ready?” Jenny asked softly.

“For what?”

“The rest of your life.”

She stepped back, and I cradled Hope in my arms. Ren cuddled me from the right with Dylan just behind. Isaac took my left with Carter just behind and Todd raised the camera.

“Say cheese!”

“Cheese!” We chorused as Hope laughed, clapping her chubby, tiny hands while the camera flashed.

That photo was the first thing I hung up in our new home two months later.

A NANNY FOR CHRISTMAS (PREVIEW)



DESCRIPTION

Three sinfully delicious single dad billionaires.

One fake marriage.

I spend my days in the icy cold Alps, taking care of their babies.

And they tip me generously at nights, like only they can.

My Christmas won't be lonely this year... because guess what? I'll have *three* men in my bed.

I never had a family, and then I lost my sanity after sending my abusive ex to prison.

But these three gorgeous single dads have made me feel more than just their hot nanny that they can't keep their distance from.

Maybe I *do* have the capacity to fall in love again.

Especially when **Luke**, president of a security company, looks irresistible as ever.

His power shines through those hazel eyes that I could keep staring into.

Jax, the hot security guard, has messy hair that I love running my hands through.

He's a bad boy – the kind that any parent would warn their kid about.

Lucky for me, I never received that warning.

And **Theo**, their muscular CEO, would give his life for his
loved ones.

I'm included in that list. For now.

I know I'll be kicked off it when they find out what I'm
hiding.

And just like that, my Christmas tree will crumble down,
along with my entire heart.

SUMMER

In a sudden gust of bitter cold, the wind picked up around me as I trudged through the powdery snow toward the Belancio Hotel. It was a luxurious establishment where I had spent the better part of the last three years working every available hour in the hopes of climbing to a management position. As another New Year threatened just around the corner, that promotion wasn't looking likely. Still, it lingered in the back of my mind. This time of year not only brought about the prospect of promotion but was also my busiest time of year.

Most people were desperate for time off to spend the holidays with their families, but not me. All I had waiting for me when that fateful day rolled around was a microwave dinner and whatever trash was on TV. As such, I always put myself forward to pick up the extra shifts that no one else wanted, which I was praying would give me the edge for the assistant manager's position I applied for a few weeks ago.

Another cold gust of wind dislodged a few unruly strands of dark brown hair from my carefully placed knit hat. With cheeks pink from the cold, I clutched at the edge of the hat and half jogged the last few steps toward the Belancio. I let out a deep, relieved sigh the moment I was through those gold-rimmed double doors and was met with the well-heated lobby. The light scent of vanilla and cinnamon mingled with the warmth to create a cozy and inviting entrance.

"Evenin' Roger," I beamed up at the doorman as I stamped my feet on the branded mat to dislodge lingering snow and

unraveled the wool scarf from my neck. “It’s a wild one today. I saw there’s a snowstorm coming down from the north. Hope it doesn’t cause too much trouble.”

Christmas was just under a month away, and with it, I would get the extra fat bumper check for all my extra hours.

“Yep, wild one,” Roger replied. As he checked me over, I noticed he lacked the usual twinkle in his eye, and his smile didn’t quite have the same warmth I was used to.

“Long day?” I shrugged off my coat and draped it over one arm, then shook my hair free of my almost dislodged hat.

“Something like that,” Roger replied tightly. The door behind me dinged, signaling someone was a few feet behind me, so I hurried forward and headed for the front desk. Two women staffed the desk; Sophie Alcott, who handled the desk during most of the day, and Mary Gilchrist, who often took the night shift. They weren’t often seen in the same place due to personal grievances, so I approached them cautiously.

Sophie was my main competitor when it came to the assistant manager position. While she was often bitter, I worked hard to maintain my politeness.

“Evening, ladies!” I offered my brightest smile. “It’s cold as all hell outside. Might mean we’re in for a quiet night.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Sophie replied, her tone tart. Her lips were pursed, emphasizing the wrinkles of age around her mouth. She stood behind the front desk smoothing her hands down the dark blue jacket and pencil skirt of the Belancio uniform. “Dillon wants to see you in his office.”

“Right now?” I glanced at the ornate clock behind the desk and frowned. I was ten minutes early for my shift, and I was only just in the door. “Alright, let me change, and I’ll head up.”

“No,” Sophie replied shortly. “Now. He said he wanted me to send you up when you arrived.”

“Really?”

Sophie smoothed one hand over her jacket and a small smile teased at the corner of her lips. “Yes, really.”

“Did he say what it was about?”

Sophie and Mary glanced at one another.

“No,” said Sophie with a light sigh. “But you shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

It was difficult to ignore the sudden bubble of excitement that rose in my chest as I thanked the girls and hurried toward the elevator. These past few weeks had been pretty mundane in terms of work, so there was only one thing I could think of that would require a visit to the manager’s office.

The promotion.

My promotion. Was it terrible to hope for that?

I wouldn’t have to put up with Sophie’s stale attitude any longer if I had the power of assistant manager, nor would I have to continuously try the undercooked brownies Steph from accounts often brought in to show off.

Those thoughts and more carried me on clouds as I took the elevator to the fourteenth floor and hurried down the corridor. Finally, after so much hard work, things were starting to pay off. It was almost hard to imagine that I had been at the lowest point of my life four years ago. Battling a drug and alcohol addiction while under the influence of my abusive ex-boyfriend, I had done many things in my life that I was far from proud of.

Some of those things kept me awake at night, wrapped in cold sweats and jumping at noises. Guilt that would never shift despite how hard I had worked to turn my life around. I had started that change the day I sent that abusive, piece of crap ex to prison.

Now here I was on the cusp of a new promotion, and with the money that would bring in, maybe I could finally say goodbye to my dingy apartment.

“Dillon?” I knocked lightly on the door of the manager’s office, then tested the handle.

“Come in,” boomed a deep voice. I pushed open the door and plastered my brightest smile over my red-painted lips as the large, round form of my manager, Dillon Higgins, came into view.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Ah, Summer.” Dillon wetly cleared his throat and leaned into his large metal desk, causing his chair to complain loudly. “Take a seat.” With a portly hand, he indicated to the small plastic chair in front of his desk, and I forced my smile wider.

I had little love for the loud, rotund man that held power here, but while his sleaziness had never touched me directly, I knew that staying too long in his office—alone—could result in Dillon getting the wrong idea.

I presumed he was just lonely in the early days of working here, but the years had taught me that he was simply power-hungry. I lowered myself into the seat and draped my coat and items over my knee, trying to keep the excitement at bay. It was wrong to get my hopes up, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“I’m sorry, Summer, but we’re letting you go.”

It was as if the winter storm outside had crashed through the walls to deliver those words. The smile faltered on my lips, and my eyes widened as I struggled to understand.

“Wh... what?”

“We’re letting you go,” Dillon repeated shortly. “With immediate effect.”

“I... I don’t understand?” I clutched at my coat, my knuckles bleeding white from the strength of my grip, and I scooted forward to the edge of the chair. “Why? What? Why?! I haven’t done anything, have I? Is it a customer complaint?” I straightened up suddenly, my back as stiff as a board. “Was it Mr. Trunkle? Because he acted against regulations, I even checked—”

“No, Summer.” Dillon raised one thick hand to silence my tirade. “It wasn’t Mr. Trunkle. It wasn’t anyone but you. I’m sorry, but I can’t have someone with your reputation working here. This establishment houses the elite and the upper class,

and someone such as yourself... well, I'm sure you can imagine that once our clientele finds out..." Dillon shook his head so violently that his thick chin wobbled. "I'm sorry, Summer, you're an excellent worker, but I just can't have your kind here."

A terrible chill swept through me so quickly that the hairs on my arms and legs shot to attention. My gut clenched painfully, and nausea grew in my throat, teasing the burn of acid on the back of my tongue.

"My... my reputation?" I stammered softly. "What are you talking about? My *kind*?"

Dillon's large face suddenly flushed darkly, and he cleared his throat. "You're not going to make me say it..."

"Oh, I am!" I snapped suddenly as the cold dread snapped to heated anger. "Dillon, I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Your... *outside* work," Dillon clarified, pressing his fingertips together. "It's not becoming of a young lady like yourself, and it's not in line with Belancio's business practices. I'm sorry."

"Dillon," I demanded sharply, "stop talking in riddles. What are you saying?"

Dillon sighed and turned to his computer, tapping furiously at the keyboard for a few seconds, then he turned the monitor around to face me.

"We received several complaints from guests who *stumbled* across your work on other... *sites*," Dillon explained, but his voice began to fade to the background as the furious thump of my heart began to fill my ears.

Displayed on the screen was row after row of saucy pictures. A scantily clad woman—me—was present in every photo, in various states of undress and in multiple risqué poses. I wanted to defend myself; after all, the pictures weren't the best quality and could belong to any brunette. However, just as those words formed on the tip of my tongue, something Dillon said cut through the fog I was under.

“That’s your tattoo, right?” Dillon said, tapping a lower photo with his pen. “The daisy chain on your ankle?”

I stared at the picture until my eyes blurred, unable to comprehend how these pictures still *existed*, never mind how they got put in an e-mail to my boss.

“Who...” I tried, but emotion clogged my throat, and I had to swallow a few times before trying again. “Who sent these?”

“I’m afraid I can’t reveal that,” Dillon said, “but we received them through various sources and... I’m sorry, Summer, there’s nothing I can do. You’re fired.”

Those words followed me like a ghost all the way back down to the lobby. Those pictures... I hadn’t seen them in years. They were old pictures taken by my abusive ex-boyfriend Felix during the thinly veiled *happy* times. Back then, I had been young and more reckless with my body and my life; I had posed like there was no tomorrow. After he was sent to prison, I had done everything I could to destroy those pictures, yet somehow they resurfaced online.

I walked past everyone until Roger touched my arm and pulled me from my daze. The lack of sparkle in his eyes earlier and Sophie’s extra tart attitude suddenly made sense. I had no doubt that Dillon could not keep those pictures a secret.

“Summer,” Roger said softly, “I’m so sorry.”

Still in a daze, I turned my glassy eyes to Roger as he began helping me back into my coat.

“What am I going to do?” I whispered. Roger helped me rewind my scarf around my neck, tucked my hat onto my head, and then settled a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“You need anything,” Roger said quietly, “then you call me. Agnes and I would hate for anything to happen to you.”

“Give her my best,” I smiled slightly, cuddling into my coat. Then I turned and trudged back outside into the city’s dying light and the storm’s rising winds. I doubted I would ever see Roger or his wife again, not if she found out about those pictures.

How... how had this happened?

In the space of half an hour, my life had started to crumble, and what should have been an exciting chat about a promotion had turned into a humiliating job loss and resurrection of old wounds. The wind nipped at my cheeks and fingers, threatening to turn flesh into ice, but I didn't have the focus to fight it. The fuzzy, confused cloud that had settled over me continued until I reached the subway station.

I took the steps two at a time, building speed as the prospect of drinking my last bottle of wine and crying my eyes out grew more appealing by the second. Making it down into the dark tunnel, I pulled the hat from my head and stamped my feet to shake off the snow, only to stumble when I turned around a pillar and walked smack bang into a solid back.

“Oh my God,” I gasped, jolted out of my thoughts. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t—” A powerful wave of disgust flooded me when I lifted my head and came face-to-face with the stranger.

Only he wasn't a stranger.

Blue eyes so light they were almost gray stared back at me, set shallow into a square face topped by a close-cropped shaved head.

“Well, well, well, it ain't time for Summer,” drawled the aching familiar nasal voice of Felix Saunders, my ex-boyfriend.

What the fuck was he doing here?

Felix's hands landed on my upper arms, helping to steady my footing, but he didn't let go when I was still.

“What... what are you... *how* are you...?” I stumbled over my words, trying to work through all the thoughts dislodged by our collision and the shock of seeing him standing before me. The last time I had seen him was when he was dragged away into a police car and arrested for a drunken hit-and-run.

“Oh, how am I here, you mean?” Felix scoffed, and his grip tightened slightly. “And not in prison where *you* put me?”

“I...” Words failed me, and I tried to pull away, but Felix’s grip on my arms tightened further.

“What’s the matter, Summer? Surprised to see me?”

“Of course I am,” I gasped finally. “I never thought I would see you again. What are you even doing here?” The nausea that had faded on the walk from the hotel to the subway surged up once again, and that familiar acrid taste washed over my tongue.

“I’m getting the train, obviously,” Felix remarked, “but I was hoping to run into you. I wanted to see you after the big reveal.”

“What reveal?”

“Your little showcase of the boudoir shoot?” Felix sneered. “I’m sure your boss will have a pretty wank over those.”

“*You?!?*” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, and in a surge of energy I wrenched myself out of his grip. “You sent those? What the fuck is wrong with you?! How did you even know where I worked—you know what, I don’t even care. You’re still just as twisted now as you were back then.”

“Careful,” Felix spat low, “don’t *push* me, Summer. I just wanted to talk.”

“*Talk?*” With the daze gone, the anger of losing my job and the humiliation from those pictures surged up. I threw both my hands forward, shoving Felix furiously toward the track. “We have nothing to say to each other. Do you have any idea how much you’ve royally *fucked* me?”

“Oh, I’m just getting started baby,” Felix laughed and grasped at my flailing fist, only to release me when a sudden surge of people flooded down the staircase and filled the platform.

The train screeched into the station a few seconds later. In a rush, I threw myself onto the train and hurried through a few subway cars, losing myself in the crowd before I took a seat. With a hammering heart and trembling hands, I huddled into my chair and kept my eyes fixed on the doors until they closed. As the train pulled forward, I saw Felix’s square face

peering into the cars, so I huddled down further until we were safely away from the station.

Felix was out of prison and back in town.

I couldn't wrap my head around how he had found me, never mind how he had those pictures to send to my work. Was it some kind of twisted revenge because my testimony sent him to prison? In a flash, my mind was filled with that terrible night. I had been a drunk passenger in Felix's car as we had crashed into some poor man crossing the road.

Just the thought of the crunch his body had made on the hood caused nausea to swell, and I shifted in my seat, trying to shove those memories away.

After a beat, I pulled out my phone and quickly pulled up a job search engine, anything to distract myself from those memories. What better way than trying to find a new job immediately? I lived paycheck to paycheck, a lull in funds wasn't an option.

Three stations later, my heart was calmer, and I had scrolled through nearly 100 job listings, each one dampening my spirit a little more, but they were all a decent distraction from the noise in my head. Close to giving up, I almost closed my phone when one job caught my eye.

Someone was looking for an in-house nanny to care for three children. The nanny needed to be capable of traveling over the holiday period. Tapping on the ad, my heart skipped a beat as the paycheck stared back at me in big black letters.

Ten thousand dollars *per day* over a minimum of two and a half weeks with the chance that the trip could be extended into the New Year. Such an amount was *mind-blowing*.

It couldn't be real.

Tapping for more information, I was surprised that the job poster was none other than Luke Ellis, President of Helix. Helix was a security company that covered everything from computer software to in-person safety. It was the primary security provider at the Belancio, so the name was familiar.

Taking care of children wasn't my forte, but how different could it be from caring for whiny hotel guests? And with Felix back in town, a job that took me out of the country would be fantastic.

It took three seconds for me to submit my resume and close the app. It was a long shot, a wild card that I was wildly underqualified for, but it did help calm my mind a little.

I would go home, get intimately familiar with that last bottle of wine, and tomorrow... Tomorrow I would apply for every job under the sun.

SUMMER

Three days later, through some insane stroke of luck, I was on my way to Helix for an interview for the in-house nanny position. How any of the fudged information on my resume had made it past whoever was in charge of the hiring process, I had no idea, but I wasn't in any position to pass it up.

The three days I had spent huddled in my pajamas scrolling through every job website I could find, had resulted in four bites (including the job with Helix), and compared to the other three, it stood out like a beacon. The other three would result in me taking a big pay cut, and who was I to pass up the chance to earn ten grand *a day* looking after some children?

There was such a thing as a Christmas miracle, right?

The confidence I had to bluff my way through any sort of interview, however, promptly died the moment I climbed out of my cab onto the main street and came face-to-face with the sheer glass shard building that served as the headquarters of Helix Security. It wasn't the shining, clear windows or the gigantic Christmas tree propped up against their logo on the building, nor was it the spiral statue out in the front of the building that shattered my confidence. It was the clothing that graced the back of each man and woman I watched moving through the revolving glass door.

Helix was a multibillion-dollar company, so of course, everyone was dressed to the nines, but it wasn't something I

had considered until I was standing on the pavement surrounded by melting slush and caressed by a cold wind. I was not rich by any means, and in my faux-confident desperation that morning, I had thrown on my trusty black dress that was one size too small and had a hole under one armpit. It wasn't *great*, but it had served me well at interviews before.

Interviews for fast food restaurants and high-end hotels, not multibillion-dollar tech companies.

I huddled under my coat and toyed with the end of my scarf, quickly debating how important clothes would be in the interview. They were looking for a nanny. There was no need for me to dress fancy because nannies didn't dress fancy... right?

A chill stole through my body the longer I stood there trying to convince myself that what I was wearing was fine. Then a beautifully tall and slender woman seemed to float out of the door flanked by two bulky men dressed in pristine suits. She had a small, fluffy hat on top of her head and a figure-hugging red dress complete with gold heels while her hands were tucked neatly into a pure white fluffy muffler.

She looked stunning, completely untouched by the cold, and no wonder. Within thirty seconds, she was swept away into a car and driven into the city, out of sight.

The people that worked here, regardless of position, didn't have to dress for the weather, did they? They dressed like they belonged in the upper class and that the weather should bend to them. The picture of that woman lingered in my head as I glanced down at my coat and contemplated how impressive my dowdy dress would look in a place like that.

Fuck.

I couldn't impress them looking like this. I turned on my heel and glanced down the street, spotting my savior a few buildings down. The couture fashion brand Pluxuro had a shop not far, and it was the only place that I could get to, buy something, and get back in time for my interview.

They let people shop on credit in places like that, I'm sure.

Tucking my hair behind my cold ears, I hurried across the street and dodged slushy puddles to the best of my ability, trying to keep the snow to a minimum on my black boots. The last thing I needed was to create a puddle in Helix and send some rich person to the hospital because they slipped.

The thought made me smile, though, and by the time I bundled into the shop, I was breathless with warm cheeks. They flushed hotter the moment I hit the wall of heat within the store, and I quickly shrugged off my coat and draped it over one arm. Blowing my hair out of my face and smoothing a nervous hand down my rumpled dress, I perused the hangers and mannequins for something that screamed *respectable* and *upper class* but also *capable-of-caring-for-your-snobby-rich-children*.

Everything I looked at took my breath away when I checked the price. Each dress cost five times my rent and then some. There was no way in hell I could afford anything in here, not even on credit. As I wandered the store, I repeatedly checked my watch and counted the minutes as they flew by, bringing me closer and closer to an interview I would surely fail the moment I walked through the door.

And I needed this job. Fuck, I needed this job more than I was willing to admit.

Ten minutes in, I finally settled on a dress that only cost four months' rent and dragged it with me into the dressing room. Wriggling out of my dress was more of a challenge than I was prepared for. The heat from rushing here and the smothering warmth in the store had caused me to sweat profusely. My dress stuck to me over my wide hips and clung to my thighs. By the time I wrestled free, I kicked it into the corner and then stood there, catching my breath for a good few seconds.

"Breathe, Summer," I muttered to myself. "You've got this."

I closed my eyes and counted to sixty, focusing on my breathing and giving my body a chance to cool down; then I

grabbed the new dress and slipped it on. It took a few seconds of twisting to get the zipper up in the back, but I almost didn't recognize myself when I stepped out from the curtain to admire myself in the mirror.

The dress was a V-neck, blue floral print ruffle dress made from lightweight contrast mesh. The short flutter sleeves caressed my shoulders with every movement, and the light material meant that the long skirt barely held any weight. It clung to my body in all the right places, accentuating my chest and hips while being light enough that I could definitely picture myself with rich kids by my side.

It was beautiful. And it cost far too much.

"Everything alright here?" asked a tight, feminine voice from behind me. I spun around in surprise and marveled at how the dress moved with me, to find one of the shop assistants standing there clutching her lanyard. Her powdered face showed streaks from the heat, and her faint, over-plucked eyebrows had her looking constantly surprised.

"Oh, no, thank you. I was just... I'm just looking right now," I said, clasping my hands to my abdomen.

"This is your first time here?" she asked, but from the tone of her voice, it didn't sound like I was supposed to give an answer. "We have a policy that customers can only try on garments that they intend to purchase."

"That's dumb," I muttered without thinking.

"Quite." The woman pursed her lips and narrowed her wide eyes. "If you would follow me to the counter, I can set you up with a—"

Just as my mind raced for an excuse as to how I could not afford to buy this dress, a clatter of boxes and a soft cry echoed from the back of the store, drawing the assistant's attention. She stepped back, peering over the racks then she turned back to me.

"Don't go anywhere, ma'am." With that, she scuttled deeper into the store, leaving me to return to the mirror and admire myself again.

Fuck.

I couldn't pay for this dress. It was impossible. And yet it was *beautiful*, definitely something that made me look light and professional while also bringing a homey warmth with it. I glanced at my watch, then over the railing to the back of the store. Time was ticking by too fast, and the assistant was busy helping another employee gather up some fallen boxes and *very* expensive-looking shoes while scolding her severely.

Another glance at my watch. I had four minutes. Four minutes until my interview time.

Fuck.

Suddenly a bold thought burst through my mind, and my heart froze momentarily in my chest.

I hadn't stolen clothes since I was a teenager, and stealing something this expensive was sure to have terrifying consequences, but if it got me that job then...

I hadn't even finished the thought when I grabbed my coat and bag and hurried across the store. I threw my coat over my shoulders and bolted through the doors at the same time as another customer who stopped and stared at his own bags when the alarm blared. My heart raced, and heat flooded through me so intensely that I barely registered the cold as I raced up the street back toward the Helix building.

I didn't stop running until I was across the street, through the revolving door, and safely inside. I stopped inside the foyer, panting desperately with my heart racing so fast in my chest that it was almost under my tongue.

Oh God... what have I done?

Slowly I turned and glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see that assistant hot on my heels, but there was no one there. Not a soul. When I turned back, I came face-to-face with a burly security guard who smiled warmly despite his bushy brows pulling low.

"Are you alright? Were you running from someone?" he asked in a deep voice.

I laughed breathlessly and straightened up, shaking my head and trying to smooth my hair despite the sweat that crept over my scalp and neck.

“No, no, I’m okay. I’m here for an interview,” I said in a rush, feeling incredibly hot and exposed under his dark gaze as if he could see the weird *thief* tattooed over my skin. “I’m late.”

“Oh, you’re with Mr. Hayworth!” called a sweet, tinkling voice. Behind the guard scurried a beautiful, short woman dressed in a rosy pink dress with a square neckline. Her blonde curls were piled on top of her head, and her glittering pink lips pulled into a bright smile when she saw me.

“Summer?” she asked in that sweet voice. I nodded, forcing my most polite smile.

“Your dress is *gorgeous*,” she cooed, then she flapped her hands at the guard. “Shoo, Andrew. I have her from here.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Andrew chuckled deeply, and he headed back to his station as the woman spun me out of my coat and motioned with one long pink nail to follow.

“Come along then! You’re a little late, but Mr. Hayworth is also running late, so it’s no sweat!” she called cheerily, leading the way to the elevators.

“No sweat,” I murmured under my breath as I plucked at the dress, trying to pull the mesh away from my torso and allow air to circulate. “Sure.”

“I’m Terri, by the way,” she smiled as we bundled into a large elevator covered in wooden panels decorated with various Christmas wreathes and twinkling lights all around the ceiling. Terri stared at them with a big smile. “Don’t you just love this time of year?”

“Yes,” I replied politely as the elevator swept upwards, leaving my stomach firmly on the ground floor.

Ten minutes later, I sat in a cozy waiting room. With dark red walls and a tan carpet, there was a rustic aura to the room. It contained four chairs, one of which I had sunken into gratefully when realizing the leather was cool, and a single

dark oak table. Terri pressed an iced lemonade into my hand that I had drained instantly, hung up my coat, and then vanished into the elevator, leaving me alone.

Nerves began to build the longer I was made to wait, but adrenaline still flooded my system, keeping the guilt for the theft at bay. I imagined what the rich little kids could be like to distract myself. Taking care of them surely would involve keeping them well-fed and entertained on their iPads, right?

“Miss Bradley?” asked a deep, slightly rough voice like the patter of small stones through the silk of a pouring waterfall. I turned in my seat and fixed a bright smile on my face.

“Yes?”

“I’m Jax Hayworth. This way, please.”

I saw him just as he introduced himself, and my smile faded as my jaw dropped.

Holy... shit.

End of preview. [Get the entire story here.](#)

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