



Nick

THE BRASH BROTHERS BOOK SEVEN

JENNA MYLES

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MYLES HIGH PUBLISHING

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Published by Myles High Publishing

authorjennamyles.com

Here's to sliding into home, one boob out, a rip in the ass of your pants, looking like you got dragged backwards through a bush.

It's wasn't easy or pretty, but it was damned well worth the effort.

THE BRASH BROTHERS READING ORDER

Book 1: Kade

Book 2: Micah

Book 3: Colton

Book 4: Declan

Book 5: Zach

Book 6: Jonas

Book 7: Nick

Book 8: John

CHARACTERS

Ransom Kyle: The ‘dad’ of the group. He brought together a group of misfit boys and turned them into a family. He’s the big idea guy.

Kade Dixon: The CEO, in charge of operations. Favorite word is Fuck and he manages to work it into nearly every sentence. Wife is Becca

Becca Tyler: A teacher at a Dojo and runs a lot of self-defense classes. Colton trains with her, and she makes him cry at least once a week. Often referred to as a Ninja.

Micah James: Works on custom projects out of the Knight Street garage. Was beaten by his father as a child, and suffered brain damage. He will often use ASL to supplement his speech. Big reader, has a kitty named Minnie (as in mouse). Girlfriend is Holly.

Holly Clarke: Escaped her abusive husband and hid from him for two years. He’s now in prison with Joker. Holly works at Knight Street with Micah.

Colton Miles: He’s the overprotective Golden Retriever of the group. Had a history of underground fighting. Wife is Evie.

Evie Collins: ER nurse and mom to Mia. She has a no-bullshit attitude that the guys find equally terrifying and hilarious. She’s the one that helped Holly escape her abusive husband, and as a result, had her life torn apart. Now married to Colton.

Declan Wilder: The hacker/computer geek. He can find anything on anyone. Obsessed with video games. Notorious

for losing bets with his brother Jonas, leading to Mohawks and ass tattoos. In a relationship with Cara.

Cara Davis: Ransom's right and left hand. Owns her own club *Curves Ahead*. Obsessed with Declan and after years of chasing him, they are finally together.

Bree Davis: Cara's sister. She's a physiotherapist and often works at Cara's club in the evenings. Cara raised her from the age of sixteen. Had an abusive boyfriend and she's still recovering from his attack.

Zach Lee: Head of marketing. The playboy of the group. Very image-focused and loves his expensive suits and beautifully decorated home. His younger biological brother is Jonas. In a relationship with Maya.

Maya Miller: Marketing Guru. Zach's new hire. Brilliant. Incapable of keeping her shoes on her feet. Awful sense of direction. She and Zach are a couple.

Jonas Lee: The CFO, the numbers guru. On the Autism Spectrum. He tends to be reserved around new people. Huge fan of puzzles. Married to Janey.

Janey Lewis: Head of HR at Brash. She's a people person, and everyone talks to her about their problems. She's incredibly intuitive, kind but doesn't always believe in herself. Accepted Jonas marriage proposal, got married, then fell in love.

Nick Diaz: The fixer. He could convince a nun to marry him in ten minutes flat. No official title, he goes where Ransom needs him to.

Maverick Walker: The lawyer. He and Nick are often sent out to handle problems that Cara can't solve.

John (Joker) Miles: Older brother of Colton. He was in prison for 18 years. He's out now, and living at the high rise trying to figure out how to navigate the real world again.

Abigail Brightwell: Was Maya's assistant in New York. Had a bad breakup and came for a visit, and never left. She's working at Brash with Maya now, trying to recover from her broken heart. She spends a lot of time at John's

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you're new here, you might want to go back and start with Book 1 - Kade. Trust me, you're going to want to get to know these chaotically wonderful men right from the beginning.

Content Warning:

This book mentions a previous attack & the attacker's subsequent death. It deals with the aftermath of trauma, and the slow road to healing.

Nick's also dealing with survivors guilt from the death of his grandmother when he was a child.

As always, there's swearing and sex.

I love hearing from readers. If you spot a typo, or you just want to complain about how long it's taking me to get to Ransom's book, email me at: jenna@authorjennamyles.com

“Give me one more,” I say, smiling encouragingly. I get exactly what I expect, and I don’t bother hiding my grin.

“Fuck off,” Wes growls, glaring at me. He glares at me the whole time he gives me one more leg press, then glares at me as he punches out one more without my asking. “There. You happy now? You’re a damned sadist.”

“Thrilled. You’re a champ. You just made it to the top of my favorite client list, Wes.” He side eyes me, then with a shake of his head, wipes his face with his white gym towel. His cheeks are still red, and his breathing is labored, but not as much as it was a few weeks ago.

I drop to the floor beside the leg press machine and pat him on the shoulder. “I’m serious. You did so well. Every little bit of extra effort is paying off. Your mobility is so much better. Your muscle tone is coming back. These are all good things.”

He sighs and rolls his head to look at me. “I guess so. It don’t hurt as much, anyway. That’s something.”

“That’s a lot of somethings. You’ve been through a lot. Your body’s been through major trauma. But it’s coming back.”

His lips curve the tiniest bit. “It ain’t nothing special. Never was. Too short, too fat, too creaky.”

I'd never say so, but he's right about some of it. He has a distinct garden-gnome look to him, especially with the way his beard is growing in. All he needs is a little pointy hat, and the picture would be complete.

"I think sometimes we don't give our bodies enough credit. It got you here, didn't it? It didn't quit on you after your car crash, even though it could have. It's been there for you for...what...fifty years?"

My teasing does exactly what I hoped. A rusty chuckle escapes him. "Quit flirting with me, missy. You know I'm seventy-three." Shadows creep into his eyes. "Besides, I'm taken."

"Yeah," I murmur, taking his hand. The old coot lets me too. "I do know that. And she's damned lucky to have you. Come on, let's get you up. That's enough for today."

He grumbles at me halfheartedly, but I see the tiredness, and I see the sadness. Other than going home to shower, he spends all his time at his wife's bedside, holding her hand, talking to her. I can't imagine how he must feel, having his wife of fifty years lying in that bed, body broken. A mixture of hope, fear and dread all swirling in his mind. *Will she wake up? Will she be whole again?* That car accident flipped his entire world. I know he's only pushing to get better because of her. Because he hopes that one day, she'll open her eyes and come back to him. He wants to be whole for her.

"Head home for a bit. Have something to eat. Have a nap," I urge him. He won't, but I can't help asking every time I see him.

"Stop nagging me. That ain't your job." He tips his chin at me and heads for the doors, cane tap-tapping on the floor. He won't need that thing much longer. And he's not going home. He's going straight to her. I watch from the front windows as he slowly makes his way to his big, red pickup and heaves himself in. He mentioned more than once that they would've been in better shape if they'd been driving his 'tank' instead of his wife's smaller car.

The regret in his voice when he says it is hard to hear.

I understand loss. Cara and I lost our parents too soon. I was only sixteen. We both had to grow up fast, and Cara had to figure out how to take care of a hurt, angry teen. We both turned out okay, if a little too attached. But they were gone in an instant. This long, drawn out agony he's living through is a whole other beast.

I wave at my next client coming in the doors, and put my mind back on my work. I'll try to put aside Wes and his poor wife. I don't want to think about loss right now. I just want to do my job. I want to help people.

Physiotherapy wasn't my first choice of careers. Though to be fair, my first choice, international thief, wasn't really a great career plan. But I'm still damned good at stealing. I think I would have been a Robin Hood kind of thief since I don't really care about material stuff. It's probably better that I headed in another direction. A more legal one.

Playing as many sports as I do, you're bound to get injured. I ended up with a major ankle sprain my first year of college, and it changed everything. I found the whole physiotherapy process fascinating. I loved how strong my therapist was. I loved how concrete the fix was. Do this, do that, and you'll get better. That doesn't apply to a lot of areas of my life, but at work, it mostly holds true. I help people feel better, live better, and with less pain.

That's something I'm proud of.

Plus, I'm not stuck behind a desk all day. I need to move. I crave it.

That's why this clinic is perfect for me. It's right near the University hospital, so we get a ton of referrals from there. And I love mentoring the students. And okay, sometimes, there's some serious eye candy. It's my happy place, and it has been since I graduated. Here, I know exactly who I am.

I'm safe.

It's the rest of my life that's the problem.

My judgment is shit. I made such a big mistake in trusting someone. I ignored every red flag, and it went horribly,

horribly wrong. Actually, horrible is not the right word.

Deadly.

He's dead, and my sister and I had to do something I never imagined.

We killed someone.

Yes, technically, she's the one that picked up my bat and hit him with it, but it was my fault. I put us in that position. I ignored my gut about someone, and she paid for it. I will never forgive myself for that. Cara should never have had to do what she did. Maybe if I'd walked away sooner, he wouldn't have flipped out. Maybe we could have gone our separate ways peacefully.

I have a hard time with the maybes. Some days...the regret eats at me.

The rest of my day is routine. I help people. People with hip replacements, heart attacks, posture-related shoulder issues, and torn ligaments round out the rest of the day. All people I've been working with for a few weeks. I build deep relationships with people, helping them through some of their weakest moments, and then I never see them again. It feels weird to invest so much into people, and then have them walk away, but that's the nature of the job.

I grab my last file of the day and page through it. Below the knee amputation, thirty-six years old. I've worked with lots of amputees, but never one this young. I turn the corner to my curtained-off table, and spot my newest patient.

Striking. Powerful. Beautiful. From his ice-blue eyes, to his bunched powerful shoulders, everything about him screams I don't want to be here.

I give him a small professional smile, sit on the rolling stool, and place his file on the treatment table next to his expensive prosthetic leg.

"Hi, Gabe," I say, extending my hand. "I'm Bree." He doesn't move for a few moments and then takes my hand in an almost painful grip. I don't let anything show on my face. "I see from your file you were injured a year ago. I'm guessing

you had PT back then?” I wait for his nod. “Good. So what brings you to me today?”

His voice is gruff when he answers. “My grandmother booked the appointment.”

“Your grandmother...” The man looks like he would rather be anywhere but here. But he shows because his grandma wants him here. I can work with that.

I take a deep breath, trying to ease the tension in the room. “Okay then, let’s start with what happened.”

Gabe shifts his gaze away from mine, looking out the window as he talks about his back-country skiing accident that left him an amputee. He describes it without emotion, like he’s trying to distance himself from it and block out any feelings associated with it. I understand that feeling too well.

“I need you to walk around the room so I can assess your gait. It’ll help me understand what’s not working for you right now.” He hesitates for a moment, looking unsure before finally standing up. His face is tight with tension, and his gaze avoids mine as he moves. His body language makes it clear that he is trying to be stoic, but underneath the facade, I see a deep reluctance in his eyes as he cautiously takes each step.

His posture is stiff and his movements slow, as if he had to mentally will himself to make the journey around the room. His eyes are focused on the ground, never looking up to meet mine.

It’s clear that he is struggling with the prosthetic. His movements are jerky and awkward as he tries to adjust himself to it.

“That’s enough, thank you.” I wait for him to settle back on my table. “Can I take a look at your stump? It’s important for me to get an understanding of the mechanics of how you move so that I can best help you. I want to make sure that you’re not putting too much strain on one area.”

Gabe’s jaw tightens, but he nods his head and pulls up his sweatpants to reveal the full prosthetic. He pulls it off, then peels off the sock underneath.

I touch him gently and begin my assessment. His muscles are tense and tight, which makes sense considering what he's been through. He winces when I press into certain areas, telling me there is still some inflammation. It's also clear, by the slight snarl on his face, that he really doesn't like me touching his stump, or even looking at it.

Finally, I pull back, jotting down some notes.

“Okay, Gabe. From what I can tell, your body is still adjusting to the prosthetic and the changes it has caused. You don't have to be in this much pain. You don't have to feel like you can't depend on that leg.” Something sparks in his eyes. A faint hope, maybe. “We're going to need to focus on pain management in the short term, gait training, strengthening exercises for both your legs and core training. All of this will help you adjust better to the prosthetic and make sure that you aren't putting too much strain on any one area.”

I give him a reassuring smile. “We'll take things slowly at first and then build up over time as we assess your progress.”

Gabe nods his head, looking slightly relieved that I have a plan of action for him.

“We need to monitor your progress with each exercise to determine if any adjustments are needed or if we should continue working on it until you feel comfortable,” I explain. “We'll also be using massage and heat to help manage any discomfort or inflammation in your stump and leg muscles.”

I pause before finishing my thought. “Your hard work will pay off. Eventually, you'll be able to move freely without pain or strain from your prosthetic. It doesn't have to hold you back.”

Gabe exhales slowly before finally looking up at me and giving me a guarded nod. He's fighting it, but I see a glimmer of hope in his eyes. Hope that he won't always have to live in pain. A little trust built, he lets me work on him for a bit, loosening his muscles. The lines around his eyes seem less pronounced by the time I'm done.

He nods goodbye before standing up and making his way to the door. He moves slowly, but with a renewed sense of purpose as he steps out of the clinic and into the parking lot. His truck is parked in an accessible stall, and for a moment he pauses to glare at the sign before finally getting in.

He starts up the engine and guns it, the roar of his truck's engine echoing through the parking lot.

My mind still on Gabe, with his forced smile and shadowed eyes, I wave a distracted goodbye to my coworkers and head for the parkade. Keys in my hand, I walk slowly toward my vehicle and do a wide circle around it, looking for anything out of place. Then I get closer and peek in the windows of my Jeep. I hate this part. Every horror movie I've ever seen urges me not to look. But my paranoia won't let me just unlock the doors and hop on in.

I didn't used to be this scared, and it's a little dumb. The person who hurt me wasn't a stranger. But stranger danger feels very top of mind for me now, so I check. Every single time.

Finally satisfied that no one is in my car, I click the locks, hop in, and lock the doors immediately. I used to sit in the car and decompress after a day of work. Not anymore. Now I'm jumping in the car and peeling out in seconds. Nascar pit crews have nothing on my speed.

Normally, I'd be heading to a softball game or a soccer game. Or even curling with a particularly boozy group of friends, but tonight is a rare night off. So I turn toward the lake, toward the expensive part of town. Toward home.

That feels weird to say. Cara and I spent a decade in a shabby apartment on the other side of the city. I knew every clank of the pipes, and the way every neighbor walked. It was familiar and safe. Until it wasn't. Until that night. The night I brought my angry boyfriend back to my house, and he snapped. Then it didn't feel so safe anymore.

A week after that night, I met *him*. Nick. The man with the wide killer smile, rich brown eyes, and shaggy hair so thick and perfect I wanted to run my hands through it. Cara and I

weren't sleeping. We couldn't go near the spot in the living room. The spot where Tyler died. We couldn't stay there. Moving was a logical option. But the speed and efficiency that they did it with was mind-boggling. I nearly had a panic attack when Cara told me all her bosses were coming to help us move. The fact that they're billionaires didn't factor into my fear. But she described them as gargantuan more than once. Gargantuan men coming into our home? I was not on board.

But I sucked it up and came out to meet them and thank them for their help. And yes, they were huge. But they were also incredibly kind, and sweet. Cara introduced them one by one, but when she got to Nick, there was something about him that drew me in. He was kind, and flirty, and somehow, I felt more like me than I had in a week.

“Nick's kind of a problem solver, I guess?” Cara said. “I don't actually know what your job title is, but he could convince a nun to marry him in ten-minutes, easy.”

I believed it. The man's sex on a stick, no doubt about it, but it's more than that. You can tell, just by looking at him, that he loves women. Wouldn't matter if I were eighty, or eight, he'd still wink, and pour on the charm. Something about him made the real me come out. The me that can handle any man.

“So, you have excellent oral skills?” I ask, my voice deadpan. The way all the guys' eyes widen, but especially Nick's, makes the corners of my mouth twitch. I couldn't hide my grin. That's all it took. All the guys, all nine of them, howled with laughter. Nick, charmer that he is, took my hand, still laughing, and pressed a soft kiss to the back of it.

No one's ever done that before. It should have felt weird. But it didn't. Not even a little.

Then the men were a whirlwind, packing us up, and bringing us back to their high rise, and one of their empty apartments. Because if you're a billionaire, obviously you'd have a few spare ones lying around.

So we went from an admittedly dumpy apartment in a so-so neighborhood to the thirty-fourth floor of a high rise on the

water, and I'm not mad about it. I could never have stayed in our old place. Here, we're safe. Here, we have a bunch of very large, very protective men surrounding us.

And a secured, private parking garage. One just for the top floors of the building. One with enough sensors and cameras to make even me feel safe. It's here that I let myself decompress, breathing out the stress of the day. It's hard seeing people in pain. It's hard causing it sometimes, even though I know in the end, it will help them. But I know that's not why I'm tense. It's the low level fear I'm living with that's doing the most damage.

I have to get a handle on it. I can't live like this for much longer.

NICK

He's an arm waver. I've witnessed a lot of versions of angry. There's the pulsing jaw guy. The clenched hand guy. There's the yeller and the avoider. Dealing with all of them is my job. I'm the guy that comes in to calm shit down. To make everyone feel heard. And in the end, get exactly what we want.

The arm waver, the owner of a garage we're negotiating a takeover with, raises his voice and takes a threatening step forward, slapping his hands on the top of his desk. It's completely expected. Almost boring, really. I don't bother standing up.

Some of my brothers would intimidate him with their size at this point. I could too. I'm a big dude. But that's not the play. This guy doesn't want to sell. But he has to. We both know it.

"You're a damned leech, feeding off the hard work of others," he snarls, spit flying, landing on the dust-coated pile of papers on his desk. A few red 'past due' notices peek out of the stack.

"You did a lot of good work here for a long time," I say, nodding. I don't say that he fucked it up with his bad choices. He knows it as well as I do. He's just not ready to admit it yet. "Aren't you tired? Wouldn't you like to take a little time and find something new? You've been in this business for decades. Might be nice not to be the boss anymore. No more bills, no

more dealing with delayed parts orders, or employees that don't show up. You can do whatever you want."

He's still snarling, but the fire in his muddy brown eyes has dimmed. "You're lowballing me," he mutters. He doesn't really believe it. He's just putting on a show.

I make a humming noise and prop my chin on my fist, staring at the paperwork. He follows my gaze, and his cheeks flush. "You have a good shop here," I say quietly. "But you've been going through a rough patch. It's not worth what it used to be. But you have choices, man. You don't have to sell. You can stay and keep fighting the good fight."

Now I stand, rising to my booted feet. I don't look like the kind of guy that would be sent in to talk through a deal. I don't wear suits if I can help it. I love my motorcycle boots. And I'm about a year past my last haircut. Add in my leather jacket, and nothing about me says 'corporate stiff'. And that's exactly why these guys respond to me. Some deals we do, it's the suits that handle it, like Maverick and Ransom. But when it's time to get in the mud, I'm the guy for the job.

"Fighting the good fight," he mutters, raking his fingers through his mostly gray hair. The man's hollow eyes and ruddy cheeks tell the story of the last few years of his life. Too much booze, not enough sun. His hands are still calloused and worn. I guess they would be since he's chased most of the good employees away and is stuck doing what little work there is, all on his own.

He drops heavily into his chair, a puff of dust rising into the air, and pulls the contract off the desk, flipping pages with a little more interest. "If I sold...you wouldn't want me to stay on? Help you run the place."

I shake my head. "We have a team that handles everything. The renovations, the management, all of it." Keeping a drunk former owner around would be very bad for business.

His lip curls into a snarl. "Of course you do. You fuckers got enough money. Don't need a little guy like me."

I don't respond, and he runs out of steam, staring down at the papers. "Might be nice, not having to worry about all these damned bills." He looks up at me, forgetting to be angry as he studies me. "I expected them to send a stuffed shirt. You don't look like any rich guy I've ever met."

I shrug and tuck my hands into my jeans pockets. "That's the nice thing about being rich. You can dress however you want. There's no one left to impress."

He snorts and grabs a pen off the desk, scribbling his name on the signature line. "There. This giant pile of junk is yours. Enjoy. When do I get my money?"

I take the paperwork and tuck it under my arm as I pull out my phone, and send a text to my brother Maverick.

Me: He signed. Wants the money.

Maverick: He threatened to come down here and take a shit on my desk. How the hell do you get them to change their minds so easily?

Me: I'm charming as fuck.

Maverick: I've seen you puke in your own lap.

Me: That was the lemon potato's fault

Maverick: Pretty sure it was the nine shots of ouzo

Me: No way. It was the potatoes. That's all I tasted coming up. The lemon wasn't as enjoyable the second time.

Maverick: No, I guess it wouldn't be. I'll send Lou down to deliver the check and change the locks. Should be there in an hour.

Me: Tks

"THEY'RE SENDING THE CHECK. SHOULD BE HERE SOON. YOU can give the keys to him too."

“It’s not going to bounce, is it?”

I wink, “Nah. We’re good for it.” I move to the door of his grimy office and pull it open. The familiar sounds of a garage filling the air. “This isn’t my place, so feel free to tell me to fuck off, but I’ve done hundreds of these deals. And I’ve met a few guys that looked a little like you. Like they spent too much time in a bottle. It usually goes one of two ways. The smart ones, they get some help. They quit the booze. Some of them buy a boat and go adventuring. Some pay off their mortgage and spend all day tinkering with their own project cars. The others though...” I trail off, watching him carefully. A guarded look comes over his face. He knows what I’m going to say, but I say it anyway.

“The other guys? The ones that took their check and partied it away? Too many of them are in the ground.”

I learned a long time ago that I can’t make people want to get better. But I also can’t say nothing. I have to try. And some people take it better than others.

“My life is none of your damned business. Why don’t you get the fuck out. It’s still my shop until I get that check.”

He didn’t take it that well. I don’t argue, giving him a quick nod before I exit. I don’t need to argue with him, or tell him he’s wrong. There’s no winning in this fight. None. So I let him have the last word.

I hop into my Ford Raptor, wishing spring wasn’t so far away. I miss my bike. I miss the freedom of riding. But if I have to be stuck in a box, at least it’s a nice box. The skies are gray, a heavy weight pressing down on me. I hate the cold. I hate clouds. I am a man built for sunny skies and warm beaches.

We should take a vacation. A few days somewhere warm, and everything will look brighter. I dial Declan, the bluetooth connecting the call, as I head away from our newest garage.

“I’m at the toy store,” he says as soon as he picks up.

“I’m on my way,” I mutter as I change lanes, excitement coursing through my veins, weaving across three lanes to get

to the turning lane. “Give me ten.”

I make it in eight, pulling into the back of the parking lot and jogging to the door. I pick up speed at the end, intercepting a young dark-haired woman pushing a stroller, and holding the hand of a little girl. I pull open the door with a big smile and a bow, making the woman grin and blush. I wink at the little girl, a little younger than my brother’s little nugget, and she giggles.

Maybe I don’t need the sun and the beach. Maybe I just need to stand here all day and open doors for beautiful little girls. It’s not like I need a real job. I would be the best toy store doorman in the history of the world.

I prowl the perimeter aisles of the store, stopping to look at a few displays of slime, science kits, and dolls, but eventually track down Declan. I stop next to him and slap him on the shoulder. “We need more babies.”

Declan grunts. “Agreed. Mia needs buddies.” His voice is distant as he stares at the largest display of NERF guns I’ve ever seen. I stare at all of them as I pull the wrapper off my sensory putty. I can’t pass it up. Doesn’t matter where I am, I see one of these tins and I have to buy it. I peel it out of the tin and squeeze it between my fingers, twisting and pressing it mindlessly.

“So,” I ask, staring at one particularly huge gun. “You guys want to go to the beach for a few days?”

Declan turns to me, stepping closer to let a little dude kneeling on a skateboard roll past. “Where? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. We could use a break. Cara works too damned hard. Miami? We can get a house right on the beach.”

“Perfect.” I try not to, but I can’t stop myself from asking. “Think Bree might want to come?”

Little lines of worry appear between his eyebrows. “That’s a good idea. She...” He trails off, and I’m desperate to know what he was going to say. In negotiations, there’s power in being the quiet one. In giving people room to think and to

wonder why you aren't talking. There's power in being the cool one.

"She...is she okay?" I can't be the cool one when it comes to her. I just can't. If I had a tail, it would wag every time I even think about her. And when I'm with her? Other parts of me wag. But it doesn't matter. I'm not going there. She's family. And you shouldn't fuck with family. Literally.

Ok, I just made that weird.

"She says she's fine. But I don't know. Cara doesn't seem convinced. She gets really quiet sometimes. She watches her, and I see the worry in her."

"Cara doesn't usually come across as a worrier."

"I know. She comes across as a ball-buster of a woman, in charge of everything. And she is. But when it comes to Bree, she's more like a worried mom. It's obvious that Bree used to be different. I kinda wish I'd known her before."

"Yeah, me too." Before she was hurt. Before her boyfriend tried to kill her. "But maybe it would help her? To get away for a while?"

"I hope so." He pulls out his phone and sends a message, and I'm satisfied for the moment. I'll stop asking about it for an hour, at least.

Done texting, he slaps his hands together and stares back at the wall of NERF guns. "So...NERF battle?"

I look back at the wall, and mentally calculate how much room I have in the back of the truck. Should be just enough.

"Yep. NERF Battle."

"NO HONEY, THAT ONE'S MINE. THIS IS YOURS." COLTON carefully removes the blue, three-foot-long sniper rifle from Mia's hands and gives her the small pink one we picked for her. She glares down at it, her black curls falling over her face. Her shoulders drop, and I'm ready to fight Colton to get her the big one back.

“Okay,” she says. “This nice too. It okay.” ‘This’ comes out like ‘dis’ and I hope she never stops talking like that. It’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard. She gives him a fake smile, and her lower lip trembles.

Colton’s face falls.

He carefully strokes over the big gun, and I see the longing in his eyes. He fought Declan and Ransom to get his hands on that gun. He’s a terrifyingly good shot, so I really hoped one of the other guys would win.

Finally, with a big sigh, Colton extends the gun to Mia, holding it out in front of him like a sword. She gasps and drops the pink one on the floor, hugging the sniper rifle to her chest.

“Oh Daddy! Thank you,” she says, and Colton melts into a big puddle of goo on the floor.

Maverick, in a white tank top and black athletic shorts bumps my shoulder. “We’re fucked.”

“I hid five hundred bullets in John’s apartment,” I whisper. “Aim doesn’t matter as much if we can scatter a barrage of shots.”

Mav shoots me a grin. “Did you know you’re my favorite brother?”

Laughing, we finish gearing up. I snap a pair of swim goggles over my eyes and adjust the fit. They’re tighter than I’d like. I also would have picked a different color, but oh well.

Everyone’s here, even Cara, who’s taking a rare night off of work, and Evie, who’s just woken up after a night shift. This is going to be epic. There’s a look in both women’s eyes as they study their guns that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Okay,” Declan says, clapping his hands. “Ground rules are the same as last time. I’ll go over them again for all the newbies.” He waves his hands toward the women and John. John’s eyebrows raise and he folds his arms over his chest. “The game takes place anywhere from the thirty-fourth floor and up. All apartments are fair game except Jonas’s.”

“Wait, why is Jonas’s off limits?” Holly asks from her seat at the dining room table. The woman is less than two months away from giving birth and insists on participating. The scowl on Micah’s face makes it clear how he feels about this plan. I’m not worried. No one in the family would even think of shooting at her. She has enough trouble just walking around. I’m amazed that her belly doesn’t just make her tip right over.

“I’m working on a new Lego set,” Jonas says, helping Janey tighten her goggles, a look of intense concentration on his face as he carefully pulls her hair out of the way. We really should have stopped and gotten some proper eye protection. We used to have a bunch of really expensive goggles, but had to throw them out. It’s hard to get dried egg off of plastic.

“Which one?” Kade, Zach and Micah all ask at once.

“Titanic,” Jonas mutters, still mostly focused on his wife. “I have at least four thousand pieces to go.”

“Oh, cool. Um, you need some help?” Kade asks.

“I was looking at that set last week. Can I come check it out?” Zach asks.

“Me too?” Micah asks.

All three of them look ready to drop their guns and go build Lego. No way will Declan let them miss this, but I guarantee we’ll all be checking the set out at the end of the battle.

Jonas, the shit disturber that he is, eyeballs all three of them. “One with the most kills gets to help.”

Oh, they are so in this. Nobody’s listening to the rest of the rules. We don’t need them. We play on all the floors we own. You get hit, you have to count it and stay down for five minutes. Same rules as last time. Though this is the first time we’re playing with women. I can’t really imagine shooting any of them. And if anyone hits Mia? I’ll murder them.

Picking up a purple pair of goggles and another sniper rifle, I head in Cara’s direction. “I got Bree a gun and some googles. Do you think she’ll be home soon?” *She’s off limits. Stay cool.*

Cara smiles and steps closer. I'm always surprised when I stand next to her without her heels on. She's really tall, but still seems tiny to me. I'm used to her looking me straight in the eye. I don't think I've ever seen Bree wear heels. She would be so tall, and her legs would look amazing. Another thing to add to the naughty time list in my head.

"She's on her way. Probably pulling into the garage as we speak."

"Oh...maybe I should bring her this then?" I ask, holding up the gun and goggles. *Please say yes, please say yes.* "I mean, she shouldn't be left undefended. She's walking into war, Cara."

Cara smiles, idly swinging her goggles from one fingertip. "That's a good idea. I know you'll take care of her, Nick. She's safe with you, right?"

Oh shit. I don't like the way she's looking at me. There's a ton of subtext here, but I'm going to play dumb and just answer her truthfully. It's all I can do. "I'll always take care of her," I tell her. "Promise."

Cara pats me on the cheek, a mix of threat and affection on her face. "Good. We're both lucky to have you. Have all of you. We really needed a family, Nick."

Fuck. This is exactly why I need to rein my shit in. Bree's never going to be mine. Never. And the sooner I can get that through my thick skull, the better.

The elevator doors slide open just as I'm about to punch the button. Heart racing, I step back. A wave of relief washes over me as the tall, incredibly sexy man wearing bright pink goggles grins at me.

A chuckle escapes as I take him in. He's dressed all in black, except for the ridiculous goggles. "Nick," I say through my laughter. "What is going on?"

He truly has the best smile. It lights up his face and makes him go from sex on a stick to heartthrob in a second. How does God grant one man so much sex appeal? It's not fair.

He turns and presses his back against the open door, holding it open, NERF guns and another pair of goggles clutched in his arms. "Come on, Bree, there's a battle afoot. I need a teammate."

How can I say no? Why would I say no? These guys are pure chaos, and I'm here for it. It's hard to stay stuck in your own head when they're around. They're too alive. Too filled with joy. "Gear me up. I'm ready to fight."

His warm, husky laughter rolls over my skin as I slide past him. So maybe I slide past him slowly, and let myself rub up on him just a tiny bit. Who would blame me? Besides, it's harmless flirting. He's practically my brother.

Okay, he's not even close to being my actual brother. If I had a brother and felt this way about him, that would be really, really gross.

But I like Nick. He makes me laugh, and he's really good at helping me get out of my head. I like being around him.

Maybe too much.

The elevator doors close behind me and the moment they do, I turn and punch him on the shoulder. "You're such an ass. I thought I was going to have a panic attack." He didn't do anything, not really, but I've discovered treating him like one of the guys is the best way to put him back in the friend box in my head.

"What?" He pushes his goggles up, revealing his rich brown eyes. They light up even more when he laughs, and they sparkle when he smiles. They're so pretty. "What did I do? I came down here to invite you to play."

"Never mind. I just got startled." I wave away his words and take the extra gun from him. "I haven't had a NERF battle since I was a kid. Why am I not surprised that you guys are having one? And what's with the pink goggles?"

"We're not that bad. We haven't had a NERF battle in at least a year. It got a little out of hand that time, so we thought it would be smart to take a brief break. Maturity is overrated anyway." He leans against the elevator wall and grins at me. "Toy store didn't have much to choose from for goggles. We're making do." I grin at him, because he's adorable, and because I'm picturing the rest of the guys in pink goggles too.

Nick wiggles his eyebrows at me playfully, and even though my heart is racing, I roll my eyes. *Keep it in the friend zone.* I have too much baggage. I'm too damaged. Tyler damaged me, and I don't know how long it will take to find myself again. To get back to me. I don't have the energy or the time to try and date.

And if I did, it wouldn't be Nick. I need someone easy. Someone simple. Nick is anything but. I distract myself by checking how many bullets I have, and sliding on the goggles.

The elevator doors open on the thirty-fourth floor, revealing Mia, her tiny frame armed with a giant three-foot-

long NERF gun. Nick and I freeze, trading glances. We raise our hands and step slowly, carefully off the elevator.

“That gun is bigger than she is,” I mumble out the side of my mouth. “How on earth is she even holding it up?”

“I have no idea. I thought it was funny when Colton gave it to her. I don’t think it’s funny anymore.”

Colton appears out of John’s apartment, and the second he spots us, a huge grin covers his face. “Mia, baby, what do we have here? Looks like you got the drop on them. That’s my girl.”

“I no drop it. I strong, see?” She lifts the gun a little higher and waves it in our direction.

“You’re right. You’re not going to drop it,” he says soothingly. His grin’s even bigger. His whole face is smiling. We’re going to be hearing about this for a long time unless we can get out of it.

I trade a look with Nick. Are we opposed to taking out a three-year-old to win this game? He’s considering it, I can tell. Maybe we could aim at her leg or something. It wouldn’t hurt her that bad, right? I wobble my eyebrows, then stare at Colton, trying to mentally urge him to take down the big guy. He wobbles his back.

“I have no idea what that means,” I whisper, trying not to move my lips too much. I wouldn’t put it past Colton to read my lips.

“It means he’s less likely to shoot y—“ A NERF bullet slams into Nick’s cheek a second before I feel a battering of bullets down my right side. Mia screams “cowabunga”, her bright giggles filling the air as she rams her finger on the trigger and continues pelting us with bullets.

Colton’s howling laughter joins the giggles, and the smack of the bullets. Finally, Mia runs out of ammo and lowers her gun with a pout.

“You dead now, kay?”

Nick and I trade glances, then I let out a dramatic groan, clutching my heart as if I've been struck by the deadliest foam bullet known to mankind. I fall dramatically against the wall, and slowly, with a long low moan, slide to the floor.

"Nick, it's been an honor fighting alongside you," I say, my voice a dramatic wheeze. "Tell my sister I love her and my dog to stop eating my socks."

Nick coughs, barely suppressing his laughter, then falls to his knees. "Bree, you've been a worthy comrade. But I hate to break it to you...you don't have a dog."

"Right, I forgot." A giggle snort escapes and I press my hands to my cheeks. "Make sure they write something nice on my tombstone. I don't want anyone to know I was killed by a kid."

Nick drops face first to the rich carpet, chuckles rolling through his body. "I'm dead, remember? I can't do anything."

"Right," I mumble, tipping sideways until my head is tucked next to his. "We had a good run, didn't we? I hoped I'd get to shoot someone, but that's life, I guess."

Colton's belly laughs are starting to get annoying. I lift my head, glare at him, then raise my gun and fire one bullet, right in the middle of his eyes. I wish I could say it's skill, but nope. He stares at me, dumbstruck, mouth gaping open. Mia plops down onto Nick's back, using him as a chair, and laughs so hard she nearly tips over. Nick's shaking back doesn't make it any easier for her to keep her seat.

"Bree!" Colton says. He'd be clutching his pearls if he had any. "I can't believe you did that." He tucks his little pink gun into the front of his sweatpants, sniffs, and moves to Mia, scooping her up under one arm. He grabs her gun with the other and glares at me as he heads for the stairs. "It doesn't count. You're already dead." Mia, still giggling, waves and yells "later dudes" as she disappears with her dad.

The door slams behind them, and I'm left lying on the floor with a still giggling Nick. I drop my head back next to his. I can't take it anymore. I yank my goggles off, then gently

pull his away from his face. He goes still, lifting his head to give me room to work. Maybe I take a little longer doing the job than I planned, but god, his hair is so soft.

“Your hair’s long enough for a man bun,” I murmur, pushing it away from his face. He swallows, studying me, then smiles.

“Holly said the same thing. I don’t actually know how to make a man bun.”

He’s fucking with me. He has to be. He just gave me the perfect opening. Giving in to the urge, I slide my hand into the hair near his face and gently pull it back. “You just pull it all back, like this, then go up. I can get you an elastic.” I look toward my apartment door, and so does he. The air between us is charged with electricity. Why did I make that offer? No way should he be coming into my apartment.

Slowly, reluctantly, he shakes his head. “We better not. If Colton comes back here in the next five minutes and finds us gone, he’ll never let me live it down.”

“Okay,” I murmur, relieved and also not. “Is that how long we have to wait? We’re not out completely?”

“Nah, not out. In five minutes, we respawn. Then we take them down.”

I roll over onto my back and stare up at the crisp white ceiling. “Perfect. I really want to nail him again.”

Nick laughs and rolls over, too, folding his hands over his wide chest. I work with bodies every day. Of course I noticed his chest. It’s not because I’m wondering what he looks like underneath the shirt. I mean, I’m sure he’s gorgeous. I’ve seen him in enough tight tanks to know that for sure, but I still want to see.

“What do you think?” he asks, staring at me expectantly. Is he offering to take off his shirt? What did I miss?

“Sorry. Long day. I zoned out. What were you talking about?”

“The trip. To Miami? Do you think you can come?”

“Miami? Right, Cara texted me about it. I’d really like to go. I might be able to swing it if it was a quick weekend trip.” Escaping this city, shaking off the gloom that’s settled into my bones sounds like heaven.

“You can’t get a few more days off?”

I shake my head...well I roll it side to side on the floor. “I could, probably, but I don’t really want to. It would mean canceling patient appointments, and I really don’t like doing that.”

“Couldn’t some of the other therapists step in?”

“Technically, yes. But it’s not the same. I know my clients. I know what their pain tolerances are. I know just when to push them. And they trust me. It’s not easy to shift that over to another therapist. Plus, they all have full caseloads too.”

“Right,” he says quietly. He rolls his head to look at me. “A weekend would be good. A little break from real life. We can fly out Friday night and come back late Sunday night.”

“That could work.” I try to sound relaxed and casual. “So, it would just be the four of us?”

There’s that bright smile again. The man is always so happy. “Yes. Just us. If everyone came, it would be...” He trails off, and I laugh.

“A shit-show. It would be a shit-show. That’s what you were going to say, right?”

“Pretty much. Last time we were in Miami, Maverick ended up in a Drag show. And let me tell you, those ladies can hold their liquor. I woke up on the beach wearing a wig and pasties.”

Howling, I clutch my stomach. Nick rolls onto his side and rests his cheek on his massive bicep, a small smile playing on his lips. “It was a fun night,” he murmurs. “But not relaxing. And I get the feeling you could use relaxing. You’ve been strung tight for a while.”

My laughter settles as his words register. “Strung tight,” I repeat. “I guess I am. There’s a lot going on.”

“I’m sure there is. But your boyfriend trying to kill you is a pretty big deal. You’re still processing all of it. Are you still talking to the counselor?” It was foolish of me to think he’d let that pass. These boys don’t believe in glossing over the hard stuff. They’re talkers, and I usually love that about them. But not today.

I want to tell him to mind his own business, but I see the concern in his eyes. He’s worried, and that warms me as much as it annoys me. I haven’t been the girl people feel sorry for in a long time. Not since my parents died. Now, I feel like everyone’s been tiptoeing around me, just a little.

“I’m still seeing her. It’s helping, I think. I’m sleeping better, anyway. So that’s something.”

“That’s a big thing.” He reaches out and brushes his thumb over my cheek. “We just want you feeling whole again, Bree. I know there’s not a quick fix for what you went through. I know it will live with you for a long time. Maybe forever. But it will get better.”

“I hope so,” I say, forcing the words out through the constriction in my throat. I don’t want to live with it forever. I just want to forget. But he’s right, I know he is. It will stay with me. There are still way too many nights I wake up in a sweat, feeling Tyler’s hands around my throat.

“It will, I promise. With time, it’ll be okay again. And you have all of us rooting for you, Bree. All of us.”

“You guys are good friends,” I say, needing to put distance between us. Needing to make sure the line is clear. I won’t cross it. Not ever.

His mouth twists, and he winks. “I’m an excellent friend. It’s been five minutes, let’s go shoot some folks.”

I reach out and boop his nose. His face scrunches up, making me laugh. “Okay, let’s go. Dibs on Cara.”

He shudders and sits up. “She’s all yours. Your sister’s scary.”

Images of spaghetti dinners and soft hands brushing my hair fill my mind. “You have no idea.” They really don’t. She is

scary, but she also loves so fiercely, and cares so deeply. I push to my feet and stare down at him. “If we’re doing this, we need a plan.”

NICK

“**S** top giggling,” I whisper, scowling back at Bree. I don’t actually want her to stop. I love her laugh, and I want to hear more of it, but every time I scold her, she laughs more. I can play the grumpy competitive guy all night if it makes her happy.

“We’re supposed to be sneaking woman. My brothers are going to catch us.”

She presses her fingers to her lips and rests her NERF gun over her shoulder. “I know, I know. I can’t help it. You just look so funny in those goggles.”

I cross my eyes at her and focus back on the stairwell. We’re just passing my floor, but my focus is on the penthouse. At least I’m trying to focus, but of course I can’t help sneaking glances back at Bree. She insisted on changing into her ‘stealth’ clothes. She’s wearing a black jumpsuit, the loose onesie type thing, and her hair is tied back in a ponytail. She looks like a sexy toddler, and I’m slightly uncomfortable with how attracted I am to her.

We reach the penthouse floor and I hold up a hand to signal for Bree to stop. I press my ear against the door and listen for any sounds of movement inside.

Silence.

I grin at Bree and give her a thumbs up. “Let’s do this.”

We creep into the penthouse, taking exaggerated steps to avoid making any noise. I feel like a cat burglar, and I can see

Bree is loving it too. She's squinting through her goggles, carefully scanning every corner of the room, her NERF gun at the ready.

Suddenly, we hear footsteps coming down the hall and my heart jumps into my throat. We both freeze in our tracks and look around frantically for somewhere to hide. In a panic, I grab Bree's hand and drag her into the kitchen just as someone enters the room.

Bree is signaling to me, but I have no damned idea what she's trying to say. Clearly, she has a plan, but from what I can tell, it's to pick grapes and then juggle them, which makes no sense at all. We should have practiced the signals at least a little before coming on the offensive.

My tension ratchets up. I can feel someone standing on the other side of the island. I widen my eyes at Bree through the damned goggles, and she widens hers back. I start a slow countdown on my fingers, holding up three, then two, then one.

With a roar, we pop up from behind the counter, letting loose a barrage of bullets. I hear my bullets hitting home, and register the feminine gasp before my eyes lock on the very pregnant woman standing in front of me. I yank my finger off the trigger and drop my gun.

"Holly," Bree gasps, "I'm so sorry."

Holly's eyes are wide, and her mouth is open in shock as she stares at us. Her gaze shifts down to the ice cream cone pressed against her stomach, with a blue NERF bullet lodged in the top. The mint green desert speckled with chocolate chips oozing down her top a stark contrast to the pale yellow of her maternity shirt.

I can't believe I shot at a pregnant woman. I'm going to hell. My *Abuelita* would have my head.

Holly lifts her head, eyes meeting mine, and the rage in them backs me up against the far counter.

"That was the last of the mint chip. There is no more, Nick. None." Something in her voice makes my balls shrivel

up. Instinctively, they're trying to hide. My balls are wise.

Bree and I trade glances. Mint chip has been Holly's one consistent craving through this pregnancy. Now, we've taken it away from her. We're going to die.

Bree and I raise our hands, and I give her my most charming smile. She looks like she'd like to slap the smile right off my face. It shouldn't be scary. She's barely five feet. But she's terrifying, and I'm man enough to admit it.

"Holly, we're sorry. We can get you more ice cream. We'll go now," Bree says placatingly.

"It's too late for that," she says grimly, looking between us. "Now you have to pay."

I have just enough time to look at Bree in confusion, when suddenly we're peppered with bullets.

Again.

I spin and press Bree up against the counter, covering her with my body. "Bree, it's been an honor and a privilege to fight with you."

She's laughing, tucking in tight to shield herself. The bullets are still coming. Who the fuck?

Finally, they stop and I risk turning around. Micah, wearing a mean mug that admittedly is scary as fuck, is standing there with two massive NERF guns, one in each arm.

"We're supposed to die now, right?" Bree asks, peeking out.

"Yeah...um, why don't we go die somewhere else, though? If we stay here..."

"Right," she squeaks as Micah calmly puts one gun on the counter, ejects a magazine from the other, and grabs a refill from the back of his pants.

"Oh Fuck," I mutter. "Run."

"Sorry, Holly," we yell. I swear I hear her cackle in response.

Bree, thank god, doesn't waste any time hauling ass straight to the door. The slap of the magazine in the gun chases us out. Micah's maniacal chuckle follows us, coming closer and closer to the door.

"Where do we go?" Bree asks, eyes wild as we tear down a flight of stairs, then the next. Her breathing is harsh, jagged. Out of habit, I slam through the door on my floor. I drop my hands to my knees and suck in air, heart pounding. I love that rush of adrenaline. I love the panic. It makes me feel alive, like nothing else can. I used to chase this feeling, right off buildings, or bridges, or jumping out of planes. Now, we get it through NERF battles, and racing at the track. Maybe I've grown up. More likely, I just have more to lose now.

"God, he's never going to let us forget that," I say, laughing. I raise my head to look at Bree and straighten up immediately.

Bree is standing in the hallway, shoulders shaking, eyes wide and unfocused. Panic attack. I've seen her look like this once or twice, but Cara was always there to whisk her away. Now, it's just me.

No way am I going to let her down.

I step forward, one arm outstretched, but it's like she doesn't even see me. She's stuck, her mind somewhere else, as she gasps for breath.

"Bree," I say calmly, my voice softening as I take another step nearer to her. "It's okay."

She seems not to hear me, her gasps becoming more ragged by the second as she stares into nothingness. I take another step and grab her hand in mine, grateful she lets me lead her into my apartment, then lock the door behind us. I hope none of my brothers are hiding in here. The last thing she needs is someone jumping out at her.

I take a deep breath and lower myself onto the floor, gently tugging her down with me. Her knees seem to unlock, and with a gasping exhale, she drops to the floor next to me. I can't take her ragged breathing and panicked eyes. Afraid to make it

worse, but unable to do nothing, I carefully wrap my arm around her waist and pull her into my lap. She fits perfectly there between my legs and against my chest like I was built for her. I pull her legs over my thigh, and with one hand on her back and the other cupping her face gently in my palm, I whisper that everything is going to be okay over and over again. I don't know how long we sit there, but she finally starts to calm down enough for me to feel her body soften against me.

"That was dumb," she mutters, gaze fixed off into my apartment.

"Was it?"

She looks at me, brow furrowed. "I had a panic attack running away from Micah. Micah! The sweetest person I know." Her lips purse. "He's big, but still, it's Micah."

"Panic attacks aren't really logical." I've seen enough of them to know. The littlest thing can set them off, and sometimes, it takes too long to drag a person back.

Her fist clenches on her thigh. "Maybe. But this isn't me. I'm not this girl. I don't want to be."

"Who did you used to be?" I don't know any other version of Bree. And I desperately want to.

"I was the *handle any situation* person. Nothing phased me. Nothing was too hard. I just put my head down and powered through."

"Sort of like someone who's never been through anything?" I wait for my words to register, for her shoulders to drop. "Like you didn't realize you were vulnerable? You have to stop being so hard on yourself," I say gently. "Trauma changes a person, sometimes in ways that are permanent. But that doesn't make you weak."

She sighs. "It feels weak. Like I shouldn't be falling apart over things that used to be easy."

I shake my head. "You're not falling apart. You're working through pain that takes time to heal. There will be good days and bad, but you'll come out the other side."

“You think so?” she asks, a glimmer of hope in her voice.

“I know so,” I say firmly. I can’t imagine it otherwise. I *won’t* imagine otherwise. “It won’t happen overnight. Recovery is a process. But you’ve already taken the first steps.”

She considers this quietly for a moment. “You’re right. I’m not curled up under the covers anymore. I spent a lot of time in bed, after...” Her voice trails off. The words she didn’t say ‘*after he tried to kill me*’ hover like a dark mist between us.

I swallow down the rage I feel, imagining what he did to her. It’s the same rage I feel every time I think about him touching her. *Not the place, not the time.* “Exactly. Just focus on moving forward, one day at a time. Don’t get hung up on who you were or who you think you should be. Just be who you are now and hang on. You’re forever changed, Bree. You lived through something horrible. You will never be who you used to be. But that doesn’t mean that the new Bree is a downgrade.”

A small smile tugs at her lips. “Downgrade? You’re spending too much time with Declan. You’re sounding all techie.” Her smile falls. “You make it seem so simple.”

“Healing is never simple,” I admit. “But it does get easier, bit by bit.”

She studies me with a small frown. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Too much experience. “I haven’t had someone try to kill me, but there’s been a lot of...death in my life. It sometimes feels like each one chipped away at me. Like they remade me into someone else.”

I’m lost in her blue eyes and her flushed cheeks. She has me trapped. It wouldn’t matter if the building was coming down around us. If she’s sitting here, looking at me like that, I’m not moving.

A yelp from the hallway, and a banging on my door, shatters the moment. “I’m under attack. Help! I need reinforcements.”

“It’s Maverick,” I lean in to whisper in Bree’s ear. “What do we do? Kill him, or help him?”

Bree turns her lips a breath away from mine. “Help him.” She scrambles off my lap and moves to the door, looking back at me with a wild grin. The panic of the last fifteen minutes is nowhere in sight.

She swings the door open, and Maverick tumbles in. “Lock it, lock it!”

Laughing, Bree locks it, then turns to study the panting man on the floor. I do too, because...” Why the fuck are you wearing underwear on your head?”

“I didn’t have a full face mask,” he says, like it should be obvious. Hands resting on his chest, NERF gun clutched between them, he sucks in deep breaths.

“I can’t tell if you’re a genius, or an idiot,” Bree says, not trying to hide her laughter. I get it. The man looks ridiculous. He’s in all black, with a pair of boxer briefs pulled down over his face. “How can you see anything?”

He lets go of his gun and pulls apart the flap, revealing his nose and mouth. His lips part with his exhale. “I cut eye holes.”

I crawl a little closer, and peek down at him. Yep, there are holes, and beneath that, a bright yellow pair of goggles.

Bree slides down the door, snorting with laughter. “Oh my god. You guys are so weird.”

Maverick lets the flap fall closed, and wiggles a finger in her direction. “Weird, maybe. Crazy smart? Yes. Way too competitive? Yes. It makes grown men do dumb shit...but I managed to sneak up on Kade and Becca. Nailed her right in the ass.”

“Dude, she’s not going to let you forget that. That was a dumb move.”

“Nah, she can’t be the best at everything. It’s not natural. It was my duty to knock her down a peg.”

Bree crawls forward, and looks down at Mav. “So you nailed Becca in the ass, then came running, begging for help?”

He nods, the dim light from my kitchen shining on the goggles. “Pretty much.”

Bree laughs again, and sighs, laying back on the floor. Now I’m feeling left out, so I lay on the floor too.

“It’s okay,” Bree reassures him. “We accidentally shot Holly. It hit her ice cream. She is so pissed. Then Micah got us. We ran like Godzilla was about to destroy the city.”

Maverick sits up and peels the underwear up until it’s sitting on the top of his head, yellow goggles making him look like some kind of bug. “You shot Holly? You fucked with her ice cream?”

His giggles start in his throat, high pitched. Predictably, it gets worse, and he collapses back onto the floor on his side, clutching his stomach. “You guys are so dead,” he says between bouts of hysteria.

Bree and I trade a look, then nod. “We’ll be back,” I say. “We’re going to the store. If you see Holly or Micah, tell them we’re bringing a peace offering.” I push to my feet and hold my hand out, glad she doesn’t hesitate to reach out for me. I tug her up a little too forcefully, and with a laugh she lands against my chest. She tips her chin up, just the tiniest bit.

“Ice cream?” she asks with a grin. I can’t resist giving her a boop on her nose. She scrunches up her face and rolls her eyes.

“Ice cream. First one out the door gets to drive.”

With a gasp, she shoves me in the chest, then spins, jumping over a still giggling Maverick, and bolts for the door.

I don’t run, content to just watch her for a second. Then I step over my brother, dragging my boot over his chest as I go. He punches me in the calf between giggles, then I follow Bree out the door.

“I ‘m sorry I’m late. I won’t be long, promise,” I yell as I bang through the front door. “Traffic sucked.” I kick my shoes off and run straight to my bedroom, frantically throwing open my closet doors. I know I should’ve packed earlier, but I might’ve been avoiding thinking about this trip a little bit. Yeah, I’m super excited to go, but I know that Nick and I are going to be thrown together a lot over this weekend. I fully expect Cara and Declan to be lost in their own little world.

“The guys will be down here in a few minutes,” Cara says from the doorway. She’s wearing her classy version of relaxed, loose flowy pants and a slouchy shirt that probably cost a hundred bucks. The woman’s wardrobe is small, but everything in it is expensive and makes her look like a million bucks.

“Shit! Shit! Okay, we’re at the beach, so all we need is bathing suits and maybe a couple of dresses, right?” She nods, and I grab a handful of bathing suits and throw them on the bed.

Cara wanders over and drops to the bed, pawing through the suits. She holds up a turquoise two-piece with cut outs. “This one is cute. You’d turn all the boys’ heads in this one.”

I snort and yank the carry-on suitcase out of my closet. “I don’t care about turning any boys’ heads. I don’t want a boy, a man, or a sugar daddy. I’m fine being single.”

Cara nods soberly. “I know, honey. You shouldn’t rush into anything. Not for a long time. But a little flirting is just fun,

isn't it?"

"Flirting is sometimes fun. With the right guys anyway. But sometimes, I'd just rather not."

"Not every guy is like Tyler, honey."

Pulling open my underwear drawer with a little more force than necessary, I sift through the panties and bras. I shove the lacy ones out of the way and grab the basic sets. All cotton this trip. Nothing showy. Nothing I want anyone to look at. "I know that," I mutter.

She makes a low humming sound and grabs another bathing suit. A completely revealing bikini she bought for me and I never wore. But I don't object when she slides it into the suitcase. I'll wear it when hell freezes over. Maybe not even then.

"Bree," she says suddenly, hands gripping her knees tightly, "I don't know how to help you. You're hurting, and I just want you to be better."

"I know," I say, sitting next to her on the bed. The air between us feels suffocating. "I'm trying."

Her eyes fill with tears. "God. That came out wrong. Of course you're trying. I know you are. I just wish I could make it better. Or do something. I don't know what to do."

I take her hand, loving how tightly she grips me. When we're like this, together, it feels like there's nothing we can't handle. "I don't think this is a battle you can fight for me. We both went through something awful. But we went through different kinds of awful. I don't think it's your job to make me better Cara. It can't be." Sometimes I wonder how she can be so okay. She was there that night too, and yes, she had sleepless nights, but overall, she seems back to normal. And I just can't seem to get myself out of the deep end.

She opens her mouth to say more, eyes full of worry, but we're interrupted by the front door opening and Nick and Declan's voices. Cara closes her mouth and studies me, finally giving my hand one more squeeze before standing up. "Finish up. We'll leave when you're ready." Her grin turns maniacal.

“I bought swimsuits for the guys. You have to help me convince them to wear them.” Then she’s gone.

I wait for the door to close before flopping back onto my bed. She means well, I know she does. But sometimes the way she looks at me gets to me and I find myself pretending for her. It doesn’t feel good. At all.

I shake out my hands, then sit up and hurry through the rest of my packing. I eye the bikini at the bottom of my suitcase, but don’t take it out. There’s not much to it, so it barely takes up any space. I tend to gravitate toward the sporty suits, the kind that won’t let my boobs pop out when I jump to spike a volleyball. This one? I don’t see how it could possibly contain the girls. There’s just not enough material.

Declan’s the first one to catch my eyes when I exit my bedroom. He grins and winks. “Ready to go Little Bee?”

I secretly love the big brother energy he sends my way, but letting him know that would ruin our little game. So I roll my eyes at the nickname, lift my suitcase, and shove it into his hands. “Make yourself useful, dude.”

Nick’s warm chuckles roll over my skin, making the little hairs stand up. No one has this effect on me, not even my hot new patient at work. Unable to resist him, I turn and rest my butt on the edge of the kitchen counter, matching his pose. I gently nudge him with my shoulder. “Are you actually leaving this building without your leather jacket? Won’t it be lonely while you’re gone?”

He tilts his chin down a smidge and grins. “I snuggled her up in my bed and left some music playing. She’ll be okay for a couple of nights.”

A surprised laugh escapes. “Your jacket is a she?”

Something in his eyes heats and sweat beads at the back of my neck. “But of course. She’s luxurious, and soft, and wraps around me so perfectly.”

I have nothing to say. No flirty comeback. No joke to break the tension. Nothing but a wheezing exhale thankfully

disguised by Cara's laugh as she dances away from Declan's grabby hands.

"Let's go. I was promised beaches and sun. Don't keep me waiting any longer," Cara says.

"I always keep my promises, love, always."

We climb into the car for the ride to the airport, and I'm spared the torture of sitting next to Nick. Everyone agrees I get to sit up front. The driver isn't talkative, seeming more focused on getting us there in one piece. We head in the opposite direction of O'Hare, instead pulling into a smaller airstrip.

My stomach flutters when I see a private plane waiting for us on the tarmac.

Declan puts his arm around me and nods towards the aircraft, while Nick and Cara trail behind us. "You ready for the real first class?" he winks.

I'm too shocked to reply, still staring at the plane in amazement even as we board it. The cabin is spacious and luxurious, filled with plush black leather chairs, a couch, and a little kitchen. It's sleek and shiny, and way bigger than Cara described.

I've never been on a private plane before, and I can't help but be overwhelmed by its opulence. There's a stewardess offering us snacks and drinks before we even take off. I say yes to all of them. Who knows when I'll have the chance to travel like this again? I'm going to appreciate every moment of it.

We all buckle up for the flight, and as soon as we're at altitude, Cara and Declan disappear into the bedroom at the back of the plane.

I catch Nick's eye across the table separating us. The grin twitching the corner of his lips sets me off too, and we laugh. Declan's muffled, "We're just napping assholes," makes us laugh even harder.

"They're definitely joining the mile high club," I mutter, gratefully taking a glass of champagne from the stewardess. I

settle back in my chair and take a sip, glancing at Nick out of the corner of my eye. His gaze is fixed on me, and my stomach flips at his intensity. I can almost feel the electricity between us in the cabin. I clear my throat nervously and take another sip, nothing but inane conversation starters ringing through my head.

“Can you blame them?”

Nick’s voice is low, and I can feel the heat radiating from him. Blame them? For what? What are we talking about? Right, the mile high club.

“No,” I answer honestly. “I’m glad Cara’s happy.”

He nods thoughtfully and takes a sip of his champagne. “What are you most looking forward to this weekend?”

I pause for a moment, thinking about all the possibilities. The beach, the sun, the sound of ocean waves crashing against the shore, it all sounds so inviting. “The water. I can’t wait to just...float. Hey, where are we staying, by the way?”

“We rented a private house with a 24-hour butler. We’ll have two hundred feet of beach all to ourselves.”

My mouth drops open. “That’s insane!”

He laughs and pours us each a second glass of champagne. “Maybe. But we can afford it, so why not?”

“I guess. Cara and I have been talking about a Miami trip for a while, but I was picturing a crowded beach and pool, drunk frat boys, and lots of margaritas.”

“Sorry to disappoint. Instead, you’ll have a private pool and hot tub, and a butler bringing you all the drinks you can handle.”

“I think I’ll live,” I say dryly.

He laughs and waves over the stewardess, whispering in her ear. She quickly returns with a Jenga box, and a couple of packs of cards. “Jenga? Really?”

Nick grins, “The pilots are great, but being in the air adds a layer of complexity. You never know when you’ll hit an air

pocket and knock the damned thing over.”

“You know, most billionaires probably fill their planes with drugs and booze... and women. Definitely women. You guys have Jenga?”

He snorts as he dumps the blocks on the table. “We’ve done that. The first flight on our first private jet was wild. Jonas spent the whole time wearing massive headphones and glaring at us.” He shrugs and carefully starts stacking the blocks. I should help, shouldn’t I? But I don’t, content to sip my fancy wine and watch his strong capable hands build the tower. “The novelty wore off pretty quickly. Now when we fly, we’re usually doing it for work...though this plane is different.”

“Different how?” I ask, glancing around at the opulence around me. When Cara described the plane, it was smaller, but still really luxurious. And she said it was white leather, not black.

“It’s bigger. It has a bedroom. We upgraded just recently.”

Well, that answers that question. “Because you wanted to join the Mile High Club?”

Snickering, he carefully stacks another row of blocks. “No, though, with the right person, that would be fun.” He meets my gaze, face serious. “Our family is growing. We needed more space for everyone. And the babies are going to need a quieter place to rest on longer flights.”

Now my heart is breaking and being knit together, all at the same time. Growing, because of course these guys would buy a new jet for the babies. They’re all about family. But imagining Nick and all the babies he might have in the future hurts more than I thought it would. “You’re telling me that you guys bought this very massive plane for the babies?”

“And the women. All of you factored into it a lot. After what happened to Cara and Declan, we decided having a plane large enough to hold everyone was important.”

“The way you say that ‘after what happened’ is funny. Like Colton didn’t deliberately manipulate the two of them

into getting stranded at that motel.”

He grins, rolling a block between his fingers, eyes lit with laughter. “Yeah, he was playing matchmaker. I can’t say I agree with his method, but you can’t argue with the outcome, can you?”

Like it was planned for this perfect moment, a low moan comes from the bedroom, followed by some muffled voices. “Still sleeping,” Declan yells.

I cover my face with my hands, the champagne glass still clutched in my fingers. “Oh my God.” I’m not jealous, not really. Ok, maybe I am. I miss being touched. I miss that connection you only have with a boyfriend. But everything else that comes with it, I’m not ready for. Just because I’m not ready for sex doesn’t mean I should cockblock my sister. Nick apparently has other ideas.

Leaving his half built tower on the table, he rises with a wicked grin, and moves to the bedroom door. “Hey sleepyheads,” he yells through the door. “There’s plenty of room out here for one of you to stretch out. Dec, want to nap on the couch and give Cara a little peace?”

My tough as nails sister doesn’t disappoint. Her words, laced with sugar and steel, carry easily through the door. “He’s fine right where he is, Nick. And if you don’t get away from that door within the next five seconds, you’re going to learn way more about me than you ever wanted to know. Like how I sound when I—“

Nick howls and slaps his hands over his ears. He spins, eyes closed so tightly his cheeks touch his eyebrows, and he stumbles back to the table, knocking his blocks over as he falls facedown across his seat, ass in the air. It’s an incredibly biteable ass. Maybe it’s the champagne, or maybe it’s the fact that Nick isn’t looking, but I let myself stare at his marvelous backside, visions of all the naughty things I’d like to do to it flowing through my mind.

“They’re behind a closed door dude. You could have kept your eyes open!” I say, clutching my stomach as giggles roll through me.

His eyes slit open. “Right. Yep. I knew that. It was instinct.” His eyes crinkle up and he laughs, a low, rich chuckle that dances up my spine. Another thing to go on the list of my favorite things about Nick. He can laugh at himself, never seeming to take offense.

“This weekend is going to be a lot of fun.” I murmur.

NICK

As I walk out of the ocean with Declan, water dripping from my skin, I catch Bree staring right at me. She's good, she hides it pretty well. But I feel her gaze like the tip of a feather trailing along my skin. I wonder if she feels the same thing when I look at her? That phantom skin tingling sensation?

I rub my towel through my wet hair and drop it back onto my lounge chair, feeling her gaze intensify. My fingers twitch; I want to touch her. I want to know what she's thinking. Does she want me as much as I want her? The depth and breadth of my wanting leaves me stunned most days, but today, looking at her in that sporty blue bikini, it feels totally appropriate.

The woman is a knockout, lush curves, tanned skin. My mind immediately goes to all the ways I want to explore those curves. All the places I want to taste. I have to turn away and stare at the expanse of blue water, cresting with white, foamy waves. There's something about that sound, the waves crashing against the shore in a soft whisper that makes my shoulders loosen. It's better than any white noise I've ever heard.

My body under control again, I tug my way too short swim trunks down, and turn back to the women, only to find Declan laid out on top of Cara, locked in a scorching kiss. Grinning at Bree, I drop to sit next to her on the lounge, deliberately pushing into her space so she has to stay pressed against me or risk falling off.

“I bet if I started filming now, I could blackmail him into buying me this house,” Bree murmurs, watching her sister and Dec with a mixture of amusement, sadness and longing.

Desperate to make her smile, to take her mind away from any horrible memories chasing her, I lean back against her raised knee. “Nah, that would earn you an entire island, at least. He won’t want anyone hearing him make those noises.” Glancing at Bree, I make the most obnoxious making out noises. And thankfully, a wide smile breaks over beautiful Bree’s face, and she joins in, pursing those lush lips as she makes kissy noises.

Cara and Declan break apart, laughing. Declan shoots us a glare, but can’t hide his smile. “They’re both smartasses,” he mutters, lowering his head to whisper in Cara’s ear.

“Care Bear,” Bree says, sounding happy, and carefree. “Let’s go build a sandcastle. Like we used to.”

Cara lowers her sunglasses, her smile wide and open. “Think this ritzy place has buckets?”

I don’t know, but the women want to play in the sand? I’ll get them every sandcastle building set I can find.

I’ve always wondered what it would be like to play in the sand. Maybe they’ll let me join.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, I’M SNIPING AT DECLAN AS A section of our nearly three feet tall masterpiece crumbles into the moat I’m sitting in. Bree and Cara are sitting cross-legged in the sand as Declan and I work frantically to defend against the tide.

“Wait, that turret isn’t secure. It needs to be reinforced.”

“It’s fucking secure, man. Worry about your moat. The tide is coming in. Work faster asshole,” I say.

“Why did you build it so close to the water?” Declan grumbles at the women, frantically scooping the water away.

Bree and Cara exchange grins. “Because that’s half the fun,” Cara says with a cheeky grin. “It’s sand Declan. It’s not

meant to last forever. The goal is to build the best castle you can, then defend it with everything you have in you until the water beats you. It's about the battle. Not about keeping it forever."

I freeze, staring down at my sand covered hands. Her words crawl through me like an army of sand crabs, scratching and digging, unearthing snippets of memories. My *Abuelita* said something similar one night. It was just the two of us in her kitchen, which itself was a rarity. *Abuelita's* house, and especially her kitchen, was the hub for our family and our neighborhood. It was never empty. Except that night we had it to ourselves. *Abuelita* was icing a *Tres Leches* cake, and I swear I had to wipe the drool off my chin. I was complaining, as only kids can, about how long it was taking her. "It doesn't matter how it looks. It tastes the same," I whined. I wanted that cake in my belly, bad.

I can still hear her soft laugh and feel her fingertips raking through my hair. "*Mio*," she said, in her softest voice. "I'm making it with love. That's the only way to do it. It doesn't matter if there are only crumbs left at the end. I know I made something wonderful for all the important people in my life." She put time and effort into all of us, and in the end, I was the one that destroyed it.

"You guys haven't done this before, huh?" Cara asks quietly.

Declan answers her while I drift in the painful memories. Bree's voice shakes me out of my daze.

"What about you Nick? Did you ever go to the beach?"

"My *Abuelita* didn't swim. She was afraid of the water."

"Your *Abuelita*?" Bree asks, her voice delicate, careful, the question unspoken, but obvious.

"Yeah. She died when I was seven."

Bree's face fills with sympathy and echoes of shared pain. She's lost people too, but not in the same way. Her parent's death wasn't her fault.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I can't look at her, so I give her a mockery of a smile, and stand, brushing the sand off my hands. "If castles are temporary, then I think I'm ready to pack it in. Anyone want to swim?"

I hope the answer is no. I need to chase away these thoughts. I need to be alone. I don't wait for an answer, heading straight into the water.

I feel Declan pull up next to me a few steps in. I don't say anything, and neither does he. With a familiarity built over two decades, we dive into the cool of the deeper water. One of the best ways to chase away all the things I don't want to feel is physical exertion. After a while, the thoughts and the guilt stop swirling, and all I can focus on is the burn in my arms and the sting in my eyes from the saltwater.

Finally, heart pounding, I come to a stop, treading water about fifty feet from shore. Declan rolls over and attempts to float, but the man can't keep that rock solid ass of his from sinking.

"You're too heavy to float, man. It's no use."

"Fuck off. Everyone can float. You just need the right—"

His words cut off as he sinks again. He comes up spluttering and slaps the water in frustration. "Why can't I do it?"

"You're about forty pounds of muscle heavier than you were last time we went swimming."

"Oh. Right. I forgot."

"You forgot you're a ripped son of a bitch?"

His lips quirk as he stares at the beach, or more specifically, Cara. His eyes get a glazed look in them. "Bet Cara would float."

"Bet you're right." Cara's spectacular chest would guarantee it. Bree would be a top-notch floater too.

Shaking himself out of his daze, he turns to me. "You good man?"

I smile, a real one this time. “I’m good.”

He nods, taking me at my word. We all have shit we deal with, and sometimes, we need to push and talk it out. But today isn’t one of those days. Today, we’re on vacation. The head fuckery can wait.

“Let’s head back then. We can—“

The howl that comes out of me is more from shock than pain as I feel a sharp sting on the bottom of my foot. I plop my face into the water, spotting a solitary jellyfish floating away.

Declan’s spinning frantically in the water, whites of his eyes showing. “What! What’s happening?”

“Fucking Jellyfish got me.”

Dec squeaks and flaps, trying to levitate out of the water. “Fuck. Shit, let’s get out of here.”

He doesn’t wait for me, just takes off for the beach. Fucker. I follow more slowly, the stinging in my foot traveling up my leg. Declan stops close to shore, waiting for me and wraps an arm around my waist as I hobble to shore. Fuck it hurts.

Bree comes to the water’s edge. “What’s happening?” Her eyes are filled with concern. Is it weird I’m suddenly grateful to the jellyfish for giving her a reason to look at me like that?

“Jellyfish,” I bite out. I’m trying to be tough, but fuck, I think cutting my leg off right now would feel better than the fiery hell traveling up my calf. Declan lowers me to the sand, and I twist, trying to see the bottom of my foot without actually bending my leg.

Bree’s eyes widen, and something passes over her face. “Oh, my god. Declan, hurry, pee on it. It’s the only way to help him now.”

“That’s not fucking funny,” I grunt, scowling at Bree.

She slams her hands on her hips making her breasts jiggle in her suit. “It’s not supposed to be funny. Do you really want to lose your leg?”

Cara, cell phone clutched in her hand, stops next to Bree.

“She’s joking right? A Jellyfish sting isn’t that bad, is it?” I ask her, desperate for her to tell me Bree’s joking.

She doesn’t. She looks from Bree, to Declan then me and slaps her hand on her chest. “Oh my god. Quick, Declan, you have to pee on it.”

Declan’s eyes get even wider. “Wait, so it’s true? She wasn’t fucking with us?”

“Why would I fuck with you?” Bree screams hysterically. Her panic is freaking me the fuck out. “You think i’m into golden showers? Pee on the fucking man, or he’s going to lose his foot.”

She spins and heads up the beach, abandoning me. What does it say about me that watching her walk away, in that spectacular bikini, makes me feel a little better?

“Wait, wasn’t this on a TV show? You have to be fucking with us,” Declan says, panic lacing his voice.

Cara shakes her head, pressing her hands to her cheeks. “They had it on that show for a reason. They didn’t just make that shit up.” Then she spins and races after Bree, yelling over her shoulder, “I’ll call an ambulance. I just hope they get here before it’s too late.”

Declan and I share a look of horror. I take it all back. Cutting off my leg is not a good option. If that’s the alternative, then there really is no option. “Just do it,” I tell him through gritted teeth. He stares at me, his look of horror nearly almost making me smile. Almost. “It’s not like you haven’t peed on me before.”

“That was a fucking accident asshole. Besides, you were the one that passed out in the bathroom.”

“In the tub man. I was sleeping in the tub. Not the toilet.”

“I probably should have turned on the light,” he mutters, glaring down at my leg. His hand goes to the waistband of his swim shorts. I don’t bother looking away, bracing myself for the horror about to befall me. I’ve seen Dec’s dick more times

than I can count. I usually don't notice it. But now, right at eye level, I can't stop staring.

"Stop fucking looking at me. I can't do this if you're looking," Declan yells, looking like he's ready to bolt.

Cara and Bree, halfway to the house, dissolve into laughter, leaning on each other for support. We stare at them, realization dawning. "They're fucking with us."

Declan yanks his shorts back up, and without giving me another look storms up the beach. "Cara," he yells, "you are going to pay for this."

Both women shriek and bolt up the stairs to the house.

I flop onto my back, letting the stinging wash over me, honestly damned impressed. They almost had us. If they'd kept themselves together better, I would've let Declan pee on me. I wonder how long it would have taken us to look each other in the eye after that one?

It could be worse. The damned jellyfish could have stung me in the balls. See, gotta look on the bright side. Closing my eyes, I let myself drift. Either the stinging will stop, or the ambulance will show up. Either way, this will be over at some point.

"Nick," a soft voice says. The touch on my shoulder makes my body light up.

Bree.

I open my eyes, taking in her remorseful, worried face. "You came back for me. I thought you abandoned me," I say sadly. Yes, I'm milking this. Am I ashamed? Nope.

She winces and turns, waving to the butler. He's a tanned, strong sixty, so with him under one arm, and Bree under the other, we start a slow walk up to the house.

I'm careful with my weight on Bree, but pretty quickly realize that she can hold me. The strength in her body is more than capable of supporting me. *God, what I wouldn't give to have her up against—.* Nope. Not going there. *Friends. That's all. That's all we'll ever be.*

They settle me onto a lounger in the shade, and within a couple of minutes, stingers have been removed, and my foot's soaking in hot water. The relief turns my muscles into jelly.

"I'm sorry," Bree says, tugging another lounger closer. "I didn't mean..." she stops, biting her lip.

I grin, letting her off the hook. "You saw a golden opportunity to fuck with us, and you took it. Honestly, that's the kind of shit that makes you a perfect fit for this family."

Her shoulders drop down from around her ears where they were hanging out, and she grins. "The look on your face." She dissolves into giggles, flopping sideways on the lounger. I turn my head so I can watch her fall apart.

This.

This is what I was hoping for. Every time I thought about this trip, I thought about Bree. Tanned, sweaty skin gleaming, her body shaking with joy and laughter. This has got to be the Bree she used to be. She's everything.

How the fuck am I going to stop myself from falling in love with her?

This is embarrassing. Sitting in a room with Nick, waiting for my sister and his brother to finish having sex, is getting old.

Nick, in a pair of jeans faded nearly white, and a simple short sleeve white shirt, unbuttoned to the center of his chest, leans against the wall in the corner of the room. He couldn't be further from me.

His eyes dart around the room, landing on me and then quickly looking away. It's obvious he's feeling just as uncomfortable as I am, but neither of us wants to be the first one to say something about it. I can't take the strained silence any longer.

"At least this place is big enough, we don't have to worry about hearing them," I say cheerfully. Way too cheerfully. Nick's crack of laughter makes me glad I said something, even if it's awkward as hell.

"I'm sick of this shit," he says, shaking his head and crossing the room to me. He holds out his hand, palm up. "Let's get out of here. They can track us down later or not. But we're only here for a little while longer, and I don't want to waste any more time waiting for them."

I don't hesitate, putting my hand in his and letting him tug me gently to my feet. "Deal. I'm in desperate need of a *Cubano*, and a very big drink." Cara and Declan can stay in that room for the rest of the trip for all I care. Nick's all the company I need right now.

The heat of the Miami night is oppressive, especially coming from the cold of Chicago, but the smell of salt water and sweet perfume is intoxicating. Music rises up from every corner, a mix of Salsa, Reggaeton, and Jazz. Motorcycles zip by, followed by old-school convertibles with their windows rolled down to let in the evening breeze.

The streets are alive in a way that I've only experienced here. Not that I've traveled much, but I still dream about the last time I was in this city.

People line up outside nightclubs and dance in the middle of intersections when traffic slows down or stops completely. Women dressed to perfection sashay past us arm-in-arm with their friends, laughing and calling out greetings to strangers on their way by.

Nick and I walk side by side, soaking up the chaos around us. Our arms casually brush, neither of us mentioning it or pulling away. We just keep walking, following our noses to a food truck parked crookedly at the curb. Judging by the crowd around it, we're in for a treat.

Everyone seemed to be talking at once, but it doesn't drown out the sizzling from the grill. The air is filled with the smell of Cuban sandwiches and fries and my stomach growls in anticipation.

Nick and I step up to the window. He smiles at me, like someone just offered to do very dirty things to him, then orders in perfect Spanish for the both of us. The woman, somewhere between fifty and seventy years old, her plump cheeks still smooth and unlined, grins at him. They exchange a few words...scratch that. They're flirting. With gusto. Both of them leaning into it, the woman doesn't stop taking orders or making change the whole time.

The man is a born flirt, but more than that, it's obvious to anyone that looks that he loves it. That in his eyes, she's ageless, and beautiful. I get it. If he flirted like that with me, I would be putty in his hands. Thank god he always keeps a distance between us. He flirts, but it's not with all of him.

With a wink, the woman hands over two platters of food. Nick insists I hold his elbow as we cross the street, narrowly missing a gaggle of drunk bachelorettes, and settles us on an unoccupied bench a little away from the chaos.

“I think this is the best thing I’ve ever eaten in my whole life,” I moan. “It’s even better than the one I had the last time I was here.”

Nick mutters some sort of positive reply, but seems more focused on shoving as much of the sandwich into his mouth as he can. I get it. I’m doing the same with absolutely no shame. Another perk of just being friends. I don’t have to pretend to be full after a few bites. Not that I usually played that game. At least until Tyler.

In no time, Nick is staring sadly at the last bite of his sandwich, looking like he wants to cry, then pops it in his mouth. It should be gross, the man wolfed it down, but he did it so neatly. He sighs, and leans back on the bench, then lifts a fry to his mouth.

“When were you here last?” he asks, those perfect white teeth taking a bite of the crispy fry.

“College. Me and a few friends came down for spring break our last year. I almost didn’t come, but I’m so glad I did. It was so much fun.”

He turns his body toward me, extending one arm along the bench. “You were going to pass up a trip to Miami? Are you nuts? Or a total bookworm?”

I snort. “No. But I was working a lot to pay for college. Cara was helping, but I didn’t want all that burden to be on her, you know? So I decided not to spend the money.”

He hums low in his throat. “What changed your mind?”

“Cara. She told me there was no way I was going to miss that trip, and she made me go.” I rest my sandwich in my lap, and don’t miss Nick’s longing look at it. “I’m so glad. I crashed in a small motel room with three other friends. We drank, and played a ton of beach volleyball, and flirted with college guys. And we danced. So much.”

The memories wash over me. The heat of the sun on my skin, the sand under my feet, and the music blaring from speakers that seemed to make everything else in life disappear. I loved that trip so much. I felt free, like life was out there waiting for me to grab it. We stayed up late talking about our dreams and ambitions, and how we were going to take on the world when we got back home.

We spent four days in Miami, but it felt like an eternity of blissful freedom. In those four days, something shifted inside me. Suddenly, I saw all these possibilities for myself. And I realized that life was more than studying and working. More than trying to make Cara's sacrifice worth it. When we drove back home, taking turns sleeping and driving, I felt different, more confident in myself and what I wanted out of life.

Then I let Tyler destroy all of that. Why did I do that? I still don't understand how I let it happen.

"Bree," Nick says softly, drawing my gaze back to his. "Where did you go?"

I shrug, unwilling to let Tyler ruin tonight. "Just daydreaming. You mentioned you'd been here before?"

He gazes at me for a minute more, but thankfully doesn't push. "Yeah. A few times, some more memorable than others."

"What makes them more memorable? Did you get tired of the beaches, the nightlife, and the beautiful women?" I ask dryly.

He laughs, a low chuckle that fills the air between us with warmth. "Nah. Some of the trips we spent pretty damned drunk. I literally don't remember much about them. We're slowing down now, mellowing out. The last trip I remember, thank fuck."

"Why thank fuck?"

"Because spending the whole night being paraded around South Beach by a seven-foot-tall drag queen was so much fun. Then her friends joined, and it was a hell of a party. I stayed

sober for most of it. Things went sideways at the end there, but it was awesome.”

“Sideways? I need details Nick.”

He grins and wiggles his eyebrows. “Let’s just say I look great in pasties.”

I sputter out a laugh, chasing after him as he rises and heads down the strip with that loose easy walk of his. “Seriously,” I grumble, “you can’t just walk away after dropping that bomb. I need details!”

“My lips are sealed,” he mimics a zipping motion, and I growl at him in frustration. He just laughs again. “C’mon Bree. Let’s go dance.”

I can’t help it. I freeze in my tracks. “Wait. You dance? Seriously? I’ve seen you in the club. You just...sit there.”

He turns, sliding into my bubble, the warm salty wind ruffling his too long hair. “When you’re working, I just sit there little Bee. I’ve got to keep my eye on you.”

“Why?” I ask, letting the wind carry my words to him. It feels like we’re in our own little cone of silence, the throngs of people flowing around us easy to ignore.

He frowns, one dark hand coming up to tuck my hair behind my ear. “Because you’re important to me. I keep an eye on you, and make sure you’re safe.” He tips his head, and the lightness comes back into his face. “But when you’re not there? I shake my ass like it’s my job.”

I can’t help but laugh at the image of Nick shaking his ass on the dance floor. I’ve seen this man writhing in pain, willing to let his brother pee on him, but somehow, he’s still cool. I can’t picture Mr. Cool here shaking his ass.

“Alright, fine,” I say, giving into temptation. “Let’s go dance.”

He grins, snatches the last of my sandwich from me and taking a huge bite, grabs my hand and leads me down the strip towards one of the clubs. The music is thumping from inside,

and I can feel the energy pulsing through the air. Nick flashes his ID to the bouncer, and we're in.

The dance floor is packed, bodies writhing and grinding against each other in a way that's almost hypnotic. "Let's dance," Nick says, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the throng of people.

The music is loud, and I can feel the bass thumping through my body as we make our way to the center of the dance floor. Nick wastes no time in pulling me close, his hands finding their way to my waist. I can't help but feel a jolt of excitement at the sensation of his warm hands on my skin.

We move together, our bodies swaying in time with the music. Nick's hips move in a way that's almost hypnotic, and I can't help but get lost in the rhythm. As we dance, I feel his hands start to wander, slowly inching their way up my back until they're tangled in my hair. He pulls me in closer, and I can feel his hot breath on my neck.

I turn to face him, and our eyes lock. There's a heat there that I haven't seen before, and I can feel myself getting lost in it. A moment before we cross that line, that line that can never be crossed, the music changes to something that has everyone in the club screaming and jumping. We freeze, eyes locked, until Nick breaks away. His chest rises with a big breath, and a slow exhale.

"Are you ready?" he asks seriously.

"I have no idea. Ready for what?"

"For this," he says dramatically, stepping back and shaking his ass, just like he promised me. He shakes his hips in a way that has everyone on the dance floor erupting in cheers. I can't help but laugh, watching as he throws himself into the moves with a confidence that surprises me.

It's not just confidence either; it's almost like he knows the music, knows the beat, and is able to use it to express himself in a way I've never seen before. He moves and grooves his body in a way that's mesmerizing. The man has rhythm, that's for damned sure, but he's also throwing in the most bizarre

moves, making a fool of himself and making me laugh. He's like a force of nature, drawing people to him with his energy and charm.

The women around us are noticing him too, that's for damned sure. It's a good thing he didn't pull out these moves in *Curves Ahead*. I would have screwed up every drink order and Cara would have fired my ass.

"Come on Bree. Show me what you got," he says, one brow quirked in challenge.

"You want to see my moves? Really? You asked for it."

I pull out all the stops. The sprinkler, the grocery shopping, mowing the lawn, then a weird variation of the pee-pee dance. I'm hooked on Nick's laughter, on the way he throws his arms up, cheering me on with each new move. And I'm definitely hooked on the way he joins in with his very own version of every dance. We're completely ridiculous, the people around us giving us a wide berth so they're not hit with a flailing limb.

I'm panting, and sweaty, and wishing this would never end. That I could spend forever right here with this man, feeling this alive.

But all good things come to an end. And what feels like minutes, but is really hours later, we're spilling out of the club onto the street leaning against each other, gasping for breath. Nick tugs me toward the water, and we drop into the sand a few feet from the water, letting the breeze wash over our skin. My skin cools, my heartbeat settles, but my body is still pulsing with life. I'd forgotten how good it feels to be so free and so silly.

"Thank you," I murmur, eyes stinging. I don't look at him. I can't. But he needs to know how much I appreciate him.

"Anytime," he says just as quietly. "You're nearly there Bree."

I wrap my arms around my knees, and turn my head to look at him. "Nearly where?"

His smile is a little sad, and a lot knowing. “On the other side. You’ll never go back to where you were before, but you will come out of this. You’ll be changed, but that doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

I rub my cheek on my shoulder and ponder his words. “I can’t see how it can be a good thing. It was...terrible.”

He nods. “I watch this show sometimes. It’s about blacksmiths. Did you know how much they have to work the steel? They beat the shit out of it, hammering it over and over to build a killer blade. And it gets stronger. You’re steel Bree. You got hammered. But you’re coming out of it stronger.”

“Stronger? I have panic attacks, Nick. I sleep with a nightlight. I’m terrified to get out of my car in the garage.”

“And you still get up every day. You still go to work. You still live your life. Other people would crumble under all of that. But not you. You’re still standing.”

I clamp my lips shut against the denial on the tip of my tongue. I don’t feel strong. I don’t feel brave, or like there’s light at the end of the tunnel...well, maybe I do right now, sitting on the beach in the moonlight. But day to day? That shit is still hard.

But I don’t want to convince him I’m broken. I really don’t. I’d rather pretend that he’s right. Maybe, if I pretend long enough, it’ll be true one day.

“There you guys are. Answer your fucking phone, man!” Declan drops into the sand next to me. “Shit, it’s still hot out. How is it this hot at three in the morning. I don’t get it.” He pulls at the collar of his T-shirt, fanning himself.

Cara laughs, stopping in front of me, and holding out her hands. “I love it. My bones are finally warm. It’s the first time in months!” She wiggles her fingers, waiting for me to put my hands in hers. “Let’s go swimming Bee.” Her eyes are lit with joy, and she’s never been more beautiful, sex hair and all. I can’t resist her, or her joy. I let her tug me up. She shimmy’s away, tugging off her long white dress revealing a silvery bikini underneath. She tosses her dress at Declan’s face.

I hesitate briefly. “Fuck it.” I peel my short black dress over my head, revealing the tiniest bikini I own, the one Cara put in my suitcase. I didn’t plan on wearing it, but I didn’t see the harm in trying it on. The string bikini barely contains my breasts, and has a lot less ass coverage than I’m used to, but something came over me when I looked at myself in the mirror. It made me feel different. Sexy, desirable. I didn’t see the harm in leaving it on underneath my dress.

Now, everyone’s getting an eyeful. I don’t look back at the men, just tossing my dress to the side, and walking toward the water like the sexiest man I know isn’t staring at my ass. *Don’t you do it. Don’t you dare turn around and look at him.*

I’m weak, what can I say? As the water laps gently at my thighs, I glance back and find Nick’s eyes locked on me.

I can’t even blame the way my breath catches in my throat on the shock of the water.

No, it’s all Nick.

Dammit. This is so inconvenient.

NICK

What the fuck is she wearing? Or barely wearing. I can't tear my eyes off of her, which is a big fucking problem since my dick is waving to her. So damned inconvenient, especially since I'm sitting next to my brother. It's not the first woody I've had in his presence—we've been through some shit—but this is the first one I'm having looking at his girlfriend's sister.

Declan wheezes, eyes locked on the women. I know he's looking at Cara, not Bree, but I still don't like that he's seeing that much of Bree's skin.

"I can't do this anymore," he groans, scrubbing his hands down his face. "I have to ask you something," he says after a moment. "It's about Cara."

Shit. I know where this is going. It's inevitable. I've seen it play out with my other brothers. "Figured as much. She's pretty much all you think about."

He flips me the middle finger, still staring off at the women in the distance. "True."

"I don't blame you." He's got something good. We didn't get where we are by letting good things slip through our fingers.

Declan nods, a hazy look in his eyes. "I honestly never thought she could be mine. She's so out of my league. And now that I have her, I don't want to let her go. I know it seems fast but...I want to ask her to move in with me."

Yep. There it is. I whistle under my breath. “Wow, you don’t mess around. But are you sure she’s ready for that?” They’ve been dancing around each other for years. Of course he’s ready. But there’s a beautiful blonde Amazon of a woman with haunted eyes to think about. “What about Bree?”

Declan’s face grows serious. “That’s the thing. I know Cara won’t leave Bree until she knows Bree’s okay. And honestly, I’m worried about her too. She’s been through so much and she still seems so...lost. Like she’s just drifting day to day with no purpose.”

I nod slowly, my heart aching for her. “Yeah, I’ve noticed that too. She’s been hurt badly. Those kinds of scars don’t just disappear overnight.”

“Exactly,” Declan says. “She still needs support. Which is why I wanted to ask you for a favor. I know it’s a lot, but... could you spend a little more time with Bree? Just until she gets back on her feet. Cara would rest easy knowing you’ve got her back. And so would I.”

I stare out at the ocean, watching Bree float on her back, arms spreading wide. She looks so free out there, like the water washes her troubles away. I exhale heavily, raking my fingers through my hair. “That’s a big responsibility, man. Bree’s pretty fragile right now. I want to help but I’ve got my own issues too, you know? I don’t know if I’d be the best person for her to lean on.”

“You mean those issues?” He asks, pointing at my dick. “That’s just biology dude. I know you wouldn’t go there. It would be weird. She’s like our sister, right?”

“Shit, you just had to go there.”

“Nah. I didn’t go there.” The asshole points at my dick again. “He went there.”

“Stop pointing at my dick. You’re being weird as fuck.”

He snickers and balls up his hand. Years of practice have me rolling out of the way before his fist can make contact. Laughing, I roll back and ‘accidentally’ shove my arm into his

throat. Satisfied with the retching noises he makes, I look back over the water.

“It’s a bit of a problem,” I admit. “But I’m not sure I’d be any good for Bree, even without my attraction to her. They’re sisters, man. I’m a poor replacement.”

Dec and Cara deserve to be happy, though. It would kill Bree to think Cara’s putting off her own life to stay and take care of her.

Laughter floating over the water draws my eyes back to the women. To Bree. She rises out of the water, shimmering drops of water arcing around her, and she lunges for Cara. They go under together, hugging each other tightly.

Man, I’ve got it bad. Does Declan have any clue what he’s asking of me? It’s like asking the wolf to guard the hens. Because it’s not just biology, as much as he wishes it was. It’s more.

Am I going to say no? I should. It’s the smart thing to do.

But I can’t seem to tell him no. For his sake. But also for mine. He’s giving me a golden opportunity to spend more time with Bree. It’s not a hardship. Far from it. But what do I know about healing anybody?

I’m more broken than anyone knows. I just hide it better. I’ve had thirty years of practice.

“I can try. I can spend a little more time with her. I can be her friend.”

Declan exhales and drops back into the sand on his elbows. “Thank you, brother.” The women’s laughter rings over the water, making us both smile. “I’ll give it a bit of time. When things between the two of you are friendlier, then I’ll ask Cara. Hopefully, in a week or two.”

“So you want me to hang with Bree as much as I can, over the next couple of weeks, so Cara sees...?”

“Sees that Bree has a whole support system, and it’s not just on her to take care of Bree.”

Right. That’ll totally work. Easy.

Not.

Declan's totally delusional, but I'm going with it, for now anyway.

A cool spray of water dances over me, and I look up to a sight that stops my breath in my chest. Bree, soaking wet, flipping her hair in the moonlight and she pulls her dress down over her wet skin. The fabric clings to her breasts, but the way it hugs her hips is what makes my mouth water.

Just friends. Stop torturing yourself, man.

"You guys should have come in. The water feels so good," Bree says, grinning. It's a little shocking to realize that I'd do almost anything she asks of me...anything...if it meant making her smile like that.

More than a little unsettled by that realization, I push to my feet and busy myself brushing the sand off my pants. And yes, I keep my back to her and I run through every gross image I can think of, trying to get my body under control.

"Nah," I mutter, shooting her a grin over my shoulder. "I don't have a suit. And I really don't want to get arrested in Miami again. Once was enough."

Declan cackles, remembering that night just as well as I do. We learned the hard way cops don't really like it when you take their bikes on a joyride. Our mistake was returning them. We should have ditched them and run.

We head up the beach, Cara and Bree's footsteps chasing behind us, peppering us with questions. Declan and I exchange glances, and then stonewall them. One, because it's funny to frustrate them. And two, because we're not particularly proud of that night.

Bree hooks her arm in mine, trying to tug me to a stop. Instead, I tighten my arm and gently tug her with me. She resists for a second, then gives in with a huff, bumping her hip into my thigh.

"Fine. Don't tell me. I'm sure someone will give me the deets. Betcha Ransom would tell me."

“Don’t be sure about that, lady. We look out for each other. He’s not going to tell you shit.”

She snickers, briefly resting her cheek against my arm. I wish I weren’t wearing a shirt. I want to feel more of her skin on mine. “Nah. He’ll tell me. He doesn’t mind embarrassing you guys.”

I scowl at her, but the smile threatens to peek through. She’s probably right.

I need this like I need air. The chaos, the laughter, the smell of sweat and sand. It's like home to me.

Maddy, the shy little receptionist at work, throws back the rest of her beer and runs to the back, ready to serve. We're five games in, and I have a feeling she won't make it to the sixth. That would actually be a record for her. She's puked every time we've played this season, but you've got to give her props for trying to keep up.

The rest of us, an odd mix of physiotherapists, massage therapists, and nurses, have been playing together for years. And drinking together. Can't forget the drinking. It's a volleyball beer league after all. The drinking's kinda the whole point. Though I've scaled way back on that part of it. I want to keep my senses sharp. I need to stay aware.

By some miracle, Maddy ends up getting the ball over the net. We all cheer her on like she's just won the game, then dive at the ball as the other team returns it. Maddy's too busy celebrating to notice the ball land right next to her, costing us the point. She looks like she doesn't have a care in the world, and I envy her.

And I hate myself for it.

She should be carefree. She's young, and nothing bad's happened to her. I don't want anything bad to ever happen to her. But I wish so badly a little of her innocence could rub off on me.

Sick of myself, I dig my feet into the sand, ready to launch myself at the ball. Heart pounding, we dive back into the game, and I let everything but powering for the ball drift away. We win this one, we won't need to play the sixth.

I end up with a face full of sand and a bruised chin, but we pull it off. We win. It's a rec league, so it doesn't really matter, but I'm competitive as hell and celebrate like we just took home the Stanley cup. It's obnoxious, but the other team takes it in stride. We all pour off the courts toward the bar, other teams taking our spots in the sand.

I don't know what I would do if I lived in a smaller town, one that lacked facilities like this to play in. Winter sports are fun, but I'm not much of a hockey girl, and curling doesn't give me enough of a leg workout. My arms are killer, though, after all that sweeping.

A blend of shit talking, work talk, and laughter swirls around me. I'm totally safe here, clutching my second beer of the night, in the middle of all my friends. Nothing bad can happen to me here.

Julia, one of my coworkers, hops up onto the stool next to me, and leans against the wall with a sigh. "That is one spectacular ass," she mumbles, staring at the courts.

Laughing into my beer, I follow her gaze. "Which one. I see a few pretty great asses."

"Yeah," she says happily, making no effort to tell me which one she's looking at. She takes a swig of her beer, eyes still locked on the sand. Finally, she seems to shake herself out of her stupor, and turns to me. "So how are you? How are things going with Mr. Yummy?"

"Mr. Yummy?" I ask, my mind flying to Nick's dark eyes and to shaggy hair. Mr. Yummy is a perfect name for him.

"Come on, you know. Gabe? The hottie with the million dollar prosthetic?"

I snort into my beer. "Not a million dollars, but I get the idea. Is that what you're calling him? Mr. Yummy?"

"I am. Some of the younger girls are calling him Daddy."

I choke on my sip and have to lean over to catch my breath. Why the hell did I think it was safe to take a drink right then? Julia has no filter. I should have known she'd come out with something off center. "Jesus Julia. Super professional of you."

She rolls her eyes and flips me the middle finger, making me laugh. She's irreverent, and honest, and I wouldn't change a thing about her.

"I'm damn professional at work, you know that. But we're not at work now, are we, and I'm a single woman. Of course I noticed him. Do you think he's got a girlfriend? He must. Guys like that always do."

"I don't know Julia. I didn't ask."

She scrunches up her face at me and takes another sip of her drink. "I'm just saying, if he wants some one-on-one in-home sessions, give him my number."

"You got it," I say, holding up my beer, grinning as she clanks her bottle against mine. I'm not surprised Gabe's the talk of the office. He's a hottie, for sure. But he's also more than a little mysterious. The combination is catnip to the single women. Hell, even the married ones are speculating.

And okay, maybe I'm speculating a little bit too. The man looks like he could scale a mountain, fight off a bear, and skin a deer for supper, after building a cozy little lean to and a fire from sticks of course. How does someone so physically capable handle losing his leg? It's obvious he didn't bounce back, but where does he find the inner strength to go on?

Where can I find that same strength?

I thought I was the bounce back type. But I'm not. I'm the curl up into a ball and wail type. At least on the inside.

We linger a little longer, the jumble of work talk and gossip swirling around me, but eventually pour out to the parking lot. The DD's car fills up, and a few other sober ones head to their cars, bracing against the icy wind. I jump into my Jeep, waving through the windshield as my friends pull out. I

don't linger, turning toward home, more than ready for a hot bath and a snack.

When I pull into the garage, I swing the Jeep in next to Cara's car, and shut off the ignition. I don't want to go upstairs. I'm facing either an empty apartment, or Cara and Declan being all lovey and gross. I don't know which is worse. Both options make me feel alone.

I'm happy for her, of course I am, but she's never been in a relationship like this one and it's pretty obvious I'm losing her. Oh, she'll always be there for me, but it's not going to be the same. I see the writing on the wall. She and Declan are it. There are babies and family vacations in their future.

Maybe I could be the nanny. I could just tag along wherever they go. I think I'd like that.

Letting my gaze drift over the ridiculously expensive cars around me, I freeze on a breathtaking sight. Nick, asleep in his truck, cheek resting against the window. Well, if this isn't the distraction I need right now. Nick is a force of nature, so seeing him like this is like peering behind the curtain at OZ. He's always smiling, making those dark brows of his dance and wiggle. The man is in constant motion. His stillness and vulnerability pull me toward him like a magnet.

Giving in to temptation, I quietly exit the car, shutting the door as softly as I can. I creep closer to him, letting myself look just a second longer. Pressing my palm to his cheek through the glass, I let my short fingernails dance on the window. I was trying to wake him up gently, but apparently Nick doesn't do gentle, instead rearing back with one arm up in a defensive position, the other cocked back in a fist.

I take a step back, startled, but I'm not really afraid. How can I be when he blinks sleepily, his gaze sharpening on me? Then that slow, stunning smile curves his lips. He shakes his head, runs his hands through his hair, then opens his door and slides out.

I work up close with people every day. Touching them, breathing the same air, getting right in their space. I am familiar with how people smell, especially after a long day and

a hard workout. None of it bothers me. But Nick's smell? That mixture of oil, gas, oranges, and warm skin all blends into one enticing and distracting package.

I'm bothered. So what do I do? Get us back on the friend level.

"Hey sleeping beauty, sorry to wake you."

His nose wrinkles, and he tries to stifle his yawn. "I was just resting my eyes, that's all."

"Sure you were."

He laughs and leans back on the truck, casually crossing one leg over the other. "It's been a long week. I think I'm in vacation withdrawal."

"I know exactly what you mean," I say with feeling. "I can't seem to warm up since we got back."

"I could hel...never mind," he says, shaking his head.

Was he about to offer to help? Why am I disappointed he didn't? And how exactly was he planning to help me warm up?

I point to a dark smudge on the side of his neck. "You got a little something there." He swipes at his neck, then stares at his hand. "No, there, on the...never mind." I reach up and run my thumb along the tanned skin of his neck, wiping away the smudge. I pretend that the way Nick freezes, and my breath catches in my throat means nothing. "There," I say, showing him my thumb.

I'm not prepared for his hand wrapping around mine, or him raising the bottom of his t-shirt exposing some seriously mouthwatering abs as he wipes at my fingers.

"I was working at the garage tonight with Micah," he murmurs. "Holly chased him out of the house and he needed a distraction."

"Oh..um," I mumble, brain slightly offline because he's still rubbing my finger. I gently tug my hand free and wipe it on the side of my jeans. "Why did she chase him away?"

“He’s been hovering. A lot, apparently. Won’t leave her side. I think she lost it when he followed her into the bathroom tonight.”

Laughing, I imagine little Holly, belly stretched way in front of her, chasing giant Micah out of their apartment. “I get it. I’m surprised he went as far as the garage, though.”

Nick grins and grabs a bag from the backseat of the truck. “He put everyone on alert so they all took turns checking on her. Last I heard, she’s even madder than before.”

“Oh, my god. You guys are a little over the top, you know that.”

He laughs, but doesn’t respond. It’s obvious they’re crazy overprotective. And Wonderful. There’s no doubt in anyone’s mind about either of those things. We fall into step, heading for the elevator. He yawns again, jaw cracking, and leans against the back wall, watching me with hooded eyes. “What were you up to tonight?”

“Volleyball.”

He frowns. “Like...on the beach?”

I snort. “Not on the beach. It’s fucking freezing. Indoors.”

He looks intrigued. “I didn’t know that’s a thing. Sounds fun.”

“It is fun. It’s also serious business.”

“Of course you’re competitive. I should have guessed that about you.”

“Like you’re not?”

He shrugs. “Big picture, wanting the best for my family, yeah, I’m competitive. But day to day, I’m not.”

“Really? How does that work? I thought you were the fixer guy who goes in and gets the deal done. Aren’t you going in there to win?”

“I am, but if I’m being called in, it’s not really a competition. It’s about understanding what someone needs and

giving it to them. Or making them realize they didn't want it in the first place."

"I don't understand." The doors open on my floor and I step off, grateful he does too. I'm not ready for this conversation to end. Not yet. We stop next to my door, and he leans on the wall, seemingly too tired to hold himself up.

"There was a guy I talked to last week, he'd run his business into the ground. All his employees had left, most of his customers were gone too. But he decided we were the enemy, and out to feast on the carcass of his business."

"What happened? Why was he failing?"

"Booze, mostly. I don't know why he fell into the bottle. Not my business, really."

"So, how did you convince him to sell?"

"You're sure he sold?" I give him a look and he grins. "You're right. He did sell. But not because he lost and I won. He sold because he realized he was at the bottom of a deep hole, and I was offering him a way out."

"Was he grateful then, in the end?"

"No. He'll probably tell everyone that we came in and stole the place from him. Whatever he needs to do to save face."

"Doesn't that bother you? That he's out there spreading lies about you?"

"Honestly? No. I don't give a fuck about his opinion of me. The only opinions I care about? All of them live in this building."

"So you got what you want in the end."

"I got what the family wanted, yeah."

"I guess for you guys, the stakes aren't really that high anymore. One deal isn't going to make or break you."

"Maybe not. But winning one game isn't going to make or break you either. But you're still competitive as hell."

“Shit. I feel a little called out. I guess it doesn’t matter if we win or lose, it’s great just to play.”

Nick breaks into full-bodied belly laughs. “Jesus Bree, the look on your face. You look like you just swallowed a snail. Clearly, you’re spouting shit.”

I was definitely spouting shit. “Fine. I love playing, but I love winning more. It feels really good when a team comes together. There’s nothing like it.”

“Tell me more..”

Nick wants me to stand here and tell him all about my teams? I drop my bag and sit on the luxurious carpet, stretching my legs in front of me. Nick grins and slides down the wall, his bag landing with a plop beside him. Bath and snack forgotten, I settle in, content to just sit here and tell this gorgeous man about my favorite things in the world.

“You asked for it.”

The more I talk, the bigger his smile grows. He doesn’t look tired, or bored, or like he wants to be anywhere but here.

And I’m not going to think about that feeling in my chest. That feeling of one of the million cracks in my heart, knitting itself together.

NICK

My eyes pop open as my door bangs against the wall. Ok, it doesn't bang. The doors are too damned expensive for that. But Maverick's heavy hand slapping the door scares the shit out of me.

"Why are people so fucking difficult?" He rakes his hands through his hair, finally settling on me. His face twists. "Shit. Fuck. I'm sorry. You were sleeping. I didn't mean to wake you up."

I yawn and sit up, scrubbing my hands along my face. My sleep patterns aren't great most of the time. Times like this, though? When my mind is preoccupied with secrets and loyalty and Bree, they're worse.

I picked this couch out especially for my office. The interior designer had some ideas, but I went to the store and napped on a few different couches, finally picking this one. The perfect blend of squishy and firm. With low armrests that double as pillows. And at nearly seven feet, plenty long enough for me to stretch out. It really is perfect. So perfect I've caught every one of my brothers napping on it.

"I'm up, man. It's fine. Who's pissing you off today?"

He crosses the room, dropping onto the couch beside me with a groan. He tugs at his tie, completing the mussed business man look. Maverick and Ransom rock their suits, but Mav has a habit of unraveling as the day progresses. He'd never show up looking like this in front of clients or suppliers, but here, on the executive floor of our building? The sleeves

get rolled up, the shirt gets untucked, and the knot of his tie gets looser and looser.

“This fucking guy. Ransom’s special project. It makes no sense, really.”

Ransom’s special project? Why is this the first I’m hearing of it? “Doesn’t make sense, how?”

“The numbers don’t add up. He’s trying to buy a garage in the middle of fucking nowhere. There’s no commuter traffic, or suburb to sustain the garage. It’s barely scraping by in a tiny Podunk town a few hours from here.”

“You’re right. That doesn’t make sense. Ransom’s the one that set the rules right from the start of all of this. If the numbers don’t work, we don’t buy. He’s never deviated from it.” Never. He’s a cold son of a bitch when it comes to the business. “He asked you to handle this personally?”

“Yeah,” Maverick says with a sigh. “I’m used to difficult deals, but this guy is on a whole other level.”

“How so?”

Mav cracks a smile. “He mailed me back the paperwork, but used it for target practice first. Shot a frowney face in it.”

I laugh in disbelief. “Jesus. That’s a pretty clear message.”

“Yeah, I thought so too. Ransom’s not getting the message, though.”

I don’t like this. “He wants you to try again?”

“Yeah.”

“Promise me you won’t go there in person. At least, not alone.”

Maverick sobers, studying my face. Finally he nods. “I’ll stick to couriers for now. Besides, I’m curious to see how he tops the smiley face. Should be interesting.”

More relaxed about the whole thing thanks to Mav’s promise, I smile. “Interesting is one word for it. I wonder how he could top shooting the damned offer.”

“I don’t know, but I can’t wait to find out,” he says, slapping his knees as he stands and heads for the door.

“Wait. What’s this guy’s name?”

He stops, glancing over his shoulder. “Blair. Blair McKenna.” Turning to face me, he studies my face like there’s some mystery he’s trying to solve.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” he asks quietly.

“Busy brain,” I tell him simply. I don’t tell him that the idea of getting closer to Bree, of becoming someone she can rely on, is keeping me up at night. Actually, that’s not right. It’s *me* getting close to *her* that’s freaking me out. I wish I hadn’t promised Declan. I’m not cut out for connection. It’s different with my brothers. We were all on equal footing, all dependent on each other. Together we worked. But lo- Scratch that. Caring. Caring for a woman is so different. Women occupy a different spot in your heart. A darker, more dangerous spot. A spot that won’t heal if it’s shattered.

I can’t fail another woman. I can’t be responsible for her wellbeing, or her safety.

So why the fuck did I agree to that very thing?

“Do you want to talk about it?” Mav asks, sliding his hands into the pockets of his slacks. The man has piles of paperwork on his desk. He doesn’t have time to stand here and check on me. But he’ll stay here and talk to me as long as he needs.

“Nah. I’m good. Promise. I’ll sort it out.”

He seems satisfied with my answer, nodding and wandering out of my office, pulling the door shut behind him. Considerate of him. The likelihood of it staying shut is—

“How are things going with Bree?” Declan asks, barging in without knocking. “Hey, it’s dark in here.” He heads for the windows, opening the blinds so the winter sunlight can enter. I blink against the light, and sigh, dropping back onto the couch.

“Fine,” I mutter, throwing an arm over my eyes. So many damn interruptions. Can’t a man nap at work in peace?

“Fine,” he repeats. I hear the disbelief in his voice. “Can you expand on that? What have you done to spend time with her? What am I missing?”

I drop my arm on a groan and stare up at the ceiling. “What do you want me to say? We’ve hung out.” He shoots me a look, and I sit up. “We have. We spent time together last night.”

His eyes widen. “Did you take her to your place? I was at Cara’s last night, and she came in pretty late. I mean fuck brother, that’s okay, as long as you’re not...” he trails off.

I glare at him, and he puts his hands up in defense. “We sat on the floor outside her door and talked for a while.” And by a while, I mean an hour. Watching Bree’s face when she talks about sports and her teammates has moved right near the top of my favorite things list. The woman lights up, and honestly, I’m trying to figure out how I can slide my way onto one of her teams so I can see it in person.

One dark eyebrow raises. “You sat on the floor and talked. Okay. Maybe not how I would have gone about it, but you do you.”

“What? Not your style? Maybe I should sneak into her apartment, fuck with her computer, then wait for her to call me to fix it? That’s more like what you’re talking about, isn’t it?” I give him a shit-eating grin, and he flips me the middle finger. The man fucked with Cara’s computer daily, making sure he’d have to come down and fix it. The man has a dozen people on his tech team, but he came down himself every single day. Not suspicious at all.

He comes over and slaps at my feet until I drop them to the floor and make room for him on the couch. “So what’s the plan? What are you going to do next? I need you to move faster!”

“Not cool, man,” I tell him seriously. “Bree isn’t a problem you can rush to solve. She’s a person.”

He rears back, frowning. “I know that fucker. Better than you. She’s my girlfriend’s sister.”

“Then stop rushing this. I already told you I’ll spend time with her. I like her, it’s not a hardship. But I’m not going to stalk the damned woman. We’re building a friendship and that’s going to take some time. If that doesn’t work for you, then we can stop things right now.” Who am I kidding? No way I would stop hanging with Bree. But spending time with her without the pressure from Dec would be nice.

His lips curl into a snarl, but he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “No. You’re right. Cara’s not going anywhere. I waited for her for years, I can wait a bit longer.” He turns sideways on the couch. “I appreciate it. I do. All the other guys are coupled up, and I didn’t want to ask them. And Mav, he’s just so busy.”

“So basically, you asked me because I’m the only one available.”

He shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Asshole. I do stuff.”

Declan smiles condescendingly. “Sure you do.” He stands, stretching out his shoulders and grins at me. “Enjoy your nap.”

To be fair, he should have expected it after a dick comment like that. I sweep his legs, knocking him down to his knees. Thanks to all this muscle he’s packed on, he’s slower than he used to be, giving me just enough time to tackle him, flattening him to the floor. The bastard outweighs me by a bit, and I’m fighting to control his flailing arms. He tries some of Becca’s ninja moves, but I’ve been at those classes too, so I counter them. “Take it back, asshole. I do stuff.”

“You do stuff. Like nap. And take thirty minute trips to the bathroom. You do lots of shit.” His whole body is shaking with his laughter, but I fight mine back. I have to keep the upper hand. And I do. For at least ten seconds. Then I’m somehow on my back in an arm bar.

“Son of a bitch. Fine.” I tap out and drop to the floor. “You’re getting faster. Finally.”

Declan grins, turning on his side and propping his head on his massive hand. When did he get so big? Or so mature? He’s

not that much younger than me, but he always had this teen boy energy to him that we all nurtured.

“It was a lot of work. I kinda felt like I was carrying around two sandbags all the time. I didn’t realize how small I was before.”

I snort out a laugh. “You were never small. Never. But you were a lot scrawnier. But compared to an average dude, you were always big.”

“Maybe. But in this family, I never felt like you guys. I always felt...”

“Geeky? Dude you’re one step away from a pocket protector, despite the muscles.”

“Asshole. I make geek look good.”

“Yeah, you do.” I sit up and pin him with a look. “I’m glad you feel better in your skin. Whatever you had to do, I’m here for it.”

Declan nods, looking unsure. “I’m not sure it’s the muscles that are making me feel better. I think it’s just everything. Cara. Work. Everything seems to be...right.”

“Must be nice,” I murmur. Damn Declan for picking up on the wistful note in my voice.

“Are you okay? Things have changed around here pretty fast, haven’t they?”

“Insanely fast.”

“Fair. Are you wishing things were different? Are you wanting a girlfriend? I haven’t seen you with many women, but—“

“No. I’m good man. I’m happy with how things are. I don’t want a relationship.” I fucking said I wanted one several times, but I didn’t actually mean it. Or maybe I did, but I know I don’t deserve it.

“You don’t want one? Why? You’re so good with women, you are total boyfriend material. At least that’s what the women say.”

“The women are talking about me?” That’s terrifying. I don’t want them getting ideas about me. “What are they saying?”

Declan shrugs, but there’s a little glint in his eye that scares me a bit. “Just how you deserve a nice girl. I think all of them have a friend they’d like to introduce you to.”

“Dios Mio. When did our lives change from action movie to Telenovela? I miss when we just talked about cars and booze. Those were the good days.”

Declan laughs, and pushes to his feet. “Were they though? I don’t remember them that way.” With that mic drop, he walks out, leaving my door open. I just lay there on the floor, realizing he’s right. Life back then was good, but there’s a lot more laughter now. More softness. More joy.

I don’t want to go back either.

Sounds of people packing up on the floor force me out of the office. The staff clears out quickly, so I head over to Ransom’s office to catch up with everyone. It’s a sacred time for all of us. A time to decompress, laugh, and plan the next move in our plan to take over the world.

I walk into a fight between Jonas and Kade and immediately all feels right with my world, at least for tonight.

“Give them back Jonas. I’m tired of your shit,” Kade growls, hands fisted at his side.

Jonas looks completely unbothered by Kade’s anger. “There have been studies linking caffeine to all sorts of issues, including anxiety and gastrointestinal issues.”

“I’m really fucking anxious now, asshole!” Kade shouts.

I slide onto the couch next to Colton. “What’s happening?”

“Jonas switched out the lunch room coffee for decaf. Kade just figured it out.”

“But I believe, if you think on it, you’ll realize you’re spending less time in the bathroom,” Jonas says pushing his glasses up his nose. “And your stomach probably feels better.”

Colton's shoulders are shaking. Kade stops, finger raised and frowns. Finally, he drops his finger. "Maybe," he says grudgingly. Jonas nods like the answer was obvious to him. "But you still shouldn't mess with people's stuff just because you think it's healthier. How the fuck would you like it if I did that shit to you?"

Jonas raises his eyebrows. "If you made a change for my health? I would imagine I would thank you."

Kade nods. "Right. Then I'm putting everyone one on notice. Jonas isn't allowed any more fucking marshmallow treats. Cause I know for sure those are really fucking bad for you." Jonas face drops, and now my shoulders are shaking with laughter too.

"I really like those," he says sadly, shoulders rounding. I can see him calculating, trying to get out of the corner he's backed himself into.

"I really fucking like coffee."

"Even if it gives you the shits?" Colton asks innocently.

Kade rounds on him. "We going there, asshole? Should we talk bathrooms? How about we discuss the hot sauce situation last week? We had to evacuate the three rows of desks closest to that shitter."

Colton blanches and clutches his stomach in remembered pain. I was out of the office that day and I can't say I'm sorry about it.

"That was a very bad day," he says seriously.

"What the fuck did you expect, asshole? That bottle had a grim reaper on it."

"I dunno. I thought it was more like that other kind." His face falls, and he shifts uncomfortably on the couch. "I thought I was going to die."

"ARE YOU SURE HE WON'T MIND?" I ASK AGAIN.

Jonas sighs and shakes his head. “He won’t mind. He’s used to cooking for lots of people. One more isn’t an issue.”

“Yeah, but that was in prison. You just invited me over to his house. He might not like that.”

Jonas steps off the elevator, turning to me with a look that tells me he’s over this entire conversation. “Then don’t come. I do not care.” Of course he doesn’t. I have to laugh.

“But I want to eat too,” I say, whining a bit, giving Jonas a toothy grin when he glares at me. I am hungry, and I haven’t had a chance to eat John’s food in a couple of weeks. He cooked for us at Christmas, but otherwise mostly keeps to himself. Except for Jonas and weirdly enough Abby, no one else has spent much time with him.

The guy seems solid, despite the fact that he’s been in prison for twenty years for killing someone. Honestly, I sort of respect the way he’s handled himself since he got out. A guy gets attacked in prison, reunites with his brother at the hospital, learns he has eighty million bucks in the bank, and still cooks up Christmas dinner for us a few days later. That’s class right there. Now the man has millions at his disposal, but still seems content to spend his time giving Jonas cooking lessons. He must have the patience of a saint.

As Jonas pushes open John’s apartment door, I can’t help looking across the hall to Cara and Bree’s apartment. Maybe she’d like to come over too? What’s one more person, right? Jonas said so.

I’m across the foyer knocking on the door before my brain even engages. The level of disappointment I feel when no one answers is dumb. So what if Bree’s not home? She’s probably out living her best life. That’s a good thing.

I turn and head into John’s place, and I don’t look back once.

Maybe just once.

I can hear the shouting through the elevator door. Okay, not shouting, but very loud arguing. Not an uncommon occurrence in this building, but it's not usually on my floor.

I step off carefully, not sure what I'm walking into. John's door is propped open, and the voices are coming from inside. I haven't interacted much with John. He's a scary-looking guy, but that's not why we've not talked. He's actually pretty reserved. We've shared a couple of nods when our paths crossed, but he mostly keeps to himself.

"Touch my whipped cream one more time. Go ahead. See what happens." The words are delivered in a low snarl, but the voice speaking them makes me smile.

I step into the apartment and peek around the corner. John's there, which makes sense since it's his kitchen. He's leaning against the sink, arms crossed, a look of baffled frustration on his face as he watches Jonas, clutching a bowl of whipped cream to his chest, stick his face right in Nick's.

Jonas's jaw is clenched, seconds away from punching Nick. Nick, on the other hand, a tiny grin dancing on his lips, looks like he's trying to think of ways to push Jonas over the edge, just to see what would happen. Pretty sure I saw that exact look on my face when Cara and I were kids.

"I was just checking to make sure it was ready," Nick says in a soothing tone. "You have to make sure it's whipped just right."

“Why are you talking like you have any expertise? You put six whole eggs in the microwave last week and caused an explosion. Maverick had to throw the whole thing away.” I clamp my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing.

“He’s such a tattler,” Nick mumbles. “I was hungry.”

“Jesus Fuck, you guys are idiots,” John says, a tinge of awe in his tone.

I wish I could see the look on the guys faces as they slowly, like creepy dolls from a horror movie, turn their heads to look at John. His lips twitch as he glares back at them. “Fuck off,” he says, lifting one finger to point at them. “If you don’t get back to work, you won’t have a dessert. You can kiss the mousse goodbye.”

Nick and Jonas spin so fast, a little whipped cream flies out of the bowl and lands on Nick’s grey t-shirt. I’m woman enough to admit I stare way too long as Nick brings one finger to his chest, wiping it against the material to gather up the whipped cream. And maybe I drool the tiniest bit as he brings his finger to his mouth, licking off the fluffy white cream.

I must have made a noise. Not a gasp or moan. Nope, definitely didn’t do that. But all three men’s eyes are suddenly on me. John gives me a small, familiar nod. Jonas grins. But it’s Nick’s wide happy smile that makes my knees weak. He looks so glad to see me.

Just friends, remember. Don’t read anything more into it.

“Hey guys,” I say, casually leaning on the wall. “What’s up?”

It’s Jonas that answers. “We’re making baked spaghetti, and chocolate mousse. John is giving me cooking lessons and we’ve moved on to using the oven.” The pride is evident in his tone, and the way his chest puffs up just a little bit.

“Wow. That’s a big step.”

“I know. I am an excellent student.” He scowls in Nick’s direction. “At least I am when I’m not being distracted.”

Nick puts his hands up and steps out of the kitchen, coming to meet me in the entryway. “You staying for supper, Bree? Jonas is making lots.”

Smile breaking over my face, I shake my head. He’s so free and easy about everything. I’d like some of that to rub off on me. “You’ve just invited me to someone else’s house for supper.”

“Yep. Jonas explained to me that it’s no big deal. The more the merrier.”

Jonas stares at Nick. “That is not what I said.”

Nick blows a raspberry. “It’s close enough.” Apparently done with the conversation, he curls his hand around my back and guides me to John’s dining table. This apartment is bare bones. Nice bones, but still bare. There’s no personal touches, no sense of the man who lives here. Though maybe, the starkness of it is a perfect representation of the man. Prison isn’t a warm place. It’s not like they could decorate their cells with much of anything.

As I settle into a chair facing the kitchen, I spot something totally out of place on a low shelf. A coloring book and pencil crayons.

Unable to resist, I rise and move to them. An adult dirty word coloring book. None of the pages are colored, and the box of colored pencils look unopened. I feel John’s gaze. “I’m sorry. I know I’m being rude, but...” I trail off, bobbing the art supplies in my hands.

He grunts, staring at them. “Abigail gave them to me. She thinks I need to express myself.”

Laughing, I page through the book. “So coloring ‘you’re a twat waffle’ is supposed to be therapeutic or something?”

“Apparently,” he says, cracking a small smile. It’s both nice to look at, and also horrible. The healing scar on his cheek is still an angry red, pulling and twisting with the movement of his mouth. So much pain. So much trauma. Does he still feel it? Does he wake up in a sweat, screaming?

“Maybe I should give it a try,” I murmur, more to myself. John waves me back to the table, so I sit and idly flip through the pages. Nick sits and slides his chair closer. What a colossal, warm, musky smelling distraction.

Leaning an elbow on the table, other arm around the back of my chair, he studies the pages, chuckling. “Abby gave him this? She’s an odd chick.”

“Is this news to you?” I mean I don’t want to judge a book by its cover, but Abby’s pink hair tells me her book is unique, even if I don’t know everything that’s between the pages.

“Nah, not news. When she first showed up, she was a little wild, but that’s understandable after what her ex did to her. She’s settled in now. Though I’m not sure I understand her and John’s thing.”

“I think maybe I get it,” I say, studying John as he calmly directs Jonas in the kitchen. “He has a very calm way about him. He seems like nothing ever gets to him.”

Nick leans back, brow furrowed. “Nothing ever gets to him,” he murmurs, studying John as he guides Jonas to fold the chocolate pudding into the cream. “I guess that’s true. Considering all the changes in his life in the last month, he’s done damned well. From the stories Colton’s told about their childhood, this is a new improved version of John.”

New and improved. I’ve always hated that term. How can something be new and improved? It’s illogical. “The same could be said for anyone though, couldn’t it? None of us are who we used to be, for better or worse. I barely recognize my sixteen year old self.”

Scratch that. She was grieving, and lost, her entire world turned upside. Maybe I have more in common with her now than I have in a long time. “You’re not the same person you were twenty years ago, are you? What was sixteen-year-old Nick like?”

His shoulders climb up around his ears. He shrugs and scratches at something only he can see on the table with one fingernail. “Yeah. I see your point.” The humor has fallen

from his face, and I'm sorry to see it go. I'm even more sorry that I'm the one that chased it away. He mentioned his grandma when we were in Miami. Is she the reason he lost his smile? I want to ask, but I don't like people prying into my psyche, and I'm guessing he wouldn't either.

He pastes a smile on his lips, and grabs the box of colored pencils. "Can I work on it with you. My kindergarten teacher gave me a certificate for my coloring. I was top of the class at staying in the lines."

I smile, and let him change the subject. Casual and easy friendship is all we have. I have to remember that, and not let myself get too deep. I pull the coloring book closer and thumb through it, looking for the perfect page for us to work on. I find it and Nick laughs as he dumps the pencils all over the table. "Shit Happens. Well, if that doesn't just sum it up."

We work together, playfully arguing over color choices for the design. I maintain we need classic yellow for the happy face. Nick, heathen that he is, demands it be green. In the end, I choose to ignore him and color it yellow. He groans, but I catch his smile.

Soon, we're nearly done, and the air is filled with aromas that make my stomach growl. Jonas carefully removes a dish from the oven, placing it on the top of the stove. He leans over, smelling, and fogs up his glasses. He casually rubs his face with his arm, too focused on the food to worry about smudging his glasses. I smile, turning to Nick, and find the chair empty. I didn't hear him leave.

He sidles up right behind Jonas, peeking around his shoulder to look at the dish of pasta. He looks like he's been locked in a dungeon for a week, and this is his first sight of food. It's hilarious, but I'm also afraid they're going to end up in a fight if he doesn't give Jonas some space. It wouldn't be the first time.

The food makes it to the table with only a few close calls and a little elbowing. For these guys, that's the equivalent of having a tea party with royalty.

Jonas proudly dishes up the food, serving me first. Other than some moans and muttered compliments, our first few bites are silent. When the edge of hunger is soothed, I turn to Jonas. “Where’s Janey tonight?” I love Janey. She’s like a blanket, in the best way possible. Warm, cozy, soothing.

Jonas rests his fork on the edge of his nearly empty plate. “She’s with her dad. She took him out for supper.”

“You didn’t want to go?” They seem pretty attached. I mean, of course they are, they’re married. But it’s more than that. Every once in a while, I catch them looking at each other with a depth of feeling that takes my breath away. I’m jealous, but also terrified of the idea of putting all my love into one person like that. I did it, and it backfired big time.

Jonas shrugs, and picks up his fork. “I always want to be where she is. But I believe rebuilding her relationship with her father is very important. So it’s good for them to spend time together. He is a good man. She is safe with him.”

And if that doesn’t say everything about who Jonas is as a person. Anything that’s in Janey’s best interest, he’s for it. It’s sweet, and eye opening.

That’s not the version of love I had.

Maybe what Tyler and I had wasn’t love, not even in the good times. It was something else. Something darker, and twisted.

And I was too stupid to realize it.

Nick nudges my foot under the table. I lift my gaze from the pasta left in my bowl to his. “Are you okay?” he asks, brows furrowed in concern.

I mean to say yes. To push down the big ball of emotion in my chest, but looking at those rich brown eyes of his, I just can’t. Right now, I’m weak. I don’t want to pretend. “No.”

Nick’s body deflates as he stares at me. Now’s the moment. I’ve run into it a lot in the months since that night. He’ll tell me everything will be okay. What I’m feeling is normal, and it will get better.

Instead, he wets his lips and cracks my chest wide open.
“Me neither.”

NICK

Shit. I didn't mean to say that. What the fuck? *Me neither?* Why did I do that? I want to slap myself in the face when her eyes turn glassy with a sheen of tears. I just fucked everything up. I'm a guy who grew up with a bunch of guys. We didn't do feelings most of the time...well we did, but it usually involved a drink, and a one-on-one. We don't just blurt shit out at the table like this.

"I have been researching birth. Did you know sometimes a woman will have an episiotomy? That's when they cut the skin between the vagina and the rectum. I had a nightmare about it last night. I think Janey and I should adopt, then she will never have to experience that."

Dios. Apparently we are blurters, and I don't know what the fuck I'm talking about. We're all staring at Jonas, mouths open, Bree's tears forgotten for the moment.

"Where the fuck did that come from?" John asks, dropping his fork onto his plate, glaring at Jonas.

Jonas either doesn't notice John's anger, or he just doesn't care. "I am worried. I do not like being unprepared. But now I wish I hadn't watched that video."

"It's not your baby. Or your wife. Why do you need to worry?"

Jonas stares at John, turning his head side to side like he needs a different view to figure out what's going on in John's head. "Because Holly is family. So I need to worry about her. That is how it works."

John quirks an eyebrow, something dark washing over his face. “Really? That’s how it works? Simple as that?”

Jonas pins John with a look I’ve seen before. A Jonas style truth bomb is about to be dropped. “Loving people is not simple. People are complicated, and they never do what they should. They’re rarely logical, and most of the time, they’re annoying. But I love them all, anyway. Taking care of them is my job.”

“They’re adults. They can take care of themselves.”

“Most of the time, yes. But Micah is worried. He’s been fixating on everything that could go wrong with the birth. Because I love him, I want to help him. So I’m learning everything I can before the birth so I can be calm for him. Is that such a difficult concept for you? You more than anyone should understand.”

John’s eyes widen. “Why the fuck would I understand?” I know exactly where Jonas is going with this, and honestly, I’m a little surprised John doesn’t.

“Because you went to prison for your brother. What do you call that, if not love?”

John pushes back from the table and rests his elbows on his knees. “I call it fucking stupidity.”

Jonas nods. “Oh yes, it was stupid. No question. It was poorly thought out, illogical, but in the end, you did it for love. Because you love Colton and didn’t want anything bad to happen to him.”

“Colton’s blood. Micah isn’t your blood.” John says, glaring at Jonas. Why is he fighting against the idea of love coming with responsibility?

Jonas folds his hands on the table, and pins John with a look of absolute confidence. “Zach is my blood. I love him. I would do anything for him. When we first joined Ransom, that loyalty was only for Zach. But slowly, all of my brothers earned a place in my heart. There’s still more room in there, for their wives and their children. It is easier not to love people. For me, love comes with worry. But I still would

rather have all these people in my life than be alone. Do you not feel the same? I thought you might, since you're here."

"I'm here because I didn't have anywhere else to go," John says flatly.

"That's not quite true, is it?" I say quietly. "You have eighty million options in your bank account. You can do whatever the fuck you want. But you're still here."

John's lips curl into a sneer. "You want me to go? I can walk out that door and never bother you again?"

Jonas sighs heavily. "You are acting defensive and about to talk yourself out of here. And I don't think you actually want to go. You like it here. You like being near Colton. You are trying to build a life. Don't ruin it by being prideful."

"Prideful," John says, laughing in disbelief. "I've pissed in front of someone for twenty years. Every minute of my life was decided for me. I don't have any fucking pride left."

"Sure you do," I say, mindful of Bree's eyes on our exchange. "You were a tough motherfucker in there. You were someone respected and feared. Now that you're out here you've lost your footing. You can't pave your way now the same way you did in there. It's not about intimidation or jockeying for position out here."

"But it sort of is," Bree says quietly. We all turn to her. There's a tick in John's cheek, making it obvious how badly he hates her seeing this. "We all jockey for position at work. But we do it in families too. We fall into a pattern, especially with siblings. There's the successful one, or the athletic one, the disappointment and the favorite." She looks from Jonas to me. "You guys have been together for so long, you all have your roles in the family. I don't think you realize how tight you all are. I've seen you guys finish each other's sentences more than once. I watched Kade and Zach have a conversation once that, honestly, still leaves me baffled. Kade would start a sentence, and before it was even finished, Zach was answering. It gave me a headache to watch it. But I get it. Cara and I have enough history behind us that we can do the same."

“You’re right,” I say, settling back in my chair. “We are tight. And even if we’ve told you that you’re welcome here, you’re still the new guy.”

John sighs and leans against the counter, rubbing the back of his head. It’s something I’ve seen Colton do as long as I’ve known him, and it drives home to me how badly this could go if he walks away. Colton would be devastated. I’m mentally lining up my arguments for him to stay as he breathes, staring over our heads at the wall.

“I haven’t been the new guy in twenty years,” he says, still not looking at us. “I don’t fucking know what I’m doing.”

I nod, because when he puts it like that, it’s terrifying. And maybe, just maybe, knowing that might help. “I don’t know what it’s like to be the new guy either. I found my family a long time ago. I don’t know how I’d handle it if I were in your position. Actually, I do know. I would probably have a shit fit and go sulk on a beach somewhere.”

He raises an eyebrow. “A shit fit?”

“Yeah. I can get a little pissy sometimes.” It’s true, but usually it’s over where to eat for dinner or what movie to watch. When it comes to the big stuff, I’m the coolest, calmest version of me.

“I don’t know what to do with my days,” he says, pushing his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I knew who I was behind bars. I knew my worth, which was pretty damn worthless, and I knew exactly where I fell in the fucking pecking order. Now, I’m on the outside of this group of people who don’t need or want me around.”

He’s wrong, but I get where he’s coming from. The feelings are running deep. This is a time to tread carefully.

“You are being stupid,” Jonas says flatly.

Or we say ‘fuck treading carefully’ and do that.

I shoot Jonas a look, and he gives me one back, making it clear he’s uninterested in letting me smooth things over.

“You are welcome here, because you are here. If we didn’t want you, there are many ways we could have gotten you out of our lives. We didn’t have to fight for you to get out of prison. You were on the verge of doing something asinine and getting time added to your sentence. We could have let that happen. But we didn’t. We did everything we could to make sure you got out, and got a second chance at life.” He stands, taking his empty plate to the kitchen, then peeks into the fridge. “Is it ready, do you think?”

John, looking like he’s trying to swallow a frog, nods and clears his throat. “Yeah. It’s just instant pudding mix and whipped cream. It firms up pretty quick.”

Jonas grins happily, and rubs his hands together, diving into the fridge for the big bowl. I’m mostly watching him, making sure he gets a bowl for all of us out of the cupboard, but I keep John in the corner of my eye. “You have a place here. This is it. Maybe it’s a good thing in your eyes. Maybe not. But every single one of us are desperate to be in your kitchen. We want anything you’re willing to make. And I know it can feel like we have our own language, and we do, but we’re not trying to exclude you. Jonas is right. We don’t operate that way. We let you in, so you’re in. Eventually, it’ll be like you’ve always been with us. But we’ve had years to build a rhythm. Eventually, you’ll be sucked into our vortex and become one of us. It’s inevitable.”

John finally cracks a smile as Jonas places four large bowls, spoons and the big bowl of chocolate mousse on the table. What were we talking about? All words are gone. All I can focus on is the chocolate smell wafting out of the bowl.

Jonas, carefully sinks the serving spoon into the fluffy goodness, lifting it out and holding it up in front of his face, mounded with the rich mousse. Every muscle in my body tenses as Jonas’s eyes turn shifty. He’s moving to his lizard brain. I’ve seen it over and over again when we’re around food. Not just from him. We all do it. Evie’s trying to break us of it, but she isn’t here right now, is she?

“Don’t you fucking do it,” I tell him, standing slowly from my chair. He doesn’t bother looking at me, just tightens his

grip on the spoon. “Jonas. Don’t. There’s enough for everyone.” I’m not getting through, I can tell. I take another step closer, and he growls at me. We’re at Defcon whatever the fuck is the worst. I bend my knees, ready for whichever way this is going to go. Then, with a suddenness that startles a gasp out of Bree, he makes his move, swinging the spoon straight at his wide open mouth. The tip makes it in just before I tackle him.

I’ll admit I could have thought that through, but in my defense, it was chocolate pudding and whipped cream. How the fuck was I supposed to handle that?

We crash into the wall, the spoon of mousse smears across Jonas’s face, the bowl pressed between us. Both of us are so completely fixated on the bowl, we miss John’s approach. We don’t miss the tight grip he takes on our ears, or the way Bree slides the bowl out from between us. We’re bent at the waist, slapping at John and each other. His muttered ‘Jesus Christ’ barely penetrating the chocolate haze. Then he’s pushing us away, back into the corner.

Our prize stolen, we glare at him as he plants his hands on his hips. “You fucknuts are cut off. You need to learn some fucking self control. Not even the craziest inmates did shit like this. Now Bree and I are going to sit here and eat our dessert like civilized adults. The two of you are going to sit there, hands on the table, and learn some fucking patience. Am I clear?”

I eye Jonas, then sign, “*We could take him.*”

Jonas shakes his head and signs back, “*No way. He won’t give me cooking lessons if we attack him. He frowns on that kind of behavior.*”

I look at John, standing like a fucking wall between me and the desert. Then at Bree, who’s staring at us wide eyed, one hand covering her mouth, the other holding the bowl. We could get it from her, guaranteed, but even I know that would be crossing a line.

My breath leaves me in a sigh. “Fine. We’ll be ‘patient’. But I would like to formally register a complaint with

management.”

John rolls his eyes and turns back to the table, sliding over two bowls. I watch forlornly as he serves Bree than himself. Jonas bumps me with his shoulder, scowling.

“Your fault,” he mutters.

I eye him, and the chocolate mousse covering the side of his face from his eyebrows to his collarbone, and I break. Grabbing his head, I lick the side of his face, getting as much of the desert in my mouth as I can with one swipe.

Bree’s hysterical laughter is the only reason I’ll ever be able to look at her again. If she’s laughing, she can’t be disgusted, right?

I hope I’m right. Because I can’t be sorry. The taste of the chocolate is even better than the look of absolute disgust on Jonas’s face.

It’s a win-win.

My finger hovers over Nick's contact, but I chicken out and drop my phone on my lap. This is a bad idea. The man is too sexy, too nice, too everything. He's too much temptation. I should be smart and stay far away. I am damaged goods, and he is far better off away from me.

With a groan, I wake up my phone, letting my finger hover again. *I am not damaged. I'm hurt, but not broken.* The familiar refrain doesn't seem to be helping the way it's supposed to. It's another one of the tools in my psychological toolbox that is a bit of a letdown. It's not my counselor's fault. She's great. It's one hundred percent user error, I'm sure.

I shouldn't call him. But my competitive spirit won't let me not. It's not like I have many other choices. I've been through every other contact I have and no one's available. All of this angst over calling Nick might be for nothing. He's probably busy. I'm sure he's out there fixing a problem or making a ton of money. He wouldn't have time for this, anyway.

So what's the harm? If he's busy, then there's no reason not to ask. He'll say no, and you can stop fucking around. Giving up the fight, I let my finger hit the call button and raise the phone to my ear. After the third ring, my shoulders relax. He's busy. He's not going to answer. God, I was making such a big deal out of nothing.

"Are you okay? Bree? What's wrong?" The urgency in Nick's voice propels me out of the slouched position I'm in.

Everyone else is gone, off to grab food before the game. Honestly, this office is a hell of a lot creepier at night with no one else around.

“Nick. Um. Hi. Nothing’s wrong. Why would you think that?”

His heavy exhale sends a shiver down my back. It’s like I can feel the caress of his breath, even through the phone lines. “I don’t know. Maybe the fact that you’ve had my number for months and never once called me?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. You know what, it’s no big deal. It was just a silly thought. Go back to whatever you were doing. I’m sorry I interrupted you.” I stammer through the words, then hang up, pressing the phone to my forehead .

I should not be allowed near people I am such an idiot.

The phone ringing startles a scream out of me. I know who it is. *Woman up, Bree. Answer the damned phone.* “Hi,” I say, forcing cheeriness into my voice.

“You are one of the most frustrating women I’ve ever met, you know that?”

“Seriously? Me? No way that’s true.”

“Absolutely true. Most women can’t wait to get a piece of me. They ask for favors, or cash or for company on holiday...a holiday they want me to pay for. And you Bree? You call me for something, then hang up on me. My fragile ego is feeling quite bruised.” The playful note in his voice makes me smile.

“I’m sorry to hurt your poor little ego. I felt bad calling you for something so silly, that’s all.”

“Call me Bree. Whenever, for whatever. I’ll pick up. I’ll never not want to hear from you.”

I let myself digest his words and the sincerity in his tone. It feels good. Really good. “We’re down a player tonight. I was just wondering if you might like to play?”

I can almost hear him sit up straight. “Volleyball?”

“Yep. Volleyball. If we don’t find someone to play with us by seven, we’ll have to forfeit. And I really don’t want to do that.”

His low chuckle makes me smile. “Of course you don’t want to forfeit. And why should you, when you have me to fill in. I’ll leave now, and head straight to you.”

“Okay,” I murmur, just for a second imagining another world, where a man rushes to me because there’s no one else in the world he wants to spend time with. “I’ll text you the address. Thank you Nick, really.”

“You are so welcome, Little Bee,” he says, Cara’s nickname for me rolling off his lips.. “I’ll see you soon.”

I murmur a goodbye, then lay back on the treatment table I’ve been camped out on for the last hour. “Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I am so fucked, it’s not even funny.”

I DON’T TAKE MY EYES OFF THE FRONT DOOR. THE ROOM swirls around me, a cacophony of voices laughing, drinking. It’s the same old same old. It fades into the background. All my attention is on that door, and the man that’s coming through them. Leather jacket Nick is devastating. The Nick that walks through the door in a black tailored suit with the collar of his crisp white shirt open, exposing the tanned V of his chest, is a ten on the Richter scale. Suddenly, everything I thought, everything I knew, is upside down.

He’s tall, standing a couple of inches higher than most of the people in here, so it takes no time for him to spot me. And okay, maybe I’m a little thrilled at the way he grins when he sees me. I don’t bother turning away, keeping my eyes on his as he weaves his way through the crowd, attracting more than one woman’s attention. So maybe I lean in a little more when he gets to my table. Maybe my smile is a little bigger. For tonight, he’s mine, even if it’s just as friends. All his focus, all his smiles, are mine.

“You made it,” I breathe. His grin grows, and he leans in, letting the bag on his shoulder slide down to the floor. “You

were obviously at work. I feel bad for calling you away.” *No, I don’t. Liar.*

“Ransom had us all in a meeting with the architects for our new headquarters. He wanted a show of force. I don’t think he’s very happy with them.” He pauses, brow furrowing. “Or with the whole project.”

“I thought he was excited about building something new. Something for all of you.”

“Yeah, that was the vision. He talked about a daycare and more space for everyone. I don’t know. Something’s up, but I don’t think he’s ready to talk.”

“I always got the impression that when it came to stuff like that, he was the decision maker. Will he really talk to all of you?”

Nick pulls a chair closer to me, and sits, leaning into my space to make himself heard. “Yeah actually, he will. Ransom tends to chew on shit on his own first, thinking and planning. But eventually, he brings us in. It’s a lot more of a democracy than people think. We tend to follow his direction, because his vision for our future is so strong he’s already considered everything.”

“I wonder if his vision for the future isn’t quite so clear anymore. I mean there’s a lot happening in your lives that maybe he didn’t predict.”

“Like?” Nick asks, giving me a wink.

“Like Cara. And Holly. And Becca. The dynamics are so different than they used to be.”

He nods, rubbing his forefinger over his lower lip. “You might be right. And shit changed really fast. Faster than I ever would have imagined. It’s almost a year since Kade met Becca, and six of my brothers are paired up.”

The announcer comes over the mike listing off the next teams, and I hear our name.

“So James Bond, you ready for this?” I ask, glancing over at the courts. “We’re up in ten minutes.”

Nick eyes the courts and rubs his hands together. “Fuck yeah, I am. I should warn you though Bree,” he pauses, something mischievous crossing his face, “other than a couple of times in P.E., I’ve never played volleyball. I’m pretty much the worst person you could have called for this.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. “Aw, fuck.”

Nick laughs and picks his bag up. I point him toward the change rooms, mind whirling. This is a rec league, so we rotate, everyone playing every position throughout the game. It’s supposed to make it fair for all abilities and level the playing field. It does, to some extent, but there are still teams that are better than others. Most nights, we’re one of the better ones.

Tonight? Who the hell knows?

Nick comes back from the change rooms and I’m faced with a version of him I know much better. The t-shirt that clings to those muscled shoulders and the black shorts that end just above his knees. All the brothers spend a ton of time in their gym, so I’ve seen him dressed like this a bunch of times. But when he stops next to me, I still feel my breath catch in my chest. Standing next to Nick, no matter what he’s wearing, is like being in the eye of a tornado. Everything around and outside of us is chaos, but here inside this bubble, there is nothing but us. I’m vaguely aware of Julia stepping up beside us, and the dopey look on her face.

Nick gives her a wink, then rakes his hands through his hair, peering at me sheepishly. “I should have probably grabbed some elastics or something.”

Julia makes a weird sucking sound, and starts frantically patting her pockets. I give her a not so gentle hip check, and take Nick’s hand, leading him toward the courts. “I have some in my bag.” I don’t want her anywhere near Nick’s hair.

I dig it out of my bag and hold it up for him. He pulls his hair back into a ponytail then takes the elastic with a smile. “Thanks,” he mutters and he expertly twists it. Ponytails on guys always seemed a little stupid, but suddenly, I’ve changed my mind. Ponytails are hot.

“You’ve done that before,” I murmur. “I’ve never seen you wear a ponytail.”

“I haven’t, actually. Not really my style. But I’ve done a bunch of them for Mia.”

Mia. The most adorable little girl on the planet. And he does her hair. Shit, shit, shit, I really am fucked. Damn you, universe, for putting a perfect man in my path too late. I would have killed —bad word choice there— to have met Nick a year ago. Before Tyler. He wouldn’t have known what hit him.

Wishful thinking is exhausting. What happened, happened. And wishing it were different is pointless. I have to stop spending so much time thinking about the past, and every mistake I’ve made, and just focus on the now. I was in a dark place for a long time. So dark, I never admitted out loud how bad it was. Or how scary my thoughts were. I’m not there in that dark hole anymore. But I’m still stuck. Still not me. And that pisses me off. Anger’s better than the depression I fell into before, so I’ll take it.

Julia’s batting her eyes up at Nick, and he’s smiling down at her. It’s the flirty smile, the one he wears around most women. “So Nick, how do you know Bree? What did she have to do to get you to come and save us tonight?”

I’m ready for a flirty response. But I don’t get it. Instead, he rocks my world a little bit. “Bree’s one of my favorite people in the world. And she didn’t have to do anything. She calls, I answer. Simple as that.”

Julia presses a hand to her throat, patting it the tiniest bit. “Oh. I see. Well, lucky Bree.” She shoots me a ‘we’ll talk later’ look, then with a little wave, heads onto the sand.

Nick just dropped the kind of truth bomb I’d like to unpack with Cara, but that’s not going to happen. So for right now, I’m going to tuck his words close to my heart. Later, when I’m alone, I can pull them out and unpack them.

In the meantime, I smile up at him, stepping as far into his space as I can without touching him. “Alright, I’m going to assume you remember nothing from high school and run you

through the rules. We rotate positions after we score. Only three touches per side. We're going to twenty-one points, but we have to win by two. And we'll play three games against our first opponents. Then we play a new set against another team, which means we're playing at least 4 games if we win them all. Six if we have to fight for every point."

Nick nods as I run him through the rest of it, his head bent to mine, eyes locked on me. Just like any time I have his full attention, the world around me fades away. My teammates shouts finally penetrate, and we run out to join them on the court.

Based on his experience, Nick would have every right to be clumsy, unsure, and stressed being thrown into the middle of our admittedly competitive team. I was fully prepared to have to cover for him, the way I would any weak player, but I don't have to. Sure, there's a little more flailing than an experienced player would do, but the man can move, and that more than makes up for any shortcomings in his technique. But his sweet spot, the position I would put him in permanently if I was allowed, is center net. He's a damned shark in disguise, smiling and chatting with the other team, then jumping up with perfect coordination to spike the ball over the net.

We lose the first game, but win the next two. Everyone's riding a high into the second set. This team is tougher, though, making us fight for every point. Finally, we're dripping with sweat, victory so close I can taste it, battling for the last point. We're going back and forth, our team up one, then theirs, needing to be up by two to finally win.

That's when everything falls apart. We're so close I can taste it. Julia serves, and the other side returns it. Dan bumps it, but it goes a little wild. Nick and I both dive for it out of bounds, but neither one of us saw Julia coming on the inside. Nick does some sort of midair roll, managing to avoid falling on her, but he lands on his shoulder, and I'm pretty damned sure I hear the pop. All of us know that sound, so maybe we feel it more than hear it. Game forgotten, I crawl the foot

separating me from Nick, and carefully, gently, put my hand on the side of his neck.

He looks up at me, mouth pulled into a tight line. “Shoulder’s dislocated,” he grits out.

“I know,” I murmur, looking back at my team. Dan nods and runs for the first aid kit. “I’m sorry. That was an epic move, though. You saved Julia. If you’d landed on her, she’d have been flatter than a pancake.”

Julia nods, kneeling next to us. “Seriously. You are one big guy. Thank you for not squishing me. I have a lot of life left to live.”

Nick laughs and groans when the movement sends pain to his shoulder. I wince in sympathy. Dan’s back with the first aid kit, and I pull it open, quickly arranging a sling. “Here,” I say, tucking a hand under his neck, leaning forward to wrap the other around his back. I meet his eyes. “Take a deep breath, then let it out slowly.” I wait, watching him carefully. “Again.” When some of the tension in his muscles have lessened, I gently pull him to sitting. His left hand cups my elbow, and he rests his forehead on my shoulder as he breathes through the pain. I’ve never dislocated my shoulder but I know it’s excruciating. “Let’s get you to the hospital.”

“You’ll stay with me,” he asks, hot breath fanning my hair, brushing against my neck.

“The whole time.”

“**Y**our hair is like sunshine. All shiny and yellow and shit.”
That didn’t quite come out the way I thought it would.
“No. Not sunshiny. Like shimmery gold, just flying...” I try to wave my hands, to explain to her exactly how flowey and wonderful her hair is, and I end up curling into the hospital bed moaning into the plastic pillow. Fuck, that hurt. “Owie, Bree.”

Her soft hand on my forehead washes away the pain. Or maybe it’s the morphine. Either way, it’s so good. I sigh happily and snuggle in. “Today was awesome. Right up until I ate dirt. That part was yucky. But the rest of it was so fun. Your boobs are so bouncy and happy.” Some little part of my brain is telling me to shut up, but it’s pretty easy to ignore. She has to know, “I like when you jump.”

Bree’s rolling laughter makes me smile, and I close my eyes, loving the feel of her hand in my hair, and the cloud of no pain I’m drifting on. Today really was great. I was stuck in that stupid meeting. Bree’s name popping up was scary at first. I was afraid something was wrong. She could have asked me to join her at a root canal, and I still would have jumped at the opportunity. And not really because Declan wants me to be her friend, but because I like her.

“What do you mean Declan asked you to be my friend?”

Even through the haze of morphine, I heard the steel in her voice. I pry my thousand pound eyelids open, and focus on her. “What?”

Her eyes narrow. “Don’t what me. Declan told you to be friends with me?”

“Nah. Well, yes, but not really. Sort of.”

“Well, that clears it up,” she says.

I pat her hand and smile, “That’s good,” then close my eyes again. A pinch to my cheek forces my eyes back open. “What? Don’t be mean Bree. I like sweet Bree better.”

“You won’t ever see sweet Bree again if you don’t start explaining.”

“Fine. You’re so mean.” She really is. But she smells so good. I wonder if that’s just sweat or something else. It’s a smell I want to roll around in. Or more specifically, roll around with her, preferably in my bed.

“Dammit Nick. Why did Declan ask you to be my friend?”

“Because he wants to move your sister into his house so they can bang like bunnies.”

She’s quiet so long, I crack an eye to look at her. I can’t identify the look on her face, other than to know it’s wrong.

“And he can’t do that because of me?”

I shake my head, but stop pretty damn quick when a wave of nausea washes through me. That was a very bad idea. I hold still when I answer her. “Nah. He’s worried about you, but Cara is too, so he doesn’t want to ask her and make her choose between you two. He’s soooo in looove. He’s all coo-coo over your sister. It’s kinda gross, and kinda nice, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

I pry my eyes open...okay, just one eye. The other sucker’s stuck shut. “Declan’s not being a dick, promise.”

“I don’t think he’s being a dick. Of course he wants to move in with her. I’m sure she wants that too...or she would if she wasn’t worried about me. She’s put her whole life on hold for me, and now she’s doing it again.”

I feel sick. Sicker than I've ever felt for real. Not even the great flu episode of 2018 felt this bad. All because Nick is high as a kite and dropped a truth bomb on me. Mixed in with the embarrassment that Nick's been spending time with me just because Declan asked him to, is sadness that yet again, Cara is sacrificing herself for me. How much more of her own life will she give up for me?

"What's happening with your face? What's that?" Nick asks, waving a finger in a big circle around my nose. How much of all of this is he going to remember? In my experience with some of my patients in the hospital, not much of it. Which is why I don't bother pretending I'm okay.

"I wish I weren't fucked up. I wish that Cara could live her life without worrying about me. I don't want her putting everything on hold. And I really wish your friendship wasn't a lie."

"Ah Bree, he says, mouth twisting, "everyone's fucked up."

"Yeah, maybe. But not like me. I still sleep with the light on and my bedroom door open. Sometimes I crawl into Cara's bed with her, just because I can't be alone. There's no way she's going to move in with Declan if I keep doing that." It shouldn't be a big deal. Just stop going into her room. Sounds easy. But when the nightmares are howling, and I swear Tyler's screaming my name, I crack. I can't be alone.

But I can't keep using Cara as a crutch. She deserves to live her own life. This is bad. So bad, Declan had to drag his brother into it. "I'm sorry Declan made you hang out with me."

Nick scowls, or tries to, but his eyebrows end up dancing instead, making him look like a mischievous little boy. "Declan didn't make me do anything. I like being with you Bree. You're fun, and easy to talk to, and can really hold your liquor. You're just like a guy."

Well, if that isn't the best compliment. I'm just like a guy. Exactly what a woman wants to hear from the sexiest man on the planet. I force a smile, and he grins, laying his head back down, the big dope.

"You don't have to spend time with me Nick. You're off the hook."

He scowls, opening his mouth to reply when the doctor enters. We've only been here a short while, and he's already being seen. I guess it pays to have your name on the hospital. I wonder if billionaires take priority over gunshots?

Now I'm just being mean, and I know it. Everything I know about these guys tells me they're good, and would never want a doctor to prioritize them over someone who's in a bad way, even if they are crazy rich.

The doctor's efficient, reviewing the X-rays, and with the help of a very large nurse, has Nick's shoulder back in place in no time. She puts a prescription in his hand, and signs his discharge papers. It's a win-win I guess. He's out of here, and the bed is freed up for someone who needs it more.

On the walk to the car, Nick's humming a low melody. It's familiar, tickling the back of my brain, making me think of heat and sweat, and dancing. I wish I could go back there, back then. Back before I realized how selfish I am. Back to the time when Cara and Declan could just be wrapped up in each other, without worrying about me blocking their future.

I'm lucky I'm strong, because Nick's nearly deadweight by the time I get him into the elevator at home. I punch the button

for his floor, then lean him up against the wall, letting myself rest against him for just a second. “I was afraid I’d have to leave you in the car to sleep off the meds.”

“Nah. I’m good now.”

I snort. “Sure you are, you could barely...” I get a good look at his face, and my words die in my throat. Nick’s gaze is clear and sharp, the drugged up haze nowhere to be found. A little grin twitches the corner of his lush mouth.

“You big faker,” I mumble, pushing away from him. His arm, the one not in a sling, bands around me so quickly, I don’t manage to get anywhere.

“Not a faker. I needed the support.” I arch a brow at that obvious lie, and he has the decency to look a little embarrassed. “Okay, I needed the support for a little while, at least.”

“You seem to be just fine now.”

He hums low in his throat, but doesn’t respond. I’m hyper aware of the heat coming off of him, and the way he’s studying my face. I can’t take any more tonight.

“Let me go please,” I say quietly. His gaze searches my face, then he slowly withdraws his arm. I back up against the far wall and stare down at my feet. Everything is upside down and backwards and I don’t know what to do to make it better.

“It’s not all a favor, Bree,” he says quietly, watching me carefully.

I don’t know what to say to that. Is he going to give me a percentage? Like sixty percent of it was a favor, but the rest of it wasn’t? That idea is completely humiliating. I like Nick. I like spending time with him, maybe more than almost anyone I’ve ever met.

“Bree,” he says, waiting for me to raise my eyes. “Declan asked me to spend more time with you. That’s true. But he didn’t do it to hurt you. And I’m not playing any fucking games.”

“How would you feel if the situation was reversed? Knowing I was reaching out to you as a favor for someone else. That I was smiling and laughing with you, all the while, I had an ulterior motive.”

To his credit, he winces, and nods, acknowledging my point. I’m not angry, not really. I just feel sad, and a little dumb. “It’s fine,” I say quietly. “I don’t think there’s any point in discussing it further.”

“Too bad. I have more to say.”

I want to stomp my foot. I want to punch him in the stomach. “And I’m done talking,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest and giving him a dead eye stare. It’s the stare I perfected working in my sister’s bar. Some dudes won’t listen to words, but the stare gets them every time.

Nick’s apparently immune to the stare. “I like hanging with you, Bree. I had more fun tonight than I’ve had in a long time. I have no intention of stopping.”

I shove down the little leap of happiness in my chest. Too little, too late. “Plus, my hair’s all sunshine and shit, and my boobs bounce.”

A little wash of red colors his cheeks. “Ah...yeah. About that. I didn’t mean...”

“You didn’t mean what? To comment on my boobs? To compliment me?” I shake my head and push off the rail. “It’s okay, morphine makes you spout all kinds of random stuff.”

Disbelief washes over his face. “So I’m off the hook, just like that?”

“Just like that,” I murmur, grateful when the elevator doors open on Nick’s floor. I step off the elevator, and head straight for the stairs, more than ready to be done with this night. I have a lot of thinking to do.

“Bree,” Nick says, his voice stopping me with my hand on the stairwell door. “I’m really sorry I hurt you. But I’m telling you the truth. I have no intention of stopping being your friend.”

“I’m not sure you are my friend,” I say quietly. “I know you were just trying to help your brother, but the last...what? Few weeks? It’s all been built on a lie. That seems like a pretty shitty foundation for friendship.”

He makes a rough sound. “Dammit, Bree. It’s...fuck. You’re wrong.”

I turn back to look at him, taking in the crooked ponytail and the loose hair flying around his face. He should look ridiculous. He doesn’t. “Goodnight Nick. Take care of that shoulder. Take the pain meds.”

His mouth tightens, eyes boring into mine. I look back, wishing everything was different, then turn and walk softly down the stairs. I push through the doors to my floor and pause in front of my door. I press my ear against it, hearing the TV. She’s home. They’re home. Cara and Declan. Declan and Cara. The ultimate couple.

“You lost your key?”

The scream is trapped in my throat, I manage to spin and face John, just before my whole body freezes. I’m stuck, my body betraying me, as the look on John’s face morphs from mild amusement to a spectacular frown.

“For fuck’s sake girl, breathe,” he orders. Like it’s that easy. It’s not. My body won’t cooperate. My lungs are frozen, nothing coming in or out. Little black spots dance in front of my eyes.

I’m aware of large hands pushing me to the floor, shoving me onto my back. Then my legs are raised. It’s terrifying having a man manipulate my body, but I’m too trapped in my panic to react. I can’t logic. I can’t reason. I’m pure survival, right here on the lush carpeting of a luxury high rise.

One gasping breath fills my lungs. Another. Then another after that. I rub my fingers over the pile of the carpet, back and forth, back and forth. Finally, my higher brain comes back online, and I open my eyes to find John sitting against the wall, knees up with my legs cradled between his thighs and chest. His eyes are closed, his head resting on the wall like

he's ready to take a nap. I stare at him, letting myself breathe, too thankful for coming out of the panic to worry about what he thinks of me.

"You back?" he asks without opening his eyes.

"Yes," I mumble, still staring at his face. "Thank you."

He shrugs, eyes still closed. "Didn't want you to fall and crack your head open. Would've ruined the carpet."

A startled laugh escapes me, and his lips curve in a small smile. I gently tug on my legs, and he releases me easily, turning his head and finally opening his eyes to study me. "Wouldn't want to ruin the carpet," I say, sitting up and hugging my legs to my chest. "I appreciate you helping me out. You didn't have to."

One brow lowers. "I'm the one that freaked you the fuck out. It would be pretty shitty of me to walk away."

"Maybe. But thanks all the same. I'm sorry I freaked out. It wasn't you."

"I know," he says simply. "I've seen a lot of people react the same way."

"You have?"

"Yeah. Where I came from, bad shit happens all the time. Riots, sirens, fights. It's easy for your body to go haywire. Happens to lots of guys."

"But not you?"

He slowly shakes his head. "Not for a long time."

"How did you get over it?"

"Confidence."

"Well that's vague. What do you mean, confidence? How does that help?"

He stretches his legs out in front of him. Admittedly, this is a weird place to have a conversation, the floor in the foyer at midnight. But John doesn't seem bothered. I'm all kinds of

bothered, so sitting here peacefully, talking trauma response seems like as good an idea as any.

“When I realized I could handle my shit, I stopped panicking.”

“Must be nice to be a giant,” I mutter, eyeing the acres of muscles on his body.

He snorts and shakes his head. “I wasn’t the biggest guy in there. Or the toughest. I’m not talking about beating people up. It’s not that. It’s about knowing that whatever happens, I can handle it. I can’t be broken. It doesn’t matter if I get stomped, or shanked, or stuck in the hole. I can survive.” He scowls. “And maybe there’s a bit of not giving a fuck in there. When you don’t have much, it’s not that scary if it gets taken away.”

“But what if you died?” That idea, that Tyler might have killed me, won’t leave my mind. I could have died.

I could have died.

“Then I’d be dead.”

I just stare at him. He says it so casually. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Yeah. Everyone has to go. Yeah, in the joint there’s less to miss out on than out here. But it’s just on to the next thing, anyway.”

“You mean heaven?”

He sighs, staring blankly at the wall. “Not the way the Bible puts it, no. I read it in the joint. And a few other books.” Something about the way he says a ‘few’ makes me think it’s a hell of a lot more. “I think there’s more out there. More everything. So if I die? If I get sent off to some other place, I’m okay with it.” The man’s a philosopher.

“What about all the things left to do here? What about all the people you’ll leave behind.”

“They’ll be okay.”

He says that so casually. And maybe he’s right, maybe they wouldn’t miss me. But I’m not like John. That thought

isn't comforting. I want to be connected to people. I want to live and wring out every second of joy from the time I have left here. I always have. But that night six months ago took that away from me, and I want it back. I need it back.

I let out a shuddering breath, the realization sinking in. "I want to get better. I want to feel strong again."

One eyebrow lifts. "You didn't before?"

"I did, I guess. It was in a vague sort of way. I thought if I could get back to the old me, everything would be better. But it's not about going back, is it?"

John shakes his head. "Nah. The past is the past. The future is something way the fuck out there. I've always found it best to focus on right now? Doesn't matter what the situation is. I always ask myself, what can I do right now?"

"What can I do right now?" I repeat, mulling over the words. "Like, get up off the floor?"

"Maybe," he says with a shrug. "Or think of it this way. The person you want to be? This future version of you? What would she do right now?"

"Well, shit." She sure as hell wouldn't be wallowing in the mud the way I seem to be. She wouldn't spend so much time thinking of what could have happened. She'd be grateful for every breath.

John laughs and pushes to his feet. "You'll be okay, kid. You're through the worst of it, you just have a little more road to travel." He nods before pushing open his door, closing it quietly behind him.

Yoda's my next-door neighbor. Who knew?

But seriously, he's right. I survived the worst thing I could have imagined. And letting my brain and body stay back there is getting me nowhere. So what do I really want? I don't want Cara hovering over me, worrying anymore. I don't want her putting her life on hold.

But what do I want for me? I want to feel strong. I want to feel safe. I want to feel like a literal badass.

I stand and wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. No more time to sit around.

I have shit to do.

I take a deep breath, then another. This being the person I want to be stuff is a little harder than it seemed last night, but I'm determined. I open my bedroom door and see exactly what I expected. Cara, looking absolutely put together and perfect, sitting at the table drinking her coffee.

She looks up with a smile. "Hey, little Bee."

I smile back, and giving into the urge, cross to her, lean down and hug her tightly. Her breath catches in her throat, and her arms come around me tightly. "I love you," I whisper in her ear.

There's no delay. No hesitation. "I love you so much, Bee," she says, squeezing me even tighter.

We hold each other a little longer, longer than we normally would. Then finally, we pull away. Cara blinks quickly, fanning her face as she laughs. I help myself to a cup of coffee, adding enough sugar and cream to mask the taste, and join her at the table.

We've lived a lot of life around this table. I'm sure the guys would have given us a new one, but neither one of us could bear to part with it. This table has been the setting for late night study sessions, early morning bitch fests. It's seen tears and laughter, and a lot of truly excellent spaghetti dinners. It's a part of us.

"What's your day like today?" I ask her, smiling as she describes what I guess is a normal workday for her, kicking

butt and taking names at Brash. “What about later? Are you and Declan getting together?”

Her smile dies. “Do you need me? I can tell him to find something else to do tonight. Did you want to watch a movie? Or...?”

This right here is exactly what has to stop. Time to put phase one of the New Bree plan into effect. “Actually, I have plans with a friend. I thought maybe we’d come back here if you and Declan were at his place.”

I have to blink as she literally glows with joy. “No, that’s totally fine. We were going to this Brazilian place for dinner. Declan’s been talking non-stop about the bottomless meat, so I caved. Doesn’t sound that exciting to me, but...” She shrugs, like going out for never ending meat is just something you have to do to keep a relationship strong. Not something I’d considered, but okay.

“Sounds fun I guess?” I laugh, and she grins at me, and for that moment, everything else is forgotten. We’re just two sisters laughing about boyfriends. I want more of this.

“We were down a player last night. I called Nick to come and play.”

Her eyes widen comically. “No! Oh my god, how did that go?”

“Great actually. He hadn’t played in a long time, but he’s a natural of course.”

She snorts. “Of course he is. Because these men can’t just be gorgeous, they also have to be good at everything else.”

“Except cooking,” I remind her.

She cackles. “Right. There is that.” She glances at her watch and frowns. “I have to go.”

I nod, taking a sip of my coffee, waiting until she’s about to walk out the door. “By the way. Nick got hurt last night. We spent a while in the ER with him, hopped up on morphine. Drugged up Nick is very chatty. He made sure to tell me he likes the way my boobs bounce when I jump.”

Cara's mouth drops open as she absorbs my words. Her reaction doesn't disappoint. She drops her purse, and throws her head back, howling with laughter. She grips the edge of the door for support as her laughter rings out. "Oh, my god. Today is going to be so fun! He's such a man whore."

"Man whore?"

"Yeah. Doesn't matter where he goes, women flock to him. I would be shocked if that man spends a night alone. And he eats that shit up, always flirting."

"Right. He is charming." Why does that make me sad? He's a grown man. He can do whomever he pleases. There's nothing wrong with embracing your sexuality. Maybe I should take a page out of his book and invite someone to my bed.

Cara snorts. "Charming. Yep." She shakes her head, and picks her purse up. "I'll be checking in with him today. Can't wait." Her voice is gleeful. She's going to give him shit today, guaranteed.

I smile until the door closes, giving myself a minute to absorb the swirl of feelings in my chest. *What Nick does in his private time is none of my business. Just stop it.* I take another sip of my coffee, wincing, then pour the rest of it down the sink. I hate coffee. I don't know why I keep trying to like it. Maybe I'll treat myself to a Chai on the way to work instead. My first case this morning is a tough one, so I'll need it.

"GABE, I KNOW YOU'RE UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT YOUR LEG won't fail you. You can trust it, I promise. Let go of the bars."

He scowls at me, shoulders tightening up even more than they already were. "It's not strong enough. You're pushing too fast." His grip on the parallel bars tightens, holding most of his weight.

"You've been seeing me for a couple of weeks. You're putting in the work. This isn't fast, it's the next right step."

"I can't even balance on my good leg, and you want me to do it on this fucking thing? You're crazy."

I can't help it. The look on his face is priceless. I laugh.

His scowl is thunderous. "Am I a fucking joke to you?"

His challenge makes my smile grow. "No actually. But you are funny."

He pushes away from the parallel bars, heading back to my curtained table. I step into his path, forcing him to stop or run me over. His eyes are blazing, a little tick in his jaw showing me just how mad he is.

"You've shared a little about your life. You've pushed yourself in every area of your life. But when it comes to this, to using the prosthetic, you want to take it easy. That exact attitude is why you're still in the position you're in today. Why won't you fight for yourself?"

"Because I don't fucking know what I'm doing," he yells, leaning down to get right in my face. There are eyes on us, other patients, and several staff members. I wave them off and lean into Gabe, our noses nearly touching.

"No shit Sherlock," I say sweetly. His eyes widen and he eases back as I continue. "You were in the Marines, right?" I don't wait for his nod. "Did you walk onto base on day one, and know exactly what the fuck you were doing? Were you excellent at everything?"

"No," he says grudgingly.

"Of course not. But you had drill sergeants or instructors who pushed you, who helped you become a badass. They saw the potential and brought it out of you. So let me give you a little dose of reality. I've worked with people in far worse shape than you and still gotten them to better mobility than you have right now. The physical stuff is not your problem. Your body can do anything I ask it to. Your shit is all mental. I'm doing everything I can to help you past it, but ultimately, it's up to you. You have to want it, and right now, I don't think you do."

He crosses his arms over his chest and glares at my forehead. "I want it."

"I call bullshit."

He growls, stepping around me to the table. He drops onto it, tightly gripping the edge, muscles in his shoulders and arms bunching and twisting. I roll my stool in front of him and sit, letting the silence between us grow. I'm okay with silence. I always have been. I'm confident I can wait him out.

"I'm never going to be the same, so what's the fucking point?" he mutters, glaring at his prosthetic.

I heave out a breath. This sounds damned familiar. Wasn't this me just a night ago? I had a giant scarred Yoda set me straight. Maybe I can do the same for Gabe.

"Was the old you that great?" I ask lightly.

One of Gabe's brows arch up, and a hint of mischief glitters in his eyes. "All the ladies said so."

I snort and lean in. "If your old life was so great, then go back to living it. Build your strength back up, and go do all the crazy stuff you used to. If a double amputee can climb Mount Everest, then you can do whatever the hell you want to. But you don't have to go back to the old you. You've been through something life altering. But someone kinda wise told me just because you went through something awful doesn't mean it has to destroy your life. You have a chance to consciously decide what you want to do with your life. Think about it? Do you want to bicycle around the world? Then do it. Do you want to climb a mountain? Then do it. That leg isn't going to hold you back unless you let it."

"Just like that?"

"Nah. You have to put in the work. You have to apply all that mental toughness to it. But if you do, I promise you, you'll get there."

I wish he had an ah-ha like I did last night, but he just nods. "I think I'm done for the day."

I step out letting him change, wishing I could have found the right words to convince him. My confidence in my abilities as a physiotherapist is unwavering. I know I could help him feel powerful, if only he'd let me. But it's not up to me, that much is obvious. If wishing someone better were enough, Cara

would have had me back to one hundred percent healed on day one. But here I am, half a year later, still struggling.

Gabe tips his head at me as he exits, and I wonder if I'll ever see him again. I hope I do. I hope I get the chance to help him.

He left a little early, so even after I finish my notes, I have a few minutes free. I take the opportunity to pull out my phone and send Nick a message.

Me: You and I are going out tonight.

The bubbles appear immediately.

Nick: Yes ma'am. Wherever you want. I'm sorry, again.

Me: Enough apologies. You're going to make it up to me.

Nick: Now I'm scared.

Me: :)

Nick: Bree

Nick: Bree!

Nick: Evil woman.

I HEAD OFF TO MEET MY NEXT CLIENT WITH A SILLY GRIN ON my face. Fucking with Nick is a pure joy.

NICK

She won't text me back. She doesn't even appreciate how slow texting is with one hand, and how much effort I'm putting into it. How rude. And how evil.

From the moment I met her, her attitude and sense of humor have been my favorite things about her. The more I get to know her, the longer the list of things I like gets longer. I have no idea what we're going to be doing, but I'm too thankful she's forgiven me to worry about whatever she has planned for me tonight. And I know, whatever it is, she'll make it fun.

But I'm still going to worry about it all day.

CARA GIVES ME SOME WEIRD LOOKS THROUGHOUT THE DAY. Seems like she wants to talk to me, but every time she heads in my direction, one of my brothers intercept her. It's almost like we planned it.

Almost.

I make it to 4:30 before my luck runs out. Exiting the men's washroom, I'm confronted by Cara leaning on the wall, arms crossed, black fingernails tapping on her arm.

"Well hello there," she purrs. The way she says it makes me think something bad is coming. I don't know why. Cara and I get along great. Always have. But now that I'm spending more time with Bree, something's shifted, and I can't quite find my footing.

“Cara,” I say evenly, giving her a smile and a wink. I can’t help myself.

She rolls her eyes, a small smile playing on her lips. “So... Bree says you filled in last night at volleyball. Things went a little sideways, I see.” She eyes the sling that I’m still wearing, and grins.

“Aw, fuck. What did she tell you?”

Cara’s smile grows. “Just a little. Apparently, you admire Bree’s...assets.”

I turn around and lean my head on the wall. “Fucking morphine.”

Cara’s laughter makes me smile. She might have fared better after the attack, but she still had some dark days, so I appreciate her humor, even if it’s at my expense.

“It’s okay. I’m sure she took it as a compliment. Or at least, didn’t think you’re a creepy perv.”

I straighten up off the wall and turn to her. “Wait. Was creepy perv even an option? She knows me? She knows I wouldn’t do anything...weird. Doesn’t she?”

Cara shrugs, seemingly unconcerned. “I don’t know. I mean, how well do we really know anybody? You think you’re dating a nice respectable guy, then bam, you learn he’s got wives in three different states and two of them are expecting babies.”

“That’s an oddly specific example Cara. Seems like there might be a story there.”

She hums, smiling. “It does, doesn’t it?” She pushes off the wall, turning toward the offices, and I fall in step with her. “I’m glad you were able to pitch in last night. Bree loves playing, and it would have killed her to forfeit.”

I smirk at her. “Forfeit. Careful Cara. You might make me think you know what you’re talking about.”

She gives me a deadpan look. “You have no idea. I finished raising her. I can’t count how many nights I spent at softball games, soccer games, volleyball games. It changed

when she got older, but you think I didn't get a call to fill in last night too? I was the first dude."

My mouth drops open, and she laughs again, a rich throaty one that makes me think of a bombshell blonde from the movies. It never occurred to me that Cara was sporty. Of course she's been to games. We've already established that she's basically Bree's mom, at least in all the ways that count. Of course she's sporty. She has to be.

"I already know you're killer with a bat." I say, immediately wishing I could call the words back. Cara's mouth drops open and I wince. "Too soon?"

"For fuck's sake Nick, yes, it's too soon."

"Right. Sorry," I mutter.

I catch her smile as she walks away, though.

As soon as I climb into the truck, shutting the door against the cold win, I punch the address into my phone, laughing when it pops up with the business name. Now I'm even more excited about tonight. Seeing Bree was enough, but where we're meeting? Cherry on top. To be honest, I don't remember much about my first visit. Way too much whiskey. I do remember a blur of tongues, soft eyes, and silky hair.

I pull up in front of *LOL (Lots of Love) Animal Shelter*, and cut the engine. The building looks better than I remember. There's a fresh coat of white paint, and a new logo in the window. Maybe thanks to our money.

When Janey suggested we donate to the shelter, we didn't have a problem with it, but we didn't expect we'd be coming down in person to make the donation. Or that we'd all be coming down completely shit faced. The dogs didn't care, and from what I remember, the owner of the shelter didn't seem at all bothered by our behavior. Odd woman, that one, the kind of odd that makes you go 'huh', then enjoy every minute with them. Janey's like that. So is Becca. I guess we have a type.

An actual bell mounted above the door tinkles when I walk in. I don't think I've ever seen one outside of the movies. I scan the space, the echoes of dog's barking tickling my ears. A

woman pushes through the door from the back, smiling when she sees me. I smile back. It's impossible not to. Her blonde hair is sticking out wildly from her head. She's wearing a white t-shirt with the shelter's logo on the front, and black leggings covered in dog hair.

"I think I remember you," I say, studying her.

Her smile is wide and open. It's the kind of smile that draws you in and also makes you protective as hell. "I know I remember you. It's not everyday a bunch of drunk rich dudes are set loose in here. You guys left an impression."

I prop my hands on my hips and wince. "Yeah, shit. Sorry about that. We don't usually act...well that's not true either. We sometimes act like that. We can be a bit much." I'm understating it, I know. Anywhere we go, we attract attention. At first, maybe it's admiring looks, but often, by the end, people look more dazed and overwhelmed. We're a lot.

She shrugs, apparently unconcerned by our bad behavior. "Your money's doing a lot of good around here. So if you want to head to the back, lay on the floor again, and let one of the dogs lick your entire face, you go for it."

"I didn't actually..." Shit. I did. I definitely did that. Pretty sure I let more than one lick me hairline to chest. I'll never admit it, but it was kinda enjoyable. It must have been, to make me roll to the next cage and let another dog do it too. Heat creeps into my face. "I'm sorry. Again. Really sorry."

She laughs again and wipes her palm on her pants before extending it to me. "I'm Cadence. This is my place. Nice to see you again...."

I take her hand, shaking gently. "Nick. Nice to see you too, Cadence."

She takes her hand back and checks her watch, moving to the front doors to lock up.

"Wait...I'm expecting someone. Maybe she's running late?"

She raises an eyebrow, unlocks the door, and peers out. "Who are you waiting for? Are you here to adopt? I have a

pretty rigorous process for adoptees. There's paperwork and home checks."

"Ah, no, I'm not here to adopt." *Though that's not a bad idea. Zach doesn't share his sweet little girl very much.* "My friend asked me to meet her here."

Cadence smiles and stares at me. I smile back because what else am I supposed to do? Finally she breaks into full out giggles.

"Care to tell me who you're waiting for?"

"Oh! Yeah, Bree. Her name is Bree."

Cadence's face lights up. "I love her so much. She has her own key, she'll let herself in when she gets here. In the meantime, I could use some help with chores."

She has her own key? How did I not know she comes here that often? "Of course I'll help. I would never turn down a damsel in distress."

She snorts and waves me into the back, laughing to herself and muttering 'damsel' over and over. The noise level goes from a four to a twenty when we push through the doors. Cadence seems unbothered, leading me to a small room in the back. It's basic, a simple countertop and sink with shelves and shelves packed with dog food. She hands me a can opener, and a giant stack of cans, and I get to work. I may not know how to cook, but I'm fucking awesome at opening cans.

Meanwhile, she lays out enough bowls to cover the long counter, scooping dry food into each bowl. Some of the bowls have a little, others a lot. She takes the cans from me one by one, scooping a smaller amount on top of each bowl, and then doing only canned in others.

"Why don't they get any of the dry stuff?" I finally ask, pointing to a wet only bowl.

"Some of the dogs don't have teeth, or have trouble swallowing. The wet food is easier for them to eat. And most of the dogs like it better, so I also give it to the ones that refuse to eat, or need to put on weight."

She hands me a spoon, showing me how to mix the kibble and wet food in the bowls. I get to work as I ponder her answer. “Most of the dogs I’ve seen will eat anything, anytime. Why won’t these guys?”

Her movement slows and she rests her spoon on the side of the bowl she’s stirring. “Because they’ve lost hope.”

“Hope,” I repeat dumbly, honestly confused by her answer.

She studies me, a look on her face I can’t quite identify. “You haven’t spent much time around animals have you?” When I shake my head, a corner of her mouth tips up. “They feel as much and as deeply as we do. Maybe more. They are pure souls, and sometimes, especially if they’ve come to me from...horrible circumstances, they’ve lost hope. Hope that there are kind people out there. Hope that they’ll be loved. Hope they’ll be treated with kindness. The aggressive ones I worry about less. Not all of them, but most of them still have spirit. They’re still fighting. But the ones that lay in their cages, not reacting when you approach them, or cowering, those are the ones that break my heart.”

“So what do you do?” I ask quietly.

“You love them. You talk softly, you give them a choice in how and when they want to be touched. But above all, you give them time.” She picks up the spoon again. “They’re not so different from traumatized people. They need time to heal.” The way she glances at me makes it clear we’re talking about Bree. “And they need people who will wait, as long as it takes, doing whatever it takes to show them you can be trusted. And if you do,” she lifts a bowl, pressing it into my hands, “they’ll give you everything.”

Cadence’s words ring through my head, circling and circling as I hand out bowls to the dogs. Most of them are barking, hopping, and generally looking like they don’t have a care in the world. They’re pure excitement, thrilled for their meal and I can’t help but laugh.

I’m heading toward the last cage in the row, when Cadence puts a hand on my elbow, taking the bowl from me. “I’ll handle this one,” she says quietly.

I step back, watching as she slowly opens the gate, and lowers the food to the floor, talking softly, the words seemingly unimportant, the tone all that matters. I shift slightly so I can see past her to the dog in the crate. I don't know what I was expecting, maybe a big battle scarred Pitbull? Anything but the most beautiful Golden Retriever I've ever seen. A deep rust color, she looks like she could be in movies, or commercials for the perfect American dog.

And when I look at her eyes, I see nothing. No spark of life. No anger, no sadness. Just nothing.

Feet glued to the floor, I wait for Cadence to come back out of the cage. I need to understand. Cadence's face is grim as she steps out, closing the gate behind her. The dog doesn't move, sitting in the corner, looking at nothing. She doesn't even twitch or look at the bowl of wet food. Cadence stares in, a sheen of moisture in her eyes. I can almost see her vibrating with the need to take care of the dog. To hold her.

I'm right there with her.

"What happened to her? Was she abused?" I ask quietly. The air between us feels heavy, oppressive.

"She was rescued from a puppy mill." I look at her, confused, and she explains. "She was kept in a small cage and bred over and over again. Look at her. She's stunning. Her puppies would be worth thousands."

My stomach drops, and I'm afraid I might puke out the donut I grabbed on the way over. "How long was she in there?"

"From what we know? Her whole life. She's around five or six now. She's probably had ten or more litters of puppies."

She had so many babies, and they were all taken away from her. That's bad. Even worse, she didn't get to go outside, or get treats, or pets, or all the other things that dogs deserve. "Is...is it okay if I sit here for a bit?" I can't leave this dog. I just can't.

Cadence studies my face, then nods. "Don't go in the gate. She doesn't know you."

I nod, waiting for her to walk away before sinking down in front of the gate. “Hey beautiful girl. Is it okay if I spend a little time with you? I promise I’m a good dude.” She doesn’t look at me, but the tiniest flicker of her ear tells me she’s listening. It’s enough. I’ve cracked tougher nuts.

I let myself in through the front door of the shelter and lock it right away. I've been coming here for months, and it's become one of my favorite places. I feel safe here in a way I don't in most of the world. I think it's because there's no possible way for someone to sneak up on me. No one could get past the dogs' ears.

Cadence waves from the front desk, but doesn't look up from whatever she's studying. I circle around and peer over her shoulder, a soft gasp escaping as I catch the live video feed.

"How long has he been like that?" I ask in a whisper. I don't know why I'm whispering. It's not like he can hear me. The man lying on his stomach, one cheek resting on the back of his hand, the other one stretched forward, fingers resting through the chain link of Goldie's cage. Not the most original name for a Golden Retriever, but Cadence has a thing about not giving the dogs names until they show her who they are. And unfortunately, Goldie is totally shut down.

Or is she?

"Can you turn it up?"

Cadence hums and turns the dial on her decade old speakers and a sound I've never heard in the kennels hits my ears. Quiet. No barking, no high pitched whines. All the dogs, not just Goldie, are quiet, listening to Nick's hypnotic voice.

"I get it, beautiful girl. People are awful sometimes. I've seen it too. But there are good ones out there too. I know a

bunch of good ones. There's my brother Maverick. He's so smart. He's a lawyer, and he helps us out of bad spots all the time. He's like a superhero but with a tie instead of a cape like superman. I like superman, but he's not my favorite superhero. I think I like Batman better."

He keeps talking about anything and everything, the words clearly secondary to his low, soothing voice. And she's responding. No, she's not laying against his fingers getting rubs, but she is eating. I haven't seen her do that around anyone. I've left her bowl, and found it empty an hour later, but she'd never go near it until I was well away from her cage. But now, she's sitting next to the bowl, near the gate, taking small delicate bites, watching him warily in between. And Nick, smart man that he is, has his eyes closed or lowered — damn this grainy video feed— to give her some space.

"How long has he been like that?"

Cadence rests her cheek on her hand, still gazing at the screen. "Maybe twenty minutes. He is so patient, Bree. His voice never changes, his body is totally relaxed. He's irresistible." She straightens, turning to me. "He's single right? Because as much as I'm happy with my life, I would chase that man through the city naked if I thought he'd be interested."

My face freezes into a grimace, and Cadence erupts into snorting laughs. "Okay. Clearly, he's taken."

Shit. Shit. "No. He's not taken. I think he's single. I mean, I haven't heard him talk about a girlfriend or anything. It's fine. You go girl. Get that."

Cadence doesn't jump up and down in excitement. She just snorts again, and turns to lay her head on the desk. "Not even..." she gasps, "Not even you believe that. You hate the idea of anyone else getting their hands on that man. Admit it."

I cross my arms over my chest and scowl at her. "Cady, you know that I am not in the headspace for a relationship."

She stares at me, one brow raised. "Seriously? Have you told your lady locker that? Because I think she has a pretty

strong opinion about it.”

I stare at her, dumbfounded. “Lady Locker?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. You know, you can open and close it. Store stuff in it. And no one’s getting in without the combination.”

It’s an effort to keep a straight face. “Store stuff in it? Really?”

Cadence stares at me for a minute, and we both crack, erupting into belly laughs. We set the dogs off, some of them barking excitedly, and I glance at the monitor again. Nick hasn’t moved, but a small smile dances on his lips.

“Sounds like Bree’s here. Do you know Bree? I think you’d like her. She’s tough, not just physically, but mentally. She’s been through something pretty terrible too, and she’s finding her way out of it. You guys have a lot in common actually. Her hair’s golden too.”

Cadence reaches over, and flicks off the speakers. We both stare at the screen, and my fingers twitch to turn the audio back on. I want to hear more.

“Bree,” Cadence says softly, waiting for me to look at her before continuing. “Life sometimes drops exactly what we need in our lap, and it’s up to us to grab it with both hands before it drifts away. It doesn’t matter if we think we’re ready. Sometimes, you have to take a leap of faith that everything will be okay.”

“It’s not like that, Cady. Really.” At her disbelieving look, I explain. “He’s my sisters’ boyfriend’s brother. We’re like family. So it doesn’t matter how amazing he is. Or how sexy and patient. It’s too messy.”

She shakes her head, a small smile on her lips. “Didn’t you know Bree, the very best things in life, are messy?” She touches my hand, then scoots around me and into a side room. Her project room, as she calls it. Looks a lot like a junk room to me. She even has a cot in there. I wonder how often she sleeps here. It’s not the nicest area of town. Not the worst, but

still, the businesses close up and the area empties. What happens if there's a problem? There's no one nearby to help.

Pushing through the double doors, I slowly make my way past the cages, greeting the new dogs, saying hello to the familiar faces, giving out pats and accepting licks in return. My hands are covered with dog slobber and a few stray hairs by the time I reach Nick. He grins up at me, but doesn't otherwise move.

"Hey Bree," he says softly. "I'm making a new friend."

"I see that," I say equally quietly. "Can I sit with you?"

He nods, and I ease to the floor beside him, resting my hand in the middle of his back ever so briefly. Goldie is back in the corner of her cage, but her food bowl is empty. Maybe it's my imagination, but it feels like there's a spark of life in her that I haven't seen before. Maybe a curiosity.

"Hey sweet girl," I greet her, trying to match Nick's low tone. Her eyes shift to me briefly, then away again. I want to jump up and down and scream my excitement. "Such a good girl. Thank you." I drop my head to Nick's back. "She's never looked at me before. I've been trying for weeks." I suck in a shuddering breath, then another, then lift my head. As soon as I do, Nick eases onto his back, lifting one arm and tucking his hand under his head.

"She just needs time."

"No, I think it's you. I think she needed someone with your way with women."

"My way with women?"

"Yeah, you know. Cara says all women respond to you."

His smile falls, and he pins me with a steady look. "I like women."

"Good. That's good. It's fine. If women flock to you, then why not?"

Nick studies my face, brow furrowed. "Flock to me?"

I don't know where I'm going with this, so I change the subject. "I'm sorry I'm late. My last client ran late, then traffic sucked."

He nods, still studying me. He glances in at Goldie again, watching her as he speaks. "My Abuelita was my universe. I lived with her my whole life. She would call me Mi Vida (her life) and spoiled me rotten. So did the women in our community. They all took care of me. And early on, I learned to talk sweet to all of them. Not just because it got me extra treats, but because I liked the way their faces would light up. It was way better than the way my dad would talk to her. When he was around, she looked older and tired. I didn't like it." Those rich brown eyes pin me to the floor. "I flirt with all women because it's fun, and it makes me happy. I like being gifted with their smiles and laughter. I like the teasing. That doesn't mean I have a new woman in my bed every night."

"You...", I wet my lips. "You don't owe me an explanation."

He arches a brow. "No. I don't. But you seem to have some wrong ideas about me. Just wanted to set things straight."

I pull my eyes away, focusing on the mottled concrete floor. "Sorry. It's none of my business. You have a right to spend time with anyone you want."

Nick's mouth twists, but he nods. *I had to go and shove my foot in my mouth. Why didn't I just keep it light? Because the way I feel isn't light, and keeping things superficial is starting to physically hurt. And which of my ideas are wrong?*

"So," I say, pushing to my feet. "Ready to get to work?"

He smirks, and tucks his other arm under his head. "I've been here since five. I've already been working."

"Correction. You've fed the dogs, now the real work begins."

"Real work?" he asks, frowning.

"Yeah. What happens after you feed a dog? Even you should know the answer to that. Actually, you should smell the

answer to that.”

He sniffs the air, and realization dawns. “Shit.”

I laugh, feeling back on solid ground. “Exactly.”

IT WOULD BE EASIER TO RESIST THIS MAN IF HE REFUSED TO work, or did it grudgingly. Instead, he laughs and jokes, commenting on the dog’s last meal, complementing them on the size and texture of their poop. Basically, being a disgusting guy. What does it say about me that I find him even more attractive like this? Forget expensive restaurants and crisp white shirts. Apparently, all it takes for me to fall in love is a rugged man in a t-shirt and jeans picking up dog poop with a smile.

Nick comes back through the door after taking the trash to the dumpster and beelines to the sink, scrubbing his hands. “What’s next boss? Want me to scrub the floors on my hands and knees? Maybe clean the toilets with a toothbrush?” He’s joking, but also looks like he’d be happy to do it if I ask.

“Tempting. Truly. But I thought maybe we could go walk some dogs.”

The man lights up. “Really?”

“Really. But you’ll have to carry the poop bags.”

He blows a raspberry, unconcerned. “I’m a damned expert Bree. Obviously I’ll handle the poop. Let’s go!”

We make short work of harnessing up the first few dogs. Nick takes two larger dogs, and I grab the leashes for three smaller ones. We exit the back door into the still winter’s night. This area of town is busy all day, eerily empty at night, so all we hear is the faint sounds of the all night factories in the distance, and the crush of our feet on the snow and ice covered ground.

“Bree,” Nick says, glancing at me. “How long have you been volunteering here?”

“A few months. I started coming pretty soon after I heard about it. I just needed...” I trail off, not sure I want to finish

that sentence.

“What did you need?”

There’s an intensity in his gaze that forces me to answer. “I didn’t want to be home alone. Someone at work said getting a pet might help me feel more secure. But when I went to the shelter I somehow ended up in the back with Cady feeding the dogs. It kind of snowballed from there. Before I knew it, I was coming almost every night.”

“And you do everything we did tonight?”

“Depends. Some nights it’s late when I come, so there’s only time to help walk them. I do whatever I can. And I don’t come quite as often now.”

“You walk the dogs alone at night? In this neighborhood?”

I frown, stopping at a telephone pole for the dogs to sniff, and attempt to pee. They’re emptied out, but they still strain, trying to leave their mark. “Why do you say it like that? It’s not a big deal.”

His eyes widen, head tipping in shock. “You’re saying that? Seriously? You, of all people, know how easy it would be for someone with bad intentions to hurt you. This is not a nice neighborhood. I should know. We spent a decade a few blocks from here at the first garage we owned. Fucking hell, Bree.”

I let the dogs urge me forward, walking ahead, Nick a thundercloud of emotion following behind me. I’m not sure I know what to say. On the surface, it’s stupid, I know it. I’m afraid to sit in my locked car in a parking lot, but I’ll walk the dogs, sometimes alone, at midnight.

“It’s not so much the attack that broke me, you know,” I say quietly, watching the cloud of my breath waft billow in front of me. “The bruises faded. The concussion healed.” That wasn’t a quick or easy process, but physical pain is something I understand. “He said he loved me. He was so affectionate, Nick. He acted like he really cared about me. And then he put his hands around my neck and tried to strangle me to death.” A choked laugh escapes. It’s not funny, of course it’s not, but still

I laugh. “His face was totally blank. It looked like he was standing in line at the bank, or waiting for his coffee, not trying to kill somebody.”

The dogs stop at another pole, and I turn to him, searching his face, wondering how I can know he’s safe, when I was so wrong last time. “How could he do that to me?”

The golden light of the streetlight gives her a halo. The deep blue pools of her eyes are filled with pain and confusion. She's asking a question she deserves an answer to, but I don't have one to give her. "I don't know, Bree. I...I wish I understood why people do shit like that." The dogs stop tugging, seeming to understand how serious this conversation is. "My dad was not a good guy...actually that's an understatement. He was a violent criminal. The best thing that could have happened to me is him leaving me with my *Abuelita*. But when I was a kid, I didn't understand how bad he was. I just wished he were around more. I realized too late that I should have wished him far, far away."

She swallows heavily, eyes shimmering. "What happened to make you wish that?"

I can't look at her when I tell her. She's shared so much of herself, I won't hide this. But I know this might change everything. That she'll look at me differently from now on. Our friendship might end here. And I wouldn't blame her for a second.

"He came home for my birthday. I begged him too. I didn't see him very often, and I really wanted him there. He seemed so big and confident. I thought I wanted to be him when I grew up." Such a stupid, stupid kid. "*Abuelita* made me my favorite cake. She was always spoiling me. A bunch of the neighbors came over, and we were all out front of the house cooking out, and a car drove past. I noticed the car because it was too nice for our neighborhood. I learned pretty early when

those jacked cars come around, someone bad is driving it. I didn't notice the gun."

Bree makes a choked sound, but doesn't say anything. Her eyes stay locked on me as I finish. "It made like a spitting sound, not the big boom I'd heard in the movies and in the distance in my neighborhood." I absently rub my shoulder, right over the long healed bullet wound. "*Abuelita* was wearing a white dress, and I remember thinking she spilled Ketchup on herself." Wishful thinking. Even at seven I knew ketchup wasn't that red, and didn't definitely didn't spread that fast.

"She was...killed." Bree says. It isn't a question.

"Yeah. And my dad. And a lot of other people." *A Massacre* the reporters kept calling it. The news was on in the hospital and I couldn't avoid it. The police even came to me. In my neighborhood, we didn't talk to the police. But I did. I told them everything I remembered about that car, and the men driving it. I couldn't let them get away with it. They needed to be punished for hurting her.

We all did.

"I'm so sorry," she whispers. I nod, throat too tight to speak. People always say they're sorry, but most of the time it feels like a placeholder. Something they say when they feel like they have to say something. When Bree says it? There's pain and understanding behind the words.

I turn away, unable to stand the sympathy in her eyes. I start walking, grateful when she falls in beside me. The dogs' tails are wagging like crazy. "I've spent decades thinking about that night. About why some fucking turf war was worth murdering a bunch of innocent people, and I still don't get it. And I'm still angry about it." And guilty. Let's not forget guilt. God knows I can't.

It's my fucking fault he was there that day.

They were looking for him. Everything I know, everything I read in the official report says so. And I begged her to let him come. He wasn't allowed at her house, not for years. She'd let

me see him, but at a park or somewhere else. I always thought she was being mean. Everyone else was allowed at her house. She had an open door to anyone in the neighborhood and most nights we'd have people join us for supper, some of them looking like they hadn't eaten in weeks. *Abuelita* would never say a thing, she'd just smile and give them another helping.

She was too good. Too kind. Too loving. And in the end, that love she had for me killed her. I killed her. I might not have pulled the trigger, but I'm responsible all the same.

"I wasn't angry," Bree says quietly, pulling me out of my spiral of guilt. It's always there waiting for me, never far from my mind. "Not for a long time. Now? I'm getting there. Some days, I can't contain the rage brewing in my gut. I have these fantasies that he's attacking me, but instead of being so weak, I fight back. And I hurt him...badly. I rewrite it in my head."

I have a big fucking problem with her calling herself weak, but I don't contradict her. Not yet anyway. "Does it help? Pretending it was different?"

"I'm not sure yet. It's something my counselor suggested. Rewriting the traumatic situation. Writing a new ending."

"What's the new ending, Bree?"

She wets her lips. "I saw the footage, you know? The one of Becca, when Holly's husband came to the garage. She destroyed him. My rewritten version looks a lot like that. I fight him off, and he ends up crying on the floor. Then the cops take him away. Cara's never there. She never has to see any of it." She takes a shuddering breath. "She carries too much."

"She doesn't think so. You're not a weight around her neck, Bree. You're her world."

"The world is heavy, Nick. I have to lift some of the burden."

"How are you going to do that?"

She forces a smile. "Funny you should ask. That's where you come in."

“Me? I’m part of your master plan? Should I be flattered? I feel like I should be.”

She snorts, turning back toward the shelter, the dogs walking more slowly now. How were they so full of energy a second ago, and now they’re walking like they’re old and gray?

“You can be flattered. Or not. But I think Declan was on to something. I don’t like the way he went about it, but Cara needs to worry less. Or more specifically, I need to give her less to worry about. So you’re going to be my beard.”

“Wait...what? I’m not sure that means what you think it does....” My stomach drops. “Unless... are you telling me you’re...a lesbian?”

Bree stares at me, face slack, long enough for me to spiral into denial and grief. It’s not like we’ll ever be together anyway, but the possibility of it gets me up in the morning. “It’s okay if you are. Yay. But I just thought—“

“Nick! Stop talking,” she shouts, covering her eyes with her hand, the bright blue of her mitten glowing under the streetlight. “That was obviously an awful choice of words.” She sighs and drops her hand. “I keep myself busy. Between my day job and working at the club, plus all my leagues, I’m gone a lot. But there’s a lot of time that I’ve got nothing to do. Every time Cara sees me at home, she worries she should be spending time with me. Or she and Declan try to include me in everything.” Her nose scrunches up. “And honestly, that’s worse. Do you know how lonely it is, sitting on a couch watching a movie with two people who are so clearly in love?”

“Yeah, I do.” Not gay. That’s way too big a relief for this to be casual. I do not have casual feelings for this woman. I have big, complicated, scary feelings. “So, my role in all of this is?”

“You’re going to do exactly what Declan asked you to do. You’re going to be my friend. We’ll hang out. Cara won’t wonder about it too much since we’re practically related. It will take the pressure off of her. Simple.”

The lights of the shelter are in sight. I slow my steps even more, letting the dogs wander back at their own pace. *Practically related.* Fuck no, we aren't. Doesn't matter that I thought the same thing a few days ago. Now the idea of her being my sister, feeling the way I do about her, is so, so wrong. "That is what Declan asked me to do. So what are we supposed to do?"

She frowns. "I don't know. What was your plan?"

What was my plan? Whatever it was, I'm sure it was asinine. "I hadn't really gotten that far. I was just going to... run into you as much as I could. And invite you to do whatever."

"Right. Brilliant," she says flatly, a hint of humor in her eye.

"You just said you didn't have a plan!"

She laughs, heading for the back door of the shelter. "Fine, fine. So we wing it. We watch some games, we get some meals. That's probably enough of a plan for now."

I study the burnt out streetlights near us, and the sketchy fence at the back of the property, and make another split second decision. "And we come here. Anytime you come, I'll come too."

Her eyes widen. "You want to volunteer here? You don't have to. I honestly thought this would be a bit of a punishment for you, then that would be it. I didn't expect you to be such a good sport."

"What were you expecting?"

"Honestly? A lot more gagging. Your brothers don't exactly have the strongest stomachs."

She's not wrong. Most of them will dry heave just hearing someone gag. Or if they smell something weird. Or you talk about worms while they're eating spaghetti. It's actually really fucking fun most of the time.

"Nah, I'm not a gagger. Never have been."

Her eyes light up, and I'm laughing before she even says it. "That must make you real popular with the guys." She dissolves into laughter at her own joke and our chuckles carry us back into the shelter. The dogs seem ok to go into their enclosures so within a few minutes they're all settled in. I can't stop my feet from moving back to Goldie's spot.

"Is it her turn next?"

Cadence, coming in the back door, is the one that answers. "I haven't been able to get her out. I can get the leash on her, but she won't move. I keep trying though."

"Do you ever stop trying, Cadence?" I ask.

She pins me with a look that makes my body feel ten times heavier. "I believe everyone deserves a second chance. And a third. And sometimes a fourth. So no, I'll never stop trying."

"Dogs deserve second chances, maybe. People though? Some of them aren't worth it."

She tilts her head, suddenly looking a lot older. "Do you believe that if someone makes a mistake, they should be punished for it forever?"

"Sometimes, yeah." Or maybe it's that living with that mistake is the punishment.

Cadence straightens, her spine lengthening until she seems as tall as I am. "You're wrong," she says quietly, but in a tone so absolute it leaves no room for disagreement.

"Maybe dogs deserve more chances, but people? We have to live with our mistakes. There's no denying that."

"I would never want someone judging me on their worst day. And I would never, ever, judge someone based on theirs."

"Some people are pure evil, Cadence."

"Maybe. But I haven't met those people." She crosses her arms over her chest, and purses her lips. "I wonder which one of our worldviews makes for a happier life?"

I push through the door, the heavy grocery bags digging into my fingers. I swing them onto the kitchen counter with a hiss, and shake out my hands.

Cara, dressed for the club, wanders over, peeking into the bags. “What did you get? The fridge is pretty full. I can try and make some space.” She heads to the fridge, pulling it open to peer at the overflowing shelves.

“It’s not for us.”

She turns to me, and raises one eyebrow. “Did you knock over an old lady and steal her groceries?”

“Ha. Ha. You’re hilarious,” I say dryly. “They’re for John. We’re doing some cooking lessons tonight, and it’s my turn to bring the groceries.”

“*We’re* doing some cooking lessons? You and John? Why does this sound like a whole thing?”

“Because it is a whole thing. I mean, it didn’t start out that way, but Jonas has been having lessons, and Nick and I hung out a few times, and I’ve managed to convince him he needs lessons too. Watching the man stick a fork into a toaster to fish out his burned toast convinced me he needs to develop some kitchen skills. It’s a matter of survival.”

She snorts and shakes her head. She’s well aware of how awful the men are in the kitchen. “So John’s giving them lessons, and you’re what? His assistant?”

“Basically,” I say cheerily, hanging my coat in the closet and toeing off my boots. “John tried doing one with both of them by himself, and he ended up kicking them both out of the apartment. Apparently they ‘annoyed this shit’ out of him. He figures it’ll go better if there’s two of us and two of them.”

Cara laughs. “I wonder what they did to set him off? I wish I’d been there. But, it sounds great. You’ll be an amazing assistant.” She shrugs into her black leather jacket. If her parking spot at the club wasn’t right next to the back door, I’d worry about her. But looks matter more to her than warmth... at least when she’s in ‘sexy club owner’ mode. She pulls the door open, then pins me with a look. “You haven’t been on the schedule at the club in a while. Did you want me to throw you a few shifts?”

I take a deep breath and plant my hands on the counter. Here we go with the ‘grow the fuck up’ plan of mine. “Actually, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. It seems like things are going well, especially behind the bar. You’ve got a great crew.”

“Yeah,” she says slowly. “I do. You’re a part of that Bree.”

“I know. But, if you’ve been managing without me, then I think I’m done working at the bar.” The words come out in a rush, one syllable rushing into the next.

Her face falls. “Why? I thought...” She trails off, and I wonder what she was going to say. But she doesn’t finish, and I don’t ask.

“I was happy to do it, because I was supporting you. But lately, my heart’s just not in it. I’ve got plenty of savings, so money’s not really an issue. You can give my shifts to someone who wants them. A lot of the other bartenders are trying to pay for school, or supporting families. They really could use the extra money.”

“Did something happen that I need to know about? If someone made you uncomfortable—“

“No. It’s nothing like that. Truly. I just...I’m not really a club girl. Does that make sense? I’d rather do other things.

Besides, you're not there as much anymore either, so it's gone from being something we do together, to just being a job."

She bites the corner of her lip and frowns. "I have been taking more time off. But maybe it's too much. I used to be so focused and now..."

I don't want her finishing that thought. "And now you're in love. You have a life. And that's a great thing." I pull her into my arms, hugging her tight. "You can have it all. Do it all. You can. I just don't want to be a bartender anymore."

"You're sure?" she whispers into my hair. Her arms are banded around my back just the way I like. So tightly that I almost can't breathe.

"I'm sure." I drop my chin on her shoulder. "I'm just figuring out what I want my life to look like now. Being in a club until three in the morning isn't it."

"Okay," she says on a heavy exhale. "You're officially fired."

"Fuck off. I quit."

She laughs, letting me go and stepping back. Her eyes are glassy, but she's smiling. "Build the life you want, little Bee. You deserve to have everything too."

I nod, throat too tight to speak, then she's gone. I lean against the counter, relieved at how well that went. I've been wanting to leave the club for a long time, maybe as long as a year, but I always felt like I couldn't leave Cara. There were a lot of lean years, both of us putting any extra hours we had into building her business. But now it's one of the hottest clubs in town. It's thriving. She's thriving.

I want to thrive too.

When it was just the two of us, being at the club was okay. I don't really like the loud music. I'm not a huge fan of the quick impersonal connections being a bartender requires. It's flirting, or being a best friend for a few minutes. That's not me.

I'm more the girl who wants to sit in the corner and get deep with someone. Learning everything there is to know about that person and truly connecting with them. Maybe that's part of why I love being a physiotherapist so much. Because I get to see people over and over and develop those relationships. I get to see their success and their struggles.

Though I can admit, those relationships are a little one sided. I know them, but honestly, how much do they really know about me?

Other than Cara, is there anyone in my life that really knows me?

I want connection. I want relationships —not *a* relationship— just relationships. I want to feel like people know me and care about me. Deeply.

I want to feel loved.

And okay, maybe I would like a relationship again... someday. Right now, that feels impossible...but someday? Someday, yes.

God, that's a huge step forward. A month ago, I didn't think I'd ever get this far.

But a really good friend? One I could trust with all that I am? I need that.

"Bree," Nick shouts through the door. "Open up. I'm starving!"

Laughing, I set aside my pondering and open the door, revealing Nick, hair up in a bun in a plain black t-shirt and gray sweatpants. His feet are bare. The man even has nice feet with long toes and neatly trimmed nails.

"Do you get pedicures?" I ask him, staring at his toes.

"Bree," he scolds, in a laughter tinged voice. "My eyes are up here."

My gaze collides with his, and I blow a raspberry at him. He laughs, letting himself in, grabbing the groceries off the counter. "Let's go. I'm serious. I've been thinking about dinner all day. Let's get cooking."

He holds the door open for me, arms wide, bags dangling from his fingers, barely noticing the weight. I stop in the doorway and look up at him. “It’s okay if you get pedicures. It doesn’t make you less manly.”

He arches an eyebrow at me. “I’m all man Bree. All man. And yes, I’ve gotten a pedicure...or a few. We should go together next time. No offense, but your feet are a little...” he screws his mouth up, holding back a grin. “Gnarly.”

I gasp. “Rude. Take that back. I mean, yeah, it’s been a while since I had them done, but they’re not gnarly.”

“I speak the truth woman. You want a man to tell you everything about you is beautiful, and that your pits never stink? Get a boyfriend. That’s what they’re for.”

I follow him to John’s door. Nick doesn’t knock, just barges in. “So boyfriends spout bullshit?”

“Yep,” he says, putting the groceries on the counter. “Not all the time, but they have a very good reason to keep you happy. Friends can tell you the truth. They’re not trying to get in your pants. It’s just the way the world works, Bree.” He turns to John, standing in the middle of his kitchen with his arms crossed, a scowl on his face. We’ve been in here a few times over the last week, and it’s a pretty standard pose for him. “Tell her John. Tell her how guys are.”

John gives Nick a flat stare, then fixes me with a slightly less scary glare. “Men are dicks, but they want the opportunity to use those dicks. They’ll say whatever they have to, to get between your legs.”

“Wait...I know men are dogs.” I wave my hand in a sort of apology when Nick gasps dramatically. “But once they’re in a relationship, I thought it was about being a team. You know, ‘Us against the world’ and all that.”

John rubs his chin, eyeing Nick. “You wanna field this one?”

Nick head droops. “Chicken bake,” he whines. “I don’t know what it is but it sounds so good.”

“Waiting for the other one anyway,” John mutters. “The other one being Jonas of course. He knows Jonas’s name, even seems to like him, but John also seems to want to keep his emotional distance.

Nick drops the pout. “Fine. Yes, all men are like that. It’s not necessarily a bad thing. You’re heard that saying, ‘happy wife, happy life’ right? It’s kind of like that. If a guy thinks a lie will keep you happy, then they’ll lie.”

“And if I don’t want to be lied to? I don’t want that. Ever again. I can’t.”

Nick studies me, but doesn’t seem to have an answer. John looks equally baffled, but his gaze is somewhere behind me.

“Then you find someone who knows all of you,” a soft voice says from the doorway, “the good and the bad. Someone who’s seen you at your worst, and date him. That’s the only way you’ll ever have a chance.” Abby moves into the room, grabbing her regular spot at John’s table, the one with the best view of the kitchen. “I’ve been in a long term relationship. I was lied to through all of it. But I did a lot of lying of my own. I lied about who I am, what I really like and what I want. All of it.” Her tone turns introspective. “I’m not sure why I expected him to be honest if I couldn’t be.”

I move to the table, pulling out the chair at the end. “But why did you lie? That’s the part I don’t get. Why lie to get a boyfriend?”

“Honestly? I don’t know if I was conscious of doing it. It sneaks up on you. He asks if you want to go to a club, and you say yes, even though you hate them and would rather stay home and get take out. Then before you know it, you’re someone who’s going out every night because he likes it.”

“How long were you guys together before he...before you...”

“Before I found him fucking another woman in our bed? Six years.” She props her chin in her hand, and stares at me. “Why did I stay? Because I was in too deep. I lived with the guy. I reminded him to buy his mom’s birthday presents.

When I moved in, I chose all the furniture. I didn't want to lose it." She raises one brow. "Why did you stay? Were you totally you in your relationship with *he who shall not be named?*"

"I thought I was," I mutter, flashing to all the nights we spent together. "But we met in Cara's club. That's the side of me he knew first. I think he liked that version of me. The bartender, the flirty girl. He seemed...not shocked, but maybe disappointed, when he found out I was a physiotherapist and didn't wear leather pants every day."

"And when things started to go bad? I don't for one second believe he just flipped out. There had to have been signs."

I asked myself the same thing, laying in that hospital bed, throat so sore it hurt to breathe. And yes, there were signs. So many signs.

"There were. But I didn't see them. What he did...it wasn't even in the realm of possibility to me. My family was amazing. I always felt safe. Nothing bad ever happened to me and they always protected me. So his jealousy seemed harmless. And when he grabbed me the first time, I chalked it up to him not knowing his own strength. By the time I figured out there was a pattern, it was too late to get away."

"You tried. Before that night I mean?"

Conscious of Nick's and John's silent presence I answer. "I broke up with him. He apologized, smoothed everything over, so I took him back. That night though, I'd had enough. He'd gotten jealous at *Curves Ahead* over nothing, and I ended my shift early. When we got back to my place, I broke up with him. But he didn't seem like he heard me. Or maybe he did, but he just brushed it off." He was pacing and ranting, and honestly didn't seem to hear anything I said. "We spent an hour talking...well, yelling. Finally I'd had enough. I was so done. But when I tried to make him leave, he snapped." Snapped is an understatement. His whole face changed, becoming someone I didn't recognize. "I didn't know he had that kind of violence in him."

Abby sighs and leans back in her chair. “I don’t know what the answer is. I obviously failed at my relationship. But I do know that everyone lies.”

“So I just have to accept that.”

She shrugs. “I have.”

“You shouldn’t,” John says, hands planted on the island. His whole body seems to be vibrating in our direction. “You don’t have to fucking settle.”

These men are giving me whiplash. “You guys just told me that men lie. That’s just the way it is.”

“Then find a man that values you so much, and understands every fucking part of you. Then tell him that you need his fucking honesty, or you’re gone.”

“Simple as that?”

John shrugs, and turns to rifle through the grocery bags. “You eating Abs?” he asks casually. Same way he asked her at the last dinner, and the dinner before.

“Yes, if it’s not too much trouble,” she answers politely.. The same way she answered last time, and the time before.

John grunts, but there’s a hint of humor in it that makes Abby’s lips curve. She busies herself getting her art supplies out, smiling the whole time.

NICK

“Jonas, it’s my fucking turn.”

“I’m better at it than you.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to get any better if you don’t let me have a chance?”

He slow blinks at me, then huffs out a breath. “Fine. Here.” He holds the knife out to me, point facing the middle of my chest.

“For fuck’s sake. How many times have I fucking told you not to pass the knife that way?” John semi-yells, taking the knife out of Jonas’s hand.

Jonas stares at him, unbothered by the shouting. “Six. No, seven.”

“I thought you were a fucking genius. How many more times do I have to say it?”

“Well, you’ve had to say it every time, so statistically speaking...a lot more.”

John’s hand tightens on the knife, and I’m about to stick myself in between them, when Bree’s there. “Jonas, why don’t you help me with the onions?”

“Okay,” he says cheerily, turning away from John. I have no doubt that Jonas was very aware of how close to the edge John was. But he’s also confident that John is one of us, and won’t actually stab him. A punch or mild strangulation aren’t out of the question, but those are pretty run of the mill for us

brothers. I think I've strangled or been strangled by every one of my brothers. It's kind of a regular Saturday night thing.

John passes me the knife, point side down this time, and leans against the counter with a heavy sigh. "You guys are a lot of fucking work."

I laugh, but don't bother denying it. "I know. You've been damned patient. I'm impressed actually. We once had a chef leave the restaurant we were eating at. He owned it actually, but he up and left halfway through a meal thanks to us."

"I'm fuckin' shocked," he mutters, glaring down at the pile of mushrooms.

Unable to resist screwing with him, I turn to him with wide eyes. "No, it's true. He came out the kitchen with a butcher knife, yelled at us about ketchup and stars and called us heathens, then marched straight out the front door and into the bar across the street."

"Stars," John mutters. His eyebrows raise dramatically. "Michelin Stars? Where was this?"

"Some place in Paris. We were pretty drunk, and I remember most of the portions were way too small. And the sauces were weird."

"Huh. You drove a Michelin Star chef to drink. That actually makes me feel a little fuckin' better."

"You're welcome!" I say cheerily. John glares at me, and I laugh as I very carefully, very slowly, chop the mushrooms. The little fuckers are slimy and the knife is really big. "Shouldn't I use a smaller knife for this?"

"No."

I groan and go back to it, John watching me like a hawk as I slice. He growls at me to get me focused, and I stare hard at the cutting board, but my ears and brain are focused on Bree and Jonas. She's a natural teacher, her voice calm and soothing, guiding Jonas through dicing onions. Jonas is sniffing.

“They’re so pungent. Why do people eat these?” he mutters. I want to shove my face in his and see if he’s tearing up, but I stick to my chopping like a good little student.

“When you cook them, they add such amazing flavor. They get sweet and so yummy.”

“My eyes are leaking,” he mutters, and I glance over to see him shoving his glasses up on top of his head. Bree shouts ‘no’ as he reaches up and rubs his eyes.

It takes a second, but Jonas’s yell of pain is so worth it. “My eyes,” he screams, hands flailing in the air, eyes squeezed tight. Tears drip down his cheeks.

Bree’s trying to be soothing, hand on his shoulder as she guides him to the sink, but her eyes flash to mine, and they’re filled with laughter.

I’m seeing that look on her face more and more. She’s healing.

And I’m falling.

So fucking hard.

She guides Jonas to the faucet, running cool water over his face as he leans over the sink. Her hand rubs slow circles on his back as she talks to him calmly, reassuring him he’ll be okay.

“What happened?”

I turn and smile at Janey as she enters. She’s usually at these dinners, but she likes to give Jonas one on one time with John first. Or maybe she’s taking alone time. “He was cutting onions and rubbed his eyes with onion fingers.”

Her lips twitch, but she makes a low sound and moves to him, taking Bree’s place. Bree catches my eye, and something she sees glues her feet to the floor. Her smile slowly dies as she stares at me.

Just fucking friends asshole. It’s way harder than I thought it would be, but I manage to hide what I’m feeling, and grin at her. I throw in a wink and it seems to do the trick. She shakes

her head and laughs, heading for the chopping board and the onions left there.

It's not her problem that my feelings are changing. Fuck changing. Have changed. In my eyes, the woman is perfection. But I know I'm not what she needs. I can't be. She doesn't need some damaged asshole attaching himself to her. She needs a friend. That's all. Just a friend.

I keep reminding myself of that as we finish prepping dinner —with only a small fire right near the end— and it mostly works. I tease and laugh, I joke with her. I nudge her with my elbow. I pull out all the friend moves I can think of. As she relaxes more and more, teasing me back, whatever weirdness is between us evaporates away.

When I catch myself watching her slide another bite of pasta into that lush mouth of hers, I force myself to turn away and pay attention to the other people at the table. John's here of course, sitting next to Abby. Those two are a strange pair. She seems to be here a lot, but it doesn't really seem like they're friends. More like two people occupying the same space. It's a weird dynamic, but they're both weird, so if it works for them, who am I to judge?

Jonas has his head down, shoveling large bites into his mouth. Janey's looking on with a mixture of humor and awe.

"He's done that his whole life," I tell her.

She smiles and shakes her head. "I made a romantic dinner the other night. Steak, potatoes, the works." She laughs, eyes crinkling in the corners. "He didn't look at me once after I gave him his plate. He kept his arm wrapped around it the whole time, like he was afraid I was going to steal it."

I wince. "Yeah. That's our fault. We had a few lean years near the beginning. Ransom had a rule you couldn't have seconds until you cleared your plate. It fucked us up. We would rush through the meal, just to get seconds. And if the pot was empty but there was food on someone else's plate... well things got hairy."

"But you don't do that," she says, pointing to Jonas.

“I’m easily distracted. Jonas’s extreme focus is a superpower, but also a curse.”

She rests her chin on her hand, fork dangling as she studies her husband. The look of intense love, mixed with ownership and familiarity, makes me really fucking jealous. Which is stupid. Didn’t I already decide I don’t want that?

Don’t deserve that.

A little voice in my head tries to convince me that I’m wrong. That making a mistake as a child doesn’t mean I have to be punished for the rest of my life.

A bigger voice reminds me that she’s gone. That her life was cut short thanks to my selfishness. That voice is louder, and much easier to believe. It’s had it’s claws in me for a long time.

Desperate to get out of my head, I turn the conversation to safe ground. “How are things going with your dad?”

Janey beams at me, her joy in her relationship with her dad obvious. “So good. He’s so different, but the same. It’s weird sometimes. I’ll see flashes of my old dad, the one before the booze. He’s still that person.”

I met the guy, not that long ago. He came to their apartment. He was a little overwhelmed by all of us, but no way was he going to get to stay around unless we all checked him out. “He seems like a good dude.”

She nods, looking so serious for a second. “He is a good guy. He didn’t used to be, but now, he is.”

“And just like that, everything’s peachy?”

She raises her eyebrow at me. “Peachy? Really?” She laughs when I scrunch up my face. “No, things aren’t peachy. They’re work. We’re trying to build something new. There’s so much pain and sadness between us, that doesn’t just go away.”

“Then how do you do it? How do you forgive? He abandoned you in every way that matters. Why are you letting him back into your life? Why does he deserve a second

chance?” I’m desperate to understand her, but also her father. How does he allow himself to be forgiven? How does she forgive?

Her gaze turns soft. “I don’t think it’s about a second chance, not really. If he were exactly the same man he was a decade ago, I wouldn’t be trying. But he’s not. So it’s not a second chance. It’s giving the man he is now a first chance. I don’t know if it will all fall apart, or if he’ll go back to drinking. But I won’t ruin everything we have now by worrying about that happening in the future.”

“None of us are who we were a decade ago,” I mumble, her words rocketing through me. I am not the same person as I was a year ago. Do I really have to suffer for something I did as a seven-year-old?

I was so small. Only a few years older than Mia. And I know for a fucking fact that I would never hold her responsible for the actions of an adult. Never.

So why do I hold myself responsible?

“It’s hard to let go of the past. You make it look so easy.”

“I’m married to a man who loves me unconditionally. I have a beautiful home, a great job, and wonderful family.” She grins at me when she says family, and I’m suddenly so fucking grateful Jonas pushed her into marrying him. She’s a damned amazing sister-in-law. “It’s a lot easier to shake off the past when you’re happy.”

“Yeah, I guess it would be.”

Am I happy? I thought I was, but maybe I didn’t understand what that meant. Maybe I’ve just been...satisfied. That’s the same as happy, isn’t it?

Isn’t it?

John seems to relax by the end of the meal. He even cracks a smile when Janey scoops what’s left of her meal onto his plate instead of Jonas’s. Jonas’s look of absolute betrayal makes us all laugh. He pulls her in for a kiss and I look away, leaving them to their moment. My eyes land on Bree who’s watching them with a look of longing on her face.

Maybe she's changed her mind about a boyfriend. Maybe she's ready. Am I ready to watch her fall for some guy?

No fucking way.

Things break up quickly after that, Janey and Jonas's flushed faces making it pretty clear that they're going upstairs to play hide and seek. Abby picks up her art supplies and heads for the door, giving us a little wave as she exits.

"Are you guys friends?" Bree asks, looking at the closed door.

John shrugs and carries a stack of plates to the counter. "I don't know. Maybe? She comes over a lot, but she says the light is better in here." He sets the plates down and starts rinsing. "I don't really care. She's mostly quiet. Doesn't get in the way."

Bree looks baffled by that answer, and I get it. They're not friends, but she's allowed to hang out whenever. She lets herself in anytime she wants. And he doesn't yell at her.

Maybe they're more than friends? Friends with benefits maybe? I don't really get that vibe, but weirder things have happened.

After a quick thanks to John, I walk Bree to her door, not quite ready to say goodbye. I search for a way to keep her talking longer. "So, when's your next game?"

She looks at me in confusion, then her eyes flash to my shoulder, thankfully free of the sling. "Why? You ready to dislocate the other shoulder?"

I gasp in outrage. How dare she question my superior manly abilities? "That was an accident. Besides, I was kicking ass. You could use me on your team."

"Maybe. But no one's called out sick."

"But if they do?" I push.

She laughs and pushes her door open. "Then you'll be my third call. Maybe second."

“Wench,” I mutter, smiling. She smiles back, then steps into her dark apartment. Cara must be at Declan’s or the club tonight. I almost offer to stay and hang out with her, but that seems like a disaster waiting to happen. I’m catching *feelings*, and I doubt spending more time with Bree is the solution.

But I really, really want to.

No. She’ll be fine. It’s just my imagination that her eyes look a little lost, or that her hand tightens on the door just before she closes it.

She’ll be fine.

I *am not okay.*

I'm actually freaking the fuck out, but *not okay* feels a little more manageable at the moment. *Not okay* feels closer to fine than freaking out. *See, it'll be okay. I just need to breathe.*

I pull the covers up over my nose and force my eyes shut. They pop open immediately, completely out of my control. It's too dark in here.

I flick the lamp on. It adds a warm glow to the room and feels way better than relying on my nightlight alone. Here, in space just before midnight, I don't have to be embarrassed about needing a night light.

Cara's not here tonight, and I'm realizing I've been depending on her even more than I thought. I desperately want to climb into her bed. But she's not there, and an empty bed is no comfort.

I planned on weaning myself off of her. Of acting like a grown up. And I was succeeding. Just knowing she was in the apartment was enough to let me feel safe in my bed. Sure, I haven't been sleeping as well as I do with her, but it's a step in the right direction.

This is the first night in a week that she's gone though, and I'm not okay.

I throw back the covers and turn on the overhead light. I can do this. This building has Fort Knox level protection. Nothing is getting to me. The guys assured me of that the night

we moved in, and pretty much every time I've seen them since. I am safe.

I don't believe it though. In my bones, danger is lurking just outside every door, in the shower, down a hallway. I can't escape it, and I'm exhausted.

I snatch my phone off the nightstand, pulling up Cara's contact. I so desperately want her here. But instead of calling, I toss the phone on my bed. I won't do that to her. I'm supposed to be letting her live her life, and calling her right now would set everything back.

There's only one other person I feel comfortable calling for help, who knows how bad it is, but he's probably fast asleep by now. Besides, that would be crossing a line, wouldn't it? We're friends. I shouldn't be going to him in the middle of the night. I shouldn't use him.

I'm deep breathing, pacing, reminding myself I'm fine when a huge gust of wind howls outside my windows. My feet are moving before I even realize it. I'm out the front door and running up the stairs to his floor.

I knock quietly, then cross my arms over my chest. Then I knock louder. I know I should give him more than two seconds, but I'm still flipping the fuck out. I slap my hand on the door. "Please," I whisper. *Please open the door. I need you.*

The door falls away from my palm, and I tuck my hand under my breasts. I don't look up as Nick crowds into my space.

"*Dios*, Bree. Fuck. What are you doing? You're barely dressed." He's scolding me, but his tone is so soft, so caring, that the stiffness in my shoulders immediately starts to fade. His warm arms wrap around me, and he pulls me into his dark apartment. A few hours ago, I walked into my own place with a sense of foreboding. Now, a man is pulling me into his lair, and I couldn't be happier about it.

He pushes the door closed and looks down at me. His face is lit by hall light. Everything else is dark. I've only ever been in here in the dark. I wonder what it looks like in the daytime?

“Bree, *Mi Carino*, what’s wrong. Who do I need to kill?”

He startles a laugh out of me. “Nobody. Jeez.”

“Good girl. Breathe again for me.”

I suck in a shuddering breath, realizing for the first time that I’m lightheaded. “I think I was holding my breath the whole way up here.”

“I think so too,” he murmurs, brushing the hair away from my face. I should apologize, I should go back to my own home, but I do none of those things. Instead, I stand in the warm circle of his arms and let him fuss with my hair. Finally, he seems satisfied with the way it’s laying, and his warm worried eyes lock with mine. “Bad dreams?”

“No. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Cara’s not home?”

I shake my head and he tugs me further into his arms. I wrap mine around his back. We’re hugging, and it’s the best feeling in the world. I thought Cara’s hugs were wonderful, but Nicks? Maybe even better.

“What do you need, Bree? If it’s in my power, I’ll give it to you.”

“Will you sleep with me?”

His body goes rigid, and I realize how the words sound. I should probably clarify, but I don’t. He knows exactly what I need from him, I’m sure of it.

“Bree...maybe—“

“You said anything,” I remind him. He studies me carefully. I see it cross his face, the moment he gives in.

“Okay. *Si*. Um...where do you want to go? Back to your place?”

“And risk Cara finding you in my bed? She will cut off your dick.”

Nick shudders. “Right,” he squeaks. “That’s bad. We’re not doing that. So...the couch?”

I pull out of his arms regretfully. This was a colossal mistake. He doesn't want me in his room. He doesn't want to do this at all, and I'm making him another crutch, and unwilling one at that. "It's okay," I say quietly, backing to the door. "I'll figure something out. I shouldn't have come here."

I run into the door, my hand fumbling for the knob, when he surges forward, pressing into me. "And go to who Bree?" I'm still processing the 'who', honestly confused who's door he thinks I'm going to knock on next, when I'm up in his arms in a bear hug, feet dangling, arms pinned at my sides. Now's the moment I should be panicking, but I can't because Nick is grumpy and muttering to himself under his breath as he walks, and I'm riveted.

"Walking around the building in her damned tiny pajamas, with no fucking shoes on her feet. *Loca*. No fucking way she's leaving my sight tonight."

My pajamas aren't that tiny. Old shorts and a tank top. But he does have a point. My feet are freezing. He's clearly not in the mood to be fucked with, but oh my god, I want to. I already feel a million times better, which is weird, considering a man is bodily carrying me to his bedroom. Would it be wrong of me to wrap my legs around him and settle in for the ride?

Yeah, that's probably not one of my better ideas.

But it's really damned tempting. And isn't that just all kinds of shocking?

He sets me down next to his bed in his dark bedroom. The curtains are open, letting moonlight stream in, illuminating his very big bed, with dark sheets and a very mussed black duvet. Was he restless? Was he dreaming? Maybe he got too hot.

Honestly, it *is* a little warm in here.

"Get in my bed, Bree," he orders, the words a low growl that sends a shiver down my back. For just a second, I wish I were a different woman, or a woman without scars. Because that other version of me would give almost anything to hear Nick order me into his bed like that. Hell, this version of me

isn't mad about it, but I know I'll never act on the urges running through me. I'm not going to slide off my clothes, crawl slowly into his bed, then lay back and invite him in.

But oh my god, my body wants to. I blink back tears at the realization that Tyler didn't annihilate me. I'm still here, fighting my way back. Every part of me.

Nick's thumb brushes along my cheek, capturing the wetness there. His voice is low and pained. "Bree...please, stop. You're killing me. Tell me what you need. Please?"

On instinct, I cup his hand and press a kiss against his thumb. His breath shudders in his chest and his eyes widen. "I'm okay, I promise. I just need sleep." All my boldness used up, I turn away and climb into his bed. And yes, maybe I go a little slower than I need to. And yes, maybe I make sure he gets a good view of my ass. But that's all this is. A little teasing. Because while I may have just realized I want Nick badly, I also know I'm not ready for it yet.

I'm not ready for him.

But I will be, I promise myself. Soon.

I snuggle into a pillow on my side, and look back at him. He's standing motionless at the side of the bed. I don't say a word, instead letting myself take him in, cataloging all the details I was too panicked to catch before. The bare chest, sprinkled with hair on his pecs, tapering down to a fine line. The wide, strong shoulders leading to roped, powerful arms. And his hands? Those wide, capable hands currently balled into tight fists. He's holding himself back for me. He's fighting his instincts. He wants me.

I thought he might, right there in the middle of John's kitchen tonight. The way he looked at me was so clear. Nick wants to be more than my friend. I don't know if he wants more than sex. I'm not ready to know. But the man wants me. And I'm not above a little teasing.

I smooth my hand over the black sheets in front of me, then slowly pat the pillow, the one with the indent from his head. "Come to bed Nick. It's cold."

A muffled groan, a heavy exhale, and he's moving. The comforter is unbunched, then it's airborne, falling softly over me. Then he's standing at the side of the bed, staring at me. I can't see his face, but I feel his gaze, his intensity.

"Come to bed," I urge him again. Those big hands curl into fists again, then release. In one motion, he pulls back the blanket, and slides in. He punches his arms out of the blankets toward the headboard, then drops them on top of the blanket on either side of his body, pressing the blanket down and effectively creating a barrier between our bodies.

"Good night Bree," he says tightly, staring up at the ceiling.

Smiling, I cuddle in a little closer. I lift one hand and run it down his bare arm until I reach his hand. I tug gently. He fights me for a second...or maybe it's more accurate to say he fights himself, but with a sigh, he turns his palm over. I don't waste a second, interlacing our fingers tightly. I press my forehead to the side of his arm and let out a shuddering sigh.

"Good night Bree," he whispers.

"Good night Nick," I whisper back, my eyelids already feeling heavy. "Thank you for letting me in."

I'm fading fast, but I catch his final words, and I know I'll be unpacking them later.

"I didn't have a choice, Bree."

NICK

This is the worst, most wonderful position I've ever been in. My balls are so fucking blue they're icy, and still, I'm so fucking happy.

I said it. Happy. This is happy. Everything before this? Satisfied, content, proud maybe. But definitely not happy.

Happy is Bree using my stomach as a pillow, her whole body sideways on the bed. Happy is the small smile on her face. Happy is the tickle of her tangled blonde hair on my stomach.

Bree is my happy.

So, so, fucked.

She stirs, nearly purring, and rubs her cheek sleepily on my stomach. I hope she doesn't roll backward. If she does, she's going to realize really damn quick that this is so far from platonic for me. Like, light years away from platonic.

And I don't think she's ready to know that. Not yet.

Memories of her crawling into bed and the way she petted my sheets flash through my mind. Maybe she's more ready than I think. Because no way in hell is she that innocent. Bree fully in her power, on the prowl is an unstoppable force of nature, I'm sure.

But is she there yet? Maybe it's just natural sexuality that she can't turn off.

Maybe.

Whatever it is, somewhere around 3:00 AM, I decided I'm not going anywhere. Whatever Bree needs, whatever she wants, she'll get from me. And I mean anything. If she needs me to be her friend, that's what I'll be. If she needs more...I'll give her that too. I'll give her all of me, whatever the fuck that's actually worth.

She makes an adorable snorting sound, then she shoots up, eyes wild, hair crazy, and scares the shit out of me. "What time is it," she yells, flailing. I laugh, because holy fuck is she cute.

"Six," I say, crossing my arms under my head. She's fucking incredible. I'm completely distracted by her gorgeous breasts bouncing under her tank top. I wish it were a little looser. All night I hoped one breast might accidentally fall out. That hope kept my eyes open and on her most of the night. I'm used to functioning on little to no sleep, but this is the best reason ever to be exhausted this early in the day.

Her fuzzy eyes come to rest on me, and a wash of color fills her cheeks. "Morning," she mumbles, shoving at her hair.

"Morning," I return, content to just look at her. I'd normally be in the gym right about now, shaking off a shitty sleep, mentally preparing for the day. My day's already fucked up, and I don't have a problem with it. Bree can fuck up all my days if she wants.

Done fussing, she tucks her legs to the side and drops her hands in her lap. She meets my gaze head on. "Thank you for last night," she says quietly. The pink is fading from her cheeks, and I miss it. Flustered Bree is something else.

"You're welcome. Anytime," I say with a wink. She grins, and I smile at her. If Bree's smiling, I am too. That's just the way the universe works now. "I mean it. My door is always open to you. And my bed," I can't resist adding.

She laughs and shakes her head. "I'm just lucky you were alone last night. If you hadn't answered, I don't know what I would have done...no, never mind. I do know. I'd be sitting at the kitchen table all night, waiting for Cara to come home. It would have been a disaster. She'd realize that I'm not okay, and all this progress we've made would be undone."

Something in her voice makes my shoulders tense up. I sit up and rest my back against the black suede headboard. “I’m always alone, so you never have to worry about that happening. You come to me if you need me, anytime.”

One pale golden eyebrow arches. “Always alone? Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She frowns. “But...that’s not true, is it? Cara said something about you never spending the night alone. She talked about all the women you would pick up at the club.” She waves her hands, “Not that it’s a problem. Far from it. You’re a healthy attractive single guy, of course you have company. Good on you.”

Cara and her big fucking mouth. “Used to. I haven’t been to the club on my own in months. I spend my nights here, by myself.” Since around the time Bree and Cara moved into the building, actually. That timing is...interesting. There was something about Bree that night, such bravery over her vulnerability that I admired. More than that, I couldn’t get her out of my head.

“Oh,” she says quietly. But a flash of something crosses her face. What is it? Satisfaction? Pleasure? Whatever it is, it makes my shoulders relax. She likes my answer, and that’s enough for now.

She reaches out and taps my knee through the covers. “Well, thank you big time then. Thanks for sharing your massive bed, and your incredibly comfy mattress. I’m going to get out of your hair now, and get ready for work.”

She rolls off the bed instead of crawling. Disappointing.

She heads for the door and I jump up. “Wait,” I yell, heading for the closet.

I rifle through my racks. My closet is huge, but there’s still a ton of empty space. Still, there’s a lot in here. Finally I pull out my favorite hoodie. I bring it to her, bunched in my fist. “You can’t wander through the halls dressed like that. Everyone’s up.” I want to wrap her in my sweater and zip it up

myself, but that doesn't feel like a friend thing to do. And friend is where I need to stay for now. So I hold it out to her instead, and soak in her smile as she shrugs into it. The deep blue fabric makes her eyes even bluer.

"Thanks," she murmurs, tucking her hand into the pockets. The hoodie hangs low enough her little shorts are covered. It's easy to imagine she's not wearing anything under it. I cross my hands over my crotch casually, holding down the snake. "I'll bring it back to you."

"Tonight," I say firmly. She's going to be back in my bed tonight. I'll make damned sure of it.

She frowns, "Tonight? Did we have plans?"

"Not specifically, but Declan's got something planned for Cara tonight. I have a feeling he's going to be keeping her busy all night long."

She exhales and tilts her head. "All night?"

I nod, smiling. "Yep."

"So if I don't want to be alone..."

"Yep. You don't have to wait till the middle of the night to come over. Why don't we do dinner? We can order in, and watch a movie or something."

She chuckles. "Make it Chinese, and you have a deal."

"Whatever you want, remember?"

"You better be careful offering women everything," she teases. "Someday, someone might ask you for it."

I want to tell her that she's the only woman I'll ever make the offer to. But the words are stuck in my throat. I can't lose her. I won't risk chasing her away. "Then I'm lucky you're an independent, ornery woman who prefers to do shit herself, and makes me beg to help her."

She laughs, tossing her head back in joy. "Yeah, you are lucky. I'm about as low maintenance as they come. I guess it's a plan. I'll head over after my game tonight. I get to pick the place we order from." She gives me a wave, and she's gone. I

drop onto the side of my bed, mind swirling. How do I catch her? Is that even what I'm going to do? Or do I entice her in? How do you make a woman want you?

I need my brothers.

I throw on some joggers and a tank, shove my feet into some sneakers, and head down to the gym. As I push through the door, the sound of feet pounding the treadmill, weights clanking, and grunting fill my ears.

Sounds like home.

I scout out the space, clocking Declan on the bench press, and then pick a brother as far away from him as possible. I grab a spot on the mats next to Colton, who seems to be in the middle of trying to touch his toes. Literally in the middle, his fingers seem to be stuck somewhere around his knee.

“Fuck brother, your range of motion is pathetic.”

He glares at me, then scowls at his fingers, grunting with the strain of trying to reach a little further. I stretch my legs out in front of me, then bend, wrapping my hands around the toes of my sneakers.

“Dickhead,” he says with a scowl. “How the fuck do you do that.”

“Maybe start by leaning out a little. You're kind of chonky.”

He gasps, “Take that back.” He lunges for me, and I roll backward over my shoulder out of his reach.

“See. If you weren't so chonky, you could have caught me.”

He gives me double middle fingers, then goes back to his awkward stretches. The man is mostly muscle, with just the right amount of fat for insulation. He'll never be the guy with his eight pack showing, not because he doesn't have one, but because cutting that much water and nutrition is unhealthy, and Colton would never do anything that might make him weak and unable to protect the people he loves. We watched a documentary on those bodybuilder dudes. Most of them were

so weak they could barely function by competition day. No thank you. We'll keep a little padding and stay dangerous motherfuckers.

“What’s up with you?” Colton asks, eyeing me.

“How did you make Evie fall in love with you?” I blurt. Fuck. I should have been cooler about that.

Colton sits up slowly, a light in his eye. “Love. You want to talk about love? This is the best day ever. I got some this morning. The sun is shining, and now you want to talk feelings? It’s the trifecta!” he crows, making happy fists.

“Keep your damn voice down,” I whisper, eyeing the rest of my brothers. Declan has his headphones on thankfully and looks to be totally in the zone. But Zach and Maverick are heading our way. Fucking Colton and his big mouth.

“What’s happening? Who’s in love?” Zach asks, absently smoothing his fitted white t-shirt over his stomach. Of course his shirt is white. Even weirder, it’ll stay white the whole day. Not a single drop of sauce or a stray crumb would dare fall on it. How he and Maya, a walking crumb factory, muddle along, I’ll never know. But he’s happy and so is she, so whatever they have going for them must be working. I do wonder if he has some sort of pocket vacuum he whips out before they bump uglies. The thought makes me roll onto my back, laughing.

Zach props his hands on his hips and glares down at me. “What’s so funny?”

It’s too good not to share, especially with Maverick right here. “It’s just..you’re allergic to crumbs and Maya leaves a trail wherever she goes. Do you have a pocket vacuum or something? Do you bring it out before sexy time?” I can barely get it out, but the guilty look that crosses his face makes me howl. Maverick catches it too, and he collapses to the mat giggling hysterically.

“It’s not a fucking vacuum. It’s a lint roller. I have a bunch of them. Maya keeps going to that shelter, so I always have to clean off her clothes for her,” he says defensively, as if it’s totally normal to use a lint roller on your lover.

Colton's shaking his head, looking disgusted. "She's never gonna marry you if you keep doing shit like that."

Zach turns smug. "Yeah she will. Trust me. She has no complaints."

Colton chuckles and holds his fist out for a bump. Zach grins and taps it. He has a point. Maya seems really damn happy, despite Zach's neat freak tendencies. They're opposites, but it works for them.

Bree and I aren't opposites. Does that mean the road will be easier for us?

Not likely.

That's assuming she even wants to go down that road with me. I know it's not fucking guaranteed. When she's ready, she can have any man she looks at. I just have to make damned sure that when she's ready, I'm the only man she wants.

Resigned to having the conversation with the peanut gallery, I ask my question again. "How did you get Evie to fall in love with you?"

Maverick's giggles taper off. He's trying to hold them in so he can listen, nosy bastard. Zach looks smug again. Of course he does. He doesn't have to worry about any of this shit. He's got the girl too. He and Colton are on one side of this abyss, and Mav and I are on the other.

Time to knock them both down a bit, get this conversation back on level ground. "I mean, she's way out of your league. You're one step up from a caveman most of the time, so it's a damned miracle you actually married her. You know you're lucky, right?"

He doesn't flip me off, or make a joke. Instead he throws me off balance by turning serious. "Yeah. I do know I'm lucky. Luckier than anyone on the planet. That's how I got her, man. I knew how special she was, and I made sure she knew I'm all in. That she was it for me, and I was willing to do anything to make her happy."

He leans back on his hands and studies me. "You been hiding a girl from us? Someone special?"

Zach settles onto the mat propping his arms on his knees, and peers at me like he's going to peel off the top of my head and find all my secrets. "Who is she? Someone from the club? Have we met her?"

"No, there's no one," I say, lying through my teeth, and not feeling an ounce of guilt about it. Telling the family about me and Bree—if there ever is a me and Bree—will have to be done carefully. Otherwise, I may find myself running from Cara and her very sharp scissors.

No, before that happens, I'm going to need to prove myself and recruit a bunch of the family to my side. That's the long game. In the short term? Lying's a totally valid plan. "I just... you're all getting paired up, and maybe someday I might want what you have. I just...don't know much about it."

Maverick nods almost to himself and lays his head on the floor, apparently waiting for words of wisdom. Zach and Colton seem to sit taller. This could go one of two ways. They act like dicks and give me a bunch of terrible advice, or they actually help. Or a mixture of both, so three ways actually.

Colton leans forward and points a finger at me. "Women are really damn confusing. They're thinking about way too much all the time. If you can't get their brains to calm down, you don't have a fucking chance."

Zach frowns. "Maya's not really like that. She's sort of the opposite. She had everything figured out, or she thought she did, and she just put her head down and barreled along. I had to work hard to get her to...Oh. Yeah. That's what that was. What he said. Women are thinking way too much of the time, and usually, they're thinking the wrong thing."

"The wrong thing? What would Evie say if she were right here?"

Colton shifts uncomfortably. "We're not going to tell her now, are we? It's bro code asshole. What's said in the gym stays in the gym."

"Unless she asks," Zach says firmly. "If Maya asks, I'll tell her. I don't keep secrets."

“Fine. If Maya asks if we talked to Nick about how to make a woman fall in love with him, then you can tell her. Deal?” Zach nods, looking all kinds of relieved.

“Truth is important,” I mutter, thinking of the conversation with Abby and John last week.

“Yeah, it is. One of the most important things. Never lie to her.”

Zach nods. “Also, you have to be honest about how you’re feeling. Otherwise they’ll decide they know what’s going on in your head. And they can make up some really stupid shit.”

“Really stupid,” Colton echoes with a curl of his lip. “Evie had all kinds of stupid shit in her head about her body. It kinda fucked her up, and almost ruined things for us before they started. Make sure you tell her how sexy she is, and how much you love the way she looks. Women need that.”

“Evie had doubts? She’s so damned beautiful—”, I shut my mouth when Colt looks at me with murderous eyes. It’d rather not die today. “So they don’t see themselves clearly, is what you’re saying?” Colton gives me a slow nod yes.

“You have to be on their side,” Zach says, staring off at the wall. “Always on their side.”

“Even if they’re wrong?” Maverick asks.

“Sometimes you have to talk shit out. But always in private. But in the end, if they make a decision, you need to support it. You can’t be the one to hold them back.”

“So basically,” Mav says, yawning, cheek still pressed to the mat, “treat them like we treat each other, only nicer?”

We frown at him, and he yawns again. “We don’t lie to each other. If someone’s bulking up, we cheer them on and complement their look. And we always have each others backs, especially against outsiders.”

Zach and Colton stare at him, but slowly not their heads.

“Basically, yeah,” Colton says.

Great. So treat Bree like one of my brothers, minus the trash talk and nut punches.

Why the fuck did I think they would have good advice for me?

Guess I have to figure this shit out on my own.

“Oh my god! Bree, oh my god.”

Julia’s whispers aren’t really whispers, and a few of our teammates glance back at us. Julia waves them away and tugs on my arm. “I totally forgot to tell you. Gabe, your hottie patient? He asked about you today?”

I let her drag me to a stop and look down at her impatiently. Tonight’s dragged on forever. Normally I don’t want a game to end, but usually I’m just going home to my lonely bed. Tonight? I have a gorgeous man waiting on me. But Julia’s staring at me expectantly, so I do my best to look interested.

“Oh,” I mumble, glancing at my watch. There’s still a crush of people between us and the door and I’m ready to shove my way through.

“That’s it? Oh? I just told you the hottest guy on the planet asked me if you’re single. Can’t you at least pretend you’re excited?”

“Oh my god. He did? Really? That’s amazing. Maybe we’ll get married and have babies and live happily ever after.” I drop the squealing voice and pin her with a serious look. “He’s a patient. That’s all. And I would hope you answered him professionally? My personal life is none of his business.”

Her eyes drop guiltily and my stomach drops.

“Jesus Julia. You told him I was single?”

“I’m sorry. I really am. I know I’m not supposed to...it’s just...he seems into you. And you aren’t seeing anyone. I know what your last boyfriend did to you and I just thought if you could be with someone great like him...” she trails off and bites her lip, guilt written all over her face.

Panic rises and I’m nearly gulping in air. “You can’t do that. You can’t share my life with strangers. I don’t care how hot you think they are or how nice. You never know! You can’t know who a person really is. You crossed the line.” I need air. I need away. I turn and shove my way through the crowd, nearly staggering outside. Julia’s apologies cut off with the door closing, and I don’t wait for her, instead running across the icy parking lot to my Jeep. I throw myself in, on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

I should wait and calm down, but I crank the engine, roll the windows down, and peel out of the parking lot. I make it a few blocks, but finally pull into the parking lot of a 24-hour diner. I’m panicky, but I’m not suicidal, and I don’t want to risk it.

I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt someone else because of a stupid choice I made. So I sit here, hyperventilating, replaying the conversation with Julia over and over. I can’t figure out how to reframe it, or what I wish would have happened instead, other than wishing she hadn’t told Gabe anything.

My phone buzzes, and I reach to turn it off. I don’t want to talk to Julia right now. But it’s not Julia’s name flashing across the screen.

Nick.

I don’t answer. He’s been there for me before, when I fell apart, but I don’t want to keep relying on him. It sounds stupid even to me. I’ll sleep in the man’s bed, cuddling him like my very own stuffed animal, but I won’t let him see me having a panic attack.

A long time later my cheeks are numb but my eyes are dry. I’m worn out. All I want is something warm to drink, and some food. And to get out of this car. The lights of the diner

are inviting. Through the windows I can see a few tables of people laughing, and a few other solo diners, sipping their coffees and looking peaceful.

I'm going to get myself a slice of peaceful. And pie. Pie would be good.

At my request, the waitress seats me in the back corner and leaves me with a simple one page menu. Breakfast all day plus a few dinner staples fill the front, and a full drink and dessert menu covers the back. I order a hot chocolate to start, and after a few sips, get brave enough to check my phone. There are messages from Julia, apologizing. But there are even more from Nick, spanning the last forty-five minutes. I didn't realize I was sitting in the car that long.

I'm not ready to let Julia off the hook. But looking at Nick's increasingly worried texts, it's obvious I'm in the wrong. We had plans and I flaked on him, or so he thinks.

Nick: Bree! Where the fuck are you? Are you okay? Answer me please.

Me: I'm okay. I'm sorry. Had a bit of a rough patch. I'm fine.

His reply bubble pops up immediately.

Nick: Where are you?"

Me: At a diner. I'm just going to grab food here. C see you later.

Nick: Which diner?

I ANSWER HIM, AND WHEN HE DOESN'T REPLY, I DROP MY phone back into my bag. I've spent a lot of nights in places like this, taking up booths just like this one. In college, they were great places to study. Of course I went home and used the kitchen table, but whenever I did, Cara felt the need to cook

for me. Cooking was always her first choice when she wanted to nurture me. I'll admit I could be a little prickly, so sometimes a hug or kind word was out of the question. But I never turned down a hot meal. I knew she was trying to love me, and I never threw that act of love away. But sometimes, I just didn't want to go home and have her watching me. I'd go to diners for the steady flow of drinks and food I didn't have to feel guilty for asking for.

The kind eyed waitress delivers my plate of breakfast. I raise my head and thank her, freezing when I spot Nick walking in the front door. Deep down in that lost place in my chest, did I hope he'd show up? Yeah. Did I actually think he'd leave his luxury apartment to come halfway across the city to find me?

Yeah, I did.

Somehow I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that Nick was coming.

I watch him, giving myself a chance to admire the long lines of his body, the powerful shoulders and piercing gaze. And I notice the way other people look at him. He's not smiling or flirting, which isn't like him, but that doesn't seem to decrease the amount of attention women give him. From the high schoolers at the big booth at the front, to the white-haired lady on his left, everyone's looking. And admiring.

But Nick's not looking back. Instead, his piercing gaze is searching, scanning the booths systematically. I'm watching him look for me, my chest tight at the worry and anxiousness on his face. I'm sorry I put that look there, but I'm also really grateful to see it. To see how much he cares for me. I give him a little wave as his eyes lock on me and his entire body changes. His shoulders drop, his eyes soften, and the corner of his lips turn up. He doesn't hesitate, moving straight to me.

The intensity on his face makes it hard to breathe, so I pull my eyes away, and busy myself with wrapping the silverware then slide the mug and carafe of coffee I ordered him to the other side of the booth.

He stops at the table, staring down at me. I tip my head back and smile at him, so happy to see his face. “I got you coffee, but I wasn’t sure what you were in the mood to eat. There’s no Chinese, but the pancakes look epic.” So epic I nixed my original pie plan and went for the breakfast platter.

His eyes shift, studying the table. He nods, shrugs out of his leather jacket revealing a tight black long sleeved T-shirt with Brash Auto logo on the left side of his chest, and hangs it up on the hook next to the booth. He’s all smooth movement, no wasted motion with this man.

Then he’s sitting, hands folded on the table, studying me. “What happened tonight Carino?”

Carino I repeat over and over in my head. I don’t know what it means, but the way he says it makes me feel special. It could be the Spanish word for donkey for all I know. I don’t really want to know if it is.

I busy myself spreading the butter on my pancakes. The waitress buys me a minute when she comes over to pour his coffee and take his order. His simple ‘what she’s having, triple the sausages’ is delivered with a wink.

“Bree,” he prompts when we’re alone again.

“Someone from work did something that...upset me. I just needed some time to settle down, and I didn’t want to drive while I was upset.”

His eyes narrow, but he nods and tears open a little creamer cup. “I’m glad you got off the road. That’s smart.” He pours the creamer, and stirs it with a little side to side before resting the spoon on the table and taking a sip. “What did she do?”

Mesmerized watching him sip and swallow his hot coffee, don’t bother hedging or hiding what happened. “A patient asked if I was single. She told him I was. She had no right to share anything about my personal life.”

“She doesn’t know that?”

“She does. She’s been at the front desk for a while. She knows privacy for the staff and patients is required. She just...

thought the guy was cute and figured I would be flattered, I guess.”

He watches me over the rim of his cup, lips pressed into a tight line. “Are you? Flattered?”

I shrug and take a bite of my sausage. Maybe I should wait for his meal to arrive, but I’ve seen the man eat. He’ll catch up, I have no doubt. “Not really. I’ve had patients hit on me before. It’s not a big deal usually, but this time...”

His fingers tap out a quick pattern on his cup. His nails are clipped short, so the tap tap is faint. “Is there something about this guy that sets off your spidey senses?”

“Not really. He’s a guy. He carries himself a lot like you, actually. Big, *I-can-handle-anything* energy most of the time. But I don’t actually know him. I don’t like the idea that he knows things about me I didn’t tell him myself. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does. It was fucked up, what she did. You’re right. But on the surface, it doesn’t seem like a big deal. But it poked a wound, yeah?”

A big gaping wound. “I don’t know him. I don’t know who he is outside of the clinic. Julia doesn’t either. She looked at a handsome face and decided he had to be good. She got fooled by the packaging.”

“So did you, once,” he says very softly.

“Yeah, I did. I don’t want to make that mistake again.”

He nods and puts down his cup. “I don’t blame you. It’s okay to expect your coworker to do better. Or your friend. Is this the little pocket size woman I met at Volleyball? The one that talks all the time.”

I choke out a laugh at his description. “Yeah, that’s about right.” I sigh, and watch as the crowd of high school girls make their way out, giggling and teasing each other. Not a care at this moment, just happy to be together. “She wasn’t trying to be mean, I know that. She wants to see me happy, and figured letting a hot guy know I’m single is helpful. I feel a little bad about how I reacted, honestly.”

“Are you good now?” He stops to smile at the waitress as she puts a plate in front of him.

“I asked the cooks to rush it,” she says with a wink.

Nick gives her a big smile and winks back. “Thank you, beautiful lady,” he purrs. Smiling even bigger when her cheeks pinken. She pats her salt and pepper hair and heads off with a little bounce in her step.

I snicker as I carefully move my egg on top of my pancakes, then pierce the yolk. I spread the golden yolk around the pancake, then the white, making sure I have even coverage. Then add a small spiral of syrup on top. Conscious of his eyes on me, I cut a small, perfect bite, bringing it to my mouth.

“Oh my god,” I mutter, mouth still full. “Best pancakes ever.”

Nick’s eyes are on me, his fork clutched tightly in his hand. He catches my gaze and clears his throat. “That’s quite the concoction you have going there. Have you always done that?”

I cut another small bite and lift it carefully with my fork, bringing it to eye level. “Most of my life, yeah. My dad did it forever. Finally, I asked him to make my breakfast the same way. I’ve done it ever since. Cara does it too, most of the time. It’s kind of like having a piece of him with us. It’s silly I know, but...”

He makes an indistinct sound and shakes his head. “I can’t eat tres leches cake,” Nick says, idly moving a piece of bacon on his plate. “It was my favorite as a kid. My *Abuelita* made the best cake ever. I dreamed about that damned cake. And I can’t touch it now.”

“Brings back bad memories?”

“Bad. Sad. They’re never as good as I remember hers being,” he laughs dryly. “She always said the secret ingredient was love. Whatever her secret ingredient actually was, I have no idea. But every time I try that fucking cake, I think about her. And I miss her. And I feel bad.”

“Why do you feel bad?”

“Cause I killed her,” he says easily, pushing his untouched plate away from him.

He told me the story. He explained what happened and how he was involved. And so I say the only thing I can say at that moment. The only thing anyone in their right mind would say.

“That’s the dumbest fucking thing I’ve ever heard in my life. Complete bullshit, and you’re an idiot for even thinking it.”

His eyes widen at my simple delivery. Good. What else was he expecting? Me to condemn a seven-year-old kid? I cut another bigger bite and shovel it in because seriously, how the hell have I never been here before? The pancakes are perfectly golden, fluffy but not crumbly, with a slight nutty taste that’s addictive.

He’s still staring at me while I chew, and I pointedly push his plate back toward him. “It’s getting cold. Trust me, you don’t want to miss out on these pancakes.”

I keep nudging until he takes the edge of the plate and pulls it toward him. I watch as he spreads the butter, then carefully tries to move the eggs on top. He growls in frustration and uses his fingers to drag them up. Then he holds up his fork and carefully, methodically, pokes holes all over the yolks. It’s actually a pretty respectable technique.

He smears it around, then grabs the syrup. I drop my fork and intercept him, wrapping my hands around his. “This part is important,” I tell him quietly, remembering my dad saying the same words to me when I was little. “Some people make the mistake of overloading the pancake. They use too much syrup, and end up soaking it through. It throws the entire balance of the dish off. You’ll miss out on the creaminess of the yolk, and the hint of salt from the eggs. The syrup is just to add a touch of sweetness, that’s all.”

Nick’s big chest moves with his breath, then he nods. I let go, and watch him mimic my perfect swirl of syrup. I hold my

breath as he cuts into his creation. Why do I care if he likes it or not? It doesn't really matter, does it?

Maybe in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter, but I like the idea of him knowing a piece of my dad. Of liking something I gave him.

Nick uses the side of his fork to cut out a giant bite, and shovels the whole thing into his mouth. It should be gross. It's a huge bite. But again, he makes it look easy and natural. He makes a sound of appreciation and takes another bite.

Smiling, I got back to my meal, and we eat in charged silence. Neither one of us has forgotten his ridiculous statement, and I don't think either one of us is going to let it go, but at this point it's anyone's guess who's going to break the stalemate.

I'm wiping my mouth after my last bite, when he breaks. "It's not bullshit. I told you what happened."

Good. I was on the verge of cracking. "Do you honestly believe that a seven-year-old should be held responsible for what happened that day?"

His stormy eyes tell me he believes he should. His words confirm it. "I begged her to let him come. If he hadn't been there, it never would have happened."

"Are you sure? Really?" I ask doubtfully. He scowls at me, but there's a tiny sliver of confusion that I pounce on. "I mean, it was his kid's birthday. There were a bunch of people there. Maybe they opened fire without actually knowing he was there."

I'm on a roll. I don't really know much of his life, or what happened that day, but I have questions, so I'm going to roll with it. "Was everyone else at the party law abiding? Not involved with your dad's shit? I wonder if they could have been targets? Or maybe they shot at your grandma to teach him a lesson."

Nick blinks at me. "They were there for my dad."

I nod, not needing to fight this battle. "Then I bet your grandma is in heaven, beating herself up for inviting him to

the party that day.”

His mouth drops open, and he jumps to her defense. “It’s not her fault. I begged her.”

I snort a little. “Right. Because she gave you everything you ever begged her for, right?”

“No...she didn’t. She was really good at saying no,” he admits grudgingly. He’s really tied to this idea of him being the bad guy.

“Cara was too. I think anyone responsible for raising a kid has to be. Otherwise it would be pure chaos.” He nods, and I drive my point home. “She said yes that time because she wanted to. For no other reason. If she’d told you no, she knows you would have gotten over it. She could have moved the party to somewhere other than her house. She could have made a ton of different choices. But she was the adult. Hell, they were all adults, and they made their own choices.”

I lock my eyes on his, and give him the truth he needs to hear. I don’t know if he needs to hear it from me. Maybe not. But I’m going to say what all the other adults in his life should have said. “Nothing about what happened that day is your fault. You had no control over it. Those were adult actions and adult decisions. And trying to take responsibility for it is just dumb.”

Nick shrinks back into the booth, seeming to deflate. He rubs his broad palms over his cheeks, then drives them into his hair. His gaze is stark and a little lost.

“I think I knew that.”

“Then why do you keep trying to take responsibility for something that happened when you were little?”

“Because I believed it then, and I think it got to be a habit. I’m used to feeling guilty and like I’m...”

He trails off, and I give him a little push. “You’re?”

“Like I’m worthless.”

Tears prick my eyes, but I don’t wipe them away. He deserves to have someone cry for him and for everything he’s

lost. “I’m sorry you had to live so much of your life believing that’s true. Because it isn’t. It never was. You were a sweet little boy who loved his grandma. And you lost her, and everything you knew that day. That’s the truth of it.”

Nick searches my face, the truth of my words finally penetrating through the wall of guilt he’s built around himself. He reaches out, brushing a tear from my cheek. “For me?” He asks quietly.

I draw in a heavy breath, “For you. But also for me. What happened to us was awful, and it changed us. But that doesn’t mean it has to be the end of our stories. I don’t want it to be the end of mine.”

“What do you want your story to be, Bree?”

“I don’t know for sure. But I do know that surviving isn’t good enough anymore. I want to live my life grateful to still be here. I want to deserve it.”

“Of course you deserve it,” he says harshly.

I shrug. “Maybe I do. But my life before was so... superficial, maybe? I worked, I had fun. That was kind of it. And I remember waking up in the hospital, wondering why I got a second chance when so many other women didn’t. What made me deserve it? It just feels like I’m supposed to do something great now, to balance out this gift I’ve been given.”

“That’s fucked up,” he says with a snarl.

“Well obviously. Just because I have your shit figured out, doesn’t mean I have a handle on my own. I’m still a work in progress.”

“I really want to tell you you’re wrong...but I can’t dammit.”

“I know. It’s a curse, being right. I’ve had to live with it my whole life.”

He taps his fingers on the table, lips tipped up in the corner. “You just know it all, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. I only got it wrong once. It was a big one, I’ll admit. But still, if we’re talking averages, mine is stellar.”

He shakes his head, a kind of humor in his eyes. “You are a weird woman. You have such a handle on some stuff, but you’re still a wreck in other areas. Guess that makes you... human.” He stands, pulling out his wallet and dropping two hundreds on the table. “We ready to go home?”

Am I ready to go home with this beautifully damaged man, and crawl into his bed? Am I ready to draw comfort from him, and maybe lend a little of my own?

I scramble out of the booth, dragging my bag out after me, then duck under his arm and through the open door. “Yeah, I’m ready.” I wait until he’s about to close my Jeep door for me and head to his truck to head home. “Tonight...I call big spoon.”

BREE

Mind whirling, I keep my eyes on Bree's tail lights, staying close enough that no other car can get between us. Not that there's much traffic this late on a Thursday night. I'm rattled, I can admit it. Bree rattled me. In a few minutes, in a mostly empty diner on a Thursday night, she tore apart my worldview and put it back together again. And I don't know how to find my footing.

Her analysis of my tragedy forces me to look at it in a way my pain wouldn't let me. I don't understand why I felt the need to claim responsibility for *Abuelita's* death. I'm sure I should unpack that with someone.

Or maybe, there's no big mystery to it. Maybe a seven-year-old kid sees the world from a very selfish point of view. Maybe that's just the way it is. Something happens, and they see it as a result of their impact on the world. If mom's mad, I must have done something. How many times did I think that about my dad when I was a kid? *If only I hadn't cried so much. If only I'd been tougher, he would have kept me.* It's not true. My dad was a waste of air, a blight on the world, and his choices have nothing to do with me.

I feel light enough to fly away, but I don't want to go anywhere but where Bree is. Because if *Abuelita's* death isn't my fault, then maybe I do deserve Bree.

I MAKE IT TO BREE'S JEEP DOOR, STANDING BACK UNTIL SHE sees me, then moving to open it for her. She's jumpy in

parking garages. She already told me that. And I don't plan on doing anything that might spook her tonight.

We ride the elevator in a peaceful silence, neither one of us needing to fill the space with empty words. It feels like we said everything we need to say tonight. There's no need to add to it right now. And she's right where I want her to be. We watch as the numbers tick past her floor, and continue on to mine. A little smile plays on the corner of her lips.

Opening my door to her tonight feels big, bigger than I ever imagined. Last night I was in such a fucking panic, that I just needed her with me. I wanted her safe and couldn't think past that.

Tonight though? I'm walking the woman I'm falling in love with into the home I hope she'll share with me one day. A home I want her to love.

I tug her big bag off her shoulder, and lower it to the floor just inside the door, then wave her into my space. "Get comfortable." She doesn't hesitate, toeing off her shoes and padding through the living room to the windows.

"Every apartment has such a great view," she murmurs. I stare at her bare feet, then down at my own shoes, then kick them off, suddenly conscious of how much disgusting crap must come in on the bottom of my shoes. I don't want her walking on filth of any kind.

I join her at the window, admiring the view of the lakeshore and lake. "Ransom wanted it to be nice for all of us. He laid out the apartments so we all have city and lake views. It's easy enough to do when there's only two apartments per floor.

She turns, and leans her back on the glass. "Two massive apartments. I mean the ones downstairs are huge too, but this? It's epic."

I slide my hand behind her back and gently nudge her away from the window. It's strong. She won't fall through. I get that intellectually, but my gut is screaming at me to get her to safety and I can't ignore it.

She gives me a wry smile, and I get the feeling she knows exactly why I moved her. She wanders through the living room, running her fingers along the framed pictures on the shelves on either side of the fireplace, stopping on one.

I don't have to look to know which one. It's a picture of me and *Abuelita* a few weeks before my birthday. I'm sitting on her lap on the old brown couch she had. We're both beaming.

"She's beautiful," she whispers, running her finger across the glass. "You two look so happy."

"We were."

She nods, head turning to look at me. "You were lucky to have each other. I'm sorry it got cut short, but I'm so glad you had as much time with her as you did."

So am I.

She carefully puts the framed picture back on the shelf, then wanders across the apartment. Her fingers dance along the wall outside my bedroom. She stops at the doorway, looking inside, her hands on either side of the doorframe. The pointer finger on her left hand taps the wood frame once, twice, three times, then she drops her hands, and steps inside. Her head and shoulders turn, her blonde hair veiling her face. "Are you coming to bed?"

I change into shorts in a daze. Any numbness or sense of peace about this is gone. Bree is going to be in my bed tonight, and I don't know how to handle it. I should act like this is normal, play it cool, but I don't think I have it in me.

"Nick."

Her voice is muffled through the door, but I still catch every word. They reverberate through me like electricity. "I didn't pack pajamas, and I really don't want to go downstairs, just in case Cara's at our place. Can I borrow a shirt? Maybe one of your baggier ones?"

An involuntary wheeze escapes. Bree in my T-shirt? Fucked. I'm so fucked. How the hell am I supposed to sleep in a bed with her, while she's wearing my t-shirt no less, and hide

my dick's reaction to her? I was relying on wearing that damned t-shirt to cover it, but now all I can think about is seeing her in it.

I snatch it off the hanger, and open the door to the walk in closet, shirt bunched tightly in my fist. Drawn to her like a magnet, I stop an inch from the tips of her toenails. "Yellow," I say, staring at the bright polish. "It's so...sunshiny."

She drops her head to my chest, staring down, a smile in her voice when she answers. "I can be sunshiny sometimes." She raises her head, giving me a challenging look.

"I believe it. I'd love to see more of it though."

"More sunshine?"

"Just more. More sunshine, more smiles. More of your happiness."

She sobers, searching my face. Finally she nods. "I'm working on it."

I can't resist her. I let myself tuck her hair behind her ear, and cup her cheek. "I know you are. I see how hard you're working to get better."

She briefly cups her hand over mine, then with the other hand tugs the shirt out of my grasp. She's closed in the bathroom before I can breathe. I drop to the side of the bed and cup my hands around my neck. I can do this. I can follow her lead and control myself. I'm not some kid desperate for a fuck. I'm playing the long game here.

I'm playing for keeps.

"There has got to be a story here," Bree says. I suck in a deep breath and give myself a full exhale before looking up. Standing in the doorway of the bathroom, hands braced on either side of the doorframe, light on behind her, it's worse than I imagined. *So fucked*. As expected, the material of the shirt is baggy and loose, but I didn't realize how thin it was. With the light behind her, every curve, every dip of her body is on display.

And there are a lot of curves.

A lot.

I like all women. Young, old, tall and short, skinny or fat. But Bree is ticking every *perfect* box I didn't know I had. The thickness of her thighs, the curvy strength of her bare calves, the roundness of her tummy, the strength in her shoulders. She's steel wrapped in warmth and softness.

She's everything I never knew I wanted.

“Nick?”

I shake myself out of the stupor a glimpse of her body put me into, and try for a smile. “Our one and only trip to New Orleans. Colton and I stumbled across this joint with an all you can eat challenge. Prawns,” I say, pointing to the giant cartoon prawn on the front of the white shirt. The prawn is faded, the once bright red now cracked and softened after repeated wear. “We both went for it, but Colton tapped out.”

Her eyes widen comically. “You ate more than Colton? How is that possible?”

“I don't think I could do it again if I tried, but that night, I was on a mission. I cared more about beating Colton than whatever the prize was.”

“How many did you eat?”

“I have no idea. The bowl was bigger than Colton's head, and we only had five minutes. I haven't eaten a prawn since that day.”

“Oh my god,” she says, laughing. There I go getting distracted again, but who could blame me, really? Her laughter makes her breasts bounce enticingly. “And you ended up with a giant T-shirt? This thing must be a 5X.”

“Yeah. They said it was the only one they had. I refused to take it off for the rest of the trip. Every time Colton sees it, it makes him grumpy. It's a fuck of a lot of fun, so I've worn it a lot over the last ten years. I don't think it was the highest quality fabric to begin with, so...um, it's a little thin.”

She runs her hand over her hip, an unconsciously sensual move. “It's so soft now,” she murmurs.

“Yeah,” I squeak, a wave of heat washing over me. *Dios*. I haven’t felt like this since I was in my teens. Maybe not even then. Ransom preached control at all times, and we bought in. Control over our minds, control over our emotions, and definitely control over our bodies. I thought I had that last one mastered, but Bree is proving me wrong.

She bites her lip as she stares at me and there’s another uncomfortable jerk in my shorts. Pulling that lip of hers out from between her teeth and nibbling on it is about all I can think about. *Slow, go slow. She’s in charge.*

She lets go of her lip, takes a deep breath, and pushes off the door, coming to stand at my bent knees. She’s trying to make me break. She has to be. “Which side am I sleeping on?” she asks quietly.

I rub my hands down my thighs and grip my knees. “Whichever you want. It doesn’t really matter. You ended up on top of me last night. I’m guessing we’ll have a repeat tonight.”

Her hands cup her cheeks. “Oh god, I did, didn’t I. I’m so sorry.” I shrug because I’m not even a bit sorry, and I tell her so, but she doesn’t look convinced. “I should go to my place and leave you in peace.”

Her body makes the slightest sway back, and I’m moving before my brain engages. Giving into my instincts, I clamp my hands on her hips and yank her into me on the side of the bed. She’s tall, really tall, but so am I. Those two things together equal Bree’s delightful chest pressed right into my face. She squeaks and plants her hands on my shoulders, but the movement I’m waiting for, the one I promised I’d respect, doesn’t come. She doesn’t push me away. Instead, her fingers curl into my bare shoulders, gripping tightly. The rest of her is frozen.

I should let her go. I should play it off, and let her circle the bed and lay down. I definitely shouldn’t nuzzle into her breasts. But holy fuck, I want to. My breaths are coming in pants, the effort of holding myself back, making my entire body ripple and tense. “I don’t want you to leave,” I grit out.

Her strong fingers loosen their grip and start a slow, maddening stroke. It's not a big movement, just a barely there side to side of her fingertips. But my body's reaction is completely out of proportion. It figures she's trailing those fingers straight to my cock. There's just too much stimulus. Her breasts, right there and up close. Her hands on my skin. And those smooth strong legs touching mine. One of her legs is outside mine, the other is behind it, keeping her body twisted sideways.

I'm breathing, giving myself a pep talk, trying to convince it that making a move would be a big mistake and scare her away, when she blows my fucking mind. Turning her body, she lifts her back leg and slides it on the outside of mine so she's straddling me, and with a slow, deliberate movement, sits in my lap.

We use these machines at work with little adhesive pads that tingle on the skin, penetrating deep to make the muscles twitch and flex outside of your control. That's what's happening right now, only it's not just one muscle group out of my control, it's my entire body.

I blame Nick's bare chest for this. I saw it last night, and this morning, but didn't get the full impact then. First, I was too anxious, then I was too rushed.

Now? I'm all sensation. My brain, usually so busy analyzing and worrying, is mostly offline. And god, what a relief. My brain and I have been at odds for too long. Right now? We're on the same page.

Maybe I shouldn't have settled myself into his lap. But the tight grip of his hands, the way his fingers dug into my hips, had my core clenching. Now that I'm here, though, I can't decide what I want to do. Scratch that. I know what I want to do, but I don't know if I'm ready for it.

I could also be making a huge mistake. Nick's supposed to be my friend. That's what we talked about. He didn't sign up for a woman on his lap, but when I bring my eyes to his, the dazed look on his face makes it pretty clear he doesn't mind.

A low wheeze escapes him, and he wets his lips. His arms tighten around me, pulling me even closer, forcing me to widen my knees on the bed. Any closer, I'm going to leave a wet stain on the front of his shorts.

I really, really like this position.

“Friends,” he stutters out. “I’m supposed to be your friend.”

“That’s what the plan was,” I murmur, sliding my hands up his shoulders and around his neck. He swallows, throat bobbing nervously.

“Right. The plan. Make Cara stop worrying. It’s a good plan.”

“Yes, it is,” I say, letting my fingers play with the hair at the back of his neck.

“Right. Good plan,” he says again, making my lips curve into a smile. His eyes lock on my mouth and he groans again. “Are we...are we changing the plan?”

“I don’t know. Are we?”

“Do you want to?”

“Do I want to what?” I ask, distracted by the silky feel of his hair. I get why men like long hair on women. I think I’m into it too, because all I can think about is the way his hair would fall toward me when he’s above me, moving inside me.

I want him. Badly.

“I have no idea,” he says, eyes looking stunned. “What are we taking about?”

I stare at him blankly, so lost in sensation I honestly can’t keep track. Something in my face makes the corner of his lips curl, and a low chuckle escape. I really like the way that feels, the waves reverberating through my body. His laughter is infectious. Rolling giggles travel through me. I drop my head on his shoulder, and hug him closely. His hands start a low slow sweep up and down my back.

I really like that.

I like pretty much everything he does.

The words bubble up, impossible to hold back. “My feelings aren’t just friendly.”

His hands freeze on my back. He’s still for so long, the mind chatter starts up. *I scared him. He’s trying to let me down*

easy. So stupid. I'm not ready for this. I'm so in my head, I almost miss his low rumble.

"Mine aren't either. Not sure they ever were."

It's my turn to freeze, his words hitting me with the force of a hurricane. Even if we never act on it, we can't go back to pretending there's nothing between us.

Everything is different now.

Cheeks hot, I pull back to look at him, liking the way he lets me move, but not too much, keeping his arms locked around me. His eyes are soft, but guarded.

I'm sure mine are too.

"It changed," I say. It's a question and a statement, and he seems to get that.

"Yeah, it did. I tried to keep my head on straight, but I failed. Big time."

"What do we do?" I whisper.

"What do you want to do?" He pauses, scowling. "Maybe the better question is what are you ready for?"

What am I ready for? It's a valid question, and a question that I don't have an answer to. "I don't know," I admit, dropping my eyes to his shoulders.

His breath escapes him in a long, slow hiss. His arms slide from around me, gripping my hips as he carefully moves me off of him. I settle on the side of the bed, unconsciously mirroring his position. I liked where I was. I wanted more of it. But he's right. We shouldn't be riding that line if we're both unclear about what we're doing.

"Stuff like this used to be simpler," I mutter, pressing my thighs together, lining up my feet so they're perfectly matched. "If I liked someone, I acted on it. My mind and my body were both on the same page."

"And now they're not?"

"No. My body feels like it's on board for anything. It's ready to pounce."

His hand, gripping the bed between us, turns white. “And your mind?” he asks, voice low and pained.

“Confused. Scared. Wanting. All the things, sometimes all at the same time.” I rest my palms on my thighs and give him everything. “I think about you a lot. And those thoughts are good...really good. But when we’re together, I spend a lot of time worrying about how everything could go wrong. And how this could go so, so bad. And it terrifies me.”

“How this could go so so bad?” He pins me in place with the intensity of his gaze. “Or how I could?”

There it is. My fear laid bare. How well do I really know this man? Can I trust myself, can I trust my own judgment? “Tyler was smaller than you. A lot smaller, and he...nearly killed me.”

His shoulders sag forward and his head droops, but he doesn’t look away. “I would never hurt you, *Carino*.”

I see it in his eyes. The pain my words caused. But I also see his promise.

Promises can be broken.

“In calm, quiet moments like this, I know that. I know it deep in my core. But then I’m reminded that I never thought Tyler would ever hurt me, either. And I was wrong. I was wrong about everything, and I don’t trust myself anymore. I can’t trust my own instincts.”

He nods more to himself, and looks away. There’s nearly no space between our thighs but between our minds and our hearts. It’s an ocean of sadness and confusion. Where do we go from here? “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I wish I were different. Better, maybe.”

Nicks hand, clutching the bed, loosens and curls into a fist between us. Unbidden, my hand rises to cover his. I’m craving a connection. I need it. Like he knows it, his hand rolls under mine and his palm is there, open to me. Our fingers link like we’re of one mind and we both sit staring at the place where we’re connected.

“We’re both fucked up, Bree.”

I squeeze his hand tighter. “Yeah, we are. You took on the weight of your grandmother’s death. And I just feel...broken most of the time.” He doesn’t jump in with platitudes or try to convince me I’m wrong. Cara does that, and while I understand where she’s coming from, it doesn’t help. There’s a desperation, a need underneath her words that are a heavy weight on my shoulders.

We sit silent, both feeling the truth of my words. He’s starting to realize that he was an innocent kid, and he doesn’t need to be taking on the weight of everyone’s actions. He was an innocent, and what happened to him scarred him. But it was a long, long time ago. The pain of that day is somewhat dulled by the decades since.

My pain doesn’t feel dull. My fear doesn’t feel dull. It’s a sharp knife pressed into my ribs.

His hand squeezes mine. “I need you in my life, Bree. I didn’t think that would happen. The day we met, you were so hurt but so tough, I admired you. I wished you would get better, but you were Cara’s sister, so I didn’t let myself think about you too much. But spending the last couple of weeks getting to know you made it really fucking clear.” He exhales and turns his upper body to face me. “I want you in my life. And if that means we’re the best friends either of us ever had, then that’s what this will be.”

The wave of relief washing over me is evidence of how not ready I am for anything more, despite my raging hormones. “I can’t talk to Cara about a lot of things. She is so wrapped up in her need to have me be better, that I don’t feel like I can share anything but good stuff. And it’s not all good stuff.”

“No, it isn’t,” he murmurs, studying me. “So friends? You come to me when you need to talk about anything. Anything,” he repeats, waiting for my nod to continue. “Whatever you’re feeling, I can take it, Bree. Believe it.”

“I do,” I choke out, throat tight. “You’ve proven that.”

He sighs and pulls my hand to his mouth, pressing a quick kiss on the back. “Crawl in there, woman. Pick a side, any side.” He winks and lets me go, rising and moving into the

bathroom. The door closes softly and I stare at the dark wood for a minute, wishing things could be different. Wishing I could be different.

Maybe that's my problem. Instead of accepting who I am now, and starting from here, I keep trying to go backward. I know as well as anyone that going back is impossible. I spent a lot of nights wishing Mom and Dad hadn't died, making bargains with God to bring them back. In the end, I had to accept my new reality. Cara helped me accept it. We were together in our grief, and in our healing.

This time, Cara got out of the hole and keeps trying to drag me out after her. I don't need that. I need someone to come down into the hole with me and help me climb out myself.

Maybe Nick can be that person. I pray he is, because I don't want to give him up. I don't want to lose him, and maybe, just maybe, when I finally make it out of that hole, he'll be waiting for me with open arms.

Hopefully, with no pants on.

NICK

The grunts and thumps hit me as soon as I open the door, carried on a wave of heat. I toe off my boots and shove them into one of the cubbies right by the front door, then hang up my jacket. Not the leather one this time. The weather turned even colder, and I finally gave up and dug out my winter jacket.

I wave at a few guys I know on the way to the locker room. I beat everyone here. Not surprising really. They're all at the office today and don't usually leave until 5:00 PM. I've been around the city, checking on garages, solving problems, and mediating squabbles. Nothing difficult to handle, just annoying as fuck. But that's my job. Handle the shit with a level head. So I did it, only needing a small amount of brain power to accomplish it. The rest of it stayed focused on a few nights ago. On Bree.

On everything that changed, yet didn't.

Knowing she wants me, has feelings for me, is such a high.

Realizing she's not ready to act on any of it threw me into the depths of disappointment. I get it. I do. But it fucking sucks. What doesn't suck? Having her in my bed every night. That is its own special kind of high.

I turn the corner to the lockers and stop dead, shocked to find Micah sitting on the bench, looking like a thundercloud. "Holy shit. What's wrong? Where's Holly?" If he's here, she has to be close by. Or she lost her shit with him again and kicked him out of the house.

Nah, if she kicked him out, he'd be sitting in the hallway outside his apartment, waiting for her to calm down. She's got to be here.

"Holly," he says with a massive scowl. "Self Defense."

I lean back on the lockers, facing him. "Shit, man. She's still going? She's nearly nine months pregnant." Thirty-seven weeks to be specific, but who's counting? "Is that even safe?"

Micah groans and raises his hands to sign. *"I don't fucking think so, but her doctor seems to think it's fine as long as she doesn't exert herself. She says any activity that Holly's used to is fine. I'm losing my mind. What if she falls, what if she overexerts herself and passes out? There's so much that can go wrong. I can't bring myself to go out there and watch her. I can't fucking breathe."* He drops his hands and rests his elbows on his knees, head hanging.

"I'll go check on her," I say, dropping my hand onto his shoulder. "Be right back."

Holly's abusive ex beat her down for a long time, so I get wanting to learn how to protect herself. And learning from Becca, a slightly unhinged but incredibly badass Ninja is good for her. But this far along? It seems like a really bad idea. I'm usually on the women's side, but in this, I can't be. She's putting Micah through hell, and it's not okay.

I'm building up a bit of a mad as I get to the classroom. The windows are frosted, but there are several areas that I can peek through. I spot Becca right away, at the head of a class full of women. Most of them are in that very attractive, stretchy athletic wear, but I don't let that distract me for long. I scan the space, sure I can't miss a five-foot woman with a belly so big she looks like she'll tip over.

Becca moves, and a chuckle rolls through me. There, near the front of the room, propped up on a large stack of athletic mats, is Holly. She's wearing her workout gear, but she's lounging back, a metal bowl on the mound of her stomach. As I watch, she smiles, chatting with Becca, and reaches into the bowl, happily tossing a piece of popcorn into her mouth.

Becca attempts to steal some and gets her hand slapped, which sends her into peals of laughter.

I step back quickly, grinning. No way do I want Becca seeing me. Last time I was in that room with her, I got my ass kicked...actually had my crotch kneed, too. Becca seemed to think it was perfectly okay for us to be used as punching dummies for her class. Yeah, we had suits, but those damned things didn't do much to protect us.

I return to Micah in the change room, crouching down in front of him, and slap him on the shoulder. "You don't have to worry. She's lounging on a big stack of mats, eating popcorn. She's not doing a bit of the workout. I don't think she tried to. Looks like she just needed a break."

Micah's sigh is long, and weary, and relieved all at once. "Thank God." He scrubs his hands over his face, then signs. "*She needed a break from me.*" I don't answer, because he's probably right. He's an overbearing bastard when it comes to Holly.

"She's dealing with a lot. So are you. It's okay for you guys to frustrate each other. It's not permanent. Once this baby comes, you can relax a bit." He shoots me a look that makes me realize the stupidity of my words. "Right. Yeah. Then you'll have a baby to worry about. That's not going to be easier."

"No, it's not. Right now I'm just worrying about her. If she's safe, so is the baby. But when they're here, I don't know what the fuck I'm going to do. My entire heart is in their hands, and it's terrifying. I worry all the time, about everything."

I drop onto my ass in front of him so I can peer up at him. "I think that's normal man. I'm not an expert, but love comes with worry. I worry about all of you."

"Different," he mutters. I hear the tightness of his throat, the emotion in the one word, so I'm not surprised he keeps signing. Speaking takes effort and focus, and for a conversation like this, one with heightened emotions, signing gives him the flow he needs. "*We can take care of ourselves. I*

worry about the family, but it's a vague kind of 'hope he's all right' kind of worry. With Holly? I wake up in the middle of the night just to hold her belly. I can't stop until I feel the baby move. I watch her all the damned time. If she winces, I lose my damned mind."

"You have to ease up. This level of worry can't be good for either one of you. But I have no idea how to help you do that." Sometimes I wish I were smarter, like Jonas level smart but with better people skills. I would be unstoppable. I would go around fixing everyone's problems, giving great advice and everyone would love me. Or they'd punch me in the face. Could go either way. "What do you need? Want me to spend more time at your place? I could bring Bree, and we could chill. Give you a chance to go do something for you. Even just workout. Something man. Anything."

"Bree?" Micah asks with a raised brow. Well that distracted him from his worry. And it's Micah, so I don't brush off the question. If one of my other brothers were asking, I'd hesitate, but Micah knows some shit. The man's turned his living room into a library, and it's not just decoration. He's read every single book.

"Yeah. We've been hanging out. We get each other."

"Nothing...more?"

I tighten my lips and shake my head. "Nah, man. Nothing more. She's still healing. Besides, I'm not sure i'm what she needs."

He stares at me, eyes wide for a minute. "*The fuck you aren't,*" he signs fiercely. "*She's been through some shit, so she'll need a careful hand. Of course that could be you. If you're not interested, fine, but she would be damned lucky to have you. You're one of the best men I know, and if you can get over your fucking misplaced guilt you could be there for her like no one else ever could.*"

Misplaced guilt? Jesus, did everyone see it but me? Apparently, yeah, they did. "I didn't think it was misplaced," I mutter.

“Dumbass,” Micah returns with a curl of his lip. That’s pretty damn definitive. *“Kids take the world on their shoulders, and they’re screwed up by adult decisions. They have no control over their own lives at that age, so why the fuck could they be the cause of any tragedy?”* He shakes his head and mutters, “Dumb.”

“Right. Yeah that’s logical. I just...couldn’t see it, you know?”

“What changed?”

“Bree. She pointed out that I was being an idiot, and wouldn’t ever lay that kind of blame on a kid. We get lost in our own shit sometimes,” I say, raising my eyebrows at him. “I’ve admitted my shit. Now, you’re the one being a dumbass.” He gives me a flat look, and I gentle my voice. “We’re men. We’re designed to want to protect. But some things are out of our control. It makes us hold tighter to the pieces we can control. I’ve seen it too many times at work. A garage owner’s personal life goes down the drain, and they tighten their grip on their business. They end up a nightmare to work with, controlling, overbearing, and before they know it, they’ve driven away all of their good employees. In the end, they’re left with an empty garage and an emptier bank account.” Micah’s face is twisted into a grimace. He’s getting it.

“Holly’s...everything. Can’t I—“ he stops and draws in a big breath, exhaling slowly, then pins me with a look of absolute certainty. It’s the same look he wore when he decided to bring Holly to live with him after the fire. He was immovable then, so I’m relieved to see it now. The panicky look he’s been wearing the last few months was freaking me out.

“Won’t lose her,” he says firmly, nodding more to himself. He gives me a nod, and focuses on the gym bag at his feet. I move to the other bench and busy myself getting ready for class. I need this. Time to get out of my head and into my body. Time to put aside all my internal drama and just be with my brothers. Spend some real quality time...choking each other out. Sounds like heaven.

Only when I get to the other room Becca's self defense class is exiting, and of course, Bree's right there. I was so focused on getting a glimpse of Holly when I was peeking through the window, I didn't even try to catalog the other students. But of course she's here. She spends a lot of time in Becca's classes. I think they do a bunch of one on one's too.

Our eyes lock from across the room and for a minute, I'm a statue. She's too beautiful. Her skin a rosy pink, flushed from the workout, eyes shining with life.

At least her eyes were shining, until Becca leans over and whispers something in her ear. Her face drains of color, and she shakes her head, vehemently disagreeing with whatever Becca is saying.

But that's the thing about Becca. She's overbearing, and nosy, and most of the time, at least in here, she's right. And if she's right, she won't let up.

Ever.

I busy myself with warming up, but I don't let Bree out of my sight. Becca's hands are on her shoulders now, gripping tightly as she stands toe to toe with her. In many ways, the women are a matched set, both tall, both muscle covered with softness. But the eyes? That's where the similarities end. Becca's eyes are always alert, clear, or filled with mischief. She travels through the world knowing that she can handle anything that comes her way. She proved that against a knife wielding madman in one of our own garages.

Bree's eyes tell a different story. The story of a woman who's been through hell and hasn't managed to find her way back yet.

She will though. She has to.

Finally, Bree's head drops, and she says something that makes Becca squeeze her shoulder, then turn and search the large room. The Dojo is mainly one large open space filled with mats, with two smaller glass enclosed classrooms. So there's nowhere to hide. Not that I'm trying to hide. Her eyes dance over several of the other men, my brothers, and other

people in the grappling class. When they come to me, they lock on.

A shiver runs down my back, and for a second, I consider running. I have no idea what she wants, but the last time she looked at me like that, I got kned in the jewels by a dozen women. Not doing it again, no way. Not for anything.

She must read the panic on my face, because a smirk covers hers.

That's even more terrifying.

I honestly thought things couldn't get scarier until she strides over to me, crouching down in front of me on the mats.

"Bree's joining the class. I'm partnering her with you."

I 'm going to hyperventilate. Then I'll pass out and fall on my face in front of all these men. Still, that might be preferable to Becca's plan. Because I don't think I'm ready for this. I can't do it.

I won't.

Except, apparently, Becca doesn't hear any of those words. She just holds your shoulders and talks to you until you stupidly believe you can handle anything.

Then she walks away and I'm left with all my fear and my doubts...and my malfunctioning lungs.

I really do feel like I'm about to pass out until I see who Becca stops in front of. Nick, wearing tight shorts and an equally tight t-shirt, gives her a look that I know well. It's the same way I look at her, with this mix of fear and awe, all wrapped up in a bundle of anxiety. I wish I could say those feelings are reserved for the gym, but in all honesty, Becca's a little unhinged, so you have to keep alert when she's around. Or you'll find yourself in a seedy bar, in an arm wrestling competition with a bachelorette party.

But when he locks his eyes on me, something new crosses his face. Something that makes my bare toes curl against the padded mat on the floor. Something that makes my heartbeat speed up. I press a hand to my chest, covering its dancing beats, watching as he nods to Becca. She slaps him on the face, a little tap that makes him roll his eyes at her. Then she's back with me, right in my face, blocking my view of Nick.

“You can do this Bree. You’re going to work with Nick. You’re going to kick his ass, I have no doubt.”

“You want me to kick Nick’s ass? How the hell am I supposed to do that?” My stupid breathing picks up again, and she grips my shoulders. “I don’t want to. Why can’t we keep working together? That’s been going well. We’ve been doing it for months.”

“That’s the problem,” she says, squeezing gently. “You can’t keep working with me. You’re not afraid of me.”

“Not true,” I mumble, glaring at her. “You’re terrifying.”

She grins. “Thank you! Now, as I was saying, you have to challenge yourself to face your trauma. That means working with a man. You have the skills Bree, I’ve made sure of it. But it’s no use if you freeze up whenever someone with balls gets in your face.”

“You have balls,” I mutter, not at all surprised when she just beams at me. Nothing gets to her. “I don’t freeze up,” I say, feeling stupid when she gives me a look. I do freeze up. It’s a fact. I don’t know why I keep denying it.

“I’m not a psychologist. You have one of those already, so I’m not trying to take their place. But I do know that facing what scares you is the best way to start conquering that fear. You can’t spend the next decade worrying about the next time a man gets rough with you. You will have to face a next time, and I’d much rather you do it here in a controlled environment than out there, alone.”

When she puts it like that...I still don’t want to do this. The certainty in her voice, that someone is going to try to hurt me again, is devastating. But she’s not wrong. Statistically, it could happen again, with a boyfriend, or some random man on the street. And the fear that’s wracking my body thinking about it makes me so...angry. I hate everything about it, and its presence in my body. I want it gone so badly that I do something that I promised myself I wouldn’t do.

I agree to her stupid plan.

She leads me over to Nick, then heads off to talk to the instructor, one of the owners of this place. And I'm left looking into the richest, prettiest brown eyes I've ever seen. He's searching my face, and the worry on his calms some of my panic. Not all of it, but enough that the black spots in my vision recede.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he finally asks, looking torn. I can't figure out if he wants me to back out, or if he's just trying to reassure me that this will be okay. Either way, I surprise myself when I parrot back Becca's words.

"I'm going to have to face a man out to hurt me sometime. It's better it's here, with you, than out there."

He physically recoils, looking like he's just taken a bullet to the stomach. "What? That's fucked up? Why would you ever have..." he trails off, and I see the realization wash over him. I'm a woman. The likelihood that I'm going to face some sort of violence again in my life is high. "Fuck." His hand curls into a fist and he presses it against his forehead. "I really don't like that idea. At all."

"Neither do I. But I think I'm even more terrified of not being able to protect myself when it happens. I don't want to be anyone's victim again. I won't." Then I give him the deepest, darkest fear I live with. "I'm afraid that if something like that happens again...I won't survive it."

The way I say it makes it clear that I'm not talking about someone killing me. His face falls, filling with sadness. "Oh Bree."

I can't stand that look, or the fact that I put it there. I clutch his hand and pull it against my stomach. "I barely survived the first time. The pain and the fear, and the betrayal, were too much. But I pulled myself out of that spiral. And it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. I don't want to ever have to face that again. And I can't control it all, I know that. But I have to believe that I can protect myself, or I don't think I'll ever be able to leave the house again."

"I can have security on you anytime you leave the house. One phone call Bree, and you won't ever have to worry about

someone getting to you.”

The idea is both unsettling and tantalizing. To know that there’s always someone looking out for me would be wonderful, but I’m not sure I could live with constant monitoring. I’m not Beyonce. I am not built for the spotlight. I never wanted it. I just wanted to live my small happy life.

But sometimes we don’t get what we want. Sometimes, a man walks into our life and blows it apart. Sometimes, you have to choose a new path.

Looking into Nick’s eyes, I make another choice, choose another path. A path that leads to him. To us. “Go ahead Nick, attack me.”

He doesn’t smile. If anything, his gaze gets more intense, his muscles tighter. “I don’t think I can. I can’t hurt you, Bree. I...I’m sorry. I can’t do this.”

He tries to step back, but I don’t let go of his hand. I hold it tighter and step into him, pressing our chests together. He looks down at me, absolute torment in his eyes. He is such a good man.

“You’re not going to hurt me. That’s the point, Nick. That’s why it has to be you. I’m safe with you. I know that. And that’s why this is okay. I need you to help me feel stronger. No one else can do it. There’s not a single other man on this planet that can do this for me.”

His head bows, forehead nearly touching the top of my head. “Declan should be here soon, can’t he...”

“No. I want you. It has to be you.” It’s true. Yes, I trust Declan, but not the way I trust Nick. Neither man would ever deliberately hurt me, but I know that Nick would cut off his own hand before he would ever raise it to me. I’m not sure when that certainty settled into my being, but it’s there now, locked in my mind and my heart.

I am safe with Nick.

I raise on my toes and press my cheek against his. “Please,” I whisper in his ear. “Please, do this for me.”

His massive chest grows bigger with his inhale. Then I feel it, the smallest, most imperceptible nod. A wave of relief crashes into me. “Thank you,” I whisper, then step back.

Becca and the instructor are moving to the front of the class, so I move to the side a little and scan the room, laughing when I spot our audience. Holly, Maya and Janey have settled into the corner of the room and appear to be snacking. The owner shoots them a look, but they grin unrepentantly. No food, no drinks other than water on the mats. That’s the rule.

A rule that apparently doesn’t apply to heavily pregnant ladies and their entourage.

Smiling, I give them a little wave, then turn back to the front, my eyes locking with Micah’s on the way. The look on his face, as he peers from me to Nick, is far too knowing. There’s a small curl at the corner of his lip, then he gives me a tiny nod.

He knows there’s more than friendship between Nick and I. And I think we just got his nod of approval.

Good. Only a butt load of people left to talk to.

And my sister, the scariest one of all.

Becca and the other instructor move us through a series of warmups before demonstrating some of the defensive moves we’re practicing today. I’m still freaked out as she demonstrates. Not because the moves are new —Becca and I have practiced them a ton— but because I never realized the intimacy of the positions until right this moment. Wrestling around on the floor with Becca was simple. There was no attraction to worry about. But now I’m supposed to do the same thing with Nick?

And when she calls for us to assume our positions with our partners, I hesitate. I trade glances with Nick, relieved to find him looking just as unsure. It makes it easier for me to lay down and spread my legs. From the outside, all of this looks crazy. And way too intimate.

And it is.

As Nick comes over me, into the cradle of my legs I realize I'm in over my head. This isn't scary. Far from it. Having Nick this close, this intimate, doesn't feel anything like I thought it would. We're in a room full of other people doing the exact same thing we are, and yet, it's as if none of them exist.

As we move through the motions, practicing the moves slowly, our bodies gliding and pressing together, I thank God I wore my thickest sports bra. Never, not once, did I think something like this would turn me on, but it *so* is. The heat of our bodies, the moisture on our skin...it's all sex. It's not supposed to be, I know that. But that's all I can think about, at least until Becca moves us into actual grappling drills.

"Bree, do you want me to go first?" Nick asks, studying the groups around us. In the corner, Micah has Zach in a chokehold from behind. Zach is scrabbling around, but shockingly, doesn't look like he's beaten. He should be. Micah is way bigger than he is, but even as I watch, Zach twists himself and breaks Micah's hold. Then he and Micah are jockeying for position, both trying to pin the other one.

"No," I say firmly, certainty pumping through my muscles. "I'm okay. You pin me first." I get down on all fours, waiting for Nick to lie along my back, locking his arm under my chest. I know it's Nick, but the power of his body and the intimacy of our position suddenly make me feel vulnerable. I didn't feel this way when Becca did the same thing, and now I get why she pushed this. It's different with a man. The strength of his arms, the power in his body, is different. A shudder of fear wracks my body. Nick starts to pull back, but I grip the arm across my chest tightly. "No. Don't leave. Just...give me a second."

I don't fight the fear. I don't judge it. I just let it exist, and through it, I count Nick's breaths, and mine, working to match his slow, easy rhythm. I don't know how long we stay like that. The movement of all the other bodies in the room, the grunts and the occasional swears are all background static. It's just Nick and I in this bubble, but eventually, my body is back

under my control. The fear is still there, but it's a low hum instead of a roar.

I turn my head until my lips are nearly meeting Nicks. "I'm okay. Let's do this."

There's an electrical storm between us, zinging and crackling along our skin. It's been there through the class. Through the drive home in separate cars. And now, alone in the elevator, it's all I can feel.

My throat is tight. I should say something to break the tension, something to laugh this off. I'm the one that said I wasn't ready for anything right now.

But I changed my mind. No way am I going to ignore the pull between us. I don't want to.

The elevator doors open on my floor, but I don't look away from him. Cara might be home. Or she might not be. I don't care. I have no intention of stepping off the elevator anywhere but on Nick's floor. His eyes light with a scorching fire as the doors close and we move swiftly up to his level. This time when they open, I slowly, deliberately push off the wall. Clutching my bag in my hand, I step off, and stop right in front of Nick's door.

His bag makes a thump of sound as it hits the floor beside me. Then mine is lifted off my shoulder and dropped to the floor too. Then, in an echo of the hour we spent in that class, his back is pressed against mine. His arm comes around me, banding around my ribs and pulling me slowly into him.

"Bree," he rasps, chin on my shoulder. "What are we doing?" The stubble on his cheek scrapes against my neck and sends a tingle down my spine. I love that feeling, the heat of

the scrape adding another layer of desire to my already tingling body.

I have to clear my throat to speak. “We’re going inside, just like we have every night this week.” It’s true. I’ve been in his bed every night. Most of those nights I started out on my side, and by morning we wrapped up together. It’s the best I’ve slept in years. Maybe my whole life.

“This doesn’t feel the same,” he says, deliberately rubbing his chin along my shoulder.

“No...it doesn’t,” I admit. “Things are...different.”

“Since when?”

“Since tonight.”

He pulls back, arm staying wrapped around me, but his head moving away from mine. I miss him already. I clamp my arm on his, keeping him locked to me. We were in the same position just a couple of hours ago, but this feels totally different.

“The class was a lot,” he says softly. “You’re probably feeling all kinds of things. You did so good, Bree. I’m so proud of you. You kicked my ass multiple times.”

“You let me win,” I mumble, staring at the dark wood of his door.

His arms tighten, and he gives me a little shake. “No, I didn’t. It was too important to fake Bree. You needed to see how strong you are. You’re a fucking powerhouse. And if Tyler pulled that shit today, he’d be a sniveling mess on the ground. I am completely certain of that.”

My head droops in relief. I thought I was doing well, but it also seemed impossible that I could overpower a man as big as Nick. But it’s just like Becca promised me. It’s about leverage, not about strength. “I hate to admit it, and if you tell her, I’ll deny it, but Becca was right. I do feel stronger.”

His low chuckles sends a shiver dancing along my skin. “I won’t tell her, promise. Her head’s big enough already.” A wave of gratitude washes through me. Becca was there as soon

as I was healed, offering to train me. It took me a while to agree, and a while longer to get comfortable. Maybe comfortable isn't the right word. It took me time to feel not broken. But now? Tonight. I feel almost like me. And that's a really good place to be.

"Nick," I say suddenly. "Let's go inside."

He's silent for a long moment, then slowly, deliberately, like he's giving me time to change my mind, he reaches for my left hand. Holding my wrist, he brings my palm to the scanner next to the door. All the doors have it, an uber level of security set up by Declan. Cara and I didn't used to use it, but since they've been together, Declan's been pretty insistent. But it's a shock when it scans my palm, and Nick's door opens with a click.

"Wait...what?" I say breathlessly. "Why does my hand open your door? Does yours open mine? Can anyone get in?" I'm spiraling a bit, I know it. But until this second I didn't realize how comforting that layer of security was to me. The idea that anyone can come in scares me.

"Shh, no Bree," he says soothingly. "It's just you. I asked Declan to add your print to my door. Just mine. Yours is still just you and Cara."

"Oh," I say with a breathy exhale. Thank god. I didn't like the idea that Declan would betray us like that. "When did he do this...why?"

Nick covers the hand still pressed on the scanner, interlacing our fingers and bringing our joined hands to his mouth. I turn my head, resting it against his shoulder, so I can look at him. I want...no, I need answers.

"After the first night you came to me," he says, eyes looking distant. "I didn't know if you would ever need to get in here without me, but I wanted you to have the option. I wanted you to be able to get to me if you needed me."

"What did Declan say?" I ask breathlessly. We're supposed to be friends, but having a key to a guy's house isn't really a

friend thing. “He doesn’t know about our...sleepovers does he? That’s supposed to be just between us.”

“He was a little suspicious, but I told him that we’ve been hanging out just like he wanted, and that I didn’t want you waiting in the hall with takeout.”

I raise my brows at him and he grins, some of the tension breaking. “Weak, I know. But he bought it. It probably helps that Cara was wearing his favorite heels, and kept walking back and forth, teasing him. Well, that’s what he calls it anyway. She just calls it working.”

“What do you think?”

“I think she looks for all kinds of lame excuses to see him during the day. She plays it cool, but we all know she’s nuts for him. And him for her.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty lovey. She didn’t talk about him a lot, before they were together I mean, but when she did, I knew there was a spark there.”

“A spark,” he murmurs, pressing his lips to my palm. There’s a roaring sound in my ears. All I can focus on is his plump lips against my skin. I want those lips on other parts of me.

Now.

“Nick,” I say, my voice raspy and low, “take me inside.”

The arm around my ribs tightens, and then I’m airborne, toes a few inches from the floor as he slowly walks inside. He lowers me just inside the foyer, then turns me and presses me against the wall. “Don’t move.”

I nod dumbly, and stay exactly where I am, watching as he grabs our bags, bringing them into the foyer, and shutting the door firmly behind him. He presses something on the panel next to the door, and *Privacy Mode* flashes on the screen. Privacy seems like a really good idea.

Our bags are dropped against the door, and Nick’s dark figure is looming in front of me. His hands go to the wall next to my head, one muscled leg pressing into the seam of my

thighs. Head lowering, he brushes his lips against my hair, my brow, my cheekbone, gliding all the way to the corner of my mouth.

“What are we doing, *Carino*?” he asks again. “Just a few nights ago, you were in my bed telling me you weren’t ready for this. For any of this. We agreed to stay friends. But this is not what friends do, Bree. My friends don’t look at me the way you do. Like you’re thinking dirty things about me. Like you want to be under me. Friends don’t look at me like they want me inside them.”

My core clenches, and a low moan escapes. “You’re right. I said that. I did. I meant them. Then.”

“So what changed? I need to understand Bree. I won’t let this break us. I won’t do anything that might hurt you or scare you. I can’t...I can’t be someone that hurts you.”

I search his eyes, sad for the pain I find there. Pain that I caused. Not because I did anything, but because this man has feelings for me. “I don’t want that either,” I wet my lips, and raise my hands to his neck, cupping the sides and running my thumbs along his jaw. “I don’t know exactly what I’m ready for. I don’t think I can know that until we’re in the moment. But I do know just being friends is dumb. I can’t even believe I’m saying this, but I want more with you. You’re such a good man. The best, really. You’re nothing like the guys I’ve dated before. Nothing. And I like that. But it’s not just about you, not really. It’s about me. I feel different. Today made me feel different. Stronger.”

“You are strong. You’re the only one that didn’t see it,” he says fiercely.

His breath catches as I lift and press a kiss to the underside of his jaw. It flexes under my lips. Then, with a rumbling growl I feel right on my clit, he takes my mouth. It’s not a tentative kiss. There’s nothing delicate or first time about it. He kisses me like he’s been waiting to devour me. Like he knows exactly how good I taste and he’s desperate for more.

He holds me with a fierce tenderness, like he never wants to let me go. It’s the single hottest moment of my life. Better

than anything I've felt before.

It's in that moment that I realize I am so, so fucked.

Hopefully anyway.

She was made for me. That's the only explanation for the fire between us. She was made for me, and I was made for her. No way could we fit like this, right from the start, otherwise. The tight grip of her hands on the back of my neck, and the bite of her fingernails, gives me goosebumps. She is too hot and I'm not going to survive her.

And I really won't survive if she's wrong about being ready. I can't risk losing her, which is why I pull back. "Ground rules," I say, gasping for breath. All I want to do is dive back into her. Into her heat, into the heat of her mouth. She looks at me, dazed, and I nearly forget everything. But this is too important. Too big. I can't allow myself to forget that I want everything from this woman. Everything. And I'm prepared to take it slow if it means getting all of her in the end.

Even if she thinks she's ready for everything right now.

"We need ground rules, Bree. We're taking this slow."

Her fingers fist in my hair, and a low whine hits my ears. How can she whine, but still look like she'd like to tear my throat out? *Dios*, it's harder and harder to remember why we should wait. "I don't want slow," she bites out.

"Tough," I snap back, pinning her against the wall. "I do. You're too fucking important to me to screw this up. So we go slow. We don't skip the steps. And we take the time we need to build this right. Build it strong."

"Can women get blue balls?" she asks, dropping her head to the wall and staring up at the ceiling. She's too funny. Too

tempting. I can't resist leaning in and taking a bite at her neck.

"Oh baby," I murmur, pressing my tongue against the pulse in her neck. "I have no intention of leaving you unsatisfied."

Her breath catches in her throat and she shifts against me restlessly. I take her hands in mine and press them to the pounding in my chest. "Feel that? That's how I feel for you. And I'm not going anywhere."

She slides her hands up my chest, tracing the curves of my muscles, and then she wraps them around my neck. Her lips find mine and we kiss until our breathing turns heavy and ragged.

I slowly walk her backward from the foyer, through my darkened apartment to the bedroom, kissing the whole time. The moonlight streams in through the window and casts a silvery glow around us. I pause at the door to my room, taking in her silhouette bathed in pale light. She's so beautiful, so perfect it takes my breath away. I can feel my heart clench as she steps closer to me, her hands tracing circles on my back.

I want this woman more than I want my next breath, and it's terrifying in its intensity.

I'm not sure I can survive loving someone like this, but at the same time, I know I don't have a choice.

I take a deep breath and tug her towards me, my lips seeking hers in the darkness. I can feel the electricity sparking between us as our tongues meet, and I know that it's only a matter of time before we give in to the flames. Bree tugs me through the door, pulling me onto the bed.

She lies back on the mattress, and I follow, never breaking the kiss. I push her shirt up as I kiss her, and she arches against me. I trail my lips down her neck, pulling her shirt aside to kiss her collarbone. I catch her hands in mine and hold them above her head, pressing them to the mattress. I take her mouth again, and she writhes beneath me. "I can't wait any longer," she whispers, her voice husky and pleading.

"I want to look at you," I whisper. "All of you."

My hands tangle in her hair, and I yank her head back so that I can see her face. Her eyes are half lidded with passion. Her body moves restlessly under mine as I let my fingers dance at the hem of her shirt.

I slide her shirt up, slowly, as I stare down at her in the moonlight. I want to drink her in, I want to burn this image into my memory. Every inch of her is perfect, and I want to remember every dip and curve. Just in case things blow up my face.

I let my fingers trace the edge of the almost see through fabric of her bra, and she moans as I cup her breast. Her nipples harden under my fingers, and I lean down and take one in my mouth. I suck her through the lace, and she arches off the bed.

“Nick,” she moans, as I kiss my way down her stomach then up again. Her skin is soft, maybe the softest thing I’ve ever felt. There’s a faint blush of pink across her shoulders and chest. Roaming back up to her bra, I pull the lace down and take her other nipple in my mouth. I let my fingers trace her abdomen, and I kiss down to her hip bone. Her breath catches as I move my fingers to the front clasp on her bra, and she arches her back as I push the silky material aside. Her breasts spill into my hands, and I groan as I take her in, as I stare down at her perfection. I trace my thumb across her light brown nipple and she gasps.

I want to see more of her, but I’m too impatient to turn on the light. I’m not stopping for a second. She’s fucking fire, scorching me, the flames licking up my spine. I’m close to the edge, to losing control, so I pull back, bracing myself over her. “I want to taste you, every bit of you. I need to taste you.” I want to feel the wet heat of her on my tongue. I need to hear her cry my name, over and over.

Of course she can’t just lay here and let me have my way. Instead, she arches her brow and runs her hands up my arms to my shoulders. “Then I get a turn?”

I shake my head, lost in the sensation of her fingertips pressing into my skin. “Not tonight. Tonight I’m in charge.

Next time it's your turn."

She looks like she's about to object, so I cover her mouth with mine, taking deep, drugging kisses from her as I slide my fingers underneath the button of her jeans. I slowly unbutton her jeans and pull them down. She lifts her hips, helping me, and I slide them off.

I stare down at her, and my mouth goes dry. Her panties match her bra and I can see the wet spot at the front. The fact that she's wearing black lace under her plain t-shirt is kind of blowing my mind. Though I'd be happy with anything, even a sports bra and granny panties. Whatever Bree wears is hot, just because it's her.

Her breath hitches as I run my hand up her thigh, and then my fingers are there, pushing her panties aside. I can feel how ready she is, and it makes me shudder. She's so fucking hot. So wet. She's ready for me, she's ready to take me.

I want inside her so desperately, I almost can't remember why I thought it was a bad idea. I surge up her body, letting my hips press into her core. It's then that I see it. Behind the need and the want on her face is uncertainty. Not fear, thank fuck, but the smallest hint of worry. It's enough to rein me in tonight.

"Bree," I groan, taking her earlobe between my teeth for a little bite, "I need to get my mouth on you. Please baby, can I taste you?"

I pull back until I can see her clearly. Her gaze is fuzzy, so I wait until she focuses on me. Her slow smile and tiny nod are all the encouragement I need. Locking eyes with her, I hook my fingers in the sides of her panties and pull back, taking them with me. I don't take my eyes off of hers as I tug them down her silky legs, and off her toes. She helps me, raising one leg to kick them off onto the floor. She plants her foot on the bed, and slowly drops her knee to the side, exposing her wetness to me. She's glimmering in the moonlight.

My control snaps. I need her. I need to feast.

I drop my head and kiss her thigh, my tongue tracing patterns on her sensitive skin. I love the way her body responds to my touch, undulating and rolling under me. I want to know every inch of her. I'm going to drive her higher, wanting to savor how she tastes, needing to know everything about her.

“Nick,” she gasps. “Please.”

My tongue darts out, tasting her, and she's even better than I imagined. She's wet and ready as I drag my tongue through her soft folds. So fucking wet that I can barely stand it. She moans and bucks her hips against me, and I grip her against me, holding her still as I lick her again, and then again, and then again.

I slide one finger inside of her, and she cries out. Her hips buck, and she tugs on my hair. I can hear her breathing speeding up, and I slip another finger in as my tongue circles her clit. Her breath catches. She's close, and I want her to fly. I want to watch her, to see the ecstasy on her face. I keep my pace, and she moans, her fingers tightening in my hair.

Suddenly she throws her head back, and I watch as her body splinters apart. Her pussy clenches on my fingers, and she cries out, her hips bucking into my mouth. I love hearing her, feeling her. Her body is flushed, and she's tensing all over. She's so fucking beautiful like this.

She collapses back on the bed, and I slowly pull my fingers out of her. She's so wet, so fucking ready for me, and my cock throbs. I want to bury myself in her. I want to feel her wrapped around me, but she's not ready for that. Hell, I'm not, especially if it means that I lose her.

Her soft sighs combined with her fingers raking through my hair are nearly enough to make me come. I press my cock into the bed and trail my lips along her ribs, enjoying the quiet with her, even though my entire body is aching for release.

“Nick,” she whispers, her fingers still raking through my hair, “why are your clothes still on?”

“Got distracted,” I mutter, running my tongue along one rib, loving the way it makes her squirm.

“I want them off,” she says, her fingers tightening, tugging on my hair. I love that feeling, and wouldn’t mind her pulling a little harder.

“Tonight is about you,” I whisper, pressing my hips down again. “I’m good.”

She yanks my head back, and yep, I fucking love it. Her eyes are fiery as she glares at me. “Tonight is not about me. It’s about us. And I want you naked.”

“Not going to happen,” I mumble, staring at her bare breasts. They’re heaving in the most enticing way, and I’m more than a little distracted by them.

That’s why she gets the upper hand. Damn Becca for teaching her so well. Suddenly, I’m on my back and Bree’s on top of me, straddling my hips. She shifts until my cock is nestled right between her folds. The only thing stopping me from getting inside her is my shorts.

“Bree,” I wheeze out, “we’re not having sex. Not tonight.”

She circles her hips, and my eyes roll back in my head. “Nick,” she says, her hair in a halo around my face. “Shut up.”

Her mouth is on mine as she rolls her hips, creating the best kind of friction. She’s determined to drive me mad, but she’s not trying to get my shorts off, so I go with it. Her hair is a wild cloud around her face, and she looks like every sexual fantasy I’ve ever had, all wrapped up in one perfect for me package.

I can’t think. I can’t breathe. I can’t do anything but feel her as she takes what she wants from me. I grip her hips and roll with her, my eyes locked on hers, watching her feral smile as she rocks against me. I watch her breasts bouncing with each roll of her hips, and I can’t stand it.

I break, gripping her hips I grind her soft pussy down on top of me as I come in my pants. She works with me, grinding down on me, helping me ride it out. It takes me a second to realize she’s not just helping me, she’s coming again.

Wrung dry, I collapse back on the bed, and she follows me down, draping herself across my chest. She sits up just as quickly and frowns at me. “I want your shirt off, at least. Please?”

She doesn't wait, sliding her hands under my shirt and shoving it up my chest. I get stuck for a second, and her low laughter makes me want to put on a clown nose and make her laugh for the rest of her life. I'll make a fool of myself every day of my life if it means hearing that spectacular sound.

Finally, my shirt is off, and she tosses it across the room. I wonder if it's lying there on top of her panties. I like that image, our clothes tangled together on the floor. It feels right.

She lays down again, her bare breasts pressed to my chest, and my cock gives a little jump. He's not finished with her, clearly.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, tracing a little circle around my nipple.

“You're welcome. For what? The orgasm?”

She laughs softly. “For that too. But I meant for everything. I wanted more...my body wanted more at least, but I don't think I was quite ready.”

I run my finger down her cheek, pushing back the hair blocking my view of her face. “You'll get there, Baby, I have no doubt. You just need a little more time. And some more practice. And I volunteer my body to the cause.”

She's snorting with laughter, her whole body shaking. “You're such a selfless man.”

“I know,” I say, running my hands up and down her back. “Everyone says so.”

She falls asleep with a smile on her face and I'm content to just watch her, soaking in a peace like I've never felt before. I didn't know I was missing this. My whole life, just waiting for her.

I'll do anything I have to, to keep her.

“I don’t remember the forecasters calling for this much snow,” Julia mumbles, staring out the front window. We’ve had snow all day, but in the last hour things have really ramped up. We’ve already had a few no shows today, people who are safer staying in their homes than trying to navigate slippery sidewalks. But I’m not surprised to see the big pickup truck pull in, and Gabe exit.

He’s been one of my most dedicated clients, but this is the first time I’m seeing him since Julia decided to share my personal life with him. I’m a little on edge, unsure what to expect from today’s session.

He walks across the parking lot carefully, but with a lot more confidence that he showed a few short weeks ago. He’s worked hard, and a wave of satisfaction washes through me. I helped him get here. I helped.

That’s all I ever want, for any of my clients. For them to feel better.

When he enters, he brings a blast of icy air. He stomps the snow off his boots and yanks his hat off. I aim for a professional smile, but it morphs into laughter when he glares at me and mutters, “I should have stayed home. I would have, but you’ve fucked me up and now I want to see how far I can push myself.”

Shaking my head, I wave him toward my work area. We fall into an easy familiarity, and I push him through his exercises, reveling in his glares and muttered swears. He’s

different than he was a few weeks ago. Less cold, less wary. Thankfully, he doesn't mention anything personal, and I've relaxed. He's working his boots back on when he pins me with a look.

"This may be out of line, but I was wondering if you'd let me take you out? We could grab dinner or something."

If he'd asked me any other way, it would have been easy to turn down. I've been asked out before, but usually the words and tone were cocky, like it would be such a gift for me to go out with them. I would laugh them off, and we'd move on.

Gabe's not cocky. His words are low, a little hesitant. But he's serious. I get the feeling that he hasn't taken this step with anyone since his accident. "I'm sorry. I can't. It's not appropriate for me to date a client."

He nods, looking thoughtful. "I'm nearly done here though. You said it yourself, I'm making excellent progress. I won't be your client much longer."

"That's true, but I'm sorry. No."

Something shifts behind his eyes. He forces a smile. "I get it. I'm sure you have a lot of options, guys with all their extremities." He tries to laugh it off like it's a joke, but I hear the pain, and the clear belief that he's damaged, and somehow less than. I can't let him walk out thinking that.

"Missing a leg or not, you're a catch Gabe. Don't ever doubt it."

"But not for you?"

I shake my head firmly. "No, not for me."

I don't know if my reassurances have any effect, but he nods, and makes his way to the door. He turns back, the white snow outside outlining his large powerful frame. "If you change your mind, I'll be around." He waits for my nod. "I'll see you next week. Drive safe tonight, you hear? The roads are shit."

"I'll be careful. See you next week," I say, giving him a little wave.

The office manager makes the decision to cancel the rest of the afternoon's appointments, so soon I'm on my way home with hours of nothing stretching in front of me. I haven't had a snow day in years, and I wonder if Nick might be at loose ends too.

I keep my head down through the blowing snow to the garage, and jump in my jeep. She turns over easily and I smile. My Jeep was old when I bought it, nothing fancy, but I loved its rumbling growl and the way I felt in it. Over the years I've made some improvements here and there, but nothing big. I had student loans to pay off so most of my money went there.

But not too long after we moved into the tower, my jeep disappeared for a day. When I asked around, no one would say anything other than 'don't worry, it's in good hands'. I didn't like that answer, but I met a wall of muscle and blank stares. When it reappeared the next day, it was on new beefier top of the line tires. Inside, the heat was working like a dream, and a brand new entertainment system had been installed. But the biggest changes were under the hood. My girl still growled when I wanted her to, but she also purred. No one ever took credit, but I know that some of them worked all day to make sure my ride was safer. That's just who these guys are.

I pull out carefully into the snow, thankful for my Jeep's clearance and four-wheel drive. I hit the button to call Nick, smiling when he picks up on the first ring.

"Bree? You okay?"

"Do you never get phone calls? Why do you always seem so panicked every time I phone you?"

"Habit," he mutters, a smile in his voice. "In our family, phone calls are reserved for the serious shit, like needing bail money. The rest of the time, we text."

"Should I start texting you more?"

"No," he says firmly. "I always want to hear your voice."

"I always want to hear your voice, too. You have a sexy voice, Nick."

"Where are you?" he rumbles, voice low and rough.

“Driving home,” I say breathlessly, already imagining all the things I want to do with him.

His voice sharpens. “The roads are fucking nuts. Ransom closed the office earlier and sent everyone home. How far are you?”

“Not far,” I say quietly, clutching the wheel tightly as I maneuver around a sedan stuck in the snow at the edge of the road. It’s not the only one either. This is crazy. “There are cars stuck in the snow everywhere.”

“Stay on the phone with me. All the way home,” he orders. It’s an order I’m happy to follow. He talks to me quietly as I navigate the streets. Some are totally empty, and others are backed up thanks to stalled cars. By the time I pull into the underground parking at home, every muscle in my body is tight.

“I’m home,” I whisper to Nick.

“I know,” he says. There’s a low tap on my window, and there he is. He puts his phone away and opens my door, reaching in for me. I let him pull me out into his arms and soak up his warmth and the reassurance of his touch.

“That was scary,” I say into his neck.

“Yeah, it was.”

I pull back, searching his face. Echoes of worry still line his face. I smooth those lines with my fingertips, wiping them away one by one. “I’m okay,” I reassure him. He nods, but doesn’t smile. “Everyone else made it home okay?”

He nods, still looking grim. “Yeah, we got back a little bit ago.”

I search the garage for Cara’s car. It’s missing, along with several others. Nick follows my gaze, answering my question before I need to ask it. “Cara’s car and a few others wouldn’t have done well in the snow. We all came back in trucks.”

“Good,” I breathe, glad she’s safe, but a little disappointed that the tower is filled with interfering family. Nick seems to feel the exact same way. He looks around the empty garage,

then backs me up against my Jeep, his arms insulating me from the cold metal.

“I missed you,” he growls into my ear, his breath hot against my skin.

I moan, feeling his lips trail down my neck. “I missed you too,” I whisper, my hands reaching up to thread through his hair. His hands slide down my back, pulling me closer to him. We both know that we can’t go any further with our interfering family home and we only have a few minutes to savor each other.

Nick’s lips find mine, and I let myself get lost in the kiss. Little fireworks race through my blood, heating my skin. His tongue slides against mine, and moisture pools at the V of my body. I’m not surprised. I want him all the time, and this waiting is killing me. I actually agree with his plan to wait, but it’s in the moments like this that I rage against it too.

But just as quickly as it started, it ends. Nick pulls back, panting, and I know that we can’t go any further.

He takes my hands in his, pressing a quick kiss to my knuckles.

“Let’s get inside before we freeze,” he says, a slight smile on his face. “Your lips are turning blue.”

He takes my hand and leads me to the elevator. Heat radiates off of him and it feels like electricity is crackling between our fingers. As we walk, our hands brush at our sides, but we’re conscious of the security cameras. Inside the elevator, I let my fingers tangle with his, wanting nothing more than to be with him. But this touch, this connection, is enough for now. Enough to tide me over until tonight.

“Cara’s probably going to be at Dec’s again tonight,” I say, giving him a small smile.

“Good,” he mutters, tightening his grip on my hand for a second.

I laugh, glad he wants to spend time with me. I honestly thought we’d get sick of each other. But that hasn’t happened.

We never run out of things to talk about, and around him I feel light. Like the best version of me.

His eyes never leave mine, and I'm suddenly very aware of how close we are.

"I can't wait," I say softly, biting my lip as his gaze intensifies. He inches forward until only a breath separates us and my pulse speeds up in anticipation. My hands itch to explore his body but instead they stay firmly at my sides as he leans closer still, the lust rolling off of him making me weak in the knees.

My heart races as his lips hover over mine and for a second, all I can hear is the sound of our breathing mingling together in the small space. Then suddenly there's a low chime. Nick leaps back and schools his expression into one of calm. I bite my lip to keep from laughing.

"You just levitated away from me. What's the chance that anyone..." My words trail off as the doors open, revealing Cara standing there, chewing on her lip. She's still in her work clothes, but she's wearing fuzzy slippers and her hair is in a messy ponytail.

"Good," she says, grabbing my hand. "I need you." I aim a distracted wave at Nick as she tugs me off the elevator and through our door. She shoves it closed behind us, then rests her back against it. She's watching me like she doesn't know what to say.

"If you keep chewing on your lip like that, you're going to make it bleed," I say quietly as I take off my boots and drape my coat over a stool at the island. "Just spit it out, lady."

"Declan asked me to move in with him."

I close my eyes and let a little wave of loss wash over me. It's only a small wave, so I let myself feel it.

"I'm not doing it. It's okay. I'll stay here with you," she says quickly, chewing on that lip again.

I turn to her. "Why on earth would you do that? You are madly in love with that man. You have been for years, and now you have a chance to really be with him. And what?"

You're going to say no? What possible reason is there to do that?"

I know what she's going to say, but we have to play this out. We have to finish it. "Bree," she says quietly, "I don't think it's a good idea to leave you. It hasn't been that long since...that night. You're still fragile."

"I knew you saw me as a little broken still, but I didn't realize you saw me like that. Fragile," I mutter under my breath. "I'm not fragile. I'm not broken. I'm just a little cracked Cara. I'm getting better, I swear I am. You have to stop this."

Her eyes widen. "Stop what?"

"Stop trying to pull me down."

She presses a hand to her chest, rubbing right over her heart. She looks like I slapped her. "I can't believe you said that," she says.

"Believe it," I say firmly. "You are babying me. You're a class A helicopter mom." I hold up my hand, silencing her objections. "I needed that from you. I did. At the beginning, I let you put yourself between me and the world. But you don't have to do that anymore. I mean, have you even bothered to really look at me? I mean, really look at me? I'm okay. I still have some rough patches, but I'm dealing."

Her eyes glisten with tears, but they don't fall. That's my sister, tough as nails, but a squishy underbelly. "You're so strong," she says, words strained. "I never meant to make you feel like I didn't believe in you. I swear, I was just trying to take care of you."

I walk to her, holding my hands out for hers. "I know you were. I do. That's why I didn't say anything before. But it's time. You need to live your life, and I need the freedom to live mine. We are seriously co-dependent. A little space is probably a good thing."

"I don't want space from you," she says sadly. I laugh, because she sounds like a whiny child. She squishes up her face at me, but she smiles back.

“I know you don’t. But honestly, I’ve kinda enjoyed the break this week. You and your man try to be discrete, but these walls are not that thick and if I have to hear you order him to fuck you harder one more time, I might lose it. How would you like hearing me with a guy?”

Cara laughs and gives me a look. “I’ve heard it more than once. You’re no innocent angel.” She sobers and squeezes my hands. “You’re right. I know you are. And I’m really glad you’re feeling better. I really am. Just promise me you’ll be smart. Take your time and later, like way later, when you’re ready to date again, you let Declan run his background first. He can weed out the bad ones.”

“There’s a lot of hot guys right here in this family.” I shouldn’t have said it. I know it immediately.

She laughs and wraps me in a hug. “Can you imagine? Sisters dating brothers? That’s too creepy even for us. Besides, all these guys know I’d have their balls if they ever put a move on you.”

She lets me go, unaware of the wounds her words have left. *She means well*, I keep reminding myself. But I’m having a hard time believing it. I want to tell her she’s wrong. That there’s a man close to me who is perfect for me, but I can’t seem to form the words. Why does she think she has to protect me from these men? Men who have been nothing but good and kind to both of us? Why does she think she gets to make those kinds of decisions for me?

I force a smile, and clap my hands. “Well, what’s the hold up? We have a whole afternoon free. We can have you packed up in no time.”

Her eyes widen, and she drops back against the door again. “Wait. Right now? You want me to go now?”

“Yeah honey, it’s time. You need to start your new life, and so do I. But maybe one more sleepover?”

“With ice cream and a movie?” she asks hopefully.

“Dirty Dancing and Rocky Road.”

“You’re on!” She says with a grin. She grabs my hand and drags me to her room, her future bright in front of her.

I follow, a hollow pit in my stomach. How is she going to react when she learns about me and Nick? I can’t help feeling like it’s a lose-lose scenario. Someone’s going to get hurt, and relationships are going to be damaged, maybe permanently.

NICK

“This feels wrong,” I mutter, glancing back at the door.

Bree sighs and drops onto the other end of the couch. “You haven’t even touched me. It’s my apartment now, not hers. We’re not doing anything wrong.”

“What if Cara walks through that door?”

“What if she does?” Bree challenges. There’s a bite to her words that propels me to my feet. I think better when I’m moving, and my gut’s telling me we’re about to dive into a load of shit. I’m going to need my mind clear. Bree and I haven’t spent any time together outside of my apartment. It’s our safe space. But now that Cara’s officially moved in with Declan, Bree’s been insistent about us spending time here.

“Are we ready for that to happen? We talked about waiting, and really figuring out what we want. You won’t even let me take you on a date.”

Bree frowns and rubs her hands on her thighs. “We spend a lot of time together, we’ve had lots of dates.”

“No, we haven’t. We spend time at my place, which I have no complaints about by the way, but that’s it. I only see you outside of here if we’re all doing something, or I’m subbing for one of your teams. Every time I suggest we go to dinner or anywhere really, you get weird.”

“I don’t get weird,” she mumbles. I tilt my head at her, and a wash of pink fills her cheeks. “Okay, I get weird,” she admits grudgingly.

I sit on the coffee table in front of her. I reach out to cup her knees, then think better and pull my hands back. “I’m almost afraid to touch you,” I confess. “You pull away from me. Not all the time, but whenever we’re in public. I can’t quite figure out why. Why don’t you want anyone to know about us?”

She presses her lips together, and her eyes get shiny. I want to tell her to forget about it. Reassure her that everything is fine, but my gut tells me we’ve reached a point of no return. We have to work this out, or it’s going to destroy us before we even get to the good stuff. So I brace my elbows on my knees and give her time to process.

Things have been so good between us for the last week. I see her almost every night, and I’m not sick of her, not even a bit. I’ve never had this with anyone. All my previous relationships were short-lived. Part of that might have to do with my fucked up head, but it’s also more than that. I’ve never connected with anyone the way I do with Bree. I don’t just like her, I respect and admire her. So feeling like her dirty little secret’s starting to get to me.

Bree grabs a pillow off the sofa and hugs it to her chest. Her fingers play with the ribbed edge. “You’re spooked about Cara finding out,” she finally says.

I nod. “Yeah. Your sister’s scary. But I’d claim you in a heartbeat and face her wrath if I thought you were ready for that. But I get the feeling you’re not.”

“So then why are you so freaked about being in my place?”

“Because I don’t have a death wish. Cara walking in and finding out about us that way is the stuff of nightmares. No, when we’re ready...if we’re ready to tell her, it has to be purposeful. She’s going to have big feelings about it, and we need to be prepared for that.”

“Big feelings,” Bree says with a groan. “She flat out told me that I won’t be dating any of you. I don’t really get it. You all are good guys, so I don’t see why she’d draw a line in the sand like that.”

I shift uncomfortably and run my fingers through my hair. “Ah...I might understand where she’s coming from there.” Bree leans forward, and I rush the words out. “I used to be pretty casual about...women. Cara saw and heard a lot.”

“She thinks you guys are horn dogs.”

“We used to be. I used to be. I don’t think it was anything crazy, but yeah, I had sex. I’m a grown man. I’ve been around a bit. But I get the feeling Cara would rather see you with a virgin.”

That startles a laugh out of her, and I relax a little. This conversation has been a long time coming. At least it feels like a long time. We’ve only been spending time together, I can’t call it dating yet, for a few weeks, but I already know what I want.

Everything.

I want all of her. I want all her nights and her days. All her happy and her sad.

What I don’t want to be anymore is her secret.

“We can handle Cara. That’s what I do for a living baby. Handle pissed off people. I have skills.” I send her a wink and she grins, loosening her grip on the pillow.

“I don’t want to disappoint her,” she admits quietly. “She’s been there for me through everything. She raised me.”

“Do you think I’m a bad guy?”

“No! Of course not. I think you’re the best guy.”

“Then that has to be enough. Cara always trusted your decisions in the past. She can get there again.”

“In the past,” Bree emphasizes. “She trusted me in the past. But I made a pretty huge mistake, and I don’t think she trusts me anymore. I don’t really blame her. I don’t trust me.”

“Is that why you won’t let me hold your hand when we’re in public?” She gives me a guilty look, and I press on. “After Volleyball this week, I tried to hold your hand, and you pretended you didn’t notice. You pulled away and fussed with

your bag.” She wouldn’t look me in the eye either. “It didn’t feel good.”

She closes her eyes slowly, forcing a tear to fall, trailing down her cheek. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers. I can’t take the separation between us, so I move to the couch and haul her into my lap. She comes easily, thank fuck, and dumps the pillow on the ground so she can wrap her arms around me instead.

“The only way I can prove to you that you can trust me is to be here. To show up. To show you who I am. It’s going to take time, but that’s something I have lots of when it comes to you. But you have to let me in a little bit, baby. You have to let me show you how good I can be to you.”

A hint of mischief enters her eyes. “I know exactly how good you are.”

“Sassy wench,” I mutter, pulling her close for a long, drugging kiss. I crave her like nothing else in my life. I’ve always prided myself on being a man without vices. I didn’t depend on anything to get through the day. But I’ve found my new addiction. She’s a five foot ten walking wet dream and I can’t get enough of her.

She pulls her mouth from mine and drops her forehead against my neck. “Okay,” she murmurs, “take me on a date.”

“Really? Right now?”

“Ten AM on a Saturday sounds like the perfect time to me.”

I tug her back for another kiss. “You’re on. Let’s go.” I playfully dump her onto the floor, making her giggle, and run for the door. “Let’s go, woman. Times’ a wasting.” I put my hand on the doorknob and wave my other hand at her.

Still laughing, she stands and grabs her purse off the back of the chair. “I assume I’m dressed appropriately for wherever we’re going?” She waves her hand at her jeans and black sweatshirt. I’m wearing the same thing and got a stupid thrill when I walked in here this morning and realized we matched. Apparently, I’d like to be that couple.

“You look beautiful. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

She smiles, pushing her feet into her boots and grabbing her coat. She rises on her toes to press her lips to mine. “Ok honey, woo me.” Her hand covers mine, and she opens the door. I’m left standing there, reeling. Honey. She called me honey. I’ve gotten Dude, and Nick, and the occasional hey you. But, honey? Oh, I’m going to do whatever I have to do to get more of that.

I want to be her honey.

We end up running to one of the local shops for brunch, our breath making billowing clouds behind us. The place is upscale, so we stick out in our casual clothes, but Bree doesn’t give a damn, and neither do I. All I care about is her. Being with her.

And when I stretch my hand out on the table, palm open in invitation, she only hesitates for a second. With a tumultuous smile, she puts her hand in mine. We’re not far from home. There’s a chance family could walk by and see us seated in the window, but she still accepts the connection. I find myself looking at the people that pass, and the others in the restaurant, wanting them to see our connected hands, wanting them to realize she’s with me. That she chose to be with me.

Every time someone actually looks, I stick out my chest like some rooster. It’s really fucking dumb, but I can’t seem to help myself.

We drift through the early afternoon, wandering through stores and coffee shops. Not buying anything, just talking about anything and everything. I’ve never had this easy relationship with anyone. Bree and I can happily argue about anything, never running out of things to share. I love the cadence of her voice, the way her eyes light up when she’s defending her point, or trying to convince me that I’m being ridiculous.

Eventually we make our way back to the tower and she takes my breath away by holding my hand in the elevator. I crowd her at her apartment door, so desperate to touch her that

I'm actually shaking. Her hand, pressed to the scanner, seems to be trembling too.

I'm not in this alone. This raging desire between us has only grown this week. We've been intimate, but not all the way, and now, standing pressed against her, nose in her hair, I can't think of any reason to wait anymore.

Her door opens and we shove through, quickly slamming it behind us. She spins, wraps her hands around my neck, and pulls me down to her. Looking in her eyes, I know that this time, we're not stopping. We're all heat and hands, pulling and tugging. There's laughter too, as we fall to the bed in a tangle. She gets caught in her shirt, I get caught in mine, but somehow we manage to get down to just our underwear.

I spear my hands into her hair, using my grip to tug her to me. Judging by her low moan, she likes my show of dominance. I make a mental note that she doesn't mind me being a little bossy. I think I have the upper hand, but she slides her hands down my stomach, under the band of my underwear and wraps her hands around me.

We've done a lot this week. I've tasted every inch of her skin, but I haven't let her get her hands on me. I knew that when she did, I'd break.

I was right.

Grabbing the sides of her panties I yank, the thin material tearing easily. "We're not stopping Bree. I'm getting inside you today," I growl, arrowing for her core. I need another taste, and I want to make sure she's good and ready for me.

Her response? A throaty moan and a frantic nod.

I could ease into it. Teaser her and ramp things up slowly. I'm not in the mood for slow. Instead, I press my tongue against her clit and she bucks up, shaking as I swirl around the sensitive area, teasing and licking until she's trembling. She grips my hair, tugging and pulling me closer, desperate for more. But there's no rushing me. I've learned over the last week that making Bree come on my face is about the sexiest

thing I've ever experienced, and I won't stop until I get it again.

So I keep up the torture, finding every hidden pleasure spot until she's panting and begging for more. Finally, when she's so close to the edge that I can feel her body shuddering, I push two fingers inside her, curling them and stroking in a way that makes her scream my name.

I'm not done yet though. As she comes down from the first wave of pleasure, I pull back slightly and add another finger, pushing even deeper until she's bowing off the bed, her hips thrusting against my hand.

Every time she rocks forward I send a shockwave of pleasure racing through her body and as I keep up the steady rhythm of teasing and stroking, I'm rewarded with more cries and moans until finally she shatters. When I finally pull away, Bree is quivering beneath me, her eyes heavy with desire.

"Please," she whispers, reaching out for me with trembling hands. "I need you."

"Thank fuck," I mutter, rubbing the back of my hand against my mouth.

Pushing her thighs wide, I slide between them, my mind consumed by her. Desperate to be inside her, I push.

It takes me way too long to figure out what's going on. I actually have to look down to see what the problem is. Bree's body is shaking, but it's not desire this time. It's laughter.

I don't blame her.

"Um," I mutter, looking down into those shining blue eyes. "I should probably take my underwear off."

Reluctantly, I pull away and stand by the side of the bed. I drop my underwear, conscious of her watching me, her legs sliding restlessly on the bed.

My brain is a bright green neon sign flashing 'take her' but I wrestle back control for a moment, and grab my pants off the floor, slide my wallet out of the back pocket, and pull out a condom.

Bree's watching me carefully. "You don't need that," she tells me. "I'm clean, and I haven't been with anyone in...well, I'm clean."

"I am too." I don't tell her that it's been nearly as long for me as for her. After I met her, I think I hooked up one or two more times. But something changed for me. Those encounters left me feeling empty in a way they never had before. So I just...stopped.

I drop the hand holding the condom to my side and take her in. The ruffled hair, the flushed cheeks, the hooded eyes. She's a knockout. She doesn't shy away, letting me look. She doesn't pose or suck in her tummy or try to hide. She just sits, comfortable in her skin, basking in the obvious lust on my face.

"I was so afraid that you wouldn't be able to do this," I admit.

Her head tilts questioningly. "Do what?"

"This. Be so comfortable with me. With sex. I...I didn't know how far things went with Tyler and if there was some... trauma around sex."

She reaches out her hand, taking mine, pulling me down onto the bed with her. We stretch out on our sides, and I pull her close, lining up our bodies. Her hands come to my cheeks. "That didn't happen. Things in the bedroom were ok. Not the kind of hot that we are together, but ok. He never hurt me that way. Nobody has."

I shudder with relief and drop my forehead to hers. I've spent too many nights making myself sick, worrying about all the ways he might have hurt her. "Thank fuck Bree. I worried about that so fucking much. I didn't want to scare you or do something that made you panic."

"You won't, promise. And honestly? I like sex. I've missed it. and I'd really like you to fuck me. Enough talking."

She's laughing as she says it, and I grin back. "Yes Ma'am. Whatever you say."

I've never taken a woman without a condom, but when she throws her top leg over my thigh, opening herself to me, I don't hesitate to slide in. It takes a little work. She's wet, but I'm big. I run through the alphabet backward to keep myself from blowing. She feels so fucking amazing, and I'm not even all the way inside. Finally, with one last glide, she takes all of me with a sharp intake of breath.

I'm gentle at first, taking my time to let her get used to me. But when she wraps her legs around me and orders me to go harder, I stop holding back. She doesn't need me to. She's right here with me, and she's making it pretty damned obvious that she can take anything I can dish out. All my worries about hurting her or doing something wrong are long gone.

She feels so good around me that soon we're both lost in the pleasure of the moment. Her hips are rising up to meet mine as we move together, our slick bodies sliding against each other in perfect synchronization.

She doesn't make me guess, telling me when something feels good, when she wants more, or harder. She's bossy as fuck, and I love it. And I give her exactly what she asks for, and more, until her breaths are one long continuous moan and she has a death grip on my hair.

That bite of pain propels my hips harder, faster. Covered in sweat, our bodies glide and slap. I'm covered in her, and she's covered in me.

And when we finally break, when all our tension coalesces into one big explosion, I'm almost sad. I wanted to stay here like this, with her, for the rest of my life.

"Nick, oh my god, that was...it was so..so..." she trails off, staring at the ceiling with a goofy grin. Her arms and legs are spread straight out, where they fell after she came down. I drop down beside her, holding her hand in mine.

"I know," I say with feeling. I don't have the words either.

She closes her eyes, a silly smile on her face. I don't close mine. I'm just going to lay here for the rest of the afternoon and watch her.

Ok, not for the rest of the afternoon, but for the next little while.

Then I'm going to drag her on top of me and make her ride me.

Less than ten minutes later, three quick texts from my phone have me surging to my feet with a yell. "Baby! That's the baby text thread!" I trip over the end of the bed and land with painful grunt on the floor. I yank my jeans to me, searching my pockets, pulling out my phone with a triumphant cry.

Micah: It's time. Holly's water broke. She's been having contractions all day and didn't tell me. We're going to the hospital. Meet us in the garage now!

"This is not a drill," I yell at Bree, scrambling into my pants and yanking my shirt over my head.

"Holly?" She jumps out of bed, breasts bouncing, and for a second I contemplate ignoring the text. Just for a second though, because...baby! "The baby's coming?"

"Yes! Now, right now. We have to get to the garage."

"Wait, everyone's going?" she asks, spinning in a circle as she puts on her bra.

I toss her shirt to her. "Hell yeah we are."

She laughs and pulls her shirt over her magnificent breasts. "Well let's go then." I run through the apartment, shove my feet into my shoes and tumble out the door, automatically closing behind me, only to freeze.

Janey and Abby are standing the hallway, eyes wide and locked on me. I'm trying to figure out how to play this. Maybe I could say I was just checking on Bree or—

Abby chokes out a laugh and points at me. "Your pants are on backward dude," she says.

Panicked, I look down and get a clear view of my back pocket. Shit, how the hell did I miss that? Why didn't Bree

warn me? I wheeze out a laugh, realizing there is no salvaging this situation.

Things get so much worse when Bree's door opens behind me.

The baby's coming. A new life, a new little member of the family. I don't want to miss this. My body is still thrumming, and I wish we were interrupted an hour or two later. I would have liked a second helping.

I grunt as I get my boots on, then swing open the door, wondering if Nick's still there, or if he's abandoned me in his excitement. I wouldn't blame him. He's all about the babies. Watching him with Mia is about the hottest thing I've ever seen.

My smile dies as I stop in the doorway, horrified at the scene in front of me. Nick, hair sticking straight up, is staring at Janey and Abby. Both women are smiling, but Janey's trying to hide it behind her hand. Everything that could go wrong flashes in front of my eyes. I see everything Nick and I are starting to build getting kicked over the way a grumpy toddler would knock over a tower of blocks. I won't let that happen.

I pin Abby with a glare. "You saw nothing. You got it?"

Abby grins, then mimes zipping her lips shut and locking them with a key. It'll have to be enough. I don't know her well enough to know if she'll actually keep her mouth shut, but it's a short term problem. Today was a revelation. Being with Nick, feeling so free to be who I am around him is healing. I'm done hiding. I'm telling Cara. But on my terms, when I'm ready. I won't be forced into it.

But now clearly isn't the moment. We're having a baby!

Just when I think we're okay, John and Jonas collide in John's doorway, shoving, trying to get through at the same time. They're shoving and swearing, but both manage to pop through. I freeze as the men catalog us. John's gaze travels over us, over Nick's sex hair, knowing. Jonas blinks slowly, then a spark of mischief lights his eyes. "You guys had sex," he says without a hint of inflection. "Nick, you are so dead."

Nick points a finger at Jonas. "Not one word. Promise me Jonas. If you tell anyone anything, I will break into your house and throw your Death Star on the ground."

Jonas gasps and presses his hand to his chest. "You wouldn't dare."

Nick takes a few steps closer until he's toe to toe with Jonas. "I would. In a heartbeat. Bree and I will tell people when we're ready, not before."

Jonas looks like he's got more to say, but Janey's hand touches his back. "You and Bree," she says quietly, her smile breaking free. "He won't say a word, I promise. And can I just say...I love this." She's beaming, and my shoulders relax. That's a better reaction than I honestly expected. If we're lucky, everyone else feels the same way.

"Baby!" John says, a hint of exasperation in his voice. An electric shock runs through Jonas and Nick. They whirl and slap at the elevator button. John hangs back and glances at Abby's door as it softly closes behind her. He shakes his head and wanders over to us.

"You and Nick huh?" he says, staring at the back of everyone's head. "Saw that coming."

"You did?"

"Yeah. The man looks at you the way the men in prison look at dessert. Like it's the best thing they'll lay eyes on all day."

"Oh," I say quietly, smiling down at my feet. "That's nice to hear."

John grunts. "You look at him like you wonder what he tastes like."

I choke out a laugh and cover my eyes. The ding of the elevator and a cacophony of voices brings my gaze up. More laughter erupts. Maverick's standing there, hugging what has to be the largest teddy bear ever made. The head is touching the ceiling. "Oh my god," I say, trying to stifle my laughter. Janey turns her back to the elevator and covers her mouth with both hands, shoulders shaking. Her eyes meet mine and I have to bite my lip to get a hold of myself.

Jonas and Nick aren't laughing. Nope, they're admiring the bear and attempting to squeeze into the car with it. They manage it, but Nick's body nearly disappears into the bears bulk.

"We'll take the next one," John says, shaking his head. Nick rears back, his head popping out of the bear's bulk, meeting my eyes and I give him a nod. He seems satisfied, and the doors close on them. "This fucking family. All crazy," John mutters, staring up at the numbers above the doors. "I don't even know why I'm going. I don't really know Holly and Micah that well."

Janey pats him on the arm. He gives her a beleaguered look that doesn't phase her at all. "You're going," she says, "because you're family. And that's what family does." He grunts in response, but I see a hint of warmth in his gaze. He's starting to get sucked into the Brash orbit. He's never getting out, he just doesn't know it yet.

The elevator ride down is peaceful, but Janey keeps looking at me. She has questions, I know it, but she's too sweet to ask me them in front of John. I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about anything. It feels too special. Nick and I have been in a little bubble, just the two of us, but that bubble is about to be blown wide open. More specifically, I'm going to stop hiding. I want us to be in the light. I don't want to hide what I feel anymore. But for tonight, I'd like to keep the bubble. Tonight isn't about us.

The doors open on the garage level into absolute chaos. It looks like everyone is down here, all arguing about what vehicles they're taking and who's driving. I catch bits and pieces as we walk closer.

“It snowed again this afternoon. We need the clearance of the trucks.”

“The minivan is easier to get into.”

“You better strap that fucking bear in the back.”

Maverick’s gasp is audible. “It’s not riding in the back asshole. It’ll get dirty. It needs its own seat.”

“It’ll fill the entire fucking car.”

Maverick glares at Kade, then flings open Kade’s back door. Still bear hugging the bear, he does a slow lean in, pushing the stuffed animal into the back seat. I slide over to get a better view, and watch as his feet slide on the concrete, before finally flipping into the air. His brothers, busy arguing, don’t seem to be paying any attention to him. Chuckling, I move to the truck.

“Do you need some help?” I ask his feet. The rest of him is wedged in the footwell under the massive bear.

“That would be good,” he says, voice muffled under the golden fur.

I grab his ankles, and tug. With quite a bit of grunting on his end, we manage to pull him out. I carefully lower his legs to the ground, and watch his ass shimmy out of the car. The man has a spectacular ass. I may be in love with Nick, but I’m not dead. I can admire a well put together backside.

Holy shit. I’m in love with Nick.

“Bree? You okay?” Maverick asks, peering at me closely.

Oh yeah, peachy. Just realized I’m madly in love with your brother and freaking out about it. “Fine. I’m fine.” I give him a quick smile. He searches my face, but thankfully lets it go. The man is sharp, and seems to read people as easily as Nick does. He knows something’s up, but he’s either too distracted or too kind to ask.

Doors slam as the men pile into the trucks. Maverick shoves the back door shut, and jumps into the front. He looks at me questioningly, and I shake my head and back up. “I’ll jump in with someone else. There’s no room back there.” He

nods and shuts the door. Kade doesn't waste any time driving out of the garage.

Two more trucks peel out after it, and move back toward the elevator to stand with Janey and John. "Did anyone see Holly?" I ask.

Janey and John trade glances and shake their heads. At that moment, the elevator doors open behind us. We all turn to find Micah hovering around a smiling Holly. Becca, and Evie are holding her arms, looking cheerful. Colton's in the back loaded with bags.

"It's baby day," Holly says happily. "Finally," she adds with a bit of a scowl. She's not overdue, but I can imagine she's beyond exhausted and ready to get her body back. It can't be easy for someone so small to carry a baby as big as hers looks to be.

"Yes, it is!" Janey cheers.

"Where's everyone?" Micah asks.

"Well, you see," Janey begins, trying to find a nice way to say it. She gives up and mumbles, "they left."

Becca's eyes widen as she steps out of the elevator. "They left? To the hospital? Without Micah and Holly?"

I'm expecting it, and she doesn't disappoint. Becca collapses against the concrete wall, howling with laughter. I can't help but join in when Micah mutters, 'Fucknuts'.

"I wonder how long it will take them to realize they left us behind?" Becca wonders, still laughing, as she pulls a set of keys out of her pocket. "Doesn't matter. Let's get you to your car, honey. You and Micah can settle in the backseat, and I'll drive you there nice and safe."

"My truck's safer," Colton says, trying to guide them in that direction. Colton is everyone's caretaker. I'm not surprised he'd like to drive.

"Where's Mia," I ask, peering behind him for their little girl.

“Declan and Cara took her to a play place, then for dinner. She’s been a little cooped up and needed to burn off some energy.”

Micah steers us toward a Lexus SUV. “Holly’s car...best.” He’s probably right. The luxury SUV is lower to the ground than the truck, but it has all wheel drive and every safety feature imaginable. It’ll also be easier for Holly to get in.

Colton gives in, popping the hatch and loading in the bags. Micah guides Holly toward the car. He keeps trying to pick her up, and she keeps slapping at him. It’s hilarious to watch. The poor man just wants to take care of her, but she’s not having it. She’s at the mercy of her body right now, and after a shake of Evie’s head, he wisely backs off. It’s a good thing they asked Evie to be their doula. They need her calm, experienced presence in the room. Micah took it so seriously, he had her take the last two weeks off work, and he paid her wage.

Micah gets Holly settled in the back seat, just as three pickup trucks come roaring back into the garage. The men all pile out, looking frantic. Kade is the first to spot us and he sprints over.

“We forgot you,” he says sheepishly as he reaches us. His eyes slide to Holly in the back seat, and he winces. “Sorry for leaving without you.”

Nick and Zach visibly clutch their chests when they spot Micah and Holly, leaning over to suck in deep breaths. Should I be offended Nick forgot me? Looking at the panic in his face, I decide I’ll let him off the hook.

The men decide that traveling in a convoy to the hospital is the safest option. We manage that for a few blocks before Kade’s truck is pulled over by the police. The officer looks a little overwhelmed when five vehicles pull over behind him. His hand clutching his gun, he peers into Kade’s truck. We’re just behind them in Colton’s truck, and I watch through the windshield as Maverick and Kade gesture wildly. The cop still looks suspicious, but he does a lot of nodding and moves to Holly’s car in the middle of the pack. He sticks his head in the back, then pops back out quickly. He grabs his radio and

within a matter of minutes, we have three other police cars personally escorting us to the hospital.

Do these guys even understand how weird their lives are?

We pull up around the back of the hospital, where a valet of all things, is waiting to take the keys. We all pile out and surround Holly, who's quickly lowered into a wheelchair. I've been to this hospital before. It's the same one they took me to that night. I don't really remember anything from that night, but I remember the days of pain afterward. It's the same one Evie works at. I know she was there that night too.

I had no idea this version of a hospital existed outside of a TV show. This side is wood paneling and expensive furniture. A smiling woman in an expensive suit comes to meet our group. That's when I realize we're missing a few people.

"Where's everyone else?" I ask Janey.

"Ransom was out of town, working on something. He's heading over now. Declan and Cara were out with Mia. They're going to finish up dinner then head over. We don't want Mia getting too bored. And Maya was at the shelter. Zach's going to pick her up right now."

I spin in a circle, realizing Zach isn't with us anymore. He was definitely in the garage with us. "There's just so many people to keep track of."

Janey nods. "It takes some getting used to, for sure. It doesn't help that they never stand still either. They're like a pack of eight-year-olds with ants in their pants."

Laughing at that absolutely perfect imagery, we follow the administrator to the elevators. We have to split into two groups and the guys actually rock, paper, scissor to see who gets to go with Micah and Holly. Their sheer enthusiasm is a joy to watch. Every one of them is excited about this baby and they aren't afraid to show it.

Things mellow out upstairs. Holly gets settled in a room, we're all plied with snacks, and the guys drop into chairs in the waiting room. Nick takes my hand in his, idly playing with my fingers. I think about pulling away, but breathe through it

and smile at him instead. I'm not blind to the looks we're getting, and the smiles. Nick inadvertently outed us, and it's okay. No one's yelling at us, or looking at us like we've fucked up.

I sag into my chair, so damned relieved.

For at least an hour, there's quiet conversation, and smiles. The guys enjoy their coffee and pastries and joke around. They lull everyone into a sense of calm, making all of us think *this is going to be fine*, when suddenly those ants in their pants kick in, and all hell breaks loose.

NICK

The coffee is sitting in my gut like a hot pepper, burning. This is taking too long, right? “How long does it take to have a baby?” I ask Bree, linking and unlinking our hands. I didn’t realize I did it at first. I had all this pent up nervous energy, and I just reached for her. But she didn’t pull away, and touching her made me feel better, so I hung on.

But it’s not working anymore.

I look down the hall to where they took Holly and Micah. Evie went with them, and none of them have come out yet. Why aren’t they updating us? Could something be wrong?

“I don’t know for sure, but I think anywhere from twenty-four to forty-eight hours,” Bree says, stroking the back of my hand.

“Forty-eight hours!” I yell. The suit lady looks over at me with a shaky smile, but I ignore her. “You’re telling me this could take two days? That can’t be safe, can it? They’ll do something for her before that? Can they just...press on her belly and pop it out?” As soon as the words exit my mouth, I realize how stupid they are, but Maverick and Kade nod like my suggestion makes total sense. Jonas looks at me like I’m wearing a skunk for a hat.

“That’s not how it works,” he says in his obnoxious know it all voice. Okay, maybe it’s his normal voice, but right now it *feels* obnoxious and know-it-all.

“Holly’s body is preparing to push out something the size of a large spaghetti squash,” Janey mutters, glaring at me. I’ve

never seen her glare before. I don't like it. "It's going to take time for her body to prepare for that, so no, they're not going to just 'pop it out'."

"I hate that we have to call it they or it. I'd really like to know if they're having a boy or a girl. Why didn't they find out? Can Declan hack the records? We don't have to tell Micah and Holly. It would be just for us," Colton whines, rubbing his hands up and down his massive thighs. He sat down earlier and started unloading an entire backpack of food, including a whole roasted chicken. I have no idea where he got it, but we've all torn into it.

"I already asked," Maverick admits, lifting his head from where it was resting on the giant bear's arm. He's been stroking that damned thing for the last hour. "He told me it would be unethical."

We all stare, because what? Declan's happily done some shady shit. He could have the information we want in a minute.

"I think it's a girl," Becca says from her spot on the floor. She has her legs up the wall, and seems to be doing some sort of a dance.

"There are lots of open chairs," Jonas tells her, frowning.

Becca raises her head and looks around. "Huh. Will you look at that. There are." Then she lays her head back down on the admittedly nice carpet and resumes her little leg only dance. Jonas stares at her hard before finally looking away with a snarl.

It's funny as fuck. Becca can get to him pretty easily, because she just doesn't give a fuck most of the time, and Jonas is the complete opposite. He cares about everything.

Maybe it's fairer to say Becca doesn't care about the details, and Jonas does. Becca's great at the big picture stuff and doesn't sweat the small stuff. Jonas cares about the big picture, but is highly aware of all the minutiae that goes into it. As a result, Becca frustrates him...a lot.

“Did you see how big her stomach is?” Maverick says. “No way that’s a girl. She’s carrying a big boy. Has to be Micah’s huge.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Jonas says, pushing up his glasses. “Babies come in baby size. There are some exceptions, but generally the size of the father doesn’t mean the baby will be huge. They let Holly go into labor, so they must think she can have a natural childbirth.”

“What happens if the baby is too big?” John asks, from his spot in the corner. He seems determined to keep himself removed from the group, but he can’t help getting sucked in. Jonas tightens his lips but doesn’t answer.

“A C-section,” Becca answers. “They slice along her bikini line here,” she draws a line with her finger on her abdomen, “then they pry the skin open, reach in, and pull the baby through the hole.”

I press a hand to my stomach, imagining that happening to Holly, and start to feel a little sick. Jonas gags, pressing his hand over his mouth.

“Jonas, stop it,” Colton growls, then gags and covers his mouth. Oh fuck, this is going to get bad really fast if we don’t change the damned subject. Thankfully the whap of a helicopter above the building distracts us. I pop out of my seat and move to the window just in time to see our helicopter swooping toward the roof.

“Ransom’s here,” I announce to the room. I exchange a look with my brothers and together we all move down the hall. John looks undecided, but finally uncrosses his arms and follows. Becca yells, wanting to know where we’re going, and I yell back. “Just showing Ransom where we’re waiting. We’ll be right back. Don’t worry.”

I know it’s a lie even as I say it. We’re not coming right back. We’re going to grab Ransom, yes, but then we’re going to go do a little recon.

We find the doors to the roof fairly easily, and meet Ransom as he comes down the stairs. His hair is standing up,

and his tie is crooked. He's been as anxious about the baby as the rest of us. Maybe more so. Even though we're grown ass men, he still takes on the responsibility for us. He's taken that protectiveness to a ten when it comes to the women.

"What's happening? Did she have the baby yet? Micah's not answering my texts." The last comes out in a growl.

"To be fair," Kade says, "he's a little fucking busy helping his woman have a baby. It's work you know. You have to get the breathing just right, and you have to stay positive." His face turns a little green. "And then there's all the stuff going on..down there." He waves his hands in a big circle around his hips.

John gives him a sideways look. "That's really fuckin' detailed. Why do you know so much about it?"

Maverick snickers. "Because he crashed one of the classes and made Micah step aside so he could coach Holly."

Kade gives him the finger. "He might need help in there asshole. I was being thoughtful." He scowls as the rest of us laugh, because nah, he was being a nosy bastard. He and Micah are attached at the hip, and Kade just wanted to be included. Simple as that. Kinda makes me wish I'd had a chance to attend one of the classes. Then at least I'd understand what's going on in that room.

"Bree said it could take two days for Holly to have the baby," I tell Ransom. His reaction is exactly what mine was.

"You're shitting me? That can't be okay. I'd like to talk to the doctor." He says 'like' but means, *get me the fucking doctor, I'm going to corner them until I'm satisfied with the answers I'm getting.* I'm all on board with that plan.

"They took them down the hall from the waiting room," Colton says. "But there's probably another way. The women are in that waiting room."

Ransom gets what we mean immediately. Over the last year we've learned that the women have certain expectations around behavior that just aren't convenient sometimes. It's

easier to go around them than argue. We had to learn that the hard way.

“Where’s Dec?” Ransom asks, pulling out his phone. “There’s got to be a map of this place. Can he hack the records?”

A throat clears and we all turn to stare at John. “You mean like this map?” he asks dryly, tapping the large poster on the wall next to us. We all take a step closer, and peer at the map.

“Yeah, uh...that should work,” I mumble.

John rolls his eyes and taps near the center. “That’s where we were,” he slides his finger along the map, “and this is the hallway they took them down. Seems to me if we head that way on this floor, and take the stairs at that end, we can bypass the waiting room.”

We trade glances, then slow nod. “Yes. That looks like it will work. Good plan,” Colton mumbles.

John looks at him and snorts. “Is it the money, you think, that took your common sense? Seems to me you guys do everything the hard way.”

Ransom pins him with a fierce look, but his lips are twitching. “You may have a point,” he mutters. “Care to lead the way oh great map reader?”

“Fucker,” John mutters, eyes crinkling. Then he turns and we all head down the hallway, passing nursing stations and patient rooms, then attempting to tiptoe down the stairs, but still somehow still sounding like a herd of elephants. Colton moves to the front when we get back to the fifth floor, and quietly pulls open the door, ducking his head out then back in.

“Don’t these floors have security or something?” John asks. “This has been way too easy so far.”

“They have floors that can be locked down, but this wing is the VIP wing,” Ransom explains. “Once you’re past security on the main, you have a lot of freedom. No random baby snatcher would ever make it past the front door.”

“Huh,” John says. “So they’re assuming if you can afford to be on this side, that you’re not a criminal?”

Ransom shrugs and grins, “More like, if you’re a criminal, you’re the kind to overthrow a country or run a billion dollar Ponzi scheme.”

“So where do you fit in there?”

Kade bumps John casually out of the way as he peeks through the door, earning a growl from John. “We’re the mostly reformed kind of criminal.”

“Mostly?”

“You’ve seen the kind of shit we do, brother,” Colton says, trying to wedge his giant body through a one foot gap in the door. I’m not sure why the hell he thinks that’s a good plan. Finally I get frustrated, knock his hand off the door, and open it all the way, waving him through. He pats down his t-shirt and lifts his chin as he walks out.

“That stuff with Janey’s brother and the scammer guy?” John scoffs. “That was you guys at your worst?”

“Yes,” Jonas says seriously. “We like being the good guys. There’s more money and praise in it. It’s win-win.”

John face turns thoughtful. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t want to fuck up everything you’ve got going on here.”

“Truth,” I say. “We’ve done shady shit, but we try to keep that to a minimum. Only when strictly necessary, or when we need to fuck someone up who is officially a bad guy. We’ve built a life for ourselves and the women that we will fight to the death for, but luckily, since we’re white collar and shit, we don’t have to fight to the death. Most of our fighting is in boardrooms and offices. And that works for us.”

John opens his mouth to reply, with a blood curdling shriek fills the corridor. I’d know that sound anywhere. “Fucking Colton.”

We rush out of the stairwell into the hallway, and find Colton across the hall with his face pressed to the wall. A very small woman is standing next to him, scolding him in Punjabi.

Her face is plump, with small lines radiating from the corner of her eyes, showing a long life, and judging by her outfit, a life lived very well.

John walks up to her, puts his hands together in a prayer position, and bows to her, speaking to her softly in the same language. She looks shocked, but yells at him too, then seems satisfied and walks through the open door, closing it firmly behind her. Where the hell did he learn Punjabi?

“What the fuck?” John says, turning on Colton. “You can’t just walk into people’s rooms. What the fuck were you thinking?”

Colton doesn’t answer, gagging again. He takes some deep breaths, then mumbles. “I should not have gone in there. That was so wrong. So wrong. Her legs were open and it was...it looked like something from *Aliens*. There was blood and..” Another heave, “goo. It looks like the stuff that came out of Mav’s nose that time I accidentally kicked him in the face, only a hundred times worse.”

I wince and cover my mouth, because that was fucking horrible. Mav’s whole face was black for weeks. And the mess was disgusting.

Colton gags again, and Jonas, obviously imagining the scene inside, does too. And they’re off, both of them bent over, dry heaving.

John stares at them, disgusted. “Neither one of you would last a day in prison. You ain’t seen disgusting until you have to pull a cat sized ball of pubic hair out of the men’s showers.”

I lean on Maverick’s shaking shoulders, laughing as Jonas and Colton bolt for the nearest trash can. “We are getting kicked out of this place, guaranteed.” I say through my laughter.

Ransom sighs, and stares at our heaving brothers. “You’re probably right. But we’re going to find Holly and Micah before we do. Come on.”

He stalks down the hallway, pulling up short when he spots Becca lounging against the wall. Her eyes are lit with glee. “I

knew you guys couldn't be normal."

Kade scoffs, looking cornered. "Normal. Whatever the fuck normal is. We were out for a fucking walk, that's all. Ransom wanted to stretch his legs."

Becca grins. "How are you such a bad liar?"

Kade scowls at her, but she doesn't pay any attention. She's busy looking past us to Colton and Jonas, both of them bent over, breathing heavily, gripping the sides of the trash can with both hands.

"Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum saw something they wish they hadn't huh?"

I snort and cover my mouth. That perfectly describes the two of them.

"Colton did," Maverick clarifies, ever helpful. "Jonas just heard about it. I think Colton saw a woman right in...the throes of pushing her baby out."

Becca cackles, laughing so hard she has to brace her hands on her knees to catch her breath. "Serves him right," she says through her giggles.

Ransom circles around her, searching the name plates next to the doors, finally stopping in front of one. He puts his hand on the handle and pushes it down.

"I'm not sure you want to do that," Becca says seriously. She puts her hands on her hips and squares off with Ransom. "You go in there, you're going to see a side of Holly you've never seen before. While you idiots were busy sneaking around the hospital, Evie came out and gave us an update."

Ransom lets go of the door, eyes looking panicky again. "What? What was the update?"

The rest of us echo him, shoving in closer, all desperate for an update. This is our first baby. Excuse us if we're a little excited.

"Well," she says slowly, drawing it out on purpose. "Apparently, things are progressing way faster than they expected. She's in something called transition. It's where the

labor goes from manageable to overwhelming, I guess. And Holly opted for no pain meds. She's decided on a natural childbirth."

"Why would she do that?" Kade asks, looking horrified by the idea.

"Something about wanting to experience everything and stay in control," she winces. "I don't think much about this process can be controlled, but I get where she's coming from. She'll be okay."

Something flashes across Becca's face that makes me look closer. Beneath her usual bravado is fear, something I've never seen from her before. She's been doing a good job hiding it up until now, but things are moving fast and she's obviously worried. Holly is her best friend, and she feels protective of her on a regular day. Today? It's probably near unbearable.

Ransom's face changes too. He sees her fear, and he takes a step closer. "She'll be okay," he says looking fierce, like his words alone can make it so. Becca's looks at him, her lower lip clamped between her teeth, unconvinced.

Ransom, being Ransom, is completely unable to resist a woman looking worried, even if it is Becca. Instinctively, he moves in, pulling her carefully into his arms. I get the careful part. Becca's scary when startled.

But she doesn't push him away. She actually lets him hug her. It's a moment I never thought I'd see. Their relationship is mostly sarcasm and teasing because Becca's tougher than nails, and doesn't need or want Ransom's nurturing. But today is apparently the exception.

She allows herself to lean on him for a moment, eyes closed. But it's a brief moment. Then her eyes clear and she grins. "Sing me a song, Ranny. Something about kitties. It will make me feel better." She's shaking with laughter even before Ransom shoves her away.

He scowls at her and puts a finger in her face. "You call me Ranny one more time..." he trails off, like he can't think of a threat big enough to scare her. He probably can't. Becca's

not spooked by much. Then an evil grin crosses his face and he leans in close, whispering something in her ear.

“Uh oh,” Kade says under his breath.

Becca’s face flattens. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Ransom straightens, looking quite pleased with himself. “Oh, I would. I guarantee it.”

She scowls at him, searching for cracks in his satisfied expression, but finds none. “Fine. I won’t call you...that, anymore.”

Ransom nods, satisfied, and turns back to the door. “I need to see them,” he says quietly. Becca backs up and leans on the wall, but Kade, Colton and Jonas, back from the trash can, Maverick and I all push closer. Despite Becca’s warning, we all want to see Holly. John doesn’t seem to feel the same way, moving to stand next to Becca in the hallway.

Ransom knocks this time, but doesn’t wait for an invitation, slowly pushing open the door. We shove in behind him. The room is dim, the city lights and a small corner lamp the only light in the room. We all squint toward the bed and find it empty. We step in closer and finally spot Holly. She’s sitting on one of those exercise balls. Micah is on his knees in front of her, and her arms are around his shoulders. Evie’s behind Holly, pressing on her back.

Holly lifts her head, spotting us. She smiles. “Hey guys.”

We take that as an invitation and crowd in. Holly’s face and hair are sweaty. She’s in a long black gown that’s hiked up to her thighs. I make sure I keep my eyes on her from the shoulders up. I’m not prepared to see that side of Holly. I’d never be able to look her in the eye again.

“Hey Holly,” Ransom whispers, crouching down next to her. He doesn’t seem bothered by the bare thighs. “How you doing? Hanging in there?”

She smiles tiredly and rests her cheek on Micah’s chest. Micah’s eyes look a little wild, but when she looks up at him, he forces a smile. She seems satisfied and settles back down.

“I’m okay. It’s harder than I thought it would be. The lady in the class made it seem like the breathing would take away the pain, but it doesn’t really. But Evie’s helping. My back is so sore. I’m really glad she’s here.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be, Hol,” Evie says, rubbing her back gently.

Holly looks teary, but her face quickly shifts. Her fingers tighten on Micah’s shoulders, and she presses her forehead into his shoulder. A low moan escapes, a sound that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand straight up. It’s a warning that we’re approaching dangerous territory.

Kade apparently doesn’t get the warning. He squats next to Holly and Micah, and opens his big fat mouth. “Remember your breathing, Holly. See?” He does the funny hissing breaths, and I take a step back when Holly’s head moves horror movie slow, to face him.

“You want me to breathe? Mister *I went to one class and now I’m an expert?*” Another low moan escapes and her face twists, but she zeroes back on her target right after. “I’ll tell you what mister expert, you go ahead and push an eight pound pot roast out the tip of your dick, then you come back here and coach me. Until then, GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY ROOM!”

We run out of there so fast, we leave skid marks on the floor. We fall into a pile in the middle of the hallway, Kade and Ransom landing on top of us. We just lay there for a second, stunned.

“We should not have gone in there,” Kade mutters, slowly rolling off the pile. “I think maybe we better go to the waiting room.”

“Yah think?” Becca and John say, staring down at us and shaking their heads. They look all superior, but I’m not mad about it. Going into that room was the wrong call. No doubt about it.

I wiggle out the pile, and stand, brushing off my clothes. “I think I’ll go check on Bree,” I mumble, trying to make a

smooth exit.

Becca's laughter chases me all the way down the hall and around the corner.

“Becca’s been gone a while. Do you think there’s a problem?” I ask the room. Zach and Maya glance down the hall. They’ve been here a few minutes, and Zach looks antsy already, knee shaking. He clearly would rather be wherever his brothers are than stuck in that chair.

Janey comes and sits next to me. “I’m sure there’s no—“ she’s interrupted by a bloodcurdling yell. We both startle, and look toward the hallway the noise came from, but can’t see anything.

“Was that...a woman in labor?” It sounded deep and high pitched at the same time, and I can’t process it, or the amount of pain that would force a woman to make that sound. Janey and I both look to the hallway, but no other noises come and eventually she turns back to me.

“I doubt there’s a problem. Holly’s in excellent hands. She has the best medical care money can buy, and a lot of people looking out for her.”

I’ve only known Holly six months, but already she feels like family, and I really don’t want anything bad to happen to her. Childbirth is scary, and despite what Janey says, things can go wrong.

I’m distracted from my thoughts on the dangers of childbirth by Cara and Declan’s entrance. And with them comes the adorable Miss Mia. She’s wearing a silver plastic princess crown, a red and black plaid shirt, pink polka dot pants, and yellow winter boots. Evie’s been complaining that

Mia's in a stubborn stage and wants to do everything herself, including picking her outfits. Clearly, she dressed herself today. I think she's pretty stinking cute, despite the fact that my eyes hurt when I look at her outfit too long.

"We didn't miss it, did we?" Cara asks breathlessly, dropping into the chair on the other side of me. Mia beelines for the brightly colored kids area in the far corner of the room, holding Declan's finger to tug him with her.

"I don't think so. Becca went to talk to Evie a while ago. We've only been here a couple of hours but..." I trail off and shrug. Cara hums and gazes sightlessly toward Declan and Mia. She seems lost in thought, and I wonder if now might be the time to tell her about me and Nick. I don't know if there's ever going to be a good time, so maybe I should just do it now, rip the band aid off and get it over with.

"Do you think you'll have kids," she asks me suddenly. I stare at her, mind blank, honestly having trouble processing her words, they're so out of left field.

"Um...yes? Maybe? I don't know. I haven't really been in a relationship that lasted long enough to think about marriage and kids. But being around Mia makes it seem pretty great, if super exhausting." She's nodding as I speak and I follow her gaze, watching as Declan lifts Mia over his head, then lowers her down to motorboat her tummy. I saw a lot of that in Miami, but it definitely was more R rated there. This? It's sweet and Mia's peals of laughter make everyone in the room smile. "Are you thinking about it Cara?" Everything is changing so fast. *We* are changing so fast.

She sighs and rakes her hand through her hair, then grips the arm of the chair, nails tapping. "I didn't want to, you know. Raising you —not that you were a kid— kinda felt like I'd been there, done that, you know? But since Declan, I think I'm starting to change my mind. The idea of watching him be a daddy..." her smile is soft and hazy. "I want to give him that."

"So you want to make him a daddy...do you want to be a mommy? Cause that's kinda how it works."

She wrinkles up her face at me and smirks. “Thanks for the biology lesson Bee, so helpful. She sighs and her fingers stop their tapping. “I want to be a mom. I want little Declan’s running around the house, and maybe mini me’s. But my life right now is *so not* the mom life. I work long days at Brash, and I’m at the club a lot of the time. Declan and I barely have time for ourselves. How would we make raising a kid work? Besides, I always thought that if I had kids, I’d give them the kind of life we had, with room to run and play and neighbors that look out for them.”

“They’d have tons of room to run at the high rise,” I remind her, “and tons of aunties and uncles to look after them. And I bet, if you ask, Ransom would build a grassy field or garden somewhere. I’m not really sure what that would look like, but I’m sure he’d figure it out.” Knowing the man he’d buy up an entire building and raze it if it meant making his family happy. He’s extreme in the best way.

Her smile is a little sad. “I guess so. I just never imagined this life, you know? Not that I don’t love it, but staying in the city was never my plan. I thought I’d graduate and go back home to start a business. Maybe open a store or a coffee shop. Be part of that small town life. But with mom and dad gone, and you to take care of, I had to find a new dream.”

“I didn’t know that,” I say slowly. “You always seemed to fit here. The sporty car, the expensive clothes. You seemed like you were happy.” I shift in my seat, uncomfortable with the idea that she changed her whole life because of me. Oh, I know it’s not my fault mom and dad died, but she had a ton of pressure on her shoulders from a young age. And she made it work. She took care of us.

She always takes care of me. She’s always made decisions that were best for me.

Suddenly, I don’t want to tell her about me and Nick. The idea of upsetting her or disappointing her is crippling.

“I’ve come to like nice stuff,” she says with a grin. “But I miss home. I miss walking down the street and waving at my neighbors. I miss feeling like I’m part of a bigger community.

I miss the festivals and sitting on the porch.” She winces. “I didn’t appreciate those things when I lived there. And when they were gone, I realized how wonderful it was to grow up there.”

“It was pretty wonderful,” I agree, covering her hand with mine. I give her a squeeze and let go. “You’ve got a pretty great community right here,” I say, tipping my chin at the waiting room. Zach’s moved to the play area and is crawling around on the floor with Mia, letting her ride on his back. Maya’s watching with a small smile. And sometime during our conversation, Janey slipped away to sit with Maya, giving us privacy.

“You and Declan don’t have to stay here. You know that, right? You can sell the club. I’m sure it’s worth a ton. You can work remotely for Brash, or do whatever you want. Maybe open that coffee shop? I bet you Declan would buy you a place in a small town. Who knows, he might even like it.” I give her a nudge with my elbow, making her smile. “He’s been a city kid his whole life. Getting him in the country could be fun.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure it’s worth it though, if everyone we love is here.”

“They own a helicopter and a plane, Cara. I’m sure visiting wouldn’t be that big a deal.”

She laughs. “You may have a point.” She slaps the arms of the chair. “I’ll think about it.” She rises and drops to the floor in the kids’ corner, smiling up at Mia. She’d make an amazing mom. And the picture she paints of a small town life is attractive. I’m not going to lie. The city has a lot to offer, but the blue skies and trees for miles of the town I grew up in still hold a big piece of my heart.

But when it comes right down to it, Cara’s my family, and home is going to be wherever she is. If she moves one day? I can’t imagine I’ll be too far behind. I don’t want to live with her again—having the apartment to myself is wonderful—but down the block seems like a good compromise. Close, but not right inside each other’s pockets. Kind of like it is right now, actually.

Lost in thought, I only vaguely register the heavy footfalls. Then Nick's here, dropping into the chair beside me and pulling me into his arms. "Holly's scary," he breathes, pressing his lips to my hair. "She scared the shit out of Kade. We probably shouldn't have gone in her room."

It's so stupid. I'm so wrapped up in him, smiling up at him as he tucks my hair behind my ear, his thumb rubbing against my lower lip, that I forget where we are.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Cara says, tone sharp. It cuts between Nick and I like a blade. We spring apart, and Nick's eyes shutter as she stalks forward, gripping the back of a chair with white fingers. "Why the hell are you touching her like she means something to you? And don't give me any of that friend shit. I know exactly what I saw."

He exhales heavily as he stands and turns to Cara. "Cara —"

"Don't 'Cara' me. Explain why you're touching my sister like you're fucking her? You're supposed to be her friend. She's healing asshole, and you took advantage."

Nick's face flatlines. I keep waiting for him to defend himself or to explain, but he doesn't. He can't. She's inadvertently hit on everything he doubts about himself. Cara's tearing into him about betraying her, and how awful he is, and she's sticking her finger in an old and painful wound. His face gets colder and flatter. Finally, I snap.

"Enough," I yell, rising to my feet. I move to Nick, taking his hand. Cara's eyes are locked on where we're connected. Her mouth snaps shut, and she turns sad eyes on me.

"How could you, Bree?" There's so much pain, and worry, and blame in her tone it's hard to sort it all out. But I have to. This is not how I wanted to do this, but I've been thinking about it for the last few hours, and suddenly I feel in control.

"How could I what Cara?" It's so clear to me how afraid she is. That's the only reason I'm able to speak so calmly. "Fall for a good man? Find someone who cares for me? Be

happy? How could I do what? Please explain what's so wrong."

She wets her lips, looking a mix of sad and angry. "You've been through so much. You're still healing. The last thing you should be doing is dating. And Nick? He's wonderful, but he's also a man whore. He's going to move on and what will you be left with then?"

Nick tenses, and a quick glance shows a tick in his jaw. I squeeze his hand tighter and when he looks at me, I smile and give him a wink. His brows raise in surprise but it accomplishes what I hoped it would, his shoulders lower and he relaxes. When I'm satisfied that he's okay, I turn back to Cara.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" I ask her quietly. She startles, so primed for a fight she doesn't know how to handle my soft words. She's been my sister my whole life, and you can bet I've learned a thing or two about how to handle her. The key is keeping her off balance, so I'm not going to get into a screaming match, which is usually the way we operate. We scream and yell, then move on, sometimes having accomplished nothing.

"You are my rock. And I know for a while, I depended on you more than I should have. I used you as an emotional security blanket. And you let me. You were always ready to drop everything for me, and I appreciate it more than you can know."

She softens, and I let go of Nick's hand, and take a few steps closer to Cara. "I'm not all the way okay. I don't know if I ever will be. But I'm not going to put my life on hold until you think I can handle a relationship. You don't get to make those kinds of decisions for me. You don't get to decide who I can or can't date, or if I'm ready."

Her eyes are glassy, and her hands are clenching, then releasing at her sides. "You looked dead," she says suddenly. Declan, standing still behind Cara, moves to wrap his hands on her shoulders, and pull her back into his body. His eyes are hard, locked on Nick. "I heard you scream...and I ran. I ran so

fast, but it still felt like I was moving through Jello. It took forever. And when I got the door open and saw you, I thought you were gone.” Her breath hiccups. “It was my job to keep you safe, and I failed. I didn’t like him. I hated him, actually, but I didn’t say anything. I was trying to let you live your life and make your own decisions, and look what happened!”

I feel Nick at my back, and give myself a minute to accept his silent comfort and collect my swirling thoughts. I’m very aware that we have an audience, but I don’t want to put this off, or move somewhere private. We need to do this right here, with our family as witness. I want everything out in the open so we can wash it away, once and for all.

“I fucked up,” I admit. “In the history of fuckups, mine was definitely in the top ten. I ignored every single red flag. I brushed off his behavior.” I tap my chest. “I did that. Me. And it took me a long time to realize it, but I’m kind of an expert on toxic relationships now. I know what to look out for. I know what the danger signs are. And it really sucks that I had to learn them the hard way. And it sucks even more that you had to get involved in it.” Cara takes a deep breath and nods. She’s with me. She’s listening. That’s all I can ask for at the moment.

“I don’t ever want to be in that situation again. I never planned on Nick. I thought he could just be my friend. I like him. I feel safe with him, so I thought that would be it. I didn’t expect more. But my feelings started to change. I saw how great he is, and how caring. Every time I needed him, he was there. And my feelings changed some more.” There’s so much more I could say. So much more that I feel, but I need to have those conversations with Nick first. He deserves to hear the words before anyone else.

“I understand you’re scared. I do. I am too. But whatever happens between me and Nick is between us. This could fizzle out next week. Or not. But that’s between us. And I won’t fall apart over a breakup. I’m stronger than that. I’m stronger than I’ve ever been, despite everything that’s happened. And Cara? I need you to not just see that...I need you to know that. Know it deep in your gut.”

“I don’t know it,” she says tearfully. I nod, because that’s not a surprise either. Her reaction made it pretty damn clear that she’s still traumatized.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to get there today. But Cara... you don’t get to shit all over Nick because you’re terrified of losing me.”

She sucks in a breath, then another one. Finally, lips tight, she turns to Nick. “Don’t hurt her,” she bites out. Of course she couldn’t just back off. She’s incapable of it. It’s one of the things I love about her.

Nick steps into my back and wraps his arm around my stomach. “I’m not going to hurt her Cara. Despite what you seem to think, I’m not playing any games here.”

“And when you’re ready to move on?” she challenges.

“Don’t do that,” he says quietly. “Don’t put that shit on us. We deserve the chance to explore what’s between us without you waiting for it all to fall apart.” His large frame moves with his exhale. “Can you do that Cara? Give me the benefit of the doubt? I would never hurt her. I would never harm a hair on her head. And you can damn well believe that if I did, every man in this room would take action to protect her.”

There’s nods and fierce eyes all around the room. I lock eyes with John, finding a vow there I didn’t expect to see. He hasn’t been around nearly as long, but somehow I think he’d go to great lengths to protect me. I give him a small smile, and he tips his chin at me.

It’s the equivalent of a smile from anyone else.

“There’s other ways to hurt her,” Cara says stubbornly.

“I’ve had my heart broken before,” I remind her quietly. “That’s never been something you could protect me from.”

“Things are different now,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ransom steps forward, gaze swinging between all of us. “Cara, I know you’re hurting and worried, but maybe we need to let things settle down before continuing this conversation.

You need some time to process this...and so does everyone else.” He turns to Nick, face carefully neutral. “Maybe we should talk. After the baby comes.”

Nick nods tightly, and dread pools in my stomach. If Ransom doesn't support us, if Declan's as angry as he looks, will we even have a chance?

NICK

We sit in silence, Bree and I together, yet not. Her hands are tightly clenched in her lap and I'm afraid to touch her. Partly because I'm afraid she might flinch away, and partly because I don't want to draw any more attention to us. How the hell did I miss Cara in the room?

Because I was too freaked out by Holly, and too wrapped up in Bree, because when she's in the room, she's usually all I can see. Right now? I'm very aware of every single eye on us. Not all at once, that would be too obvious, but no one's focus drifts far from us for long.

I get it. We've kept everything pretty quiet. Some of my brothers knew we were spending time together, but I think even more knew how suicidal I would have to be to make a move. Cara's a force to be reckoned with and she's proven she's willing to kill for Bree.

I don't know if she's still planning to kill me, but judging by her glare, my balls are definitely still in danger. I'm not looking forward to talking with Ransom and the rest of my brothers, but he at least doesn't look like he wants to make me bleed.

He doesn't look happy, though. He's settled into a chair across the room, legs out, hands loosely linked over his stomach. His suit jacket is currently covering Mia, asleep on Colton's chest. But his eyes are watchful and the rest of his body is tight.

Finally, I can't take the tension anymore. "Are you okay?" I whisper to Bree.

She carefully loosens her hands, laying them flat on her lap. "Fine," she says, but she doesn't sound fine. I should wait. Give it time, let things cool down.

But I can't let things cool down between us. I'm afraid if she withdraws too far, I'll never be able to pull her back to me.

"Let's go for a walk," I ask. She looks like she's going to refuse and I try pleading instead. "Just a short one. Please?"

She wets her lips, then gives me a nod and rises to her feet. She doesn't look at anyone, just heads straight for the elevator. I meet Cara's guarded gaze, the waves of 'fuck you' rolling off of her obvious to anyone who looks. It hurts more than I thought it would.

Bree and I are silent until the elevator doors close, then we both sag against the railing. "That was not how I hoped that would happen," I admit.

Bree laughs sadly. "No, me neither. I thought she would be upset, but I didn't think it would be that bad."

"Cara and I used to be cool...I didn't realize she thought so little of me."

Bree turns to me, brows furrowed. "She said some really shitty things, but I don't think she really meant them."

She sounded like she meant them. And she pulled that shit out fast, too. She didn't need any time to scramble around for ammunition against me. "I think she did, Bree. She doesn't think I'm good enough for you. She thinks I'm going to play around." I think that's the part that hurts the most. I am nothing if not loyal, Cara should know that. The fact that she doesn't really fucking hurts.

"It doesn't matter what she thinks," she says, looking up at me, full of fire and conviction. If only I could believe it.

I cup the side of her neck and run my thumb along her jaw. "I think it does." No matter what Bree says in the moment, Cara is her family and she cares what she thinks. If we can't

get her on board, this bump in the road may turn into a brick wall too tall for either of us to scale.

The elevator doors open in the lobby, and I hold them open for her. The snow is blowing outside again, making everything outside the windows blurry, so I guide her toward the doors that lead to the rest of the hospital. Security nods us through and we walk along white corridors, a stark difference from the warm tones of the VIP wing.

Finally, I can't take it anymore. Taking her hand, I pull her down a quiet hallway into the doorway of a dark room. I use my body to shield her, giving us some small amount of privacy from anyone who might pass by.

"I can handle Cara, Bree. I'll eat any amount of shit she needs to shovel at me, as long as I have you."

Bree leans back against the door and looks up at me. "You shouldn't have to put up with that thought. It's not fair. And you don't deserve it."

"I don't know. Maybe I do. I haven't been a relationship guy before now, and Cara knows that. Sometimes I think she knows more about us than anyone. She's scary good at her job, and she seems to think her job involves keeping track of us too. But when I make a commitment to something, I stick. She used to know that."

"I'm sorry she said those things to you. They hurt. I saw it on your face."

"I'm normally better at hiding that kind of stuff."

She puts her hands on my chest, gaze soft. "I don't want you to hide from me."

"I'm not. I promise." I lower my head, sipping from her lips, so damned relieved when she pushes up into me. I was afraid she was going to pull away after that colossally shitty scene. "Thank you," I tell her, cupping her cheeks and placing small kisses over her face.

"You're welcome," she says, smiling. "For what?"

“For defending me.” I’d like to say I’m tough and could handle Cara, but that would be a lie in this situation. She wasn’t Cara my friend and employee tonight, she’s Cara, overprotective sister.

“You weren’t going to say anything, were you?”

No. I wasn’t. Cara’s words were like piranhas, taking chunks out of me. But in the end, I wouldn’t have said a thing. I wouldn’t risk alienating her or making anything worse. I finally settle on, “She’s your sister.”

“Yeah, she’s my sister. And she’s wrong about you.”

“Your opinion is the only one that matters,” I tell her. Her look makes me laugh. “Okay. That’s a lie. We’re family and I care about everyone’s opinion. But I’m willing to work on Cara. As long as you’re still in this with me.”

She sags, and leans in for a hug. “I’m still in this. I was afraid you’d...”

I press my lips to her hair, letting the weight of her settle my anxiety. “I’m not going anywhere. You know a lot about me, Bree, but you don’t know this. I have never felt for anyone the way I feel for you. I’m not letting you go without a fight.”

“Ditto,” she mumbles nose first in my chest, making me laugh.

I let myself sink into her, letting our mouths rebuild the connection that was weakened in that room. Weakened, but nowhere near broken. Silence falls around us, the beeps of machines and the squeaking of passerby’s shoes vanishing into the ether. Finally a particularly loud cart is wheeled by, and we pull apart with a laugh. “Let’s grab some food and drinks, and head back up. I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Kind of like a peace offering. I like it. We might have to throw Cara and Declan’s at them though. I don’t think we want to get in kicking distance of them right now.”

Laughing because that image is funny as hell, and also because she’s right. We move down the hallways in search of snacks. I’ve sighted a coffee shop when Bree pulls me to a stop. She’s looking toward a small waiting area, empty except

for one little old guy. He's rocking a ZZ Top beard, holding a coffee, looking completely lost in thought.

She takes a step toward him, then another. I go willingly because it's obvious she knows him. The waves of worry coming from her make me tighten my grip on her hand. She stops a few feet from him, but he doesn't move, his eyes still staring right through us.

"Wes," she says quietly, leaning down to pat his knee. He blinks slowly, then focuses on her, a small grin tipping his lips.

"Bree. What are you doing here?" He looks around like he's just realized where he is, then scoots over, patting the seat next to him. I let go of her hand and she sits. She puts her hand on his shoulder, rubbing lightly.

"My friend is having a baby. We thought we'd grab some food for everyone upstairs," she looks at me and a little pool of dread forms in my stomach. "Wes, why are you here? Your wife? Did she... is she..." Oh crap, this sweet little man lost his wife? How does Bree know him?

A slow, wide smile blooms on his face. "She's awake."

Bree shakes his shoulder, squealing in excitement. "Oh my god! Wes! That's amazing news. The doctors didn't think that was going to happen, did they?"

"Nope," he says with a shake of his head. "Said there weren't much hope. But when you're my age, what else do I have but time and hope? I weren't going anywhere until my Lizzie came with me. One way or another."

Fuck. Those simple words are devastating, and he's so matter of fact about them. Either she was coming home with him alive, or she'd be in a box. I can't help but admire his devotion, but also, I'm freaked the fuck out at this visceral reminder that I don't have forever with Bree.

But I want it.

"Where is she now? How's she doing?" Bree asks, beaming at Wes.

“They moved her here to do some testing. She’s not talking yet or recognizing people, so there’s still a long row to hoe.”

“But they’re hopeful?”

“Fuck ‘em,” he mutters, taking a sip of his coffee and scowling. “It’s cold. I hate cold coffee. Lizzie always packed me a thermos. Every morning, even when we sold the farm and moved into town. Sometimes I’d just drink it at home, sitting right there next to her.”

“Why don’t I grab you a fresh one,” I offer.

He looks up at me, blinking slowly. “Shit, you’re a big one. You Bree’s?”

Laughing, Bree looks up at me, too. “You’re right. He is big.” Her smile softens and her eyes warm. “And yes, he’s mine.”

Wes turns calculating eyes on me. “He a good one? Do he treat you right?”

“He’s the best.”

“Good,” Wes mutters, then pins me with a determined look. “Listen, kid. I don’t know how you got lucky enough to land this girl, and it don’t much matter. She’s out of your league, and you need to understand that. My Lizzie is so far out of my league, nobody thought she’d pick me. But she did. And every day, I make sure she don’t regret that decision. Everything I do is for her. Everything. And in return, she gives me the most beautiful life a man can have. You get me?”

Squaring my shoulders, I nod at him seriously. “Yes sir, I got you.” This seventy-year-old gnome looking man just gave me the talk...and I’m grateful for it. It’s the best advice I think anyone’s ever given me. I touch Bree’s shoulder. “I’ll be right back... Wes, what’s your last name?”

He looks at me quizzically, but answers, then I stop by the coffee cart and get them both a drink, Chai for Bree, coffee for Wes, and deliver it to them. Their heads are bent together, and it’s obvious that Bree cares deeply for the man.

So I do too.

It takes twenty minutes to get the administrator down here, and another twenty to arrange everything. But soon I'm heading back to them, administrator in tow.

She smooths her tailored skirt down, and gives Wes a warm smile. "Mr. Whitaker, we're making arrangements to move your wife. If you'd like to come with me, I'll take you to her new room, and you can meet her there."

Wes looks puzzled, but rises to his feet, giving Bree a little nudge on her shoulder, then nods to me, "Boy," then he's following the administrator, his faded blue plaid shirt tucked into ancient jeans a jarring contrast to her expensive outfit.

Bree takes my hand, tucking herself under my arm. I press a kiss to her hair and steer her toward the cafeteria. "We can't go back empty-handed. Let's get some drinks at least, and you can tell me all about Wes."

"I can't tell you anything about Wes. It would be unprofessional." She winks, simultaneously making it clear that he's a client, but that's all she's going to tell me. I respect her integrity, but I'm intrigued by the man and plan on prying a little more out of her.

We make quick work of loading up on drinks, and we grab a few easy to carry snacks too. Bree holds my arm as we slowly make our way back to the VIP wing.

"His wife's been asleep for over a month," she says, looking straight ahead. "He never left her. He found some cheap little room here in town, and spends every day with her, sitting by her side, holding her hand."

"Well, where else would he be?"

She stops, staring at me, a slow smile dawning. "You're right. There's nowhere else he should be."

I look down at her, at those blue eyes a man could drown in, and give her the truth. My truth, though I haven't actually given her the words yet. "A man loves his woman that much, he's always going to choose to be with her."

Her gaze is searching, hopeful. "That's a pretty big love."

I should wait and do this with candles and a soft bed. Or just somewhere other than a busy hospital corridor with my arms full of chip bags and drinks. But I don't want to wait. The words won't stay locked in my chest anymore.

I suck in a breath, and tear my chest open, giving her everything I am. "I know exactly how he feels. I fought it, Bree. We're too messy. There's so much in our way, like your sister and my brother. But I couldn't fucking stop myself. I tried to stop it. I pushed my feelings down. But I know you. I see how amazing you are, and the idea of staying your friend and watching you meet some other man literally makes me want to commit murder. You're it for me. I've known it for weeks. Hell, my gut told me you were mine the night I met you."

Her eyes are getting glassier as I speak. Risking dropping everything in my arms, I drop my forehead to hers. "I love you Bree. More than anything. It's the sit by your bed and hold your hand as long as it takes kind of love. It's the forever kind."

She sniffs and laughs. "Thank God," she whispers, voice cracking. "I hoped you love me. Because I love you. So, so much."

My breath shudders out in a long exhale. I hoped. I prayed. But I didn't know. "I'm not ever letting you go. I can't." I don't know if I'm warning her or reassuring her. My mind is swirling with elation, and hope and relief. But behind it all is still a tiny bit of fear. She seems to sense it. She presses her lips to mine, softly nipping, chasing away everything but her.

She slides her lips to my ear. "It'll be ok. You'll see. They love us, and when they look at us without the haze of their own worries, they'll see how perfect we are for each other."

I smile and steal one more kiss. She's right. Everyone's going to have to get their heads out of their asses, because I'm not letting anyone or anything come between us.

I 'm floating. Through the white hallways, past security, across the wood-paneled lobby, and into the elevator. I can't stop smiling. Nick keeps sneaking looks at me, the same joy I'm feeling in his face. He loves me. *Really* loves me. His words echoing some of what I've been feeling too. That night I met him, the overwhelm of moving and so many large men in our space was getting to me. But his smile, his kind brown eyes were like a beacon, pulling me out of the darkness, toward his light.

I wasn't ready for him then, but I can admit that there was something about him that drew me in. It wasn't love at first sight. I was too broken for that. But there was a spark that ignited in my belly. And every time I saw him, at a family dinner or some other gathering, that spark grew. I don't know when it changed—I can't point to one moment and say *that's it, that's when I knew*—it was a slow gradual blooming instead of an instant firework. So slow that I don't even remember what it was like before I loved him.

Maybe that's why I trust it.

If it was an instant earth shattering connection, I would doubt it, and myself. But we're not that. We're the drinking beer on the couch, laughing in the checkout line, holding hands as we fall asleep, kind of love.

The kind that sticks, not the kind relying on excitement and drama to keep the interest alive. No, I can picture curling

up next to Nick in thirty years, arguing over a game. And laughing. I can almost hear the laughter.

The elevator doors open on the fifth floor, and we're back in the room with everyone's opinions and judgment, but this time, it doesn't phase me. Knowing exactly how Nick feels makes everything so black and white. We love each other, and the family will get on board. Simple as that. And if it takes them a while, that's okay.

We have time.

We pass out the drinks and snacks, and I make sure I go to Cara and Declan. Her face is guarded, but I don't let it phase me. I hand her a Dr. Pepper and some chips, then lean down and kiss her on the cheek. "We love each other Cara. Be happy for us."

Her eyes are wet when I pull back. I smile at her, then turn to Declan and give him one of the energy drinks that make my heart race. "Here. I love you too." I raise my brows and lean in closer so Cara doesn't hear us. "And you know as well as I do that you have no call to be mad at us. Right?" The man basically begged Nick to take me. Declan's wide eyes and slow swallow make it clear he knows exactly what I'm talking about. He nods, darting looks at Cara out of the side of his eye.

"Any updates?" I ask cheerily. Declan looks lost, but Cara answers.

"Holly's pushing. Hopefully not too long now."

"Oh wow! That is fast."

Not wanting to push my luck, I leave with a smile, heading back across the room to claim the seat I was in before. I nearly trip on the leg of a chair when I spot Wes coming down the hallway opposite the one Holly's in, and fall heavily into a chair not too far from where I'm standing. He doesn't look up, just rakes his hand through his hair, leaving it standing straight up, looking sort of like an electrocuted Santa.

I glance over at Nick, who's still handing out drinks to his brothers and, by the looks of it, talking about feelings. If he can smooth things over, I'm not going to interrupt him.

Though I know those boys will all need to get together and unpack the day.

More than likely, there will be alcohol involved.

I cross over to Wes and take the seat next to him. He looks over at me, and tears fill his eyes. My heart drops. I think about Wes and his wife a lot. More than I should, considering he's just a client, and I don't really know him. But I can't help it. The love this man has for his wife is something that both reassures me and scares me. Losing someone who carries so much of your heart is terrifying.

But I still want it.

"What's happening?" I ask, taking his hand.

Wes lets out a shuddering breath. "They're moving my Lizzie up here. They're bringing in specialists to look at her. They're calling doctors in other cities." He spreads his hands, looking lost. "They're going to do everything they can for her."

"That's amazing. Isn't it?" It sounds amazing, but I can't quite figure out why he's crying. Blame it on the stress of the day, or the excitement, I don't know. But I don't clue in.

He snorts. "It's expensive, is what it is. Lizzie's hospital bill is over a million dollars already." He looks off into the waiting room, shaking his head. "But apparently, I don't need to worry about that. About any of it. Or anything else she needs moving forward."

I slow blink at him, 'a million dollars' ringing through my head. "I don't understand."

He sniffs, a slow smile dawning as he squeezes my hand. "I didn't either. But apparently, that fancy woman your man brought back runs this side of the hospital. And she explained that my bills have been paid, and any costs we rack up moving forward are covered."

"Covered by who?" I ask, though I think I know the answer. Wes's finger rises, and points toward the corner of the room at Nick, who's holding Mia, swaying, as she busies herself settling her little crown on his head. A little smile plays

on his lips, and he looks like he's happy to stand there all night with her.

"Your man right there. He paid for everything." Wes's voice turns shaky. "This isn't some sort of joke, is it? They're not going to tell me they made a mistake and kick us out of here, are they?"

My own voice is shaky. "No Wes. They're not. Nick has money. Lots of money. Like, oil baron kind of money. If he's covering your bills, then you really are covered. You don't have to worry about anything but helping Lizzie get better."

"Why would he do that?" Wes asks, looking dazed. "He don't know me. He talked to me for a minute."

Why would Nick throw millions of dollars at an old man and his sick wife? The simple answer is he's a good man, and he has the money to spend. But I know, to the depths of my core, that the reason is bigger than that.

"Because I know you. And I care about you. And he loves me."

Wes stares at me, dumbfounded. I know exactly how he feels. But the answer really is as simple and complex as that. He clears his throat. "You hang onto that kid, you hear me?"

"Yes sir," I tell him. "I've got plans for him. It'll take me a good sixty years to get through them all."

Wes chuckles and leans in closer. "You got a man like that on the hook. You treat him right. Fight with him, go toe to toe with him when he needs straightening out. Turn his house into a home, and I promise you, he'll bless you with everything he has."

"I can do that," I croak.

"Good," he says on a long exhale, looking lighter than I've ever seen him. The administrator rounds the corner waving at Wes, and he jumps to his feet, plants a quick kiss on the top of my head, and hurries down the hall after her, straight to his Lizzie.

I stay in the chair, looking at Nick. He's still playing with Mia, playfully bobbing his head to make the crown slip over his face. Mia breaks into peals of laughter and Nick's low chuckles blend with hers. She reaches up to adjust it, and he nibbles at her arms, tickling her. She scolds him, waving her little finger in his face. He tries to look chastened, but the pure joy on his face is impossible to hide.

He is a good, good man. The best. Not just because he's generous, but because he loves deeply. His commitment to his family, to the people he loves, is absolute.

And I'm one of them.

I'm also the one that gets to spend the rest of my life loving him back. On the surface, it seems crazy to say that. We've only been intimate for a short time. We haven't even officially had sex yet. We just admitted we love each other today. But I know it in my heart that this is it for me. I don't care how cliché or weird it sounds to anyone else. The same part of me that knows Cara will come around also knows Nick is my future. It's a simple fact. Inarguable. Indisputable.

Nick had a rough start. They all did, but looking at everyone in that waiting room, it makes sense that he is who he is. Because despite the death and pain of his past, he's become a part of this amazing, supportive, interfering family. If the Brash Brothers are experts at anything, it's loving each other.

I've gotten to be a part of that, but on the periphery. Not because they wouldn't have welcomed me in, but because I didn't know if I wanted it. I didn't know if I wanted those ties. Connection means pain sometimes, just like Wes felt watching his wife lay in that hospital bed. But the joys? I'm realizing they far outweigh the pain.

Nick's questioning gaze meets mine, and I send him a smile and a wink. He grins and wanders my way, hauling Mia under his arm, her bright giggles making the air between us shimmer.

"Well hello beautiful lady," Nick says, "what's your name?"

Mia, still under his arm, head dangling by his thigh, laughs harder. “Uncle Nick! It Bree!” she says. The uncle comes out like *unca* and my name ends up sounding like *Bwee*. Her words have been getting clearer over the last six months, but I’m glad I’m still *Bwee*. I haven’t been around many kids, but if they’re all like Mia, I definitely want some.

“Bree?” Nick says excitedly. “Where is she?” He spins one way then the other. “Bree? Where did you go?”

Mia is nearly breathless with laughter by this point, her hair flying out in a halo of dark curls every time he spins. A little worried for her, honestly, I reach for her, pulling her into my lap. She wobbles, then face plants right into my boobs.

“You’re going to make her puke,” I tell him, rubbing her back slowly. She sighs and nuzzles her cheek in.

“You boobies comfy too. Big time cushy,” she says dreamily. A startled laugh escapes, and my mouth drops open. Nicks bent over laughing so hard his face is turning red.

“Damn Mia,” he gasps. “You really have a knack for stating the obvious.”

I press a kiss to the top of her head, hiding my smile. I’m not surprised. Mia’s shown vocal appreciation for most of the women’s breasts. She even called Becca’s pillows once. Nick’s laughter fades and his face turns serious. “She looks good on you, Bree,” he says softly.

Our future is in his eyes. He’s imagining rocking our babies, kissing their soft heads, and so am I.

Told you. Makes no sense, and yet, it makes perfect sense.

“It’s a boy!” Evie’s voice is exultant and brings everyone’s attention to her.

Pandemonium breaks out as everyone rushes to her, begging for more information. She looks exhausted. I stand, still holding Mia and with his hand at the small of my back, Nick guides us over too.

“I get you’re all excited, but if you don’t step back, I’m gonna yell,” Evie says firmly.

Dead silence, and all the men take one step back. Evie is not afraid to wield that mom energy when she needs to, and the guys all seem to not just respect it, but actually enjoy it. Every time she scolds them, they look happy.

Colton's the only one that stays close, moving to Evie's back and putting his hands on her shoulders, kneading the muscles there. Evie groans and drops her head. "Thanks, Baby," she says softly, letting her massive husband take some of the load she's been carrying all day. She covers one of Colton's hands, and presses a grateful kiss there, then smiles at the anxious faces around her.

"Holly is an absolute freak of nature. She sailed through delivery, pushing that boy out so efficiently, the doctor basically stood back and took notes." We laugh, perfectly able to imagine it. Holly's confidence was growing, blossoming under Micah's love, but when she got pregnant, a whole new mama bear showed up. I'm relieved she's okay, and impressed she handled everything so well.

"The baby?" Ransom prods gently.

She smiles at him. "Entered the world screaming at the top of his lungs. Eight pounds, three ounces. Twenty-two inches."

"That's long, right? He's above the curve, isn't he?" Kade asks, looking pleased, like he's personally responsible for the baby's impressive size.

Evie sighs and rests her hands on her hips. "He's a big boy. Long and scrawny, and hasn't stopped nursing since he came out. Holly's got her hands full with that one."

Kade hoots and claps his hands in excitement. "A boob man. He's ours for sure."

And doesn't that just say it all? Micah and Holly made that baby, but it doesn't matter. Just like it doesn't matter that Mia's not Colton's by blood. For these men, family is a choice.

And what a blessing that is.

We all celebrate, hugging. Ransom passes out chocolate cigars to everyone, plus a few other folks in the waiting room.

The mood is joyous and any lingering tension is washed away, thanks to that little baby.

The men are all smiling, slapping backs, and laughing, but I don't miss Ransom pulling Nick into the corner. And I don't miss the serious look on Nick's face.

Looks like it's time for that conversation.

NICK

“**W**hy do we have to do this here?” Jonas complains, hands firmly tucked in his pockets.

“Because I plan on walking out of here with Bree, and spending the rest of the night with her. I am not going to the ring tonight and drinking this out.”

Kade’s lower lip is nearly in a full pout. “But why? The ring is really fucking fun.” He’s not wrong. We have a bat cave of sorts in our shipping warehouse, only it’s less billionaire superhero and more billionaire Chuck E. Cheese.

“Yeah, it is,” I admit, grinning. “But spending time with Bree is more fun. Tell me you wouldn’t pick Becca over the ring any day?”

“Fine,” he mutters, wandering over to a set of portable drawers.

After the baby’s birth, and a little celebration, Ransom pulled me aside to ‘talk’. But since I’m not going anywhere tonight, we compromised and found an empty room near Micah and Holly’s.

“Can we get this over with?” I ask dryly. We’re going to talk it out. That’s how we operate. But we really don’t have to drag it out this much.

“I’ll start,” Declan says flatly from his place against the door. His hands are tucked in his pockets too, but not for the same reason Jonas’s are. No, Jonas is worried about germs. Declan’s trying not to punch me, which is pretty hypocritical if

you ask me. He's the one that asked me to get involved. So I point that out to him. In front of all my other brothers, minus Micah who's still snuggled in with Holly.

"Wait," Maverick says, holding up his hand. "Let me get this straight. You knew he was spending time with Bree because you asked him to do it. You set it all up?"

Dec scowls and drops his arms. "I didn't set them up. I just asked him to be her friend. That's all. Her friend. I didn't tell him to fuck her."

I lock eyes with him and let him know how much I don't care for his tone. "Watch your mouth, brother." My tone is low and dangerous. "You're sounding disrespectful. And you do not want to disrespect my woman."

Declan squints at me, then sighs and rubs the top of his head. "I'm sorry. I just meant you were supposed to stay in the fucking friend zone."

"Clearly, he had other plans," Kade says dryly, rifling through the drawers. Jonas is watching him with a scowl. I guarantee that as soon as we leave, Jonas will have a nurse in here to fix everything Kade's touching.

"It wasn't a plan. I just...fell for her. It's that simple."

Ransom, ass resting on the window ledge, the Chicago skyline behind him, makes a low sound. "She wasn't in a good place, brother."

"No, she wasn't. I agree. But she's come a long way. She's healing. She's so fucking strong."

"Couldn't you have waited?" Colton asks, sidling up to the cart, peering into the drawers Kade's rifling through.

"For what, exactly?"

Colton opens his mouth, frowns, and shuts it. "I don't know. I was going to say her counselor to say it's okay, but that's not her job. Counselors don't make decisions for their patients."

"So Bree gets to make her own decisions? Like a real grown up?" The sarcasm is thick in my voice, but it helps get

the point across. “You’re all treating her like she’s a child. She went through a seriously traumatic experience. But she’s also spent a lot of time working on that. When does she get to make a decision about her own life?”

A few of my brothers shift uncomfortably. They don’t have an answer of course, because the answer is obviously now, and always.

“Okay, so yes, she can make her own decisions, but brother, you were right there,” Declan says. “You were acting like her friend and then you stepped over the line.”

“Well fuck,” John says from the corner. *Why does he always choose the corner?* He’s idly twirling his still wrapped chocolate cigar. “I wondered when this happy family show was going to be over and I’d get to see the belly of the beast. Gotta tell you, it did not disappoint.” He casually unwraps the chocolate, and takes a bite, smiling grimly at Colton, who freezes, some metal instrument in his hand.

“It’s not a show,” Ransom says, tone deadly. “We are a family. But there’s no such thing as perfect. You should know that, John.”

John’s lip curls in a sneer. It’s the most expression I’ve seen on his face all day. “The difference is man, I don’t pretend to be perfect. You guys act like you’re a team, and that you have each other’s backs, but you don’t. You’re turning on a man who fell in love. I fucking saw it coming, so why didn’t any of you?” He scoffs and drops the rest of the chocolate in the garbage can near the door. “I’ll tell you why. Because all of you have your heads up your asses, too busy with your perfect lives to pay attention to what’s happening right in front of you.”

That’s the perfect mike drop moment right there, but John’s not finished. “Slow the fuck down. You,” he says, pointing at Ransom, “are so worried about building that new fucking building for your ‘empire’ that you’re checked out.” He points at Maverick. “You’re trying to be the hero all the damn time and rescue everyone. That aint’ your fuckin’ job. Take a damn night off. It won’t kill you.”

He puts his hand on the door, mouth twisted in a scowl. “You all are so used to doing everything together, you’re not adjusting to the way your lives are now. You got women and kids, and you ain’t spending time together like you used to. You all fuckin’ missed it. That’s all. It aint bad or wrong. It’s just new fuckin’ information.”

He throws open the door, muttering as he exits. “Too many damn feelings. Can’t a man just sit on his fucking couch, drink a beer, and not fuckin’ talk? This fuckin’ family.”

We all stare at each other, then Kade finally breaks the silence. “He says fuck a lot.”

We all stare at him, because seriously?

Maverick is the first to crack, his giggles rolling out, despite the hands he has pressed tightly to his mouth. The rest of us follow, our belly laughs breaking the tension.

Anger drained away, we stand in silence, eyeing each other. “The building is a distraction,” Ransom admits. “I thought we needed it. I thought bringing us all together is what I had to do, but I’m not so sure anymore.”

Maverick and I trade glances. We’ve talked about this a time or two. And we have opinions. “Micah never uses his office. Neither do I. I mean I nap in there, but that’s about it. Seems like a waste of space.”

“And Micah doesn’t need a new garage either,” Maverick reminds him. “It’s cool you wanted to bring him closer to us at the new place, but with that little baby...I don’t know how much he’ll want to work. And if he does, he won’t want to be far from Holly.”

“But the daycare?” Ransom asks, shoving his hands in his pockets. Ransom had this big idea of all our future kids being at the office daycare. Ransom always has big ideas.

“Is a really good idea,” Jonas says. “But we need it now, not in three or four years. I’ve been looking at our building plans, and I think there are some things we can do with our existing space to make it more functional.”

Zach uses the glass behind Ransom as a mirror and smooths his hair. “There’s a building not far from us up for sale. It would be quicker to retrofit into executive space and build out what we want. With the right crew, we could have it done in six months, tops.”

Ransom turns, facing the city view out the window. His shoulders are rounding in as he braces his hands on the sill. “You’re all drifting away.”

“That’s one way of looking at it. You could also look at it as the family is growing. I think that is a good thing,” Jonas says firmly.

“Yeah,” Ransom says, voice remote. “That is a good thing.” He raps his knuckles on the windowsill, then turns to face us. “So we scrap the building plans?”

The rest of us trade glances, then nod. We haven’t asked Micah, but I know he’d be on board. He doesn’t much care what happens at headquarters. As long as he has space for a project car, he’s happy.

Everyone’s lost in thought, probably all wondering the same thing I am. How do we stay together, keep our family strong, but still grow?

“I love her. More than I ever thought I would. I tried not to. I swear it. But she just...took my breath away. I know she’s healing, but I will be there, right by her side, supporting her in any way she needs.” My gaze swings between Declan and Ransom. “I’m not taking advantage, I swear.”

“I know you,” Ransom says quietly. “I know you in your core. But I don’t know Bree very well. That was the only reason I questioned you, brother. Cara’s made it seem like Bree’s still fragile.”

Declan winces. “Cara still sees her as fragile. Honestly, Cara’s still struggling with some shit. She’s taken her worry about Bree to a level one hundred. I think she knows she’s being a bit extreme, but I’m not sure she can fix it.”

“Maybe Cara needs some help—“ I break off, distracted by Colton and Kade. Colton’s playing with the metal tool he

found, and for some reason puts it to Kade's mouth. And Kade, idiot that he is, opens wide. The tool makes a clicking noise as Colton pulls the trigger, opening it wider. It actually looks a little like the jaws of life.. Both of them are grinning. At least they are until Jonas speaks.

"That is a speculum," he says, looking a little green.

"What the fuck is a speculum?" Kade asks around the metal in his mouth.

"It's inserted into the vagina. Then cranked open, often during a Pap smear."

Colton and Kade freeze, looks of horror on their faces. Kade flails, spitting it across the room with his entire body.

"Oops," Colton mutters, staring at the tool on the floor in horror.

Ransom cracks first this time, howling with laughter. He turns back to the window and braces his hands on it as his entire body shakes. The rest of us collapse where we are.

Maverick sucks back his giggles, and holds a finger up. "I speculate Kade will be using extra mouthwash tonight."

More hysteria. Colton's joining in, and Kade punches him in the stomach, which doesn't phase him much.

But we're on a roll now.

"There's no point in speculating about it," Declan cackles.

"What's the speculum's favorite game?" I ask, eyes pinned on Kade. "Peek-a-boo."

The hilarity and the jokes don't let up for a good ten minutes. We all slump on the floor smiling.

"John's right," Ransom admits, stretching his long legs in front of him. "We've been more separate lately. We used to spend most of our time together, and now we don't. I," he frowns, and brushes at the pleat on his thigh. "I don't want us to lose each other."

"Not going to happen," Zach says firmly. "We're family. That's not going to change. But life will look a little different

in the future. That's inevitable."

Ransom nods, but doesn't look convinced. "And what happens when you outgrow your apartments?"

We trade glances because the man has a point. "I don't know," I tell him, "but worrying about that right now seems like a shitty use of time."

"But that's what I do, brother. I think five and ten years out. I have to. And I see it already. The day that one of you comes to me telling me you need more space. Saying you want something different. And before you know it, we're scattered. Family dinners will happen less and less."

"I don't want that," Jonas says fiercely.

Colton rubs the back of his neck. "Neither do I."

Ransom's smile is sad and knowing. "Change is inevitable, remember?"

"Maybe," Zach says, slapping his hands on the floor and jumping to his feet. "But we'll figure it out. We always do. We prioritize what we've built, and we'll be okay. Right?"

He gets nods from everyone. Promises that yes, even if we need something different, we're going to make our family a priority.

We can do that. We're fantastic at it, actually. We just need to find our way back there.

Chapter 39 Bree

The guys disappear into a room somewhere and I'm now sort of alone with Cara. Evie's still here, though she looks like she's fallen asleep with Mia on her chest. Maya and Janey are talking quietly in the corner, and Becca's gone to meet the baby.

Not gonna lie, I really want a snuggle, but I can wait for them to get home. I can't imagine how exhausted Holly is. So I'll just sit here, a few seats away from Cara, and not talk. That's not awkward at all.

I don't know if she's expecting an apology or an explanation, but I stand by everything I said. It's not her business. Well, okay, it is, but only to the extent that any sister would share. When she shakes off this helicopter mom energy, then maybe we can actually talk.

Becca drifts into the room, a goofy grin on her face. "That little dude is so stinking cute. And he smells amazing!" She points at Cara and me, "you're up. Go in together. Holly's getting tired, but she still wants to see everyone."

"Really? I thought I'd wait a couple of days until they're settled at home."

"Yep. I filled her in on some of the waiting room drama, and she's got questions." She drops down into a chair, grinning. "Off you go. Right now. Chop chop."

I stand and slowly make my way down the hall, conscious of Cara's presence behind me. She's wearing regular shoes today, and it's weird to walk beside her and be the same size. We get to their room and I tap softly on the door, waiting for Micah's 'come in' to push the door open.

The entire room is glowing. Some of it's the lights, but most of it is the pure joy radiation from the three people in the room. Micah stands from his spot next to the bed and comes over for hugs. He wraps me up in his huge arms, and I can feel the joy and relief in his embrace. His face is wreathed in a smile that makes the bags under his eyes look smaller. He moves to Cara, hugging her just as tightly, and I step around them, sinking into the chair he vacated.

Holly looks like a queen. Far from the exhausted wreck I expected to find, she looks like she just had a day at the spa. Her hair is a golden halo around her head, and her cheeks are flushed with color. Her blue eyes are sparkling as she glances from me to the baby at her breast.

Tears immediately prick my eyes. "You had a baby!" I say, sniffing. Holly smiles and pulls back the blankets, giving me a look at his smooshy face. "Oh my gosh, he's so tiny."

"Thank you, Jesus," Holly says with feeling, making me laugh.

"You were worried I take it?"

"I'd never admit it to Micah, but yes, I was worried. According to Becca, I have birthing hips, so I hoped it would be okay, but you just never know what life is going to spring on you."

"No," I say quietly. "You don't."

Cara and Micah come over. Micah circles the bed and hovers protectively at Holly's side. One big hand cups his son's head. His hand is big enough to wrap around the baby's entire head, and the difference in size is a little jarring.

Cara blinks back tears, and she pushes in to admire the baby. "What's his name?"

"Noah," Micah says, voice thick with emotion.

“Noah Collins James,” Hollys says, smiling up at Micah.

“Colin? As in...Collins?” I ask.

Holly nods. “Evie saved me. Without her, I wouldn’t be here. We wouldn’t have met. And Noah wouldn’t have ever been born.” Well that’s about the most perfect thing I’ve ever heard. Giving the baby Evie’s last name for a middle one is beautiful.

“How did Evie react?” Cara asks.

Micah grins. “Tears. Snot. Hugs.”

Laughing, we drift into silence. Holly’s eyes travel between Cara and I, and I brace myself.

“So,” she says quietly, “heard you and Nick are a couple. Congratulations. He’s a wonderful man.”

“Thank you. And yes, he is.” She’s the first person to actually congratulate me in front of Cara. To be happy for us right out loud and I have to take a few deep breaths to settle myself. I really needed to hear that someone was happy for us.

Cara’s tension ratchets up, and out of the corner of my eye I see her lips pressed together. Holly doesn’t miss it either, gaze arrowing in on Cara.

“You’re not happy about this? Why?”

Cara, so full of reasons why this wasn’t okay, seems to have settled on one between then and now. “It’s too soon.”

“Too soon since they met? You and Declan circled each other for years, so I guess I can see how you might think that.”

“It’s not about that,” Cara replies, fingers clutched tight to the purse on her lap. “It’s only been six months. It’s too soon.”

Holly nods, looking thoughtful. “I see.” She turns to me, studying my face. “You’ve been going to counseling?” I nod. “You’re feeling stronger?” I nod again. “You’re making this decision from the clearest, most knowing part of you?”

I haven’t heard it put that way, but now that she has, it all clicks. “Yes, I am. When I’m with Nick, I’m more me than I

have been in a really long time. When we're together, I feel... peaceful, but also really energized."

"That all sounds really good," she murmurs, bringing her son's tiny hand to her lips, pressing a soft kiss there. "Cara, what's the problem, then? Sounds like Bree has made a very clear choice. Why can't you get behind it?"

She just came out and flat out asked her. Little Holly is a badass. Of course, I already knew that. She just pushed that baby out, and looks like she could do it again. Women are tough.

Cara seems at a loss for words, but her face speaks volumes. The worry, fear and pain in her eyes is hard to look at. She doesn't let me see it very often, and I want to reach for her, to hold her. But I can also see the big neon 'stay away' sign flashing above her head.

Holly sees it all too. "There's no expiry date on trauma, Cara," Holly says softly. "Everybody is different. I was away from my husband for years before I felt like me. It wasn't until Becca's class that I started to feel stronger. And when I met Micah, all my pieces came together." She and Micah are reaching for each other at the same time, their connection so powerful I can feel it. "There might be bumpy spots, but that's life. And we get through them together."

"Together," Micah echoes, pulling Holly's hand to his lips, pressing a kiss there. It echoes Holly's kiss on her son's hand, but it's also so much more. It's a remembrance of the tough times, and a promise for the future.

Cara's voice cracks, waves of emotions pouring out. "I can't lose her. I can't. I won't survive it."

I reach for her, pulling her into my arms. She hates breaking down, so she resists, but I yank her into me. "Stop being so stubborn, stupid. I'm right here. And every minute you spend worrying about losing me, you're pushing me further away. It's stupid and sad and you're making me crazy. I am right here." Tears are pouring down my face, too. I don't bother to wipe them away. "Be happy for me. That's all you

need to do. I miss you Cara. I miss the way we used to be. The way we were in Miami.”

“I miss us too,” she chokes out.

I push her hair back, and use the sleeve of my sweater to wipe her cheeks. “You need to talk to someone Cara. Someone who can help you work through all these fears. It helps, I promise it does. Because I can’t take the weight of your fears anymore. I have too many of my own to deal with. But I can give you the name of a really good counselor.”

“I have one,” she mumbles, resting her cheek on my shoulder.

“Have you been ghosting them?”

“Yeah,” she admits with a sigh.

I laugh and drop my cheek to the top of her head. “So how about you call them and make an appointment?”

“Okay,” she says tiredly, not moving from her spot on my shoulder.

“Nick loves her,” Micah says firmly, looking at Cara. “Take care.”

“I know he will. I do. I just forgot for a bit.”

After goodbyes, Cara and I exit arm in arm, leaning on one another as we slowly make our way back to the waiting room. “What a day,” she says on a sigh.

“What a day,” I echo. A baby, a secret relationship outed and a cry in my sister’s arms. “No wonder I feel like I could sleep for a week.”

Cara snorts, “I saw the way Nick looked at you. No way he’s going to let you be for that long.”

“Cara,” I gasp. “Rude. Besides, you and Declan were the ones fucking like bunnies. That Miami trip is when all of this started. So really, it’s your fault. If you and Declan hadn’t been so wrapped up in each other, Nick and I wouldn’t have had to entertain ourselves.”

Her brows raise. “Entertain yourselves? And just how did you do that? Did you let Nick put the hot dog in the bun back then? You dirty girl.”

This is the Cara I know and love. But, “What the fuck? Hot dog in the bun? Seriously Cara.” I shake my head and drop her arm, heading for Nick across the room, but I turn back, a grin playing on my lips. “It’s more like the footlong in the bun.”

Her laughter bubbles up as I spin and run to Nick, knowing that his arms will open for me. He pulls me close and holds me tight, resting his chin on the top of my head. I sink into him with a sigh, soaking in the love and comfort he offers only to me.

“Cara and I are going to be okay,” I whisper into his chest.

He hums in response, a low rumble of contentment coming from deep within him. “Dec and I are all good too.” I smile into his shirt and allow myself to relax against him, so relieved. I want everyone in my world to be okay. It helps me feel okay. And yeah, maybe that’s a little codependent, but in this group, that’s about the norm. We all live in each other’s pockets, and I’m looking forward to not having to hide anymore.

Nick is mine. I’m his. And I don’t care who knows it anymore. I lift my head, cup his cheeks and pull him down to me. “I love you. Big time.”

His fingers spear into my hair, and he tips my chin up. My breath hitches in my chest at the intensity of his eyes. “Big time,” he echoes, his voice rough with emotion as he crashes his lips to mine.

The kiss scorches through me, burning away all the worry of the past few weeks. No more hiding, no more worrying about other people’s reactions. An eternity later, we pull apart, both panting for air with matching goofy smiles on our faces.

“See, I told you they had sex,” Jonas says loudly. Janey grabs his arm and yanks him down into the chair, whispering to him.

I drop my head onto Nick's chest and laugh. Declan and Cara look at us questioningly, and Nick waves his hand dismissively. "It's nothing." Then cutting off what I'm sure would be more questions, he puts his fist out to Declan. "Up for another Miami trip?"

Declan grins and taps his fist against Nicks. " Fuck yeah."

NICK

“I missed her,” Bree says, rubbing her cheek against the arm of my leather jacket.

I grin down at her, unable to resist pressing a kiss to the top of her head. I do that a lot now, kiss her in public. Doesn't matter if we're around our family, or in a fancy restaurant, or just walking along the waterfront like we are now. “I missed her too. I don't like leaving her alone at home.”

Janey laughs, shaking her head. “Your relationship with this jacket is weird, you have to admit.”

“Maybe, but i'm okay with it.”

“Why do you love it so much?”

“You mean other than because it makes me look like a badass?”

Bree grins and takes a sip of her Chai. “It does make you look like a badass. That is absolutely true. Where did you get it?”

Her hand tightens on my bicep and she tucks in closer as a group of runners pass us. Fuckers are crazy, out here in those outfits. It's nice, but not that nice. April in Chicago can be a kitten one day, and a snarling panther the next. Steering Bree onto the sidewalk right in front of our building, I give her a little bit of our history.

“We didn't grow up with much, you know that. But Ransom always came home with stuff. Sometimes from thrift stores –the man loved his stuff a bag days– but he'd also come

home really late a night with other stuff. Weird stuff sometimes, valuable stuff other times. He actually won the first car Micah rebuilt at a poker game.”

“He played a lot?”

“It’s probably more accurate to say he hustled a lot. If he had to play a few hands of poker to get what he wanted, then that’s what he’d do. “

“He had a plan. He always has a plan,” she murmurs, smiling at an older couple as they pass, the woman’s arm tucked in her partners just like we are. That’s going to be us one day. Silver haired, still sexy, arm in arm. “And he won you that jacket one night?”

I grin, remembering Ransom’s face the night he came home with that jacket...and more. “Not exactly. He was on his way back from a game, pockets stuffed full of cash, when this dude pulled a knife, ready to roll him. Ransom being Ransom of course didn’t respond well. We weren’t working out in a dojo back then, but Ransom’s always been vicious when he needs to be. And that night, knowing he had all of us back home needing clothes and food, he snapped on the guy. Came home with all of his clothes, and the knife.”

Bree laughs, blonde hair lifting in the breeze, eyes sparkling. “All of his clothes? He just left the guy out there naked?” I laugh and nod, imagining it. I wonder what ever happened to him. Did he learn his lesson and go straight, or did he get better at picking his targets. “So Ransom gave you the jacket?”

“Fuck no. All of us wanted it. We were all young, but Colton’s shoulders were already too big for it. I had to fight it out with the rest of my brothers. Maverick got the guys motorcycle boots.”

“Does he still have those?”

“Nah. He wore those out fifteen years ago. He used to sleep in them.”

Bree’s laughter carries us into the lobby of our building. This has become our new Saturday tradition. Rain or shine, we

wander down the waterfront to the coffee shop, talking the whole time. I'm still figuring out how to make her a good chai at home, but I've still got a ways to go. I might have to ask John for help.

"Oh my gosh," Bree says softly. I drag my focus back to the lobby, wondering what's happening. I spot Connie walking toward us on the arm of a very big dude. She smiles at me, and I wink, guiding Bree straight over to her.

Connie smiles up at me, giving me her hand. "Nicky," she says, lifting her cheek for a kiss. I place a soft kiss on the apple of her cheek. She always smells so good, her perfume light and floral. Her signature scent she told me. Her late husband's favorite.

"Connie," I murmur, holding her hand. Looking at her, you'd never know she's in her eighties, but the skin on her hand is thin and papery, betraying her age. There's also a slight tremble to it that's been there for the last year. I don't want to think about what that tremble might mean.

"Connie, I'd like you to meet Bree." I turn to Bree, and find her eyes locked on to Connie's companion. She tears them away, focusing on Connie instead. "This is Mrs. Constance McCauley. She lives on the sixteenth floor, and she's my other girlfriend. I never intended for the two of you to meet, but here we are. And I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to accept that, at least at tea time."

Connie purses her lips, and I grin in anticipation. She doesn't disappoint. "The boy just can't get enough of my cookie...s." That's my girl. Eighty years old, and still a little dirty. My favorite thing about her. And she's right, her cookies are phenomenal.

Bree's laughing, but the man with Connie looks scandalized, which is a weird look on a man who looks like he was raised eating nails for breakfast. "Grandma!" he says.

Connie rolls her eyes and pats his hand. "Forgive him. Someone inserted a stick up his ass at birth, and so far, the doctors have been unable to dislodge it."

Connie's sharp gaze travels over Bree and I, and a little smile plays at the corner of her lips. "I guess I'm out of luck," she murmurs. I raise a brow, and her grin grows into a full smile. "I had hopes for Bree, but I see that I'll have to look elsewhere."

Gently tugging her hand from mine, she holds it out to Bree, who pulls her hand from my arm and takes it gently. "I've heard all about you dear. Nicky's been singing your praises for months, telling about how wonderful you were, and how good you were at your job. I must admit, when I sent my Gabe there, I hoped that you would help him, but I also hoped that a little something else might develop. But I see that you're already taken."

I'm a little lost, but Bree chuckles. "He told me his grandmother booked the appointment."

"Wait...what?"

Connie takes pity on me. "Gabriel is my grandson. He had a terrible accident a year ago, and he needed some help... healing. The way you talked about your Bree, I thought she might just be the person to help him. And I was right, of course."

She turns to Bree, and tightens her grip, eyes glassy with tears. "I thought I was going to lose him. That accident took him away. His heart was still beating, but he wasn't himself anymore. But you brought him back to life."

Connie's grandson Gabe, the man with the iron face, finally shows some emotion, covering his grandmother's hand, the one on the sleeve of his jacket with his. "I'm okay now Grandma, I promise."

"I know that," she says crisply. "I just said it, didn't I?"

Bree and I laugh, and she looks up at Gabe. "I'm really glad I could help."

He studies her, a look in his eye I don't like. I'm tempted to pull Bree under my arm and make sure he reins that shit in, when he opens his dumb mouth. "Now I see why you said no to going out with me. I was obviously working with some bad information."

I fucking knew it. The asshole put the moves on my girl. Bree just smiles and shakes her head. Connie looks between them and sighs. “I really thought she was my chance.”

“Chance for what?” Bree asks.

“To marry one of them off. I have five grandsons. Five! And not one of them are married. No women, no babies. At this rate, I won’t live to see any of them settled. They’re all too busy traipsing around the world.”

Gabe’s the one rolling his eyes now. “You’re very dramatic this morning Grandma.”

She shoots him a look that has me coughing into my hand to cover my laugh. Gabe clears his throat and stands straighter. “Sorry Grandma.”

Connie sniffs and gives him one more glare, then turns to me with a smile. “I’ll expect to see you Tuesday. Bring your lovely Bree too. I’d very much like to get to know her.” She turns to Bree, “And you young lady, thank you. Again. And I very much hope you will join us for our weekly tea.”

Bree smiles. “I would love to. I’ll try to move some things around.”

“You do that,” Connie says firmly, making it clear that it’s not a suggestion. Now Bree and Gabe are struggling to hide their smiles. “Let’s stop dilly dallying, Gabriel. I’m hungry.”

Gabe nods at me, then gives Bree one more of those looks that makes my hand curl into a fist. They trade smiles, then Connie and her grandson are on their way out the door.

Bree’s quiet as we head to the elevator. I have so many questions. Visions of Bree touching him, kneading his muscles and having her body right next to his. It’s her job. I know that. But when I was picturing all her patients looking like Wes, I was good with it. Now? That guy is jacked and he looked at her like he wants to give her the world.

That’s my job.

“A patient,” I finally say, taking a sip of my coffee. “He looks pretty damned healthy, so good job!” She snorts and

leans her side into mine. I lift my arm and tuck her in, any lingering jealousy over Gabe drifting away. She's mine, I know it in my core. And it doesn't matter how much he might want her, he's never going to get the chance. I will keep Bree so fucking happy and satisfied, that she won't even notice other men.

"Tell me about Connie," Bree asks, resting her cheek on my chest. I wish I wasn't holding this damned coffee. I want both hands free to hold her, to touch her. I settle for wrapping my arm tighter around her and pressing her closer, until our bodies are aligned from thigh to shoulder. Immediately, everything in me settles.

"I met Connie a few months after we moved in here. It was a day kind of like this actually. She was heading out for a walk, but she looked a little wobbly. She was still resisting getting a cane at that point."

"So you pulled out your charm and flirted with her like mad?"

"Basically. Only the woman is sassy and a little dirty minded, so it turned fun really fast. She's had an amazing life. She lost her husband a long time ago, and she was left to run their company alone. She's worth at least a billion by now. She's mostly retired, but she still keeps track of what's happening. She's still in charge, despite what anyone else at her company might think."

"Wow. That's an amazing accomplishment. Now I really want to have tea with her."

"Her cookies are seriously good. She imports them from somewhere in the UK. She won't ever show me the container."

"Smart woman. She's keeping you on her hook."

I snort. "I'm well aware. But I like spending time with her. My Abuelita would be about her age if she were still alive."

"I'm really glad you two found each other then," she says softly, resting her forehead against my jaw.

"I'm really glad I found you," I whisper, pressing a kiss to her cool skin.

“I am too,” she whispers back. She sighs and takes a sip of her drink. “Are we going to the shelter this afternoon?”

“Yep. I almost got Goldie out of the kennel on the leash. I’m feeling lucky. Today’s the day.”

“Do you think she’ll ever get better? She deserves a good home.”

“Yeah, she does.” Which is why I already filled out the adoption application for her, and gave Cadence enough to cover room and board for the next few months. Goldie’s not going to be rushed, and that’s ok. When I want something, I can be incredibly patient if I need to be. Goldie needs time, and I can give her that.

But one day, soon hopefully, she’ll be running around the penthouse at family dinner, chasing the kids. I can picture it now, the shrieks of laughter, and her wagging tail. It’s going to happen. There is no other option. But I don’t tell Bree that. I’m not sure why I’m keeping quiet about it. It’s not a secret, not really. It’s more that when something’s really important to me, I keep it close. I nurture it. Until one day, it’s ready for the light of day. So instead of saying more, I change the topic. “When is Mia’s birthday party?”

“Seven,” she says, her face lighting up. “I’m going to go up and help Evie decorate. Ransom wanted to hire a party planner, but that didn’t go over well.”

“No, it wouldn’t. I wish I’d seen that fight.” It would have been epic. Ransom wants to spoil Mia in every way possible, as a good uncle should. And Evie thinks it’s stupid to waste a bunch of money on a party. I get where she’s coming from, but even after marrying Colton, she still doesn’t seem to understand how rich we are. Or care, for that matter.

“I’ll come up and help. I don’t want either of you on a lad—

The elevator doors open on Bree’s floor to shouting. Trading glances, we step off, finding John and Abby in some sort of stand off.

“It ain’t your fucking business,” he growls, leaning down to get right in her face. His scarred scowl doesn’t seem to intimidate her, at all. I’ve gotten to know Abby fairly well, and honestly, the more I get to know her, the less I understand this little thing she and John have going on. She’s sunshiney, and he is not. And yet they still seem to hang out a lot. She’s at almost every cooking lesson, more often than not cracking jokes. It’s like she’s coming back into herself.

And John, despite all that, is still his grumpy loner self. It’s like Rocky and Adrian, except if Adrian were a two hundred and ninety pound convicted felon, and Rocky were a rainbow haired office administrator.

So basically the same.

She folds her arms over her chest, fingers tapping on her arm. She shakes her purple hair back, it seems to change color every few weeks, and glares right back at him. “Stop being such a jerk. I asked a simple question. That’s all. Clearly I hit a nerve, but you need to calm your tits. If you don’t want to talk about it, fine. That’s your choice.”

John’s lip curves into a sneer. “It’s my choice? Really? Well thank fuck. I didn’t think you got that. You’ve been up my fucking crack about it for weeks. Maybe now you can mind your own fucking business.”

I’m watching Abby’s face, so I wince at the pain that flashes across it. John just broke something. Something big.

And he’s too in his own fucking head to realise it.

“You’re right,” she says quietly. Quieter than I’ve ever heard her. “I don’t know what I was thinking. It’s none of my business. I thought we were friends, but as you’ve just made abundantly clear, we’re not. So thanks for letting me know.” She drops her arms and backs up toward her door. “I’ll stay out of your hair.” She turns, and pushes open her apartment door. “Good luck with everything John.” The door closes behind her with a snick.

Bree makes a low sound. Her face wreathed in concern, she’s watching John. I switch my gaze to him, and get just a

glimpse of devastation before it's hidden behind his perpetual scowl. He pins me with a glare. "You done watching the fucking show?"

Okay, he's clearly in a mood. The fuck off vibes are strong with this one, and he is not in a mood to talk about anything. He's going to need to stew for a few hours. But later, maybe at the party, I can get a little out of him.

Bree doesn't share the same view apparently. "You better be careful John," she says, wincing. "From what I can tell, Abby's a damned good friend. And I don't think you can afford to lose her."

John's face goes blank. There's nothing there. It's something I haven't seen from him since he first got out. "I'm not the kind of friend she needs. She's better off without me."

He turns without another word, and disappears back into his apartment. Bree frowns, and opens her door. I follow her in and put my coffee down on the counter. She drops into a chair at the table and scowls at the scratched top.

"*Carino?*"

She looks at me, a worried smile creasing her face. "I wonder what happened?"

"I'm not sure. But I don't think you need to worry about it love."

She idly twists her coffee cup. "I don't know how *not* to worry. They seemed close. But that argument sounded pretty permanent."

I drop into the chair next to her and pull her into my arms. "You don't need to worry. I promise."

"How can you know that?"

"Because it's what I do. I know people Bree. John's going to fix it, he just needs a little help getting there."

She pulls back to look at me. "And you're going to help him?"

"Yep. We'll get it sorted tonight."

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because that man is one hundred percent in love with Abby. And my brothers and I are going to help him get his head out of his ass.”

A slow smile curves her lips.

“Can I watch?”

Thank you for reading Nick and Bree’s story! I would be ever so grateful if you’d leave an honest review, wherever you purchased this book.

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