



Thanksgiving
with
3 BROTHERS

A HOLIDAY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

NATASHA L. BLACK

THANKSGIVING WITH
THREE BROTHERS

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INTRODUCTION

**I've got three things to be thankful for this season. Noah,
Leo & Ethan.**

The lights went out and my heroes walked in.

It would take a miracle to save my shop.

Good thing I've got three.

One thing the three brothers have in common—I can't get
them off my mind.

A crush on one guy is fine, but all three?

Noah kissed me at lunch. Leo makes me crazy. Ethan took me
out for champagne.

They say they're not jealous, that this could work.

It seems scandalous, and too delicious to refuse.

Noah's got a stalker. His ex won't leave him alone.

What she doesn't know is this,

**The Foster men are mine, and I don't give up without a
fight.**

MADISON

“**B**etter make it three,” the customer said as she eyed the fresh pumpkin-caramel muffins.

“Good choice. I can’t resist them either,” I told her, putting another muffin in the bag for her. They were definitely a big hit.

“Yesterday you were sold out,” she said, “So I made sure to come in earlier today.”

“I’m glad you did. Good luck on your presentation today,” I said.

“I can’t believe you remembered that!” she smiled, “Thanks! These muffins are better than confidence. I’m promising myself one as soon as it’s over.”

“Seems like a solid plan,” I said. I turned to my assistant who handed me the latte to go. “Here you go.”

“Thanks!” She said and dropped a five in the tip jar.

The large tip made me all giddy inside. This was the kind of shop I wanted to build, the atmosphere I wanted to cultivate. A warm neighborhood coffee place and shop where the regulars know each other, and everybody has an honest opinion when I try out a new recipe. I’d dreamed this place into life and saved for years to make it happen. And after all this time, I still find joy in waking up bright and early in the morning to keep the shop smoothly running.

The chime on the door jingled to announce another little crowd of five or six people who blew in on the brisk October wind, lured by the cinnamon and clove scent of my muffins on a chilly morning. Jacie rang up the orders while Ryan and I made coffee and served muffins and rolls as fast as we could. I bumped the under-cabinet fridge closed with my hip after taking out another can of whipped cream to top a coffee drink.

“When does the gingerbread happen?” A teenager asked me across the glass case. “You said this fall you’d do gingerbread.”

“That’s right,” I said, grinning. “I’ll do a gingersnap crust pumpkin bar in a couple weeks when I phase out the caramel apple ones. The real gingerbread will be the first of November.”

“Is there a gingerbread latte?” he asked.

“There could be if a customer wanted to try one,” I teased. “I’ll try out a couple combinations and you can sample them tomorrow.”

“That sounds amazing! It might even get me through my algebra test.”

“What day’s that?”

“Friday.”

“Okay, I’ll put that on my calendar and there will be a gingerbread latte just for you.”

“You’re awesome!”

“Just don’t ask me about algebra!” I laughed. “I was terrible at it.”

Jacie elbowed me as he left, “He’s so cute.”

“You like him?” I asked.

“Maybe,” she said, chewing her lip. Jacie was my youngest hire, a reliable cashier and part-time art student who was always breaking up with someone dramatically.

“He’s still in high school.”

“I only graduated last year,” she reminded me.

“Yeah, but when does he graduate?”

“Good point,” she agreed. “I’ll have to see if he’s a senior, otherwise, it’s a no-go.”

“Gonna help him study for his test?”

I went to the back to check on Brice, my newest employee. He had attention problems particularly because he kept pulling out his phone and getting on whatever mobile game was the most popular at the time when he was supposed to be feeding pans into the oven and loading the dishwasher.

I found him hastily tucking away his phone and straightening his apron. I reached past him to load the cooled apple-walnut muffins onto a tray.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Save the phone for a break please. I can’t afford to run out of stuff to sell. Did you check the list?” I prompted.

I referred to the laminated checklist I hung up for him. When he didn’t know what to do, he was supposed to look at the list and check those things—did the dishwasher need to be emptied or filled? Were there muffins in the oven that needed to come out and cool? Was there any cake mixes to ladle into pans and put in the oven?

Proudly, he indicated the dishwasher which was chugging along and the counter he had wiped off. “Great, thank you!” I told him. “Will you grab coffee filters from the closet?” He scurried off to get them.

“Hey, Madison?” Ryan said, a note of uncertainty in his voice.

“Something wrong?”

“The oven’s acting weird. Maybe I did something wrong, but, like when I put the chocolate muffins in, it didn’t seem hot enough.”

“Did you crank the temperature up?” I asked, wincing. No one was going to buy incinerated muffins.

“I know I’m not supposed to, but yeah, I did. The thing is, when the timer went off—they’re not done.”

“Let me see,” I said. I opened the oven door and no blast of heat singed my eyebrows or made me squint. Dismally low, soggy batter sat in the wells of the muffin tins. “Shit,” I muttered. “Okay, thanks for letting me know. I’m going to go check the breaker. Will you handle the counter?” He nodded. I almost ran into Brice on my way to the fuse box. Fortunately for him, he wasn’t messing with his phone. I was trying to stay calm about the oven. Surely it was just a blown fuse, a tripped breaker, something from the antiquated electrical system screwing up the oven which added to the quirky charm of the storefront I leased. Surely it was nothing catastrophic. I couldn’t afford another disaster.

I used the flashlight on my phone and pried open the creaky, rusted metal door to peer into the fuse box with its illegible penciled labels on the side. All the switches faced the same direction so nothing had been tripped, but maybe a reset could help. Experimentally, I flicked a couple of the breakers off and on, including the one I thought was related to the oven hookup. “Try it now,” I shouted to Ryan.

“Nothing’s coming on. Not even the display.”

“Great,” I muttered sarcastically. “Hang on,” I said, flipping the adjacent switch. A groan rose from the crowd, and I swore. “Sorry, I’ll fix it,” I said, glancing nervously out the closet door to see that the place was plunged into darkness. Frantically I reset the switch I’d tried, but nothing happened besides an ominous popping sound. I tried again but there was nothing for it. I’d blacked out my shop.

I grabbed the battery powered lantern off the shelf from my emergency kit and turned it on. I hurried forward and set it on the counter.

“Sorry about that. Let me get you your orders and then we’re going to have to close up until I can get an electrician down here. Cash only, everything’s half price as of this moment,” I said briskly. With our phone flashlights and the lantern, we managed to serve two of the three customers in

line as the people at the tables filed out muttering their discontent.

I came face to face with the third and final person in line. “Good morning,” I said with forced cheerfulness, “what can I get you? Apart from lights that work?”

The uneven glow of the lantern cast his face in shadow, but he was still handsome. His suit was financial-manager-perfect, but his smile seemed genuine.

“I’d like a couple of those muffins and a regular coffee to go. If you don’t mind, I’d like to call my brother.”

“Uh, our phone isn’t working but I guess you can use mine. Is yours broken?” I said as I filled the order.

“No, my brother Leo is an electrician. He could help you out.”

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, but I’ll handle it. Here you go,” I said, taking the coffee from Ryan and passing it to the inconveniently handsome customer who was seeing me at my worst.

“I’d like to help if that’s okay with you. I don’t have the skill set myself—I’m more of a computer guy—but he’s great at what he does, and he’s working nearby today. It won’t take a second.”

Behind me I heard raised voices in the kitchen. Brice dropped an f-bomb and stormed out. Jacie yelled after him, loudly enough for my handsome and helpful customer to hear her.

“Sorry,” I said and offered him his change. He shook his head.

“Keep it. I hope your day gets better.”

I hesitated. I’d built this business all on my own. I didn’t like asking anyone for help, least of all a stranger and least of all when it could have strings attached.

“Okay, go ahead and call your brother. I appreciate it,” I sighed.

“That wasn’t easy for you, was it?” he asked with a wry smile. He made the call briefly, then put his phone away. “He’s on his way. He should be here in half an hour.”

“Thank you,” I said. “What was your name?”

“Noah Foster. And you are?”

“Madison Stewart,” I said, shaking his hand. He offered me a business card.

“You let me know if there’s anything else I can do to help,” he said, and left with a devastating smile.

I preferred to think it was hope that I felt bloom in my chest because an electrician was on his way and not the first rush of attraction for the gorgeous knight in shining Armani who had come to my rescue.

LEO

“This had better be an emergency where a bunch of starving puppies and old people are going to freeze to death if I don’t drop everything right now and save them,” I muttered into the phone.

“Bro, where do you think I hang out? It’s a coffee shop. I’ll send you the location. And if there were people and animals starving, I’d feed them instead of calling an electrician,” Noah said.

“Fine. I’ll be right there, but you owe me one. You can work your money boy magic on my farmhouse budget,” I quipped.

“It’s a deal.” Noah didn’t argue or try to negotiate. Either he had a fever, or this was one hell of a hot woman he was trying to help out.

I parked illegally outside the door of a coffee shop that occupied the corner unit of an older building. The sign on the door said Muffins on Maple and a bell jingled when I walked in.

“Thank you for coming on short notice. Your brother was in line at the counter when the lights went out and insisted on calling you,” she said.

Yep, she was hot alright.

“Noah can be pushy. Baby of the family,” I said. “Leo Foster,” I introduced myself.

“I’m Madison,” she said and shook my hand. She smelled like lemon blossom cake and everything from the curve of her cheek to the dark hair trying to escape from her ponytail seemed to hit me with the impact of a boulder. The kind that rolls right over the cartoon characters and leave them pancake-flat on the ground.

“Let me show you the scene of the crime,” she said, “My assistant told me something was wrong with the oven, and I got the idea to see if a breaker was tripped or something. Nothing looked wrong, so I started flipping the switches, and the lights went out. Even when I flipped it back, I couldn’t undo the damage. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing you could have done with a breaker that would have caused this,” I said, following her back to a storage area. I turned on my Mag-lite and looked at it.

“How old is this box? 1960s?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. I know the place was up to code when I signed the lease. I saw the documentation. “

“Okay, I’ll see what I can do back here and then I’ll take a look at that oven,” I said.

She went back to the kitchen, and I surveyed the situation. I replaced a couple fuses and did a workaround to get the lights back on. After a few minutes, I went to find her.

“Hey, I looked it over. I thought maybe you just needed a fuse replaced, which I did, but you aren’t pulling enough voltage to run commercial appliances here.”

“What does that mean?” she asked. “In terms of the extent of the problem and how much it would take to fix.”

“Your electrical system is overloaded. The building isn’t up to code, and someone’s paid off an inspector for starters. Rewiring will take weeks, and it’s not cheap. Let me look at the oven and see if I can get it going.”

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate how quickly you came here. I’ll be glad to pay the emergency call fee. I just want to get my lights on and the oven up and running so I can

reopen in the morning.” She said it matter-of-factly as if that were the logical conclusion.

“I’m not trying to predict the future here, but it doesn’t look to me like you’ll be able to open those doors tomorrow. Bottom line is, it’s unsafe.”

“Oh,” she said. “I see. Well, I’ll leave you to inspect the oven.”

She was absolutely going to grab her phone and google ‘electrician near me’ for another opinion and I knew it. She didn’t know me and certainly didn’t get the answer she wanted from me. But I wasn’t going to risk anyone’s life or property, much less my professional reputation, and let a coffee joint burn down because the owner was too stubborn to close for the necessary upgrades.

“I wouldn’t bother with a second opinion, although it’s your money if you want one. No licensed and bonded electrician would tell you different about this setup,” I said.

I heard her make an inarticulate noise that could have been a sigh and put down her phone.

“There has to be something I can do. What size generator should I rent to run the oven and the coffee machines until the wiring’s redone?” She said, her jaw set with determination.

This woman did not want to shut down her shop for repairs. To tell the truth, I was impressed by her determination, her search for creative solutions.

After examining the oven, I knew I’d have to tell her how bad the situation was, how expensive it would be. For the first time in my adult life, I didn’t want to tell a customer the truth about their wiring trouble. She didn’t seem fragile or helpless—she seemed stalwart and tenacious, like she’d stand, stoic as if she were carved from marble when I broke it to her that it would take more than this shop could make in a year to make the electrical circuits safe and to buy a new oven. That thing was on its last legs. ‘Shot to hell’ is the term I would have chosen if I were delivering the news to any other customer.

“Can I offer you some cold coffee? A leftover muffin?” She asked with a halfhearted attempt at levity.

“You better sit down,” I said as kindly as I could.

Madison indicated one of the little bistro chairs that flanked the four small tables. She poured coffee, grabbed a chocolate muffin from the case and then brought the lantern to the table. I accepted the coffee, which was barely warm and took a drink, nodding my thanks.

“How bad is it?” she said.

“Have you noticed your lights flickering or dimming and coming back on?”

“Yes. It’s happened more in the last month. I had it on my list of things to check out, but I didn’t get to it before there was a crisis,” she said.

“You’re working with an overloaded, outdated system, some of the wiring I could get to was mediocre quality to begin with and it’s past its lifespan anyway. Did the oven come with the place?”

“It did. It was one of the reasons I decided on this storefront even though it was at the top of my budget. There was another one, better location, but I would’ve had to put in my own commercial oven, which, as I’m sure you know, is not cheap.”

“There used to be a sandwich place here, did toasted subs and stuff. My guess is they had that oven for a long time before you ever got it.”

“How long does it have?” She questioned with the gravity of someone asking the prognosis on a beloved relative.

“I’m not sure how to tell you this, ma’am,” I replied, hesitating.

“Ma’am? Jesus, it must be really bad,” she said.

“You’re lucky this place hasn’t burned down already. You have some scorching along the wall beside the oven. It’s not a black line or anything, but it’s following the path of the wire up the wall from the industrial outlet. You need to speak to

your landlord about having it fixed. You have renter's insurance, right?" I asked.

"Liability. Like if someone burns themselves on coffee or falls and breaks a tooth."

"I understand," I said. Insurance was expensive and not everyone, especially new business owners, had the extra money for it.

"My landlord isn't easy to get ahold of. Can't I just try to fix it myself?"

"It's legally your landlord's responsibility to make sure the building is safe for his tenants."

She reached over and broke off a piece of the chocolate muffin and ate it. I picked it up and took a bite. "Damn, this is delicious," I said.

She smiled, "Thanks."

"Now I see why Noah called me desperate for a favor. You're his supplier of these."

"He doesn't get the chocolate ones. He eats whatever the special is that week. This week it's pumpkin. They sold out pretty fast."

"I can see why, but I think I'd stick to these. When the chocolate is this good, there's no reason to look any further." I said, sinking my teeth into the luscious muffin again. The chocolate was dark and decadent, with a smoky, cinnamon flavor that tasted mysterious.

"Okay, so how much can I tell my landlord the repairs will cost?"

I gave her an estimate, not willing to lie and lowball her. I saw the muscle in her jaw tighten before she tipped her chin down. "Okay, thank you. What do I owe you for today?" She took out a checkbook, pen poised to write.

"Nothing. My brother called me in as a favor."

"You don't have to do that," she protested, and I could see from the tightening of her mouth that she was uncomfortable.

“You don’t owe me anything. I’ll work up a specific estimate on the work that has to be done and get it to you in writing. Friends and family rate,” I said.

“You deserve to be paid for your time,” she said.

“You can give me another muffin.”

“How about I bag up the last three of those and you can take them with you,” she suggested, getting to her feet. “Thank you for getting the lights back on.”

“You’re welcome. Listen, I have a couple of contacts in the salvage business. If I hear about any commercial ovens you can get for a good deal, I’ll let you know.”

“That would be amazing, thank you,” she said, her face brightening as if I’d given her the first hope in years.

Why was I volunteering to go out of my way to help a total stranger? Why had my ambitious baby brother done the same? There was something about her that she didn’t even seem aware of, something that called out to me and made me want to stay near her, talk with her, get to know her.

“Do you have anyone who can help you out?” I asked, knowing it was none of my business. I was thinking a husband, a boyfriend, her parents.

“Yes,” she said staunchly, “Me.”

“I’m sorry I asked.”

“Because it was sexist?” She said with a raise of her eyebrow.

“No, because it’s personal.”

“Personally, I’ve been planning this shop since I was about fifteen. Every penny I saved, every crappy kitchen assistant job I took prepping salads and counting the rolls to put into the basket was working up to this. To getting to open my own place. I have always wanted this and when I thought I had enough money for what I’d figured as startup costs, I worked another whole year to make sure I had a cushion saved up. Because new businesses take money and time you never thought you would need.”

“That’s very responsible. It must have been hard to put it on hold like that,” I said.

“Yes and no. Yes, because I wanted it right that second, of course, but not really because I knew it was the practical thing to do, to have extra money saved in case of emergency. In case my appendix exploded, or my freezer shorted out so all my ingredients had to be replaced all at once, stuff like that. Little things that go wrong.”

“An exploding appendix is minor?”

“Compared to this electrical thing, it absolutely is,” she said emphatically.

“If you’ve worked your whole adult life for this, one oven isn’t going to stop you now,” I assured her.

“I know you’re right. It just feels like it could be the end of everything.”

Something in her expression made me pause and look at her face more seriously than I wanted to allow myself. She was pretty, I recognized that immediately even before the lights were back on, but it was more than her looks. Madison Stewart had steel in her, determination and stubbornness. More than that was her energy, the passion she had for her shop, her goals, the fact that she was all in.

What arrested my gaze was the tiny, almost invisible curve of the corners of her mouth that betrayed her pride and satisfaction. I wondered how I could make that small admission of pleasure break through her reserve and get her to smile, broad and genuine and bright as the sun. I wanted to delight her, surprise her, take her in my arms and carry her up a long staircase like we were in an old movie. Romantic ideas and erotic ones filled my mind, all the ways I could please her until that single, stingy ‘exactly’ was replaced by her crying out at the height of ecstasy.

Stunned by that train of thought, I took a drink of my cold coffee to try to calm my body. Instead, I choked on it because the inappropriate fantasy about the client with the electrical problem had short-circuited my ability to swallow liquids. I

coughed, gasped, somehow snorted and felt the burn of the coffee in the back of my nose. It was humiliating. I waved her away when she got to her feet and tried to help me. I coughed into a napkin she offered me, my face going red. I felt like I was trying to breathe underwater. When I was able to rasp out an, 'I'm fine', she brought me another napkin and took my cup away. Apparently, I couldn't be trusted with coffee now.

"I really appreciate your help, and I'm sorry that my coffee tried to murder you," she said playfully.

Madison was making it difficult to stay professional when she was so likable. I cleared my throat again.

"I'm fine. Thanks for not doing the Heimlich for no reason."

"That doesn't work for choking on liquid. I'm first aid certified. I took that at the same time as my food safety sanitation course."

"I thought it was the Boy Scouts who were always prepared," I said, trying to flirt with her and leave the choking behind us.

"More like a personal philosophy of being prepared for the worst."

"Like electricians choking in your shop?"

"Yeah, and plumbers. Sometimes the people who set up the Wi-Fi," she shrugged. "I'm here to make a tourniquet or do CPR as needed."

"You should put that on the sign instead of Muffins on Maple."

"Maybe I'll consider a rebranding," she laughed.

"I wrote my number on the notepad by the cash register. In case you need to reach me."

"Thank you. I'll hang on to that. I'll put it with Noah's card, which he gave me in case you acted up and I had to call him."

“Oh, yeah? What was he gonna do about it? Make a spreadsheet?” I scoffed, just to make her laugh.

“I dunno, I mean, even though he has a desk job, he looks like he’s in pretty good shape and he did say you’re his *older* brother,” she teased.

“By one year,” I protested. “I turned thirty in March.”

“Really?” She said, lifting her eyebrows like she was skeptical and then cracking up laughing.

“Oh, you’re feisty. I get it now,” I said wryly.

“Nope. Last guy that called me feisty got his ass kicked. Now, I was in middle school at the time and didn’t have a lot of impulse control, but don’t say I didn’t warn you,” she said.

“I have to get going, but I’m not sure the rest of my day is going to be as much fun,” I said.

As I walked to my truck, I wondered what in hell got into me. It hadn’t surprised me that Noah wanted to step in and help someone who needed it—especially when that someone was beautiful. But me? I have a business to run, a farmhouse I’m restoring on weekends. I didn’t have time and energy to go around rescuing people or offering to locate discounted commercial ovens for them. It was not my usual vibe at all. I heaved a sigh as I looked at the time. I knew exactly what had gotten into me. She was funny as hell and didn’t back down, and I had a feeling I’d be calling in favors to help her in any way I could.

NOAH

“E ven the air smells expensive,” I said with a smirk after the waitress took our order.

“I had to change out of my jeans. How is it ‘hanging out with my bros’ if I have get dressed up after work?” Leo said grumpily.

“It’s called, we let Ethan pick the venue,” I said, taking in the plush, saddle-leather and smoked glass aesthetic of the upscale cigar lounge.

Ethan was now ordering a martini from a cocktail menu, so detailed it might as well have resembled IKEA furniture assembly instructions. I sipped my good single malt, and Leo had a beer while he tried to eat all the sausage off the charcuterie board. I took an olive and managed to score some of the Parma ham before he got to it. Ethan spoke to some men at another booth before showing us the week’s cigar offerings.

“The Arturo Fuente, I’m telling you,” Ethan began, “you would appreciate it if you took the time.”

“I think it’s an age difference,” I told him, and he raised his eyebrows.

“I was four when you were born, not fourteen.”

“I didn’t mean it as an insult. I think because you’re established in your career, Mr. Hot Shot, with your AMP Master Prize when you were in college,” I said. “You’re the star of the entire firm.”

“That’s flattering, but I’d say getting to spend six months in Osaka with Tadao Ando was by far the greater honor. The prize opened the door for that opportunity. He’s just on another plane as a visionary,” Ethan said, his voice going low and awed the way it did whenever he mentioned that fellowship. This Ando guy did wicked cool buildings, but my brother acted like he was a cross between Mick Jagger and the Dalai Lama. Leo and I exchanged a look. We knew what was coming. More photos of projects Ethan admired, stuff from his idea board that we’d have to appreciate and understand like it was relevant to us. He was passionate about architecture the same way Leo was passionate about that sausage on the appetizer board and I was about getting promoted to partner at work.

He whipped out his phone and flashed a photo of, not some concrete swirl of a structure, but of the exterior of Madison’s shop.

“What’s the deal here?” he asked.

“Good muffins,” Leo remarked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I go there a couple times a week. Power went out while I was there.”

“So, he called me. Because I have all the skills,” Leo piped up.

“It didn’t occur to either of you to tell me that you had decided to adopt some small business owner? We don’t take in strays, boys,” Ethan said sternly.

“We didn’t take her in. We just saw a problem and stepped in to help.”

“If you start singing about brotherhood and charity, I’ll knock your heads together. How many times do I have to tell you to quit going after the same girl?” Ethan said, exasperated.

“We’re not after the same girl,” I protested while Leo shrugged as if in admission of what Ethan was suggesting.

“We never fought over a girl,” Leo pointed out.

“That is true,” Ethan admitted. “I still can’t understand why two grown men who are so different in every other respect seem to have the exact same taste in women.”

“The best taste,” Leo said, “that’s not the flex you think it is, that you don’t go for the same kind of girls we do. It shows how ordinary you are.”

“Ordinary?” he asked dismissively. “Rebecca was a Fulbright scholar.”

“That’s exactly what any sane man is looking for,” Leo quipped. “Someone terrifyingly smarter than them.”

“I admit Rebecca was, at times, terrifying. But far from ordinary.”

“True,” I said. “You don’t usually get to meet the Wicked Queen in real life.”

“The one from Snow White?” Leo asked. “Yeah, I can see that about her.”

“Yes, it’s strange that she didn’t ever like our family,” he said wryly, “with such friendly and understanding brothers.”

“Wasn’t she gluten-free?” I ribbed.

“She said the gluten caused inflammation that could affect her thinking. Something about her language processing being sluggish if she had gluten I think,” Ethan said, sounding mystified.

“She was definitely not one that Noah and I looked at twice,” Leo said as he selected a Rocky Patel as usual.

“I’m going to try the H. Uppman No. 2,” I said and nodded to my older brother. “Your fault for sending me that Top 25 from Cigar Aficionado. I couldn’t sleep the other night, so I read it.”

“Did it put you to sleep?”

“No. It made me curious about Uppman.”

“Stress over the promotion?” He asked.

“Always,” I replied. “I think if I ever relax and feel like I’ve done enough then I might as well quit.”

“Buy an island and retire there?” Ethan said.

“I’m not quite that advanced.”

“You got me a thirty-one percent return last year. I’d say you’re good at what you do.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling proud that Ethan trusted me with his investments and had confidence in my skill.

“Hey, bro, you know when I get some money that’s not tied up in the farmhouse, I’ll invest it with you,” Leo chimed in, eating the last of the olives.

“It means a lot,” I said to them both.

The lamp at our table lit to signal that our cigars were ready in the lounge. We left our drinks and headed for the private room of generous club chairs and paneled walls hung with the style of equestrian and hunting dog paintings one might expect to find in an English manor. The first velvety curls of smoke rose from my cigar as I drew on it slowly, sinking back in my chair.

“I take back what I said about you picking snooty places to have a drink, Ethan,” I said with a sigh of appreciation. “This is the life.”

“Glad you finally recognize my wisdom, little brother,” he chuckled. Leo puffed on his cigar and stretched out his long legs.

“I can’t complain either. Remind me again how much a membership costs?” Leo said.

Ethan named the figure and Leo’s eyebrows shot up. He gave a low whistle.

“That was some thank-you gift,” he said.

“The Emir was very pleased with the vacation home I designed for his family,” Ethan said matter-of-factly. “This lifetime membership was an expression of gratitude. I even spoke to the senior partners at the firm about the ethics of

accepting such an expensive gift. Mr. Grantham assured me that it was far worse to offend a client by refusing their generosity.”

“Is that what Grantham said about the oil shares, too?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. And I donated half of them to the firm’s charitable foundation.”

“That was nice of you,” Leo said. “But promise me you won’t donate your cigar lounge membership.

“I promise,” he said as he savored his cigar. Several of Ethan’s notable clients had gone on to request his designs for their vacation homes or for commercial properties as well. This had been very profitable for him, and getting to manage his portfolio—which was, as a result of his exclusive clients, much more lucrative and diverse than most thirty-something men could boast—was a coup for me professionally. Being entrusted with the wealth management of a multi-million-dollar investment plan right out of the gate was a major step to my advancement at the financial firm. I was able to prove my mettle without having to woo a client willing to take a risk on an untried manager.

“Does she look like Helen of Troy? Bella Hadid? I’m more of a Margot Robbie fan myself,” Ethan asked finally. “The baker?”

“She doesn’t look like anyone famous,” I said. “Trust me. You’ll meet her and the next thing you know, you’ll offer her the keys to your car or something.”

“She’s that persuasive?”

“No. She doesn’t want help. She doesn’t expect anyone to bail her out,” Leo said. “The shop has been her dream since she was like fifteen, and she worked shitty low-paying kitchen jobs for years to save up for her own place.”

“Sounds like you two had a good talk. Did you go to a group therapy session together or something?” Ethan said.

“No. She just told me.”

“It’s the Foster charm,” I said.

“Got that right,” Leo smiled and fist-bumped me. “You picked a good one this time.”

“Tell me this isn’t going to be like the two of you taking Celia LoVecchio to prom,” Ethan said.

“Most people would be glad their siblings didn’t mind sharing,” I pointed out. “Why complain?”

“It looked strange and invited comment,” Ethan said. “I got so many messages that night from people who watched the three of you stroll in together.”

“Did it embarrass your much more refined ass?” Leo teased.

“Yeah, it did. My little brothers acting a fool after I was gone.”

“To be fair, we acted like fools when you were still living at home,” I said, and we all chuckled.

“A Foster on each arm, it’s no wonder she won prom queen,” Leo said nostalgically. “Wonder whatever happened to her.”

“Celia? She’s, um,” Ethan cleared his throat, “she took holy orders.”

“What?” I asked.

“She’s a nun. Sister Mary Cecelia now, at the Sacred Heart of Jesus on 11th Street.”

“No way!” Leo burst out.

“Did you want to call her up and ask her out again?” Ethan inquired.

“I just thought she—you know, like most of the girls from our neighborhood, she got married and had kids or something,” Leo said.

“Do you think we ruined her for other men?” I asked.

“Either that or she had a genuine calling to devote her life to holy work,” Ethan said. “I doubt it had anything to do with the two of you.”

“Don’t you have to be a virgin to be a nun? Not one to kiss and tell, but Celia wasn’t a virgin by any stretch of the imagination,” Leo said.

“You’ve got to be single. No kids. Didn’t you pay attention in catechism?” Ethan asked.

“Obviously not,” Leo admitted.

“We won’t take Madison to prom, if that makes you feel better,” I assured him.

“You’re an asshole.”

Ethan took a tablet out of his bag and brought up the drawings he was working on for the farmhouse that our brother was remodeling himself. Leo had inherited it from our grandfather whose childhood home it had been before he moved to the city. Knowing Leo would appreciate the property more than we would, Ethan and I got cash bequests. We helped fix up the place when we could, but most weekends he was putting in the sweat equity by himself. Ethan was working on a redesign of the main floor to open the floor plan and reinforce the staircase. I enjoyed my cigar and let my thoughts drift as they talked.

All jokes aside, I couldn’t help considering the idea of Madison, a woman who Leo and I both admired and found attractive. We were grown men now, not horny teens, and the dynamic was different of course. We had never been competitive about women and the truth was, I wouldn’t mind at all if we both had a chance at a relationship with Madison. Regardless of what Ethan said, he wasn’t as strait-laced as he sounded sometimes. Now that he’d achieved so much in his career, he had no reason to worry about his reputation. Besides, propriety or not—we were loyal to one another as brothers, and he would support us in anything that made us happy. It was early in our acquaintance to even consider it, but somehow, I knew that Madison Stewart was destined for the Foster men.

ETHAN

I was chronically early, and it left me plenty of time to stop for a cup of coffee and have a look at the woman who had my younger brothers tied up in knots. Neither one of them had been what I'd call impulsive as adults. We'd all grown up a great deal since their prom incident of course. While I suspect they were both still romantics at heart, I was the practical one. It made sense to turn a cooler, more objective eye on the person whose electrical difficulties had somehow captured the imagination of two-thirds of the men in my family.

For not one but both of them to adjust their schedules to assist a stranger was unprecedented. I was expecting her to be knockout beautiful. Some blinding combination of perfect traits.

When I walked into the shop, I spotted a woman with dark hair and whiskey eyes. She spoke earnestly to a pregnant customer and handed her a bag, moving on to the next person in line. She seemed capable, warm, lovely.

When it was my turn, I ordered a black coffee to go. She met my eyes, considering. "Are you a Foster?" She inquired, observant.

I nodded.

"You must be the hotshot brother," she said, her face breaking into an incandescent smile that threatened to take my breath. That was unexpected, I thought, trying to steady myself as if the force of attraction would knock me off my feet. I laughed at what she'd called me, but I couldn't take my

eyes off her as she turned to serve other customers and then handed me my coffee.

I found myself dawdling. Me, the pathologically early one who constantly turned up at meetings a half hour before anyone else. I waited around to speak to her some more. She talked seriously to an equally somber small child whose father seated him on the counter to select a muffin. She retrieved the one he pointed to and placed it in his hands. He nodded to her as if she had done well, and her smile for him was just as quick and bright as the one she'd given me. She placed some drinks in a carrier for an older lady and spoke to her warmly. I savored every interaction, and I found myself liking the chance to observe her.

There were no tells, no indication she was fake or that this warmth and energy were anything but natural. No stifled sigh or eye rolling, no huff of breath to reveal exasperation. She seemed to be a genuinely nice person, rarer than I cared to admit most days. When she saw I was still there, she gave me an encouraging but uncertain smile as if to say she didn't know why I lingered there.

She seemed to have it all well in hand. A tall guy in an expensive suit introduced himself as Blake and asked her out. She'd had that under control. She had shaken her head kindly and said, no thank you. Then without giving excuses, she moved on, unruffled, and said good morning to the next customer in line. When there was a lull in the crowd, she returned to me.

"I'm Madison," she said.

"Ethan," I offered my hand.

"I thought you'd be different," I told her.

"Younger? Less competent? Like someone who tries to extort discount electricity repairs from unsuspecting men?" She smirked at me.

"I had a stupid idea that you'd be a femme fatale out of an old movie."

She laughed until she snorted just a bit.

“I’ve definitely never been accused of that before,” she stated, clearly amused.

“I thought Leo said your oven was shot?” I asked, gesturing to the baked good in the display case.

“It is. I stayed up all night baking this stuff at home. I don’t even want to know what my gas bill is going to look like next month. But I’m not going to close my business down. I’ve worked too hard, and my customers depend on me.”

It wasn’t difficult to understand what my brothers had seen in her. She seemed to have a kind of confidence that allowed her to do anything she wanted, no matter what stood in her way. I liked her and wouldn’t object to seeing her again. It wasn’t even a stretch to imagine her turning up at holiday dinners with one of my brothers, all of us falling into easy conversation over a bottle of wine. Maybe I couldn’t quite see her kicking back in the leather and mahogany cigar lounge with the Foster men, but that was a decidedly male domain.

If anything, it was unnerving how well I thought she’d fit in with the three of us, not at all a gentling feminine influence but an opinionated, feisty force of nature.

“Do you want to borrow my insulated cup?”

“What for?” I asked, bewildered.

“Well, you’re lingering here when you don’t strike me as someone who wastes time. There must be a point to your presence here besides the pleasure of my company. My theory, and stop me if I’m wrong here—” she gave a mischievous lift of her eyebrow. “Is you’re going to indulge your protective instincts by lifting my fingerprints for a thorough background check That’s why I offered my cup. It has my fingerprints on it, and I’ve used the straw so there’s a chance you could get DNA off that, too.”

“Do you watch a lot of crime shows?” I smirked.

“Define a lot,” she countered.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I concluded.

Smiling on the way to my meeting, I was starting to understand what my brothers had found so captivating about Madison.

MADISON

When times were rough, I wanted so much to call Addi. We had been best friends for so long, and I'd come to rely on her the way you rely on family. We'd been as close as sisters. It was a loss that kept hurting. Anytime something happened in my life—the success of a new muffin recipe or a favorable review from a food blogger—she was the person I wanted to tell, even though she'd betrayed me. Maybe it was loneliness, the lack of any family or other close friends. Working to save the money, building the business had been so time consuming, so absorbing, that I hadn't had the energy or opportunity to try to meet new people. I liked my customers, but I didn't have much more than speaking acquaintances.

None of my employees had fit in and developed the kind of rapport I'd enjoyed with Addi, the inside jokes and shared hardships and mishaps and victories. I wanted someone to commiserate, to tell me that, hell no it wasn't fair that I had to figure out how to budget for a replacement oven or try to get my landlord to do the right thing and make the necessary electrical repairs. There weren't a lot of options. I didn't have anything to fall back on if I had to close the place, even for a week if my landlord decided to be a decent person. I certainly didn't have the money to hire a lawyer if he didn't.

I sifted through my closet listlessly, looking for anything worth selling on eBay. The only things I owned that were worth money were commercial kitchen supplies and a pair of birthstone earrings I got for my fifteenth birthday that may have cost fifty dollars when they were new. I looked on Etsy to

see if I could tie dye aprons or something, a tie-in with my business, to make a few bucks on merch. It did not look like the demand for aprons branded with obscure neighborhood shop names was booming, whether they were colorful or not.

I didn't have time to make appealing digital content about my baked goods and coffee, build a following and monetize my social media platform. It was more of a long-game strategy that took more time and attention to detail than I was willing to devote. I'd considered a YouTube channel to promote my muffins of the month at one point, but I got up so early, put so many hours into the shop itself, that I was exhausted at the end of the day.

Several orders for local offices had to be filled or I'd risk losing the repeat business that I relied upon. So, I was baking in my apartment kitchen. It was a violation of the health code, but I didn't have an operational commercial oven. All I could do was try to keep up with the bare minimum and hope no one figured it out and reported me. Apple cider scones filled the little kitchen with a rich spiciness.

I loved baking batch after batch, loved lining the box with parchment and nestling each pastry in its spot. The accountant firm and the tattoo and piercing shop would have their full orders tomorrow morning on schedule. I mixed up some blueberry muffins to add to the chocolate raspberry batch I'd made earlier—they'd be all the stock I had for the morning coffee run crowd. I was working with an abridged menu at best, but I had to have something to offer my customers besides excuses.

I was scrolling through some gig work opportunities on my phone, wondering if delivering groceries or DoorDash would be a better bet for me to do in the afternoons until the repairs were complete. I rubbed my eyes and made myself get up and stretch and drink some water. I spiraled toward hopelessness, and it wasn't a good direction to go. My phone seized up into a ringing and shaking fit, blanking the screen where I had been reading about fast side hustles.

“Hello?” I stammered.

“It’s Leo Foster. I know it’s after business hours, but are you busy?”

I looked around at my kitchen, strewn with baked goods, the oven timer ticking down another four minutes until my last batch was done.

“I’m just finishing up some baking,” I said with a little sigh.

“Baking? How?” he asked.

“I’m at home in my own kitchen. Please don’t report me to the Better Business Bureau or the Health Department,” I said somewhat glumly.

“Oh, I never would,” he said. “Listen, I just got off work and wondered if you had a minute to meet me down at your shop.”

“Sure. I’m about ten minutes from being done here,” I said. “I could meet you in twenty give or take traffic.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you then,” he said.

I wondered what Leo Foster needed at seven-thirty on a weeknight that he couldn’t just text me, but, despite how tired I was, I found a fizz of excitement running through my veins at the prospect of seeing him.

It took closer to half an hour to get to the shop, and I found him waiting by the door as I hurried up the sidewalk. He held a brown carry out bag that smelled amazing—like a garlic heaven.

“Oh my God,” I murmured as my stomach gave a loud and embarrassing growl. “I’m sorry.”

I let him in and switched on a light.

“Mind if I have a seat?” he said. “Food’s still hot.”

“Go ahead,” I said gamely. “Do you need a plate or fork or anything for your dinner? A drink?”

“This is for both of us, Madison. I didn’t bring food to eat in front of you,” he said, a concerned wrinkle between his

brows. “What the hell kind of people do you usually hang out with anyway?”

“I mostly hang out at work, and you don’t have to share your food with me, Leo. You’ve already been very kind,” I said, a little embarrassed. I was starving. I wanted the yummy Chinese food. I busied myself pouring some orange juice into a glass and sipping it.

With a slight shake of his head, he started unpacking the big bag. There were clamshell trays, cardboard cartons, a couple of intriguing Styrofoam tubs, some plastic cutlery, pouches of sweet and sour sauce and hoisin sauce, soy sauce. My mouth watered.

I took him a glass of water and dropped into a chair, feeling my exhaustion to the bone right then. I wanted to drop my head onto my arms and cry and then sleep for about twenty hours, then wake up and cry some more. The only thing I wanted more than giving in to despair was one or two of those crispy egg rolls he unpacked. I swallowed hard.

Leo took a couple of plates out of the bag and started loading one with fried rice, spicy noodles, broccoli and chicken, egg rolls, some kind of vegetables with a rich sauce and shrimp—and put the plate right in front of me.

“Fork or chopsticks?”

“Um, either one,” I said, swallowing hard.

My voice sounded raspy and forced because my throat had gone tight with sudden tears. The kindness Leo showed was the first I’d had from someone else in a very long time.

Whatever walls I’d built up to protect myself, apparently egg rolls took them down. I took weird, short inhales to stop myself from tearing up because I was not going to cry. Not in front of Leo who deserved better than witnessing an emotional breakdown over Chinese food.

“Oh crap. You’re not a vegan or something are you? Cause I figured with all the eggs in muffins and stuff you probably just ate regular food. If you need something without meat in it—I think the noodles are okay?” he said.

I couldn't help it. I started laughing in big, hiccuppy guffaws. I shook my head, eyes streaming from laughing so hard.

"You okay?" he said. I shook my head again helplessly before I finally got myself under control.

"I'm good now. I needed that, actually. You brought the food, and I was so mixed up, so awkward because it was a friendly thing to do, and I'm not—I don't have many friends anymore. It's just been so long since anyone was considerate and caring to me that I choked up. I was honestly going to start crying because you were so nice. And I am very much not vegan," I explained.

"I was so charming and heroic that you wanted to weep?" he said slyly.

"Yeah, something like that," I chuckled.

"Well, you've had a rough go. Dinner was the least I could do."

"Thank you," I said. "Really. For everything, but especially this."

I picked up an egg roll, bit down and I swear I saw stars and rainbows and unicorns, it was so delicious.

"That's what I like to see," he said.

"What's that?" I asked carefully.

"People enjoying good food. I figured as a baker you like that too, watching people eat and enjoy. It's not the same, since I didn't make the food, but I'll take credit for bringing it."

"Yeah, I do. I like to eat, and I like people to appreciate my food."

"I appreciated the hell out of those muffins. I don't know if you put, like, crack in them or something addictive, but I can see this becoming a stop on my morning commute, meaning I would have to get up twenty minutes earlier. It'd be worth it too. Once you're open."

“I’m open, kind of,” I said. “I have a few orders I can’t afford to lose so I’m making those up at home, and I’m serving seven to nine a.m. only now. Just two kinds of muffins or a muffin and a scone and coffee. Nothing that uses the oven. But I don’t want to lose all my customers, so I’m just doing small batches in my apartment. If I shut down entirely, people will forget about the place and change their routine. All it takes is a shift to stopping at a different place for coffee and a muffin, then the next thing I know, I reopen to zero people waiting in line.”

“I get that fear. And you’re smart to do it how you’re doing it. Any luck with your landlord?”

I blew out a breath. “He finally called me back and said he wanted his own electrician to look at it and give him another quote and he’d think about it.”

Leo shook his head. “He’s going to try to cut corners.”

I nodded. “Most likely. I told him I would contact an attorney if he didn’t do what was right, but I think he knew I was bullshitting. I don’t have that kind of money.”

“Don’t worry, Madison, it’ll all work out,” Leo said kindly.

“How do you do that?” I asked him.

He looked perplexed. “Do what?”

“Make me feel better just by being here.”

He looked at me for a moment before answering. “I don’t know. I just want to see you happy.” His voice was low, and his gaze never wavered.

I cleared my throat to break the spell. Whatever was going on in my panties at the moment, I didn’t have the time to get involved with anyone right now. Leo was kind enough to help me out and bring me dinner. I needed to leave it at that.

“Thanks again for bringing dinner over,” I said, preparing to stand up.

Leo shook his head. “I didn’t just come here to bring you dinner. The guy I called who does salvage had something

come in this week from a foreclosure. A top-of-the-line, multi-deck convection oven.”

“You’re kidding. That’s incredible. Tell me it’s a good price because it’s a foreclosure,” I said, bouncing in my chair.

“It retails for twenty thousand. I can get it for three.”

“Three? Oh my God. Yes! Please. Tell them I’ll take it.”

He nodded. “I told him I’d take it as soon as he sent me pics. Do you want to see?”

Leo handed me his phone and I looked through six or seven pictures of the big, shiny, capacious oven with its racks and pristine interior.

“Will it fit? It’s so big,” I said, meeting his eyes.

“It’ll fit,” he said. His eyes were hot on mine, and I felt the undercurrent of what we were saying to each other, felt the pinch of regret that I knew we couldn’t give in.

“Thank you so much Leo,” I said as I got up and rounded the table to give him an appreciative hug.

Unsure of exactly how it happened, I ended up fully in his lap, straddling his thigh and letting him feel the needy heat in my core that I couldn’t deny. I leaned in and loved the way his throat worked as he swallowed hard in response. His hands were gripping the edge of his seat like he was trying to keep them off me. I brushed my lips to his cheek and whispered, “Let go of the chair and put your hands on me,” and he made a throttled sound. Big hands settled on my hips and worked me back and forth on his thigh instinctively, giving me pressure where I wanted it, making my whole chest light up.

He slipped his hand into my hair and shut his eyes, holding me there for a moment, still, and so close that I felt his breath on my lips. Slowly, painstakingly, he tilted his head to one side and cupped my cheek in his hand. Then he brought his mouth to mine and our lips locked at last. Light and clinging, a reverent sweetheart’s kiss. Not at all the kind of fiery toe-curling performance I expected from him. Then he sighed against my lips and parted them, moving his tongue into my

mouth and letting me meet him stroke for stroke, tasting and exploring.

My hands were on his shoulders to brace myself, but soon I had a hand curling around the back of his neck, my lips parting eagerly to let him in. I canted my hips forward and brought my chest flush with his. His arms came around me like iron bands and held me against his muscled form. I felt every cut ridge of his abs, the punishing swell of his pectorals and his powerful traps flexed when I held his shoulder.

He leaned forward, swamping me with his size and strength. With one final sweep of his tongue, Leo withdrew from me, leaving my flushed skin chilled and restless. I wriggled in protest and reached for him. He shook his head. He'd resisted all he could.

I panted from the exertion of restraint, and I saw that his eyes were nearly black with desire, his lips parted. I couldn't resist pressing another kiss to the corner of his mouth, kissing first his upper lip and then the lower one, giving him light pecks as my lips clung to his. I thrummed with desire for him, and he took my hips and firmly put me away from him.

"You're going to go home and dream about a new oven, but I'm going to lay there all night with my cock in my fist and never get any relief."

"Let me," I whispered, my mouth on his ear.

"No. Trust me, I want to, but no. Not like this. Not wound up in an empty café over a table," he said. I could tell that he was struggling to string words together, that his fevered gaze and those hot, smooth hands were proof of how he was coming unraveled. I laid my hand on his cheek, the stubble at his jaw rasping against my palm, making my body tingle in response.

"I don't know how to say what you are except that you feel important," I said urgently, desperate for him to understand the truth of it. I pressed my lips to his again lightly, a soft moan of relief escaping me at the touch.

“This isn’t a hook up. If I didn’t want to be in your life after tonight, you can bet my zipper would be down by now. There’s nothing I can think of wanting more than I want that right at this minute.” Leo pressed his lips to my jaw, and my body responded.

Even that slight touch left me reeling. My breasts felt heavy and ached for his touch, a knot of needy longing built low in my belly, a deep pull that ended between my legs at the place I wanted him most. His hand was warm in the small of my back as my chest strained against his, my nipples flattened against the stark planes of his muscular chest.

“Madison,” he breathed against my temple. “God help me.”

I loved his whisper, that plea for divine intervention. Something in me felt a sharp feminine satisfaction that he was helpless in the face of my touch.

“I’ll go,” I said abruptly, steadying myself with one hand on the table as I got to my feet and backed away from him. I was coltish and wobbly after sitting so long on his lap. He reached out to help me, but I shook my head.

“I’m sorry,” I said, something like shame settling in my stomach as I backed away. “You were so nice to me, and I like talking to you, and you even found an oven I can afford. I should have just said thank you. I’m sorry.”

“Enough apologizing. We had a bite to eat, one kiss led to another, and we stopped before anything happened. No reason to feel some kind of way about it.”

“I owe you a great deal. You came at short notice and helped me. And you found me a salvage oven that will work better than anything I could have located in twice that amount of time. I’m obligated to you for all that help.”

“Well, that made it weird,” he quipped. “I wanted to tell you in person that the oven problem was solved, and a buddy of mine can help me put it in. As far as owing me anything, I wouldn’t mind free muffins once in a while.”

“You can have free muffins for life, that’s beside the point. There’s no way that a few muffins can balance out the way your whole family has helped me, but you most of all.”

“Noah is the one who called me, who saw the problem and knew how to save the day,” he said loyally.

“I’m grateful to him, too. But you were the one who rolled up your sleeves and fixed things.”

“I guess that makes him my pimp,” he joked.

“So do you have to give him part of every free muffin?”

“Only if he finds out about them,” he said. “Do you have a lightbulb?”

“In the closet back there, why?”

“Will you go grab one?”

“Sure.” I grabbed a new bulb off the shelf and brought it to him.

Leo was on a ladder, his shirt riding up to reveal a strip of tanned skin above his jeans as he reached up and changed the bulb that had been out above the sink for a while. I watched him as he climbed down, and I wondered how I got so lucky to meet people like the Fosters who were kind and considerate.

“Thank you,” I said, “I tried a couple times but even with the ladder I’m too short to reach it.”

“See, having an electrician around comes in handy,” he said with his cocky grin.

I grabbed the front of his shirt in one hand and lifted on my toes to kiss him. He hooked an arm around my waist and hauled me against him, lifting me off my feet. The kiss was fast and hard, leaving my lips tingling and my head spinning. When he set me on my feet, he kissed my cheek again.

“Good night, Madison,” he said, and then he waited silently for me to lock up and he walked me to my car.

“Good night, Leo,” I said, and when I got home, it was all I could do to unlock the door and shuck off my clothes to get in the shower. While steam rose from the water, I grabbed my

favorite vibrator from the drawer. It wouldn't take much. I was so keyed up.

I stepped under the stream of water and leaned back against the shower wall, braced one foot on the soap ledge and let my eyes drop shut as I fired up the wand to level two. I let myself unspool the fantasy of what I'd really wanted, how I wanted tonight to end instead of alone in my apartment with a shoddy, battery-operated substitute.

Leo came down off the ladder and with a cocky grin backed me up into the storage room. He bent my head back over his arm as he kissed me slow and deep and satin smooth. I clutched at his arms and his shirt. He unfastened my jeans and pushed them down. I held onto him as I kicked them off and his big hand stroked my stomach, working down until he cupped my sex possessively. I felt him smile against my mouth as I sucked his tongue and whimpered my want. I was stammering, wanting him to hurry, to just fuck me right there. He turned me around, took my hands and pressed them to the wall.

"Bend over," he instructed, and I swear I grew wetter from his words. Trembling, I bent forward and felt his hand hot as it slid down my spine. Once he held my hips, I was panting for it. He stepped between my legs. I looked back over my shoulder, my teeth chattering with need. He pressed me down with one hand and I loved it, that tender but firm mastery of me, that control he had over the situation. His eyes met mine and he kissed my shoulder.

When he notched himself at my entrance, I felt his hips flex giving me the barest slide. He reached around me and cupped my pussy. I loved the raw possessiveness of the gesture and ground against his hand greedily. He held my hip and worked me back against him inch by inch, feeding his thick cock into me with painstaking slowness. My jaw dropped as he bottomed out and I felt the brush of his sac against my sensitive folds. I went almost limp with the bliss of being filled so utterly, of having his big hand cupping me and working my sensitive nub.

The electric shock of it ran through me and I knew I was building up to an incredible climax. He rocked against me,

stayed buried inside my channel, making me breathless, overwhelmed. I wasn't sure how to move to even work up a rhythm, and I needed more but I wasn't sure how to get it. I felt my nipples tighten painfully and I writhed a little, wanting relief but feeling helpless, bent over, and impaled by him, and the restraint that let him hold that stiff and throbbing member completely still inside me was like a bowstring drawn taut, waiting to be plucked.

I heard a noise. My heart pounded and when I stole a look at him over my shoulder, I caught sight of Noah in the doorway.

"I see you started without us," he said coolly and took off his jacket. He removed cufflinks and rolled up his sleeves with slow, deliberate motions.

Noah's eyes never left me, the way I was bent over, hands scrabbling on the tabletop in artless urgency.

Noah pulled up a chair in front of me and sat. With Leo's help, his cock still buried in me, I bent forward into Noah's arms. He laid my arms over his shoulders and his lips met mine. "I've got you, baby. I know you need relief," he said, and while he kissed me, one hand went to my bare breast that hung right by his face. He fondled my nipple as I shook and groaned with pleasure. He sucked the tender bud, then rubbed it, alternating between the heat of his mouth and the cool air. Then he surprised me again, dropping to his knees and wrapped his hands around my sides. With an indulgent kiss to my belly, he met my eyes and then kissed me right where his brother had spread me with his fingers. It was Leo's cock, Noah's tongue and I trembled, jerked, held onto the shelf behind Noah's chair, afraid I'd crumple as he ate me out. Leo stirred his cock inside my core as I clenched around him at his brother's ministrations. I didn't know if my legs would hold me as wave after wave of pleasure ripped through me and Leo unleashed deep into my womb.

"Move aside, boys," Ethan's voice came. I turned my head toward the sound and saw him loosen his tie. "You had your turn. Can't you see she can barely stand?" He wasn't wrong. Ethan gathered me into his lap and reached between us,

unzipped his fly. As his mouth claimed mine, his thick shaft sprang free between us, and I wanted it. I should have felt like a slut who wanted three brothers at once. But instead, it felt like a treat, a back-room indulgence.

I slid down the wall and sat on the floor of the shower, weak from coming again and again from the fantasy. I wanted all three of them. Not just as a naughty fantasy. In my life and maybe in my bed.

NOAH

“That was a splendid presentation, my boy. Very thorough,” Ron Porter said to me, clapping me on the back.

“Thank you, sir. It’s been an interest of mine for a long time. I’m thrilled to bring it to the board for consideration.”

“I think we can safely say that the board is considering it very seriously. Well done.”

I ducked my head a little at the praise. I was proud of my presentation on global microloans, and I knew it would be a solid addition to the firm’s philanthropic portfolio. In addition to my own passion for the cause was the fact that a successful pitch to the board of directors would help when I was considered for partner. I’d put in a lot of late hours on that proposal, and I was glad it had gone well.

Porter was the third member who had sought me out to thank me and congratulate me on it. That kind of recognition felt good, but it would feel better to make partner. I’d been working toward that goal for over a year.

It was the driving force that kept me going the last few years even if it derailed a few relationships along the way when a woman didn’t like coming in second to my work. When I was ready to settle down, I would make the time. Until then, I had goals to smash.

I was on a call when my secretary came in with a muffin basket that had been delivered. I was starving and they looked suspiciously like the lemon poppyseed muffins that Madison

baked. I finished with the call and asked what the delivery person had looked like.

“It was a girl, twenties, brown hair, cute,” she said.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I said and took off down the hall to find her.

Madison was waiting for the elevators when I caught up to her. She smiled. “Hey, I just wanted to drop off some muffins.”

“Thanks,” I said, “I wish you had stopped to say hi.”

“I figured you were busy,” she shrugged.

“I was. But I’d make time to say hi. How are things going?”

“They’re good. I’ve cut back on hours for the time being until the new oven is in. Leo found me a good deal. You did me a huge favor when you called him in.”

“I’m glad he could help you,” I said.

“How was your presentation?”

“The one today was good. I’m trying to get the firm’s foundation to start issuing microloans globally.”

“That sounds interesting. What kind of microloans? I mean I know about the ones for people to buy like goats and stuff to earn a livelihood or supplies to make crafts to sell...”

“Ideally all those things. Just microloans to fund the startup supplies or livestock that someone needs to begin a self-sustaining business. Then they pay it back into the fund and the amount goes to another applicant in need. The idea is that grassroots efforts are better at getting what is needed into the hands of the people who can use it. It’s very impactful.”

“I’d love to hear more about it, but I know you’re busy.”

“What if I take you to lunch?”

“That sounds great. What time?”

“Noon?” I asked. She nodded. “Madison,” I said. “Thanks for dropping by and for the muffins. I’m going to go have one

now. I'll try not to ruin my lunch."

"I won't tell," she said with a smile.

I was excited to have lunch with her, but my conference call ran long. I had to have my secretary message Madison to say I was going to be late. By the time I wrapped up the call, it was after one. I was about to call and apologize when my secretary buzzed me, "Someone here to see you," she said. When the door opened, Madison had a bag of takeout in her hand.

"You're a lifesaver," I said.

"I figured you'd be hungry and also frustrated that you had to change your plans."

"Exactly," I said, opening the bag and setting out the food. "I'm sorry it's not a proper lunch like I offered you, but I'm glad you're here."

"Well," she said, "A man as busy as you need sustenance if he's going to save the world one microloan at a time."

We talked about my job and new recipes she was excited to try in her new oven when it came in. I couldn't help thinking just as I had that first day that Madison was exactly what I needed.

"I want to kiss you," I blurted out.

"What?" She said, blushing a little.

"You've been so patient and so sweet and instead of just being thankful you brought me lunch. All I can think about is how much I want to kiss you."

"Then kiss me," she said archly.

I put down my sandwich and got to my feet. She stood up and met me toe to toe like it was a challenge. I took her face in my hands and kissed her, softly at first. The zing of contact was stronger than I expected, the chemistry off the charts. Her hands wrapped around my forearms and when she gave a sharp inhale as I slid my tongue in her mouth.

My blood heated and my heart raced as I teased her with quick, deep kisses as I backed her up to the door. In seconds, I had my fingers skating along her rib cage beneath her shirt. She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned back into the door like she'd be content to stay there forever. With sheer force of will I slowed the rhythm, made my touch lighter and more teasing. Her little gasps and the way her skin heated under the softest kiss pressed to her jaw gave me all the reward I needed.

I took her hands in mine and laced our fingers together, pressing them to the door above her head and kissed her again, slowing down so that each brush of our lips was electric. Teasing and tentative, my calculated gentleness seemed to unlock her. She tugged one hand free from mine to reach for my hair, the back of my neck, the sensitive spot just beneath my collar. When she brushed her fingers there, I couldn't hold back a full body shudder that left her smiling against my mouth. Every lick and kiss was drawn out and savored, experienced with an intensity that rang through me like a tuning fork. Gone was my urgency and need to make things happen. I simply wanted to be here with her in this moment. I let myself tune in to the way her hands flexed in mine and gripped me back.

"I meant to take you out for lunch," I said with a soft laugh as I brushed my lips against her neck. I felt her arch in response, canting toward me.

"We had lunch. And we could never have kissed this way in a restaurant."

"We'd be kicked out," I agreed, nuzzling her soft throat.

"If we had somewhere to go," she began, a swift intake of breath, an effort to keep her voice light and playful while I was slowly undoing us both. I let go of her hands, untangled our fingers from one another and she hugged me, her arms around my neck and her face buried in my shoulder.

"I really did want to hear more about microloans," she said, her voice a little shaky. I held her and stroked her hair.

“I’ve talked enough about finance. I wouldn’t say I’ve kissed you nearly enough,” I said.

“That’s fair,” she said. “I’d offer to meet you for dinner, but I have baking to do. One little batch at a time.”

“Could I help you?”

“I don’t know. Do you have hours of extra time to stand around my kitchen waiting for things to bake? Do you know how to mix muffins?”

“I can learn,” I said, “And I’d like to. Let me help you out.”

“Okay. If you still feel like it later, you’re welcome to come over and try your hand at cranberry orange scones.”

“Sounds like a challenge. I’ll be there,” I said.

ETHAN

The Tokyo project was coming along, but slowly. I'd had Zoom meetings at odd hours due to the time difference and it was starting to wear on me. It was good to sit down and have a beer with my brothers, watch a game.

"How is your coffee shop project coming along?" I asked them during a commercial.

Noah looked up first and gave a half smile. "Madison had lunch together this week and I helped her make some scones at her apartment that night. She's having a hard time but she's not complaining. She acts like we hung the moon or something, just for giving her a hand with the oven thing."

"Yeah, it really bothers me that she has so few people in her life that treat her kindly. Makes me want to make a special effort to do things for her," Leo adds.

"Trouble keeping it in your pants, brother?" I asked wryly.

"I've kept it in my pants," he said, irritable. The aggravation in his voice proved he spoke the truth.

I knew they both liked Madison a great deal. What surprised me was how much I liked her and wanted to know her better as well. What could one woman possibly have that appealed to three men at once?

"I thought she'd be an opportunist. Some kind of seductress bent on scoring a free oven from guys who put their common sense aside for a chance to have her. I went to see her and knew from the first couple of minutes that she was too

down to earth for that. What shocked me was that I stood around watching her work, seeing how she related to her customers and—”

“You got hard?” Leo said bluntly.

“You were attracted to her,” Noah amended more politely. I nodded to them both.

“I didn’t expect to like her, but here we are,” I said.

“Does that mean you’re finally acknowledging our good taste?” Noah asked.

“I suppose I am,” I admitted.

“I kissed her,” Leo said off-handedly, not guilty, not confessing. Just letting us know. “And it felt like I’d never kissed anyone before in my life. I mean it was like my first time and I couldn’t believe how lucky I was that she was interested in me.”

“I kissed her over lunch in my office,” Noah said. Leo gave a nod.

“I only stopped kissing her because I didn’t want to take advantage of her, and I knew she was lonely. I also knew if I wanted anything with her, I couldn’t rush to hook up. If I wanted her for something real, then a fling was the wrong way to go about it,” Leo said.

“Same,” Noah said. “I wanted her but not just once, not a one-night stand.”

“You need to have a conversation with her about this,” I said. “And while you’re at it, tell her she can use my kitchen. If she needs to bake her orders while hers is out of commission. It’s not like I’m cooking.”

“You say that so casually, like you’re not trying to move in on Madison yourself.”

“I’m just offering to help her. You two are going to be away for the weekend to work on the farmhouse. I’ve got to stay here and do some drafting and about a hundred annoying Zoom calls this weekend. She may as well take advantage of

the convection oven in my loft. God knows I don't use it myself."

"I'll give her a call," Noah said, taking out his phone, "as long as you admit that Leo and I have better taste in women than you do."

"That's not much of a confession," I said dryly. "I admit this is the first time I've been interested in a woman you're both attracted to. I give you credit for finding her and bringing her into our lives."

"That's good enough for me," Leo chuckled and finished his beer.

I wanted to invite her over myself, but my brothers knew her better. I'd leave it to them to tell her she could use the kitchen however much she liked this weekend. Maybe it would help her out. I'd go to my office and stay out of her way. I was tempted to ask Noah to tell her that. But somehow I didn't want to put all communications through my brother.

"Does it bother you that I said she could come over this weekend while you two are gone?" I asked Leo speculatively.

"No, why?" He asked.

Noah came back in from the kitchen with another beer. "She said thanks and she'll text you about a convenient time. I gave her your number."

I nodded.

"Hey, Noah, he asked if it bugged me that he was going to see Madison while we were out at the farm," Leo said like it was a funny story. Noah shrugged.

"Why would it be a problem?"

"I know the two of you have never been jealous of each other. I just didn't know if it extended to me," I said frankly.

"You overthink everything," Noah said. Leo nodded in agreement.

"You're not wrong," I said. But I admitted to myself that I was looking forward to seeing her, to having her cook in my

kitchen and getting to know her better.

LEO

When I got to Ethan's loft after work on Friday with two bags of Indian food, I was surprised to find Madison already there unpacking ingredients onto the counter. She had a cart full of stuff—pans, mixing bowls, what looked like two kinds of flour. I set the food down and helped her unload.

"Ethan has bowls. Did you think he wouldn't have anything?" I laughed.

"I didn't know what he had, and it was enough of a favor to let me use the oven. I don't intend to use up his pantry staples or use his utensils and stuff."

"Did you bring a mixer?"

"Yeah," she said, not even sheepish about it. I lifted it out of the bottom of her cart. "This thing weighs like thirty pounds."

"It's a good mixer. I can get that. You don't have to."

"I wanted to help," I said, hefting the appliance onto Ethan's concrete countertop.

"This place is beautiful. It's the best kitchen I've ever seen in anybody's house. I can't believe he doesn't use it," she said.

"You've met Ethan, right? Does he seem like he cooks big meals or hosts dinner parties?"

"I don't know him that well," she said and seemed a little shy about it.

“You’ll get to know him pretty quickly. He’s great at his job, but if it’s not architecture or his family, he doesn’t have much to say.”

“That’s demonstrably false,” Ethan’s voice came from the living room. “I have a lot to say about the Knicks.”

“That goes without saying,” I acknowledged.

“I thought you and Leo were going to work on the farmhouse this weekend?” She asked.

“We’ll head out in the morning. We usually try to have dinner together on Fridays if we can.”

“That’s really nice that you guys are so close.”

Madison put her eggs and butter in the refrigerator and turned to help me set out the Indian food. Noah gravitated toward the peppery scent of the meal. He set the table, and Ethan came in, talking on his phone. Soon the four of us gathered around the table and passed the containers, loading our plates. Noah tucked into the spicy vindaloo while Ethan piled his plate with chana masala and dal makhani. I watched Madison choose a samosa and then add a little taste of every dish to her plate.

“So good,” she muttered and tore off a piece of naan to go with it.

I ate my butter chicken and marveled at Noah’s ability to eat the scorching vindaloo and still carry on a conversation like a normal person.

“I still think you were a dragon in a past life. Only way to explain the fact that your esophagus hasn’t melted yet. You have some residual flame-retardant lining in your gullet or something,” Ethan remarked.

“Are you a vegetarian?” Madison asked him.

“Not at all. Why?” he asked.

“I just saw that you were eating the chickpeas and stuff instead of the lamb or chicken.”

“You’re observant,” he remarked. “I just like the chickpeas.”

“I don’t scare that easily. When I was in cooking school, we used to eat whatever was on sale at the taco truck after classes let out. If you’ve survived on discount day-old Mexican cooked in a literal van, you don’t have to worry about the after-effects of some perfectly good Indian food,” she said.

“Van food?” Ethan said dubiously.

She nodded, “I also worked at the convenience store near my old apartment and at the end of the shift we got to take home any of the hot wings that didn’t sell.”

“It’s a wonder you’re alive,” Noah said. “Leftover hot wings? Clearance sale parking lot tacos?”

“Hey, those wings stayed hot under the lamp for ten hours at a time. They were just as good when at the end of a shift as they were fresh,” she protested.

“That,” I remarked, “is not the flex you think it is. Since that just means they were awful to start with.”

“I’m starting to suspect that none of you ever had to hustle to survive.” She shook her head at us with a half-smile.

“You’re right about that,” I said. “I did shift work some during my apprenticeship, but none of us ever went hungry.”

“I didn’t starve. But I ate a lot of free leftovers.”

“You’re a true survivor, Madison,” Ethan said. “Now I’ll clear this away and you can teach the lot of us to make muffins.”

“Oh no, I can do it myself. You’ve been so nice letting me use your kitchen. I’ve already preheated both ovens. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind. I know the top one is a convection oven. I’m not sure about the one on the bottom. Before you arrived, I took the back issues of Architectural Digest out of it.”

“What?” She said incredulously.

“I know, the issues are online, and I have a subscription. Sometimes I look through my back issues for specific design features I liked. So, I kept them in the oven I never use.” Ethan said.

We all laughed at that, because using the oven to store things was completely him—practical but a little unusual.

“If I have to use anybody else’s oven, what should I check for before I preheat it?” Madison teased.

“Instruction manuals,” I said immediately with a cockeyed grin. “I never use them, but it seems wrong to throw them away. And Noah here hides his porn in his. That way nobody ever sees it if they snoop around his apartment because who’s gonna look in the oven?”

Noah rolled his eyes. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I use my oven sometimes. I don’t treat it like an extra closet.”

When we joined her in the kitchen, Madison gave us a quick introduction to the kinds of flour she used, the different leavenings and handed Noah a plastic container. “Here’s my basic muffin mix. We have to add in flavorings and the wet ingredients. If you’ll get six eggs out of the fridge, top shelf, and break them in to a bowl with this sugar,” she measured a heaping scoop of sugar and dumped it in a bowl. Then she selected cranberries and chocolate chips, handing me a grater and an orange.

“Am I shaving it?” I said.

“Zesting it. You slide the grater across the rind and the cute little peels that curl off have a ton of flavor. Don’t grate it into the pith—the white part is bitter,” she told me. I stood at the counter and very gingerly rubbed the jagged tool across the surface of the fruit, watching as miniature orange curls tumbled off the back of it and sprinkled onto the bowl. I looked at Madison as if to say, *do you see this? It works!* She grinned at me.

“It’s fun,” she nodded.

I kept going and she showed Ethan how to line the muffin cups with parchment paper. He botched the first one twice and

swore. “Why is this so complicated?” he grumbled.

“It’s delicate,” she said. “With your background in structural engineering and design, I thought you’d like this part.”

“I would if it were made in any sensible way,” he mumbled, finally assembling the fancy paper muffin cup. “These are ridiculous.”

“You got it,” Madison encouraged him. He huffed and started the next one.

“Careful,” I told her. “If you challenge him, he’s going to stay up all night and use eight rolls of that paper designing a new and better way to do that. He’ll have a patent on it by the end of the month.”

“Maybe not that quickly, but yes,” Ethan said.

“He’s patented several of his designs. They’re all innovations on smaller components of commercial buildings that make things convenient or sustainable,” Noah boasted. Ethan shrugged, clearly pleased but too gruff to say so.

“That’s cool,” Madison said. “I’d love to hear about them sometime.” Ethan didn’t look up from his weird baking paper origami project but made a noise in the affirmative. He was suddenly shy at the praise, and you had to know him very well to understand he wasn’t being stuck up or grouchy. He was overcome and couldn’t say more, stuck in the glow of her admiration. I could understand why. I was never at a loss for words, but I could kind of see how Madison’s full attention, her interest might be more than a man could survive. Her expectant smile was lovely and bright. I had the wild urge never to disappoint her. To promise that, which a man can never promise.

We fell into a rhythm of mixing and pouring, slotting pans of muffins into the oven and starting new batches. We each had our assigned job and, if we didn’t have much skill, we at least helped things get done until she had box after box of finished muffins. She mixed up scones and started on a quiche.

“Since it’s inching into fall, I thought I’d do a savory quiche and see how it goes over. Just something with squash and leeks and bacon. What do you think?”

“Bacon? I’m in,” I said.

We took over the chopping of leeks, Ethan learned how to dice the squash and I fried the bacon. By the time we’d beaten the eggs and added some cheese, we had decided on a double batch so we could try it ourselves. When the quiche came out of the oven, bubbling with cheese and smelling of sage and bacon, we were ready to eat. Noah had made coffee, and we had a late-night meal of quiche and muffins.

“That’s it, you can never leave,” Ethan pronounced. “This is incredible.”

“Thank you,” Madison said, her cheeks turning a little pink.

We exclaimed over the meal and helped her pack up the baked goods so she could store them in the shop freezer until they were needed. When she refused our offers to follow her and make sure she got home okay, Noah and I took off. As I was leaving, I decided to turn back and hug her.

“I had a great time. Your muffins are amazing.” I said, kissing the top of her head. She hugged me back and thanked me for my help. It felt so good to hold her, and part of me didn’t want to leave.

MADISON

“I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun,” I confessed as I was cleaning up the kitchen. “Is that the lamest thing you’ve ever heard? I mean it makes it sound like I’m ready for bingo at the retirement home.”

“Not at all,” Ethan said. “It was a great night and even better with you here.”

“I appreciate you letting me tag along, and I can’t thank you enough for letting me come use your kitchen. The ovens are amazing.”

“Thanks,” he said. “My magazines always liked them.” I grinned.

“You seemed so intimidating when I met you. I wouldn’t have guessed that you’d be funny. Or, you know, real.”

“Because I seemed like AI? Computer generated forbidding older brother?” he said wryly.

“Exactly. You seemed like one of those scary-smart people who frightens everyone by making jokes like that, about AI and stuff, and we all just stare and try to understand it. But you’re human. It made me feel a thousand times more comfortable.”

I finished loading his dishwasher and started the cycle. “You really don’t mind if I leave this stuff here?”

“You’re right. You should lug home that fifty-pound mixer and bring it back in the morning,” he said.

“Alright, I’ll leave it. So, you guys have always been like that?” I couldn’t help asking. “Like the best of friends?”

“Pretty much. We argue and stuff from time to time, but we’ve always been really lucky to have each other. Most people, I think, aren’t as close to their siblings as we are.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, are your parents still around?”

“Yes and no. They’re alive and well, living in Miami. I retired them after my first big commission and got them a place where it’s warm. They love it. Mom learned to golf. Dad’s writing a book about the Cuban missile crisis or something,” he said. I smiled.

“That’s so sweet,” I said.

“What about yours?”

“They’re okay I guess.”

“You guess? You don’t see them often?”

“Last time I talked to my mom, I invited her to the opening of my shop. She and her boyfriend had other plans.”

“Opening your own business is a pretty big milestone. I’m sorry they didn’t come.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t really expect her to come. When I turned eighteen right before I graduated high school, she let me know that I would be moving out as soon as school was over in May. I guess she figured she’d put in her time raising me and wanted her own life.”

“That’s harsh,” he said, and the way his brow furrowed told me he didn’t think much of my mom.

“She took care of me when I was little. She wasn’t bad. Just never wanted to be a mom. She got caught out and had me. She was young, and her parents kicked her out. She waited tables and eventually got line work at a factory out in Jersey. I had food and shoes and a winter coat and stuff. We went roller skating on my birthday one time, and she was so good, Ethan. She could go in the middle of the rink. She could spin so fast and everything. It makes me sad to think about it

now because I see how carefree and strong she must have been before life got her down. I begged her to teach me.”

“Did she?” he asked gently. I shook my head.

“There was never any time,” I shrugged.

“Then sometime we’ll go skating,” he said. I looked at him dubiously.

“That’s sweet but, um, I haven’t skated in probably fifteen years, and I can’t exactly picture you on roller skates.”

“Thank God,” he said with a laugh. “I wanted to be sweet, but I can’t see myself on skates either.”

“It’s the thought that counts,” I said and kissed his cheek.

“Are you sure I can’t follow you?”

“I’m sure. I’ve been driving myself around for years. I’m good at it.”

“That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like to take care of you.”

“Thanks. I’m good. And you and your brothers have been a godsend. I’m not sure what I would have done, as much as I hate to admit that.”

“You’ve got a lease, right? There’s no reason why your landlord shouldn’t pay to bring the place up to code. Legally, he’s liable for it.”

“He’s dragging his feet. I think he knows I don’t have the money for a lawyer.”

“You don’t need one. I’ll have my friend Judy make the call. She’s a lawyer at our firm. She’ll say she’s calling on your behalf and won’t let him off the line until he agrees to get it done.”

I shook my head. “You really don’t have to do that,” I said.

“I know I don’t, but I want to. It’s the least I can do. Please, let me help,” Ethan prodded.

“Okay,” I said. “It’s—I don’t like giving up control or asking for favors. It’s outside my comfort zone.”

“We all need a little help sometimes, Madison,” Ethan said.

I found the number in my phone and texted it to him. “Let me know how it goes?” I asked.

“Of course. I don’t think there will be anything to tell. He’s out of options. Plus, it helps Leo to get a big project like that.”

“I like the idea that it will help Leo too. I just feel bad taking all this help from you guys.”

“Don’t. Accepting help is a skill, and we all have to learn it.”

“That sounds wise, but what kind of help do you ever accept?” I said, giving him a suspicious eyebrow raise.

“Besides the help of my parents putting me through college? Noah manages my finances and gives great advice. Leo fixes anything that needs fixing around here and is my go-to when I’m making a big purchase like a car because he knows the technical side. If it’s electronics, I’m asking Noah, obviously. You might not know it by looking at the way he dresses, but Leo has an eye for design and fashion as good as my own. We go shopping together sometimes for events and household things. That ottoman?” he pointed to a big, round gray ottoman in his living room.

“It’s great,” I said. “I have ottoman envy.”

“Leo picked it out at one of those home places, the discount one in Jersey City, when he was in town for a buddy’s wedding. It has storage.”

“So practical,” I teased. “Well, I really should get going, I have to open the shop early tomorrow. Thank you again for letting me use your kitchen.”

“Any time. You’re coming back tomorrow, right?”

I nodded. “If that’s okay.”

Ethan’s eyes found mine. “It’s okay. I like spending time with you.”

“Me, too,” I said a little shyly. He was so handsome standing there in his rolled-up shirtsleeves that I almost couldn’t look right at him. He laid a hand on my shoulder, stroked down my arm and took my hand. Then he held my hand as he dipped his face and kissed me. I had expected and wanted his kiss, but the way it felt was a surprise.

The kiss didn’t feel like a pale copy of another man’s skill. The workaholic brother, the serious one, was hiding a deep well of passion. I felt the blur of sensation, the sweetness of our lips locking together, a gentle tug, and then his tongue swept into my mouth, his arm going around my waist to steady me. It was a good thing he held onto me because my knees nearly buckled in reaction to the sweep of attraction and pleasure that rocked through me from head to toe. I pulled back a little and smiled at him.

“Good night,” I said.

He nodded, held the door for me, and looked slightly shocked. Like the force of the kiss had stunned him as well. This was another twist for me, another something to think about. I’d hardly dated, too consumed with working, saving, building a business of my own. Now I was interested in three men at once. Three men from the same family. It was absurd and kind of ironic that I could go four years without meeting anyone I liked at all and in a matter of days I’d stumbled upon a trio of brothers who could make a nun recant her celibacy vow in the blink of an eye.

I had no idea what to do with the jumble of lust, affection, and joy that I felt. But it was too wonderful to let shame taint it. I would be honest with them. Maybe they had some method—arm wrestling or rock paper scissors—to decide matters like this. I hoped they did because I was completely unable to say I had stronger feelings for one than the others.

NOAH

She was here. Again. I should have been angry, but it was a wave of mortification that hit me instead. Why couldn't she stay away? The beginning of a tension headache started at my temples as I took a deep breath.

"I'll be right out," I told my secretary. I closed out the document I'd been working on and stepped out of my office.

There she was. Olivia Rade. My one-time girlfriend of about a month, late last year. We were broken up by Christmas, yet here she was. Turning up at my office, acting like we were sweethearts. I bristled at the wide smile she gave me as she rushed to throw her arms around me. I took a step back and held up my hands.

"No," I said, "I'm not doing this. Let's go."

"Ooh, are we going to dinner? Are you surprising me for our anniversary?" she squealed with delight.

"We don't have an anniversary. Keep your voice down," I said.

"I'm not leaving this spot until you tell me that you remember our anniversary!" She trilled, every inch the offended girlfriend. I wanted to shake her, scream at her, and let security drag her away.

I couldn't do any of those things because I didn't want the spectacle or the scene it would cause. Not when I was trying to prove myself an asset to the firm and make partners. I didn't

need the drama, the gossip, the appearance of an out-of-control personal life. So, I gritted my teeth.

“You’re leaving. Now. I don’t want to call security. Let’s keep this quiet. You know we’re not together. We haven’t been since last December. You’ve got to let this go and move on. Please,” I said, taking her elbow and steering her to the elevator.

As soon as the doors slid shut, I turned on her. “Olivia, you can’t come to my office. I don’t want to see you again. Ever. All you’re doing is embarrassing yourself. Stop contacting me. Stop coming here. You are not my girlfriend. You will never be my girlfriend, and once you leave this building, I hope you have a great life far away from me. Because if you don’t stay away, I’m going to—” I stopped.

She was crying. Her manicured hands fell to her sides, and she slumped against the elevator wall, tears streaming down her face. I used to kiss her, used to comfort her when she was upset. But she had been so chaotic, jealous, always picking a fight. It wasn’t worth the effort. A year later, she dogged my footsteps and popped up, pretending we were lovers. It was a horror show at this point, and now that I had been direct and mean, she was crying, looking helpless. Her long coat fell open, revealing thigh-high stockings, a garter belt, and a bra. She had come into the building where I work dressed in nothing but lingerie and a coat. Aghast, I yanked her coat around her.

“What is wrong with you? Walking around in public like that?” I demanded, tying the belt firmly.

“I wanted you to want me again, Noah,” she bleated. I shook my head.

“I won’t,” I told her. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out. Go home and get some sleep. Start fresh tomorrow and forget about me, okay? Please.”

I walked her out the front doors and felt the tension leave my body as she walked away. She was gone. Thank goodness. I was exhausted by it, by the fear she’d show up, what she’d do or say that could potentially derail my career. I didn’t

understand when we were together how unhinged or unwell she was. I'd tried to get her help a few months ago. I'd called a social worker and had a wellness check done, asked if they could get her some resources, therapy, a doctor. Nothing came of it. She'd convinced them she was perfectly rational, just sad that I had broken her heart. I wasn't concerned about what they thought of me. I didn't mind if she needed me to be the villain. I wanted her to get help and to get away from me. Her intrusive visits to my work, the building where I lived, the gym I went to or the coffee shop I frequented had led me to change my routines. I made a point of varying where I fueled my car and where I had my hair cut and when. I had accepted so many changes and inconveniences in my daily life to try to ward off her harassment.

I was tired and anxious that it would affect my eligibility for a promotion. I made my way wearily back to my office and struggled to focus on the project at hand. It wasn't even eleven in the morning, and I wanted to go home and go to sleep, the exhaustion of this ordeal weighing on me. When Ethan messaged me, I called him.

“She was here again.”

“Olivia? Call the cops, Noah. It's past time to let them handle this. It's time to file for a restraining order.”

“I don't want to involve the police. It's embarrassing. I don't want to relive all this in great detail, go over every single day of the relationship, every incident where she's shown up someplace I happened to be. It's humiliating, Ethan.”

“It's time. That way she can't come near you without paying a fine or spending time in jail. Maybe the fear of punishment can get through to her.”

“It'll be fine. I'm going to focus on becoming a partner. Once I've accomplished that, I can consider what is best to do about this situation. If Olivia is even still messing with me at that point.”

“She's not going away. You've tried waiting it out, and you've tried kindness. You've told her to stop, and you even tried to get her help. The next obvious step is to involve the

authorities, no matter how much you want to avoid it,” Ethan said.

I heaved a sigh and told him I’d speak to him later. I attended the weekly progress meeting and gave an update on the projections for my proposed initiative and sleepwalked through the small talk with my bosses. Back in my office I wrapped up details on the explanatory document on the quarterly returns for my newest managed fund. I proofread it and shared it with the partners and the president of the board of directors.

When my phone rang, I was going to let it go to voicemail until I saw it was Madison. I answered, and she said, “Hey, are you busy for lunch? I thought I could make you something if you have time to run by my apartment. You’re not working through lunch again, are you?”

“No, not today,” I said, knowing I needed to get out of the office for a while. I didn’t have anything on my schedule until two. I had plenty of time for a long lunch. “Want me to bring anything?”

“I’d say wine, but I’m pretty sure you have to go back to work. We don’t want a tipsy financial manager pushing the buttons,” she giggled.

“I’ll be there shortly,” I said. “Thanks.”

I set the out-of-office message on my email and phone and took off. I felt free as I drove to her building and climbed the stairs. When she opened the door to her small apartment and let me in, I almost sagged with relief. I sank into a chair and listened to her talk excitedly about the zucchini bread recipe she thought she’d perfected last night. I ate the hearty soup she had made and a cheddar and chive scone as well.

“You’re awfully quiet,” she said.

“I had a rough morning. This lunch with you was exactly what I needed. It was a rescue,” I told her.

“Yeah, beef and barley save the day,” she quipped.

“It saved me. I mean it.”

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” she offered as she cleared the dishes away. “You can try my zucchini masterpiece too.”

“I have to sing for my supper then?”

“No, you have to spill the tea to get dessert,” she returned, her eyes sparkling. “Let’s go sit on the couch.”

“That’s fair,” I said, accepting a slice of cinnamon-scented bread that was tender and sweet. “It’s good. Better than what I have to tell you about.”

“It’s very good. I don’t expect you to compete with it.”

“That’s reassuring,” I said. “It’s a long story. If you decide you don’t want to hear it all, you can stop me.”

“I asked what was wrong. I want to know what you’re worried about.”

“Okay then,” I said, taking a drink of water before I began.

She turned toward me, one knee bent in front of her on the couch, looked me in the eye, and gave me her full attention.

“A few months ago, I broke up with a woman I’d been seeing. We were together about a month, nothing long-term, nothing serious. She met my brothers once, and I met her friends for drinks before a concert. We didn’t see each other every night or move in together. She had us Instagram official, but that was important to her.” I took another deep breath like I was diving into deep water.

“When did you break up?”

“December.”

“December as in last year? That’s not a few months. That’s like ten months. Anyway, sorry I interrupted.”

“It’s okay. Olivia was dramatic and jealous, making everything become an argument. I broke things off, but she didn’t take it well. For a few weeks, she would show up at my apartment and I wouldn’t let her in, or she’d be at the grocery store, Starbucks, or outside my office building. I ran into her constantly, and every time she had insisted it was a

coincidence, but really it was that she was so in love with me that we had to give it another try. The more she showed up, the more angry it made me, because to a reasonable person, if I broke up with you because you're dramatic and make such a fuss, then making a bigger fuss isn't going to make me want you back."

"Obviously. She wouldn't let it go," Madison said. "What did you do?"

"I told her to back off, that I'm sorry I hurt her. That I wished things were different, but we couldn't be together. She was a great person and deserved someone better, that kind of thing."

"You lied," she said flatly.

"What?"

"You don't wish things were different, do you? Did you really think she was great and deserved better or did you just want to make her go away without feeling like you were the bad guy?"

"Both, I guess. I tried ignoring her, refusing to see or speak to her. Then she started sending me stuff, teddy bears, chocolates, flowers, presents."

"Presents?"

"Silk boxers, stuff like that."

"Oh, so sexualized personal items."

"And the selfies. She sent me so many nudes. I only opened the first two and got the idea what she was trying to do. I delete them as soon as I get them. It makes me cringe when my text alert goes off because I'm thinking it could be another one."

"She's terrorized you all this time?"

"I wouldn't call it that."

"I would."

"Why?" I asked.

“Think about it. If I came to you and said the same thing. My ex from last year kept coming to my door and in my shop and sent me crotchless panties and unwanted dick pics, what would you say to me?”

“That’s different,” I said stubbornly.

“How? Because she isn’t going to be able to jump out at you in a parking garage and overpower you? If she had a weapon she could, Noah. This is serious. Every bit as serious as if the roles were reversed and it were a man stalking me. What do your brothers say?”

“I took Leo’s advice early on. I called her boss and told him that she was harassing me and wouldn’t leave me alone. That I didn’t want to get police involved and damage her reputation and that of the design firm where she worked.”

“Okay, what happened?”

“She got fired. Showed up at my door crying that I’d taken away everything in her life that mattered to her, and she was going to be homeless, and it was my fault. She had no place to go because she’d never be able to pay her rent doing freelance and she didn’t know what to do. She said she would just go to a shelter.”

“Wow, she *is* dramatic.”

“She was overwrought. She was convincing. I was afraid she’d do something to hurt herself.”

“Oh God, you did not let her stay with you, did you? Please say you didn’t.”

“I didn’t. No. I just gave her money, wrote her a check to cover her for a month so she could pay her rent and find a job.”

“That was probably a bad idea.”

“Yeah, I get that now. I felt guilty because all this was because she couldn’t get over me. I’d broken her heart and now got her fired. I felt awful about it.”

“But it’s not your fault that she was obsessed or your fault that she acted like you were on a campaign to destroy her

when you were trying to get someone in her life, an authority figure, to check her wild behavior. Did she have, like, a therapist?"

"I tried that too. I said I'd pay for therapy. She said she'd go to couples therapy with me to work out our issues, but I refused because we're not a couple. I don't know if I had gone with her maybe things would've turned out better."

"Stop, this is not your fault," Madison insisted, holding my hand. "You're trying to survive a terrible situation. Sure, I want her to get help but that doesn't excuse how she's invaded your privacy and made you feel hunted."

"I know that's true, but it looks like I'm the one with the power in the situation and she's the one being hurt and mistreated by a man who didn't want her anymore and tossed her aside."

"Even if you did toss her aside, which I doubt, that doesn't mean you deserve to be harassed."

"She calls and texts in the middle of the night, too. Four in the morning, stuff like that."

"Sleep deprivation is a form of torture," she pointed out. "Olivia is waging a full-scale war on you to wear you down. The poor-me brokenhearted routine, the needy, helpless thing, and then playing on your guilt."

"I'm sure she is. Ethan said I should call the police next time."

"Next time what?"

"She came to the office today and acted like it was our anniversary. I didn't call security because I wanted to avoid a scene. It wouldn't do me any good with the partners if I look like I have a crazy girlfriend whose outbursts I can't control. I walked her out. In the elevator her coat fell open, and she wasn't wearing much. This was some weird seduction she had planned, I guess."

I rubbed my forehead and thought of how I'd recoiled when I saw what she had on, the way I hadn't even wanted to

take her elbow to usher her out. Everything about the whole thing disgusted me.

“Let me guess, it’s making you feel like you’re crazy?” she said. I felt my jaw clench in response, but I nodded. “I could kinda tell. You’re defensive about all of it like you’re under attack. And I think the instinct there is to minimize the problem and try not to admit how bad it is or how much it affects you.”

“It’s why I went to your coffee shop. Because I didn’t want to go back to the Starbucks near my place. Olivia was there just before me a lot of times and I wanted to avoid her if I could. It sounds lame.”

“It sounds sensible,” she insisted. “I hate to repeat myself, but I’m right, so I’m going to underline it here. If I had a creepy ex who stalked me everywhere I went, would you tell me to toughen up and just go get my coffee where I usually went and ignore him? Like he wasn’t a threat and I just needed to quit whining?” she challenged.

“No, of course not,” I said.

“Then having a double standard about this is really sexist of you,” she said.

I wasn’t sure if she was teasing or not. I wanted to protest, to say that it was different for men, but I sat back and resisted the urge to get defensive. I’d been stressed out by it for so long that I was on edge, and I didn’t want to take it out on her.

“Noah,” she said, her voice warmer, softer, “I’m glad you told me. If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know. I mean, short of beating her up.” She made me smile and then I hugged her.

“Thank you, Madison,” I said, “For everything. You’re a good listener, and that’s rare.”

“I once went to a therapist who got out his phone and started doing the daily Wordle while I was talking,” she said. “True story. Good listeners, they don’t grow on trees.”

I kissed her cheek and pulled back to look at her.

“If I didn’t have a two o’clock today, I’d be asking if I could stay,” I said, searching her eyes.

“I’d be trying not to say yes. And failing,” she said with a soft smile. I kissed her lips and let that warmth wash over me, the closeness of her body, all sweet curves molding against me, and her mouth supple and open beneath mine. I worked my tongue into her mouth slowly, exactly the way I’d move if I were inside her. She whimpered and the sound went straight down my spine like a jolt, making me hard. I gathered her against me and kissed her for so long that I almost forgot where I was or why I had to leave. Our tongues stroked and teased, breath coming in pants as we clutched at each other in a sweaty rush.

Madison tore her mouth from mine, breathing hard, and gasped, “You have a meeting, right?” I nodded, unable to speak yet.

“I know. I have to—” I kissed her again, “go. I have to go.” Then I went back to kissing her. It was like drowning in the best way possible, being consumed by that desire and knowing she was with me all the way. I managed to pull away from her, reluctant and distracted. I made my way to her door, staggering a little. She followed me to let me out and gave me a sweet, brief kiss at the door.

“Don’t tempt me. I’ll stay,” I warned, half serious. She gave a shaky smile.

“You better go,” she said. I took her advice. All afternoon at work, I felt lighter and clearer in my thinking. Happier. I was more than an aspiring partner in the firm. I was more than a man nearly broken down by a jealous ex. I was a Foster man, and I had something special with Madison. I could feel it.

ETHAN

“What did you think, Whitney?” I asked the senior partner in the firm after my presentation.

She glanced up at me over her reading glasses.

“No notes, Ethan. We’re presenting it as is. Well done.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Gratified, I shut down the slide deck and carried my laptop back to my corner office. I took off my jacket and loosened my tie, breathing in the satisfaction. I checked my voicemail and found a message from my friend Judy, the lawyer I’d consulted about the electrical problems in Madison’s storefront. She indicated she’d sent an email through with more detail but that the owner was liable for the upgrade and repairs and could be held accountable for lost business revenue to the tenants in an amount up to a year’s lease if he wanted to push back on paying for necessary electrical work.

I messaged her a quick thank you and checked my email. She had copied me on the letter she sent to the landlord, including an estimate for the necessary work as well as projected damages for lost revenue and fines payable to the city, which would be actionable should he attempt to obstruct fair and expedient repairs at his expense. I chuckled to myself. She was a badass, and the firm was lucky to have her.

I picked up my phone to call Madison but thought better of it. I wanted to break this good news in person and celebrate the eminent victory of my building proposal as well. I messaged

her and asked if she'd join me for dinner. When she agreed, I told her I'd send around a car for her to meet me at a supper club I wanted to try.

A supper club? Should I dress like it's an MGM musical from the 1950s? She replied with a laughing emoji.

Of course, I messaged back.

At seven, I sat in a curved velvet booth near the stage as a singer in a sparkling dress crooned old love songs while a pianist in a tux accompanied her. I drank my dry martini and watched as Madison entered the room. True to her word, she'd worn a vintage-looking black dress patterned with red roses, its full skirt cinched at the waist. Her hair was twisted up and her lips were red. She looked like a pin-up from a soldier's bunk in the last century, and I told her so. She laughed when I kissed her hand.

"I know I've usually got flour in my hair, and you're used to seeing me in an apron with, like, leggings and a t-shirt. But you don't have to overdo it with the flattery. I just cleaned up because when I Googled this place it looked fancy. I'm glad I looked it up!"

Her head swiveled as she took in the posh surroundings. I liked the soft smile, her eyes shining as she noticed the pianist and singer. She touched my arm and pointed when a waiter emerged with a small birthday cake lit by a sparkler that winked, scattering its glimmer until he placed it on a table and the lady with the birthday clasped her hands in delight. Madison's excitement was so genuine that anyone would have thought she was the one being celebrated.

Speechless for a moment, I was captivated. More than captivated—I felt a tenderness toward her, something bittersweet with a trace of sadness that I didn't even know her birthday yet had not been able to make it special for her. It occurred to me that she probably didn't even do anything—no dinner with friends or night out, no presents or cake. She would've treated it as just another day. I had to fight the urge to get maudlin and ask her how she celebrated holidays and birthdays when she was alone. There was no reason to act

gloomy in a beautiful place like this. I handed her the menu and asked what she liked.

“I always think I should get oysters. It sounds so sophisticated. But it also sounds disgusting, you know?”

“Order something you like, not something that you think sounds fancy. When I traveled for my fellowship, I started out by ordering hamburgers everywhere I went. It didn’t matter how exotic the menu was or how much it embarrassed my host. I didn’t want to try anything new. Finally, I branched out and found some delicious things I might have missed out on. Except octopus. I got a salad once and it had these curling tentacles with the suckers still on just laying there on top of the greens.”

“That sounds awful. And took an ugly turn. I thought you were going to inspire me to be more adventurous, not make me scared of salads,” she giggled.

“I kept looking at it and then looking at the waiter, back and forth like, do you *see* this? This thing here on my plate that was recently part of an octopus—why is it here?”

“Did anyone explain it to you?”

“It was part of the meal. I couldn’t eat it, I couldn’t even look at it directly after the way my stomach felt when I saw the suckers in two neat rows,” I shuddered involuntarily.

“I’m ruling out octopus. What’s good here?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve wanted to try this place, and it seemed like the perfect occasion.”

“What’s the occasion? Besides that lady’s birthday obviously.”

“My proposed design for a potential client went well.”

“What are you building? Is it a bridge or a hotel?”

“A house.”

“I didn’t know you worked in residential architecture.”

“I don’t ordinarily. But this was an especially large commission, around forty million for a single-family dwelling

and various appurtenances.”

“What?”

“The trappings or accessories of the lifestyle. Massive garage. Stables. Pool house, gatehouse, storage buildings for lawn equipment, holiday decorations, pool furniture, probably an outdoor family room with a fire feature and standing heaters to extend the life of the outdoor space into a three-season feature. Whatever is both showy and restrained, enviable. It’s a dream project for me because it allows me to show off and give in to my lust for textures, sheer, crisp linens, and the luster of finely woven silk, diaphanous white, and a sultry cream. An ivory velvet for winter.”

“I thought you did the bones—the design of the structure itself.”

“Yes, I do. I also consult with our in-house interior designers on the aesthetic. The people who commission such a project have no interest in trying to outfit it themselves. They want it delivered complete. The moving company we contract with will pack and transport their belongings so the organizer can put them away.”

“You’re kidding. It’s just—throw money at it, and you get to walk into an entirely new home with your toothbrush already on the sink?”

“Definitely not on the sink. More like in the custom glass apothecary jars sourced from Italy,” I said dryly. “I don’t ordinarily talk about the logistics of relocating the very rich. It’s not the best dinner conversation.”

She chuckled, “You make it sound like some zoo is moving an exotic animal to another zoo and they have to be careful not to let it get in the wrong temperature or drink tap water because it could die.”

“You’re not wrong,” I chuckled at her observation. “They have that rare animal quality of having to be protected from, not just the elements, but inconvenience as well. Someone’s assistant will tell us what colors and styles they like and what to avoid. I don’t expect to have any direct communication

from the clients themselves. My theory, and I'm sure I'd be reprimanded at work if I said so in the office, is that they wouldn't even understand the questions we asked. They'd say, oh I don't know, can you ask Paige? She handles all that."

"They don't know what they even like? That's some kind of crazy."

"No, they just don't bother to think about it. I'm betting if I asked you about your dream shop, you'd tell me everything and show me a Pinterest board and maybe tell me a movie or a show you saw something on years ago that you loved that inspired the vibe you like."

"Definitely," she said, her eyes alight. "I'm so lucky to have my own business and be able to build a customer base and be on the road to success and I know that. But I feel like crap when I look at it. Dingy old floors that still look that way no matter how much I mop, the paint on the walls turned out a weird color because I had to buy cheap paint, and I just have the used tables with not enough chairs. I tried doing tablecloths for the seasons, but I couldn't get the stains out when I washed them and I don't have time to go to the laundromat every night, and no one wants a gross tablecloth when they sit down. So, I had to give up."

"You didn't give up. You learned what didn't work. We all do that. Now tell me about the flooring and the walls and the tables, what they're supposed to look like."

I wanted to hear her describe it. I was sure that I knew what she'd say, or most of it, after years of working in architectural design and learning to read what my clients would prefer. I was guessing a sunny Hamptons-style shop with clean, bright surfaces and fresh flowers on every bistro table. A chalkboard with the day's specials and a tastefully framed photo of Madison with her favorite TV chef on the wall.

Madison beamed at me for a second and launched into her description, words bubbling over and tumbling into one another with her enthusiasm.

“My dream shop could be in the space I have now if I just had limitless resources, agreeable tradesmen, and a magic window of time where they transformed my storefront during nighttime hours, so I never had to close for the work to get done.” She smiled a little sheepishly.

“Not logistics, just tell me what it’s like. How does it look and feel to you?”

“Like home. You know that one gnome I have in the shop?”

“The thing in the corner by the door,” I affirmed.

“Yeah, well, that’s Greeley. He’s the butler. My vision is just that he’d be in whatever seasonal setting I make for him. In fall maybe some grapevine or branches and leaves, a small crackling fire, not a real fire but a flickering light that looks like a campfire. That would set the tone. A sort of curiosity shop with interesting things you want to look at closer and delicious smells. The light is sort of amber, cozier.”

She took a sip of her water, then started in again while I was busily tearing down the generic shop in my mind and rebuilding something strange and fascinating.

“Kids would love to come there and see what was new and look for things in the scavenger hunt changes every week with a new I-Spy for them to hunt for and check off on laminated cards while their parents order and wait for stuff. I wouldn’t just have muffins and scones and cookies. I’d have some cakes and tarts and there would always be mini samples out for people to try while they wait for their coffee.”

Madison’s choices were atmospheric but customer-focused, considerate of the non-paying children as well as the parents who made purchases. It was fascinating to hear how thoroughly she’d thought this through, not merely the flooring or walls but the experience as a whole. It felt visionary and immersive. Listening to her speak about this subject on which she was so passionate and playful and serious all at once captivated me all over again. This was the difference between a refreshing sip of water on a hot day and a bracing plunge down a waterfall.

She only paused so we could order our meals and launched back into the description.

Madison went on, “I’d have an area for picnic supplies. Packages of reusable plates and flatware, bottles of wine and sparkling lemonade, packages you could buy where we pack your lunch—sandwiches on good bread with local cheese, some good avocado and tomato and a hummus with homemade pita chips, cups of melon or diced apples with a caramel drizzle, a tart to share. Just everything you need to have an elevated urban picnic and make a perfect memory—whether it’s your best friend or your lover or your eight-year-old niece.”

“Picnic. It’s a great idea, of course, I just thought your focus was on the coffee and baked goods.”

“It is. Absolutely. This is the dream scenario. You were thinking like what kind of layout I wanted in the kitchen or what does the seating look like, but I’m nerding out over the details and it’s the ambitious vision.”

“Understood. It’s very unique and charming. I’ve never had an urban picnic, but it makes me want to try one.”

“Where would you have it?”

“A rooftop. The rooftop of the firm where I work. We have a garden up there as part of a sustainability initiative. It’s beautiful and not to sound cliché, but when they proposed it, the designer kept calling it an oasis and I think I rolled my eyes at that, but it is one. It refreshes the eyes to see the green space and the slender green stems pushing up through the soil, the scent of the lemongrass.”

“Exactly. I love the city. But we need something different and interesting for our senses from time to time. This would be that place that feels like a treat just to visit it. The thing you promise yourself for going to the dentist for a checkup or finishing your taxes on time or something. A reward for being responsible. I would want to have a little bar with toppings for the oatmeal and a couple of quiches or an egg bake in the mornings. Around eleven, I’d switch to a soup of the day like a tomato basil with crostini or a really hearty bean soup with

cornbread. A selection of hot teas, only have them in a tea chest like a gorgeous, spice-smelling treasure chest you can explore so it feels like you're not just ordering water with a bag in it. I love tea—and that means you need shortbread. I make fantastic shortbread, but people seldom order it because it doesn't read as a treat the way it looks. I'd do a ginger shortbread or a cardamom cinnamon, something to make it more exotic, I guess. A beige square that's ninety-percent butter isn't the kind of thing most people are going to choose on sight. But once they taste it, I mean, you would practically sell your mother for this shortbread the way I make it. It's so tender but not extremely crumbly."

"That sounds amazing," I said.

The appetizer arrived, and I offered it to her. She grinned, "Shrimp cocktail!" she said. I knew the retro touch would make her smile with her vintage dress and her sensibilities about old Hollywood glamour. She took a shrimp and dipped it, ate it, and smiled. "So good," she said approvingly, and I felt like I'd accomplished something.

"I'd do a lobster salad and chicken salad in summer, where you can get a half sandwich on toasted sourdough with some berries or a green salad with feta and walnuts because we never really stop for a good lunch. But we deserve to, you know."

"Exactly," I agreed.

Our dinner arrived, and she exclaimed over the presentation, the sauce's richness paired with the crisp texture of the pear slices. Her discernment delighted me, and it was different than I'd expected. I wanted to spoil her a little by bringing her here and introducing her to some of the finer things when she'd had years of struggle without much indulgence. She was showing it to me instead with fresh eyes. She pointed out details I'd become blind to from familiarity, not from the restaurant itself but of every experience. She was less jaded than I figured, though it didn't make her seem younger or inexperienced. Just fresher, more perceptive and alert.

I nearly forgot to tell her the good news my lawyer friend had delivered. I stopped a story I was telling and cleared my throat.

“Let me tell you this before it slips my mind again. I was enjoying myself too much and forgot to tell you the reason I asked you here apart from the pleasure of your company. I had a call today and your landlord will absorb all the repair costs for the electrical upgrades. He offered a settlement sum to assist with paying for the replacement oven if you agree not to report him to the city, which would cost him a great deal more. My friend had given him an estimate of what a new oven costs, leaving out the possibility of a salvage or used oven. He’s prepared to offer you five thousand dollars to pay for what he thinks is half.”

“Wait, what?” she said, her voice high and eyes wide.

“You will be reimbursed for what you paid Leo, and the rest of his costs will be paid for by the landlord. You’re getting five thousand dollars. In cash. There is no record of it, so it’s tax-free. You can pay for your oven.”

“Are you kidding?” she looked alarmed.

“Not at all. I’m serious.”

“What do I owe this lawyer?”

“She might like one of your muffins. It was a favor from a friend. It’s an excellent deal for the landlord, considering you could sue him and get twice that plus legal fees.”

“I don’t want to sue anyone. I want my shop to reopen full-time with lights and an oven that works.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s perfectly fine to take the deal or refuse the deal. Your call.”

“I’m taking the deal! I thought I’d be lucky to get a slapdash electrical job paid for.”

“He’s over a barrel, Madison. He’s leasing units in a building that’s not up to code and potentially a danger to the tenants and their customers. The damages this man could be sued for on top of the fines he’d owe the city and charges he’d

face, he's the lucky one if you'll take the money. If it were me, I'd push for more."

"No, no way. I don't want more. I just want what's right. Can you call her? Should I call her?" she asked.

"I can message her right now if you like," I said and I fired off a message immediately.

"Thank you," she said. "I don't know how the three of you have managed this, but I'm going to be better off than when I started, before I met Noah."

"I'd like to think that we all want to improve things for the people around us and not leave them worse off. Not that I want to leave..." I halted suddenly and thought how awkward, how fumbling I sounded. It was out of character for me to be hesitant this way. I was flustered because of her.

By the time we shared a bread pudding for dessert, we were seated closer together in the curving booth. Her arm brushed my sleeve when she lifted her fork, and when she crossed her legs, I felt the movement. The contact along my side was alive with sparks, and I was aware of her in some inescapable way. I'd told her three times she was beautiful, and she had finally stopped rolling her eyes or trying to deflect the compliment. The third time she just murmured a self-conscious thank you. That was not all I saw in her, but I couldn't stop myself from remarking on it.

When we left, I offered to take her home. She shook her head a little and then glanced at me.

"I don't think I want to go home," she said softly, a mischievous look in her eye.

"Is there somewhere else you'd rather I drop you off?" I offered, a little puzzled.

"You could invite me up to see your apartment," she suggested.

"You've been to my apartment. You've baked there."

"I want you to take me home with you, Ethan," she said, her voice low and warm. Heat curled through me, and I

cupped her cheek in my hand. I kissed her then and asked if, she was sure. She wrapped her fingers around my wrist and a smile curved her lips.

“I won’t change my mind,” she said. “But I won’t offer again either. If you’d like to take me home, you can ask me.”

“Madison,” I said, swallowing hard, feeling a spike of nervousness, “would you like to see my apartment? I know it’s late. You might need to stay over.”

“I’d love to,” she said with a soft, knowing grin.

MADISON

It wasn't like me at all. I didn't go home with a man on the first date. Not even on the third date. Here I was, though, brazen as could be, asking Ethan to invite me upstairs. I was certain before he kissed me. Once I'd felt his mouth on mine again, I was desperate. Maybe I'd forgotten what his kiss felt like all the way down to my toes, or I'd convinced myself it couldn't be that good. It was fierce, blazing through me. I felt like my dress would melt off from the heat of that kiss. He took my hand and held it, claiming it as though I were his in real life. Valet brought his car and I'm not even sure we talked on the ride to his building. He left the keys with his doorman and led me to the elevator. I pressed myself against him and he took my face in his hands, kissed me as deftly and slowly as a man taking his time to savor a fine wine. It was torment of the sweetest kind.

Ethan unlocked the door to his loft. I expected him to hold the door for me, acting like the perfect gentleman he'd been. Instead, he caught me at the waist, scooped me up, carried me inside, and kicked the door shut. A thrill ran through me at being picked up and taken to his bed. I kicked my feet a little, a laugh escaping me. He was so masterful, so romantic, that I couldn't wait. I unbuttoned his shirt all the way to his bedroom. When he set me on the bed, I felt breathless, like I had run a mile. He took off his jacket and tie, kicked off his shoes and reached for me.

After I unbuttoned his shirt, I paused, pinned by the intensity of his gaze. He slid my zipper down, the cool air

brushing my bare back. I shivered and he gathered me into his arms, warming me, heating my blood until I forgot I'd ever felt chilled. He was everything to me then, his broad shoulders boxing me in, his mouth on mine, his hands skating down my arms, raising goosebumps on my skin. I felt swept away, unlike myself. Like I'd been freed from something holding me back. I set my hands on his shoulders and drew back to meet his eyes. My smile must have looked as dreamy as I felt, because he claimed my lips again in reply.

Time slowed down, turning syrupy and hot. Ethan stripped me of my dress and shoes and raked his eyes down the bare length of my body. Self-conscious, I tried to twist my legs together, cross my arms, to cover myself somehow. He nuzzled my neck and ear and murmured that I was beautiful, that I should be proud of my body and had nothing to be ashamed of at all. I slowly uncurled and reached for him, still too shy to lie there on display before his eyes.

He shucked his clothing and joined me on the big bed, crawling above me until his forearms bracketed my head and his big body settled over mine with delicious heat and heaviness. I loved it. I wanted to lie this way forever with his big, muscular body caging me in, pressing me down. With one kiss, Ethan loosened the tension in my body and made me relax enough that he could set a big hand on my breast and palm it, roll the responsive nipple in his fingertips and tug at it until I whimpered and bit my lip and needed more. He lowered his head and tasted my other nipple, sucking it into his hot mouth and making me shout out a shrill, high-pitched cry. I gripped his shoulders, one leg finding its way around his narrow hips. He made a sound of approval and ran his hand down my stomach until he touched me in the hot, needy place between my legs. I didn't know what to do or what to ask for. I was panting and breathless, needy and eager but unsure what I needed from him. Here was the difference between us—not age or success level, but the amount of confidence and finesse he needed to coolly move me past the nervousness and insecurity and right into the good part.

Ethan licked and sucked at my neck, then sat back on his knees. He parted my thighs with sure, strong hands and

dragged my hips onto his thighs, so I lay open for him like a feast. He took one long finger and slid it through my folds, feeling the wetness and arousal there, leaving me trembling. Ethan's face was painted with incredulity, the look as if he'd somehow won the jackpot. I twisted my hips, pushed at his hand, tried to get the friction I wanted, the fullness I craved. I wasn't sure how to ask him for it, but my body wanted to devour his. My body was spread out before him on his lap, and surely, he knew he could have me, could have anything he wanted of me. I lay there in tense, hopeful silence, eyes riveted to him.

Ethan ran one knuckle between my wet folds and sighed, his eyes dropping shut, "Jesus, Madison, you're gonna kill me," he muttered. It seemed an odd thing to say, but I didn't ask what he meant.

Soon, he palmed his cock, the heavy curve of it free and waiting for me. This was no ceremony, no planned event with choreography and an intimacy coordinator on some cable show. I wanted him raw and real and now. I wanted him to drill me from behind, fuck me into the mattress, take me every way he wanted. I was wound tight, and the first pluck of that string would send me spiraling to earth.

I think I begged him as he set his thumb to the aching bud between my thighs. I needed him, needed the sweet relief of his body joined to mine, the fury of his desire pounding into me until I could reach oblivion. When he parted my folds with his fingers, I wanted to shy away from his exploration, but every touch, every stroke felt so incredible like he stoked a wildfire inside my body that threatened to burn me down. I was nearly afraid of it as he gently pushed first one finger and then two inside my tight passage. He worked me, scissoring his fingers, brushing his fingertips against the spot inside the front wall of my pussy that made me clench and let out my breath suddenly as bright spots took my vision.

His touch gave me no quarter. I couldn't escape from the deep waves of pleasure that already built from his simple, insistent stroking. He teased and caressed parts of my body that had never been touched so thoroughly, so pleurably. I

clutched at the sheets, at his arms, at my own hair as I cried out in frustration and breathless anticipation. I moaned aloud and beat my fist into the bed, a tear leaking from the corner of my eye as I struggled to hold on to the sensation that teased and coalesced and then receded again until my body was taut, frantic for the one touch that would skyrocket me out of myself into a riot of pure ecstasy. As he strummed and plucked, playing my body like an instrument to draw lush screams out of me, I tried to keep my eyes open, to focus on his face, the way he moved and touched me. He was masterful, every sure touch taking me apart and serving my pleasure.

Each time he took me right to the edge and then backed away, I groaned or swore in an agony of frustration. It was almost intolerable when he withdrew his fingers from me, my soaking, quivering tissues clinging to his fingers as if to hold him there, to suck him back in my channel and milk him, to somehow make him serve me. I lifted my hips toward him, an indignant cry escaping my lips as I reached up and, with effort, curved upward to meet his mouth with mine.

“Ethan, please,” I whispered, beseeching against his lips. The way his breath worked in and out as if he were drowning, his heart pounding, made me feel a little better about the mess I was. All I needed, all I wanted was him, every thick inch of him to spread me and stretch me until I didn’t think I could take any more. Something like greed pulsed through me at the thought of drawing him in, trapping him by my will until I decided to ride him to my release and then let him go. I wanted to wring such pleasure from him that he forgot his name. Because he filled me to the point, I almost couldn’t stand it, surely I could tighten around him and grip him in a way that felt as otherworldly as the way he was edging me into madness.

“Now, please,” I begged him, my tongue tracing his lower lip as my whole body shook. He claimed the kiss, drove his tongue into my mouth in a way that made me go limp in his arms. He surged up into me, that broad cock tunneling into me with deep, fast thrusts until he was seated fully within me. My heart pounded and I couldn’t get my breath. I was so full of him I wasn’t sure I could even breathe. He’d stuffed me and

even as I tried to adjust to his invasion, I loved it. Loved that he was too much for me, that just his penetration made my inner muscles quiver and clench uncontrollably as if he were short-circuiting every nerve in my body by shoving into me and hitting every pleasure center that I never knew I had.

He grabbed my hips and dragged me down the length of his cock and then back up it, working me onto his shaft as I watched. It glistened with the trail of my wetness, and I reached down between us to touch it in absolute greed. *Mine*, I thought, wanting it stuffed back inside me. Even as I loved the gleam of my juices coating his throbbing flesh, I wanted it inside me even more. I bucked my hips impatiently and he gave a light chuckle. He tried to tell me to be patient, but he didn't have the breath to speak clearly. I loved that this was taking so much control from him as well. I would have hated him if it were easy and natural for him to tease me to the very brink of insanity.

As it was, by his third thrust, when he ground his pelvic bone into me, I made a helpless mewling sound as he rocked and stirred within me to hit every spot deep inside my pussy. The simple press of his thumb between us ignited my climax. It felt like eleven hundred rounds from a machine gun that kept firing. I willed it to stop so I could get my breath, so the clenching in my legs and belly would release before I cried out from pain. Nothing stopped it, wave after crushing wave of helpless pleasure crested over me until I tried to squirm away from his grip. I was out of my head at that point, just frightened of the pleasure he'd created in my body, the way it seemed taken over, not my own.

He gripped my hips, holding me in place as he relentlessly pumped into me, the power of his thrusts making me moan with the impact. It felt like he was shoving more pleasure into me with each push, piercing me and refusing me the quarter, the mercy I plead for. When I thought he'd finally screwed my brains out, I twisted and tried to get free of him, but he plowed deeper, filling me, his sac pressed to my sensitive, tingling lower lips. The texture of his sac tantalized me, brushing against my bare sex. I reveled in it, in the wantonness of loving this, of having his thick shaft jammed in me so far that I

could feel his balls on my bare skin. I was laughing as the climax rolled over me with sheer joy. I squeezed his cock inside me as hard as I could. I loved feeling him groan at the sensation of my inner muscles wringing him out. He held me close. I melted into him immediately, clinging and whispering how much I adored him. He soothed me, stroking my hair and my back until I was calm. Then we rocked together, joining again to share that moment, a slow, intense ride to his completion. He drew me into his arms and pulled a blanket over us, snuggled me, and shushed me when I tried to have a conversation for the sake of thinking I should talk and not use him or something like that.

He seemed fine from where we were. Maybe a little tired and covered in sweat like myself. I shut my eyes just for a minute, just to rest after the exertion and the release. My cheek on his chest and his arms around me were the second-best things I'd ever felt after all that had just happened. I started to drift off, but I stopped myself. "I'm sorry," I blurted out, "I know everybody probably says this, but this really isn't like me. And I've kissed all three of you. You and both your brothers. I'm terribly sorry that it could cause trouble between all of you. I should have been more considerate of those bonds before I just kind of threw myself at you."

"We're fine, Madison," he said warmly, kissing my hair, "this has nothing to do with Noah or Leo. It was between us. Obviously, you're free to tell them anything you like. But we're not competitive in that way. We all like you a great deal. And we're attracted to you. If it's something you're willing to consider, the three of us are here for you. However, you'll have us."

"What do you mean?" I said, stunned.

"We're not jealous of one another romantically. We're all interested in you and acknowledged from the beginning that you are a remarkable woman. We'd be lucky if any or all of us had a chance to be with you. What I'm saying is whatever you're willing to consider. That's all. No pressure."

"You mean all three of you want to... you know?"

“Yeah,” he said with a crooked grin. “And this isn’t something we do. We don’t pick up women and share. It’s more serious than that if it makes any sense to you.”

“I don’t know what to say. I mean, I’ll think about it. I don’t think I could keep from thinking about it now that you’ve mentioned it,” I gave a shaky laugh. It felt scandalous and naughty to even think about it, but in Ethan’s arms, I couldn’t help imagining what it would be like to curl up this way, sated and happy and warm, with all three of them in my bed.

Part of me was worried because I didn’t want to hurt any of these men. They were all special to me; it had been years since I was interested in even one person. Much less three brothers at once. I didn’t want to mess it up. When I tried to mention this concern to Ethan, he was already asleep. I surrendered to the part that longed to let those concerns go for the night and lived in the moment, curled up against him.

I slept at Ethan’s, safe and arm in his arms. Exhausted and happy, I slept a deep, dreamless sleep for the first time in a long time.

LEO

Madison's shop smelled richly of coffee and cinnamon when I opened the door.

"We open in half an hour," she said. When I didn't respond, she looked up from where she placed scones in the glass case and saw me. "Hi Leo, sorry, I didn't know it was you. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

She poured a cup of strong coffee and handed it to me. I took a grateful drink and leaned on the counter. "How's it going?"

"Okay, how are you?" She seemed subdued, unsure.

"Curious. About what's wrong. Because you're not looking me in the face," I said.

She abandoned the scones and came around the counter. I set down my cup and she came straight into my arms. I folded her in my arms and waited. She was so tense, and her hands were cold through the fabric of my shirt. Her face was buried in my chest between my pecs, her breath warm against my shirt.

"I don't know what to do."

"Tell me and we'll figure it out," I told her confidently. She shook her head, still hiding her face from me.

"I don't know how to act about this. I went home with Ethan."

“Want me to give him a few pointers? Tell him how to up his game?” I teased.

Madison looked up at me then, a furrow between her brows, “You’re not mad?”

“No. Not unless he did something you didn’t want.” She shook her head. “Okay then. Is that all you’re worried about?” I stroked her hair, which was so silky and smelled of almonds. I shut my eyes and breathed her scent in. “I missed you.”

She squeezed me tightly. “Thank you. I missed you, too. I know I’m acting weird. But this *is* weird to me.”

Madison stepped back and then kissed my cheek.

“This doesn’t need to feel weird. It’s whatever we want it to be.”

“I wish I had your confidence. I don’t want to hurt you. Or Noah or Ethan. And I don’t want to get hurt. It’s happened so fast. I went from being all alone to having not just one friend I could talk to that I found really attractive... but three of you. It seems greedy and selfish to—I mean, I’d be lucky if just one of you were interested in me.”

“We’re in agreement, Mad,” I said. “We like you and want to know you better and spend time with you. Did you have fun at Ethan’s the other night when we were baking? Wasn’t it easy?”

“It was easy,” she said with a sigh, “But I can’t quite believe in it. Nobody gets to have this, the kind of closeness and understanding with even one person. I can’t begin to tell you how...” she stopped and heaved another sigh.

I took her by the arms and looked in her eyes, serious as I could be.

“Madison, I want this, too,” I told her, my voice sure and even.

I watched her crumple then. As if the brave resignation, the neutral expression she’d held had been nothing more than a smooth, false shell made of porcelain that splintered as she

drew a sharp breath that came out as a sob. She covered her face with her hands and cried.

I was shocked and kind of horrified to see her burst into tears like that. I took her wrists and eased her hands away from her face. She shook her head, small, high sobs escaping her.

“What’s wrong?” I said, “Tell me. I’ll help you fix it. But you have to talk to me,” I said, aware that I sounded alarmed beyond what would be a normal reaction of mere concern. It was all I could do not to mutter, ‘oh shit,’ and back away. I didn’t have a problem with people showing their emotions, but this was sudden and intense in more of a bad surprise way than in an endearing vulnerability way. Uneasy, I led her to a chair and pulled another one up so I could sit in front of her without a table between us.

“Hey,” I said, smoothing her hair back from her temple where it was coming loose from its ponytail. “Talk to me, please.”

“I’m just—so,” she broke off in another storm of weeping. I looked around helplessly and finally saw a roll of paper towels which I brought her. She blew her nose a few times and hiccupped.

“What can I do to help?” I offered, trying not to crowd her even though I wanted to draw her into my lap and hold her until she felt safe and knew we had her back no matter what.

“I’m sorry. I don’t usually cry like that,” she said, a little embarrassed. “But when you say you wanted this, that it was okay, I just felt so relieved. It was like a dam broke or something. I couldn’t stop.”

“I’m glad that’s all it is. That I could make you feel better. Even though it surprised me.”

“Come on. I was there. It scared the hell out of you,” she said with a watery giggle. It felt good that she was roasting me again. “I was surprised you didn’t run out the door and call your brothers or maybe 911. I mean, tell me you’ve never been in a serious relationship without saying the words...”

“Fine, laugh all you want,” I said, relaxing. “Imagine for a minute that you come to the build site where I’m roughing in the electrical system. You bring me a water or something and say hi, but I start freaking out.”

“It’s not like I ran around screaming and breaking things, Leo. You’re going to have to toughen up if you plan to get to know me better. I’m a woman of many moods.”

“Oh really?” I said.

“Okay,” she deadpanned, “I give you credit for not saying I needed to calm down because I cried. You get a point for that.”

“Nobody’s keeping score, Madison,” I told her, my voice husky. “You startled me because I saw how deeply you care, how much you feel for me.”

She swallowed hard and nodded, her eyes bright again. I kissed her forehead.

“No more tears now,” I said, “You were afraid of losing someone again. It probably brought all that back, how alone you felt.”

“No,” she said, “I wasn’t triggered or something. I was scared. Because I know how crappy it feels to be left, but I also knew this time it would’ve been my fault. I know I didn’t do anything wrong, but it looked like I had been sneaking around with Ethan when I think about it. I never want you to feel betrayed or hurt by me.”

“Then just tell me the truth. I’ll listen, and it won’t hurt us. As far as sneaking, did you not go on a date with him? In public? And post a picture on Instagram?”

“Well yeah,” she said.

“That’s not sneaking. If you want to see sneaking around, I’ll be happy to show you,” I said, my arm stealing around her and drawing her closer so I could kiss her.

I thought she’d pull away and say she was at work, the shop would open any minute, customers could walk in or something. Instead, the instant our lips touched, need flared in

me and she seemed to melt. She came to me, pliant and warm, her soft lips parting for me to kiss her more deeply. I swept my tongue in her mouth with a groan and my arms tightened around her. I had to hold myself back and keep my lust on a leash, because I didn't want to crush her with the force of it. Restraint sent a tremor through my arms as I held her, how I wanted to claim her.

Madison pulled away, her pretty face flushed and her eyes sparkling. She had the sweet, tumbled look of a woman about to take me to bed. But she cleared her throat and was all business.

"It's five minutes till open. I'm going to send you out the back way or I'm going to mount a Foster right here in my kitchen."

She thought she was being sarcastic. She didn't know how close it was to the truth, how I wanted to shove her up against the wall by the pantry door and yank her jeans down. I think she saw the heat in my eyes because she gave a little knowing smile.

Madison took my hand and led me behind the counter. She was in my arms, her hand gripping my ass and a naughty gleam in her eye.

"You have no idea how much I want to hit my knees right now and suck you off, knowing that customers will walk in here any second."

My breath caught and I made a throttled sound.

"You like to torture me," I ground out, "I'm gonna think about that all day now."

"Why should you have an easy day? I'm going to think about it every minute, too." She bit her pretty lower lip, red and bruised from the force of our kisses. I tried to ignore the image that rose in my head of those lips parting to slide down my cock and take me in her warm wet mouth.

"You'll be the death of me," I groaned.

"No, not your death," she said, pressing against me so the ridge of my hard-on pressed into her stomach. She squeezed

my ass and grinned at me. My hand traced up her side until I could brush the side of her breast with my thumb. She responded, turning so I could palm her breast through her t-shirt. I worked her nipple until it grew hard under the pad of my thumb. Every part of me ached and throbbed with want. In another minute, we would be pushing our clothes aside to join swiftly and rut against a wall for that urgent release.

I knew I had to stop, to hold back, but I couldn't remember why. It seemed unimportant as I shoved my hand up her shirt and fondled her through the thin, scratchy lace of her bra.

The glass rattled as someone knocked at the door. We flew apart and she pulled her shirt down. Madison was breathing hard, tucked her hair behind her ears and looked panicked for a moment.

“You've got to go,” she said and sent me out the back door with a stolen kiss and a smile on my face.

NOAH

I was just going over the latest returns on Ethan's investment portfolio with him when Leo arrived at the loft. We were trying to act normal, but the excitement was a buzz of tension in the room.

"She's gonna say yes," Leo announced as he put a six-pack in the refrigerator.

"I know you said on the phone that her only concern was hurting us, but it's an unconventional step," I cautioned them. "She's lonely, but she's not desperate. If this seems wrong to her, she's not going through with it. We're serious and she knows it."

"Madison is unlikely to make a choice based on how sexy it sounds to her," Ethan said flatly, "she may not know what she wants yet, because she doesn't think it's possible, but I think I can say this to you two in confidence. She's the one. I knew it during dinner the other night. She's it for me."

"Do you—want us to back off?" I said.

"What? And 'let me have her' like she's the last beer in the fridge? No. I'm telling you how serious this is for me. How serious I know it is for us all. I'm not going to make her choose and say something stupid like you can be with me, move in here, or you can be with my brothers too. That's a stupid thing to say and preys on this traditional idea of monogamy or faithfulness that gets drilled into everyone as we grow up."

Leo chuckled, ‘You said drilled.’

“Fine, on second thought maybe I’ll say that I want her, or she could be with Noah and me since you’re over there making dick jokes,” Ethan said wryly.

“You’re right,” I said.”

“About what?” Leo asked, “Not joking about leaving me out of the equation I hope.”

“No, of course not. About not giving her ultimatums that create an artificial test of loyalty and commitment. We’re not trying to pin her down or make her sign a contract. The idea here, as I see it, is to create something new where we’re all happy and can explore what we could have with Madison. On her terms.”

“Agreed,” the other two said.

When a knock came at the door, I cleared away my laptop and papers while Ethan answered the door. I watched from the corner of my eye as he kissed her cheek and welcomed her in, not a whispered word.

I wanted to grab Madison by the hand, take her to the couch, pull her down with me, and start making out. That was how wound up, how high school-esque over-the-top in love I felt about her. Like the attraction was consuming everything.

She went to the table and sat down, asking us to join her. “I was nervous coming here,” she admitted. We sat down and listened, nodded our agreement. “Nobody has ever offered anything like this to me. I just want to know how it would look, what it would be like before I agree to anything. What are the rules?”

“There are no rules,” I offered, “whatever we want it to look like is what it is. You, I’m sure, have something in mind, and you can give us an idea of what that would be.”

“Okay, well, it’s a dumb question, but would we have to make a schedule? Like Mondays and Thursdays with one, Tuesdays and Saturday, Wednesday and Sunday. That kind of thing?”

We exchanged a look and shook our heads. “We don’t want to do anything you aren’t uncomfortable with. Suppose you want a schedule—I’m not a schedule kind of guy myself, but I’ll adapt. In that case, we can do that,” Leo said. I knew it was not an idea he liked, but he showed patience and eagerness to ensure she was okay with this. I admired how he was handling the question and stayed quiet myself.

“You can let things happen organically, be with whoever you feel like, whenever you feel like it, and the other two will be available to you for a midnight snack and binging *Suits* or whatever.”

“We’d watch TV?” she said with an incredulous smile.

“What do you mean? We all do whatever we want. If you want to play *Call of Duty*, then that’s what we do,” Leo said.

“I don’t see myself wanting to play *Call of Duty*,” she said with a giggle.

“You get my meaning though,” I said, “that you don’t have to do anything to set up activities or make plans. If you show up at one of our apartments and you just can’t sleep and it’s one-thirty, and you think getting dicked down would help, that’s what we’ll do.”

“You call the shots,” Ethan put in. “No rules on what we do, who attends, when and where. You’re an adult and so are we. There’s no obligation to see us more than one at a time, or to keep track of who gets what. I’m going to use the word, guys,” Ethan warned ruefully. “I’m falling for you, Madison. It may scare you off, but I need to be honest about this. Because what I’m trying to tell you is that love doesn’t keep score.”

“Leo said that to me, about not keeping score,” she met Ethan’s eyes, then looked at each of us in turn and gave a small nod.

“I want to try this. It’s different for me, and I may not be any good at handling this. I don’t want anyone to get hurt or feel left out. I don’t want to do anything that causes problems.”

“We’re going to have disagreements and miscommunication. It happens in all relationships. What matters is we want this to work for all of us. Are you in?” I said.

She reached out and took my hand.

“I’m in. All the way,” she said, her face serious.

Leo grabbed each of us a beer, and we drank a toast to new beginnings. She seemed happy but not totally relaxed.

We were joking around about the Jets losing and crap like that. Some muffins were done and I grabbed them out of the oven to cool on a rack and slid another batch in to bake. When I got back to the table, Ethan was getting up. “I’m going to grab the chips and salsa. Want anything?”

“Chips and salsa,” I said. He nodded.

I sat down in the chair Ethan had vacated and grinned. “I heard you liked the supper club. I wouldn’t mind seeing that black dress sometime.” I said.

“Sure,” she said, smiling, “It was a fun night. The restaurant was beautiful.”

“So are you. And I guess that makes it my turn,” I teased.

“Hey,” Leo said, pushing back his chair and getting to his feet, looking genuinely pissed. “That’s out of line.”

“What the hell?” I said, looking from my brother to Madison and back again.

Ethan set the chips on the table and turned on me as well. “He’s right, Noah. She’s not a toy we’re passing around and there’s not going to be any it’s-my-turn crap.”

“I was joking,” I said, “Jesus. You people need to relax.” I ran a hand through my hair, still shocked at how they’d taken my offhand remark so seriously and gotten mad, jumped to her defense. “I’m sorry, okay?” I said, “I won’t joke about that again. I didn’t think it would upset everyone.”

“It’s fine,” Madison said reassuringly, but she looked a little rattled, by the outburst if nothing else. Leo sat back down

but glowered at me like I'd done something obnoxious. "Thanks for putting the muffins in. You've been a tremendous help."

I nodded and took a chip, looked up at Leo and smirked. "Are you gonna lose your shit if I double-dip? You seem like you got a short fuse tonight."

"Nah, go right ahead." He shrugged. After that, Ethan told us about some home project he's working on for a rich person. I checked my phone when a text alert buzzed and tried to hide the wince when I saw who it was from. I pocketed my phone and hoped I'd acted nonchalant enough that it didn't ruin the evening. I'd already stepped in it once and didn't want to screw anything up by having to tell them who messaged me. Because I wouldn't lie to them. I just hoped they didn't ask.

When I caught Madison's eye, she reached for my hand. "Hey," she said, "Can I talk to you in the kitchen for a minute?"

"Sure," I said, and followed her. I noticed her glance back to see if the other two were bothered about her walking off with just me. She was still kind of uneasy about how everyone was going to react in real life. Time would show her that we were okay, that there wasn't going to be a petty argument about who got more time or something silly like that.

"What's up?" I said, "You, okay?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing," she said, "It was from her, right?" I nodded.

"How'd you guess?"

"Your eyebrows," she said with a little smile, "They got the same worried look when you told me about her the first time. I'm sorry she's doing this to you, Noah. You don't deserve it."

"Thanks," I said, "I'm not sure about that sometimes. Like maybe it's karma. For women I went out with and ghosted after two dates or something. That this is what I get."

"Would you say it to me? That I deserve it if an ex was bugging me all the time and showing up places and making

my life miserable? No. You're not allowed to blame yourself for someone else's actions. Now what can I do to help?"

"For one thing, you can forgive me for saying dumb shit like I did earlier. I'm sorry and I'll make an effort to run my jokes through the asshole filter before I say anything out loud."

"Wait, does your asshole have a filter? Was it an aftermarket accessory or did it come built in?" She joked with a silly grin.

"You think you're so funny," I said, capturing her around the waist and pulling her too me, giving her a playful kiss or two. "Come to an event with me. I have a charity fundraiser coming up. It's a, well, I'm not sure if they said it was a gala or a ball, but it's going to be a special night, and I want you by my side."

"I hope it's not too fancy for my black dress because that's all I own in the category of formal wear," she said.

"I'd love to buy you a dress," I told her, afraid it was too much, that she'd back away or think it was controlling. "Will you wear a dress I picked out for you?"

"Are we talking about an actual dress or sequin pasties?"

"A dress. Although you're the one who suggested sequin pasties."

"With tassels. Because once you've arrived at 'pasties' why not go over the top?" She said with a chuckle.

"And just like that my search history is going to get weird," I said.

"Like it wasn't already," she laughed.

"Will you go to the ball with me?"

"It feels so Cinderella when you say that," she said with a smirk.

"Cinderella never had her own shop."

"With a top-of-the-line convection oven on its way," she reminded me, "thanks to the three of you. So, it's possible you

might be my fairy godmother, Noah. Since you were the one who found me with a major problem and called in the right people for the job.”

“That’s more of a project manager role than a fairy situation,” I said wryly. “I’d rather be the prince.”

“What if I’m the prince?”

“What?”

“What if I had it all wrong? Maybe you were in distress with an evil ex-girlfriend stalking you, and I’m the one who’s going to save you?” She said.

“I don’t want you anywhere near her. She’s not—rational. Let the cops be my fairy godmother or my prince or whatever they are in this analogy. I think I got lost in your logic.”

“Maybe because it’s not very good logic. I meant to tease you but then it felt serious because of what’s going on. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re trying to help me. Never be sorry for that.”

“I guess now I have to go to the ball with you. I mean, such a hardship. I’ll have to get dressed up and go someplace beautiful with a handsome man on my arm and maybe he’ll ask me to dance.”

“I’ll ask you to dance anytime you want.”

“I’ll take you up on that. But the timer’s going off. Don’t want to burn the cherry chocolate muffins for tomorrow,” she said and grabbed an oven mitt to extract the latest batch.

Madison offered me a warm muffin to try her new recipe. I grabbed one out of the pan, too hot to touch and started trying to pass it from hand to hand because of the scalding heat. She grabbed a tea towel and seized the muffin, handing it back to me on the towel. “You’re such a guy,” she said fondly with a chuckle and returned to the cooling rack where she lined up muffins carefully for tomorrow’s breakfast rush at the shop.

I took my treat back to the table and while Leo grumped about not getting a muffin, Ethan nodded to me, “It feels good having her here.”

“Yeah,” I said, meaning it.

MADISON

When I unzipped the white garment bag that was delivered to my apartment, the fabric inside was emerald green. It wasn't just a dress, it was an evening gown. The kind I used to dress my Barbies in as a kid. It was a bias-cut satin gown with a scattering of deep green beads sparkling down the skirt to hem encrusted with beaded detail that matched the fabric's color exactly. I tried it on, and the weight of the beadwork held the hem just so, a little train curving behind me that didn't get in the way because of the design. The shoes were a work of art themselves, gorgeous strappy heels that gave me a little added height and made me stand with better posture. I pivoted in front of the mirror and marveled at how pretty these things were, how excited I was for Noah to see me in this gown.

That night, after a long session with my curling iron, I perfected the French twist and let a few tiny curls escape in front for a sexy, undone sort of upsweep, according to the TikTok I'd watched about six times. I threaded little gold hoops through my ears and ended up searching pics of Margot Robbie to figure out if I should wear a necklace with the dress. After I went down an internet rabbit hole ogling all the Barbie dresses, my alarm went off. I was glad I'd set it because that was my ten-minute warning until it was time to leave. I hastily plugged my phone in and went and applied another coat of mascara, slicked on my smear-proof red lipstick, and checked my teeth in the mirror.

When I heard his knock at my door, I had butterflies in my stomach like I was fifteen and going to prom. Not that I went

to prom, but in teen movies, the girls always seemed nervous and bubbly at times like that. This was better than prom because instead of a too-tight dress from Goodwill and some scrawny, acne-faced boy, I was wearing my designer gown to meet the gorgeous fund manager who liked me. The smile on my face was as real as the jolt of confidence I felt when I opened the door.

The man standing there could stop traffic looking like that. Not only was Noah unfairly handsome in a world of ordinary-looking people, but he was wearing a tux that fit him like a tailor practically went blind getting every line exact and every hem perfect.

“Damn, Noah,” I said, grinning, “you look fantastic.”

His gaze raked me from my feet up to my face and swept back again for good measure. I could see admiration on his face along with a kind of animal reaction of want flickering in his eyes.

“You beat me to it,” he said, “I was too speechless seeing you in that dress. Let me tell you now. You’re exquisite, beautiful from head to toe. I knew you were beautiful, and that green would suit you, but you are something out of a dream.”

“Depending on whose dreams we’re talking about, we better leave now.”

“What does that mean?” he lifted a brow at me, cocky. “You been dreaming of me?”

“Maybe,” I answered, coy and giggly, feeling effervescent with his compliments.

I grabbed my phone and clutch and we drove off to the ball. It wasn’t at a hotel as I’d expected but at a grand private home outside the city. The kind of place with majestic columns and outdoor lighting to illuminate their landscaping perfectly. It felt just like a movie. Noah tucked my hand into the crook of his arm and led me inside. He presented our invitation, and we were announced at the head of a curving staircase. My heart pounded and I glanced at him, a little shy. Noah tipped his chin up and gave me a small smile. I squared

my shoulders and lifted my chin as he'd indicated and held on to his arm as we made our way down the long staircase. I was thankful for the way the train slid behind me without tripping me up, the strength of his arm beneath my hand and the certainty I felt that he wanted me and only me by his side tonight.

A couple of older men, well-dressed, with wives in heavily beaded gowns greeted us and Noah introduced me. "This is Madison Stewart, owner of the downtown treasure box Maple Street shop and my girlfriend," he said. I blushed a little under the introduction.

They shook my hand and spoke highly of Noah, his business acumen and impressive achievements for such a young man. After we spoke with them for a few minutes, the music in the gleaming ballroom changed to an instrumental I recognized. I whispered to Noah, "Let's dance. This was on Bridgerton, and it was so romantic."

"Ah, a Bridgerton girl," he said slyly, "should I walk you out to the gardens and try to compromise you?" I grinned at him.

He led me onto the dance floor where two or three dozen couples already danced to the orchestral arrangement of a Taylor Swift song. I rested one hand on his shoulder, and he held the other hand, leading me in a waltz I didn't quite know how to do. Noah was a strong partner, commanding and with an irresistible lead. I felt swept into the music and didn't have to think about the steps or bumping into anyone. It was a bright, swirling interlude of feeling like we were the only people in the world, just swirling in his strong arms and being absorbed by the music. I let my eyes drift shut and thought what a perfect moment this was. When the song ended, he took my hand and kissed it, "I never want to dance with anyone else," he said. I nodded, starry eyed over him and this magical evening.

We sipped champagne, bid on items in a silent auction for the charity, and danced again and again. I didn't want the evening to end, but finally my shoes began to pinch.

“Would it scandalize everyone here if I took my shoes off and danced barefoot?” I whispered to him.

“I think that means your coach is about to turn into a pumpkin,” he said lightly, “let’s go.” I nodded in agreement with one last wistful look around the ballroom.

“It really is like something out of a movie,” I confided.

“What you’re saying is the next time I have to go to an event with dancing, you promise to be my plus-one?”

“Yes please,” I said eagerly, and his smile was so gorgeous it took my breath away.

He drove to my building and parked to walk me in.

“Thank you for tonight. I’ll never forget it,” I said. “Would you like to come upstairs?”

“I’d fucking love to come upstairs,” he said making me laugh. I carried my shoes, tiptoed on bruised feet, and he followed me up the steps to my door. Even the way he leaned into whisper in my ear as I unlocked my door felt like it should have a romantic soundtrack swelling in the background.

Noah locked the door behind us. Before I could awkwardly offer him a tour of my studio apartment, he crowded me and backed me up toward my bed, his hand cupping my cheek as he gave me soft, suggestive kisses. When my knees hit the edge of the bed, he dropped to his knees. Nervously, I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to draw him up to join me. He shook his head, a wicked grin on his face that shot sparks of want right through me. I wanted to be filled with him and wrapped up in his arms all night, our legs twisting together in multiple ways. I felt my mouth go dry with that longing. I wanted to say something, but all my words had vanished, along with my ability to breathe in a regular way.

Noah’s fingers wrapped around my bare ankle, and he drew my leg to his shoulder. He shrugged off his coat and rolled up his sleeves. My foot was just propped there on his broad shoulder as I felt the shift and movement of him rolling his shirtsleeves up to expose tanned forearms. I couldn’t wait to see what he did to me. Something that required such

preparation and more range of motion than a fitted tuxedo jacket afforded him. A swoop in my stomach told me this would be unforgettable. My eyes bored into his as he grinned a filthy half-smile and ran his hands up the backs of my calves.

A shiver trailed the touch of his hot hands on me. I shook with raw want when he swept his hands between my thighs and parted them. The stroke of his thumbs would have been soothing if they hadn't been so close to the place that pulsed and ached for him. The quiver of my muscles at his touch led him to plant a kiss on the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh. I couldn't stifle the little sound I made or take my eyes off him, his handsome face, the stubble along his jawline.

My leg jerked in his grip when he kissed my thigh. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to force embarrassment away. My body responded to him in a dramatic way. I looked away, breaking eye contact with him and tried to shut my legs.

“Hey,” he said, his hand trapped between my thighs. Noah petted me and drew a sharp breath asking, “what’s wrong?”

“I can’t,” I whispered miserably, still looking away from him, unable to meet his eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m embarrassed,” I confessed. “I’m so... wet. I know what you must think of me.” Shame heated my face.

“What? That you’re exquisitely sensitive? That you’re so wet that it makes me feel like an incredible lover because you respond to my touch like that? Why would you be ashamed of your body? Or this pretty pussy that’s flushed and slick for me? God, Madison, I could eat you out for days like this and never get enough. Please—” he broke off, his voice husky and raw.

Noah set that big hand on my pussy and the rasp of his palm on my outer lips filled me with a rush of desire for him. I unbent, trying to relax as I let my legs fall open for him again. He nuzzled my slick flesh and made an mmm sound as if he wanted to bury his face in my core. “Let me, baby, please. I want to taste you so bad it’s driving me insane.”

Again, he rubbed his thumb over my slit and gave an admiring noise as he pressed the thick tip of his thumb just inside me. He breached the lips, and I felt the flutter of my inner muscles clench already. I tried to babble something to him, but it was impossible to speak. I would only have begged him at that point anyway. I pushed my hips forward against his hand and his thumb sank into me. I sighed in relief at having something to clench on, which I needed instantly as he closed his soft lips on my clit and began to suck and lick it. He kissed first one lip and then the other, dragging the tip of his tongue through my folds with tormenting slowness. He mapped every whorl of my secret places, his muscular tongue finding every spot that gave me pleasure as if he were taking notes. My legs were over his big shoulders, which pressed my thighs wider, spreading me for him like some luscious feast. I liked that he wanted to look at me, to touch and press and kiss to find out what I needed, to coax me up the mountain of my climax. But he was just too good.

When Noah tried scissoring two fingers into my pussy as he licked my clit, everything exploded. My senses roared with a thundering pleasure that clawed at me roaring. It was no gentle sweet orgasm, but one that threatened to tear me apart. At last, I was calmer, the flutters of my inner muscles still telling the story of how intense that orgasm was. I had scratched his shoulders, had arched up on the bed and screamed.

“Sexiest thing I’ve ever seen was you coming from my mouth on your clit, Madison,” he said, “Let me go again, please. It was too short. I can do better.”

“If you do any better, I’ll black out. No way,” I said, trying to get my breathing back to normal after the exertion.

“I want to. I’ve been waiting weeks to work you over and explore every way there is to make you come, Madison.”

“I definitely want to do my part to support scientific research,” I teased, “what did you have in mind?”

“First, fingering you and eating you out, which we did. Now I want to hold you if you need to be held before we go

on.”

I shook my head. “I would rather have some, you know...” I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Tell me what you want, baby. I’ll give you anything. Don’t be afraid to talk dirty to me. I like it. I’ll love anything you do,” he said, unfastening his white shirt.

“I don’t think I can say it out loud,” I said, wondering why I felt shy after he just licked my most private and sensitive parts.

“Try me. There’s nothing you can name that I won’t be happy to do for you. I mean it. If I don’t know what it is, I’ll Google it,” he joked.

“I can’t imagine I know anything you don’t. I haven’t had that many boyfriends.”

“Maybe they were wild though,” he said and grabbed my hips, dragging me down to the edge of the bed. I squealed, delighted.

“I—I want you inside me, Noah. I want to feel that. Not just your fingers. I’m on birth control, so don’t worry. Please. Let me have every inch of you tonight. With nothing between us.”

“I’ve never taken a woman bare. I’m glad it’s you. God, I’m dying to feel you wrapped around my cock, Madison,” he sounded like he was almost beside himself, his words slurring until we started kissing. He stopped to finger me again and I felt him sag in my arms for an instant as he rubbed me and muttered, You’re so wet. I get to have all of you wrapped around me. I get to squeeze your ass while you ride me. I am the luckiest man in the world.”

Noah joined me on the bed, kicking his pants off, and there was the curve of his long, pretty hard-on jutting up for me. I lifted the long skirt of my gown to straddle him, but he stopped me. He took the dress by the hem and whipped it over my head, tossing it aside with no regard for how much money he spent on it. I was bare before him, and he growled before he grabbed my breast in one hand, his mouth on the other.

Nothing tentative here as he devoured my nipple and pinched the other one into aching torment that had me wriggling on the bed. I dragged my hands through his silken hair and parted my legs.

He laid me down on the bed and ate at my breasts, drawing little cries from me as pleasure and need wound together. He flipped me over on my stomach, tucking my knees up under me. He ran one hand seductively up my spine, my flesh so sensitized that even the rub of the sheets on my nipples felt erotic. I saw the room go dark behind my eyes. He had turned out the lights.

“I’m going to take you, and the only sense you’re going to have is touch. No sight, no sound, no tasting for you.

Noah, the back of his fingers between my legs, stroked my exposed pussy with his knuckles. My belly clenched and I grunted, struggling already to stay in place. I expected him to shock me, if knowing he was unpredictable now could be called an expectation. He gentled at once, stroking my back and hips. I felt him notched at my opening. I gasped and held my breath, keeping myself from rocking back against him. I wanted him to take the lead and that meant patience. Slowly, deliberately, he entered me, rocking. Gently, he filled me and rocked into me again and again. The caress of his hands, the painstakingly slow pace of his love making was excellent, but it would put me to sleep if I got any more relaxed. I felt his hand on my hip, his thighs behind me. I reached back, hoping to grab his hand. He took my hand in his. More than that. He lowered himself over me, crushing me with his heat and weight as he gave me the slowest, most astonishing buildup to climax.

The ebb and flow of our bodies, fully wrapped up together, was slow and delicious. I was breathless, lost in the tender joining we shared. Noah rolled us onto our sides, so he was spooned behind me, and covered my breasts with his large, warm hands. The added stimulation set me writhing and we came together all at once, the closeness and intimacy of the position adding to the sensations that had me ready to scream. Noah caught my hand in his and kissed my neck as he came. I

was overwhelmed with the pleasure and affection that followed on my own wave of ecstasy.

Tumbling onto our backs, we turned toward each other, flushed and replete, sharing soft kisses before I burrowed into his chest. He helped me slide under the covers first and joined me, and I slept with my cheek pressed to his heart.

The next morning, I stretched indulgently when my alarm went off and reluctantly left him sleeping in bed. I had the shop ready and open in record time, my body still humming happily from the evening before. Even without coffee, I had plenty of energy, so I only sipped at mine as I served customers. Noah stopped in for a coffee on his way to work and promised to call me later. I was grinning like an idiot after he kissed me and left.

At nine A.M. sharp, I flipped the closed sign on the door and cleaned up as Leo's crew came to remove the old oven and begin installation. I sat at a table going over the receipts and balancing my totals before I ran the deposit to the bank. Leo came in and let me know the oven would be delivered in the morning and be fully operational in a couple of days. I thanked him, so relieved that the replacement was happening and, if all went to plan, would be over in just a few days so I could get the shop up and running again at full capacity.

A special edition of my weekly shop newsletter went out to my subscribers with an update on the timeline and an engagement link that led to a coupon for a half-price baked treat next week only. I was counting on that promotion and a few not-cheap online ads set to drop next week to drive traffic back into my shop after the closure.

After the bank, I went to the laundromat and read a library book while my whites and towels tumbled dry. My chapter was interrupted on the e-reader app when a text came through. I tapped it, wondering if a customer had questions about the newsletter.

U never should've touched him slut.

Blinking, I read it three times before I closed it and figured it was a wrong number. Some post-pubescent teenagers

creating drama over a boy they both probably liked. I went back to the book I was reading only to be hit with a barrage of five more texts back-to-back.

Hope it was worth it bitch.

He loves me you dumb whore.

Stick to baking and stay out of my man's pants or else.

The last message was a photo of Noah and me entering my building the night before, his hand low on my hips as I unlocked the door. I felt a shudder of fear and disgust. I remembered exactly how the heat of his hand felt through the satin, exactly how the excitement had thrummed in my blood. Never knowing we were being watched. I felt bile rise in my throat, sickened and frightened.

Biting my lip, I messaged Noah a screenshot of the messages and the photo. He replied instantly, *I'm so sorry, that's my ex. I don't know how she got your number.*

I swallowed hard and replied, *It's ok. At the laundromat, then I'll go home and lock my door.*

Send me a pin on your location and stay where you are.

I thought he was panicking over some obnoxious woman trying to back me off, but I dropped the pin and gathered my things. Within minutes, Ethan was there in a cab. He helped me load my car, and we went to my building.

“You’re going to have to move into my loft until this is settled. I know you’re used to your independence, but my building has great security. We’ll grab whatever you need and get going.”

“I’d rather stay at my place,” I said, hauling the laundry out of the back.

“I wish I could give you a choice,” he said sternly. “But it’s not worth the risk. You can have my bedroom, or any of the others, if you want it. Treat it like a vacation for a few days while the shop is closed. Please.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Nobody does except the psycho who’s stalking my brother. By the way, I am making him move in too. Just in case you were worried I was a sexist who thought you couldn’t take care of yourself. I want my family under tight security until she’s off the streets.”

“Thank you, Ethan,” I said, “for the help and for understanding why I didn’t jump at the chance to move in with you. It’s not personal, I promise. I’m just used to my space.”

“I know the feeling,” he said ruefully, “I lived alone in a giant loft until half an hour ago. Now I’ve got you and Noah. I expect Leo won’t be far behind. No matter what he said about being left out or scheduling or whatever, I know he wants to be where the action is, whether it’s the stalker or whether it’s being near you. We can count on him to show up.”

“Good to know,” I said. I gathered what I needed quickly and drove back to Ethan’s loft, my temporary home.

ETHAN

It was a relief to have Madison and Noah under my roof. I'd given the head of building security all the information on Noah's stalker and the most recent social media photos my secretary could find of Olivia Rade. There was little chance she'd be able to get past the lobby if she tried to approach any of us.

I was confident that the loft itself was secure. I was also sure that if I told Madison Stewart that she had to have one of us with her anytime she went out, she'd roll her eyes and ignore me—if I was lucky. She'd more likely give me an earful about her independence. The fact was, her association with us, specifically Noah, was the reason she was in danger. The least we could do was protect her from it. While I wasn't sure the crazy ex-girlfriend posed a danger, she was clearly unbalanced, and she'd fixated on my brother. I wasn't willing to risk his life or Madison's for the sake of their pride or convenience.

Hopefully it wouldn't get to that point, and for the time being, I'd settle for Madison checking in with one of us by text when she arrived at work and when she left. The whole situation set me on edge. Noah had said more than once in a not-quite-joking way that I was trying to be his dad. That I was the older brother not the patriarch. That I was bossy, overbearing, and my favorite autocratic. I knew the situation stressed him, so I figured about eighty percent of what he said was more related to how powerless he felt to stop his ex from wreaking havoc.

“Should I try to intimidate her?” He had asked me on the phone. His voice sounded so heartbreakingly young then, more like the teenager he’d been than the man he was today.

“I don’t recommend waving a firearm in her face if that’s what you’re asking. It’s a felony.”

“Not with a weapon, I don’t know what I’m asking. Maybe I should get in her face and tell her I’m going to fucking ruin her if she doesn’t stay away from my family and friends. Some action movie shit like that. It doesn’t feel right—it feels cruel and aggressive. I’m embarrassed to involve the police and admit that I couldn’t handle this alone.”

“I think it would take a licensed psychiatrist to handle this on their own, Noah. It’s not your fault that she’s unstable and put you in her crosshairs. In fact, the way I look at it, some instinct may have told her you were a trustworthy and safe person, that you were unlikely to take drastic action like running her over in your car or something,” I told him.

“Who said I was going to run her over? Jesus, Ethan. Maybe cut down on the Lifetime movies, okay? That sounds like some show where the battered wife has to kill her ex in self-defense to save their dog or their kid or something. So morbid.”

“I meant it as a compliment. You’re a good man, and even in her convoluted mental state she must be aware of that. If it were me, if I went off the deep end like that, I wouldn’t want to try stalking somebody who’s gonna carry a concealed gun and put a bullet between my eyes the first time I aggravate them.”

“Who are these people you hang out with that run over each other with cars and shoot somebody in the head? Are you okay?” He asked.

“I don’t think you can successfully turn this around and make it seem like I’m the one with the problem here. It’s her. And by extension, you.”

“And by extension Madison,” he said ruefully, “Do you think this will ruin my chances with her? Or maybe keep her

from wanting to be with any of us? Because of the drama?”

“I doubt it. She seems like she’s made of sterner stuff, for one thing, and for another, if she’s going to be scared off by something like this, which is in no way your fault and is in fact something bad happening to you that has your career and peace of mind in the balance, then we don’t want anything to do with her anyway. If she runs over this, then I misjudged her sense of loyalty.”

“I hope you’re right,” Noah sighed.

“I’m always right,” I said easily.

“You’re an autocratic bastard sometimes,” he said with a not-so-light chuckle. “If she bails on me, you can still date her. I know you said you’re falling in love with her.”

“No way,” I said, “Anybody that blames you for this doesn’t deserve our time.”

“That’s ice cold, man. Remember, you’re not my dad. You’re just my brother. And if you say bros before hos, I’m going to shit myself.”

“I have never said that in my life and don’t plan to start today,” I said.

“Good.”

“Listen, I’m glad you’re moving in and that you see the sense in being cautious.”

“Thanks, Dad,” he said wryly, “I live to make you proud.”

“It’s a lousy situation, but there’s no need to be a little bitch about it,” I said with a snort.

It had been a long afternoon getting everything in place. It was a relief to get comfortable with pizza in front of the TV. We didn’t bother with plates. Noah had brought home a bottle of wine and that was our nod to sophisticated family dining instead of cracking open a beer. We let Madison pick what we were going to watch.

Leo grudgingly agreed to one episode of Bridgerton. We all got into it and offered to watch more. By the middle of the

third episode Leo was shouting at the TV like it was the NBA finals.

“That asshole cannot expect his sister to marry Berbrooke!”

“He thinks it’s the most respectable choice,” Noah countered.

“The devil does not need an advocate here, bro,” Leo said. “That dude’s ridiculous.”

“His name is Nigel. That was never going to play well, especially when his rival is the guy playing the Duke,” I acknowledged.

“There’s no one they could have pitted against the Duke. Nobody would have a chance. I mean... look at him. He’s so far above everyone else, even the good-looking people on that show. They’re all just mortals by comparison,” Madison said.

“Not to side with the woman who is raving about the hotness of an actor in a room full of eligible Foster men,” Noah said, “But she’s not wrong, objectively. He’s brooding and tragic, which when you add it to wealthy and being the duke of whatever... killer combination.”

We nodded in agreement. Triumphant, Madison offered to let us watch something else now that we were on board with the only possible opinion one could have about Bridgerton. One by one we shrugged. “I could watch some more,” I said. “I hate to admit it, but I’m invested in what happens to the boxer who’s throwing fights.”

“Thank God I’m not the only one!” Leo said, high-fiving me.

Madison laughed, “Like you’re not just watching it for the beautiful Daphne, right?”

“Too skinny,” Noah said. We all drank to that.

“Considering that I’m halfway through my fourth slice of pizza, I appreciate that,” Madison said.

“What do you think? Another episode?” Noah said.

“Eh,” she shrugged, “I’m okay. What about... and don’t laugh at me—do you guys ever play games?”

“We have Madden on Xbox,” I said, “and Leo’s a Call of Duty man.”

“I meant, um, board games,” she said sheepishly.

“We have those.” Noah said with a look of excitement that made me want to groan. “I get Ethan a board game every birthday. It’s kind of a running joke. Because at one point we were in a trivia tournament in our church youth group and our table won—because he answered every single question. We did nothing.”

“Not true. That was the night I got Sydney Hollaway’s number.”

“I meant trivia-wise. We didn’t help out the team.”

“Because Einstein there never shut up,” Leo chuckled.

“What can I say? I knew I’d have to carry the team if I wanted to win, and I always want to win.”

“That’s the other part of the board game joke,” Leo offered, “Ethan is competitive.”

“Like you’re not!” I shot back good-naturedly.

“We all are. So, it gets pretty heated with the trash talk even if we just play, like, Scrabble. Which should be the most boring game on earth.”

“I think nothing’s boring with the Foster boys,” Madison said.

“You say that now,” I told her, “But the fact is, you may find all of us juvenile and unattractive once you see us insult each other like pro-wrestling promoters on pay-per-view over a stupid game of Clue.”

“Clue?” she said, bewildered.

“It WAS the candlestick. On God,” Leo said vehemently.

“The candlestick was not in play!” I replied.

Madison started to giggle, “You guys are hysterical.”

“No, it’s an ongoing disagreement,” I said gravely. “Don’t even get me started on Monopoly and all of Noah’s illegal hotel construction.”

“And yet you hired me to manage your financial portfolio,” he quipped, and Madison laughed again.

“What you’re saying is that you all cheat,” she said with a side-eye in Noah’s direction.

“I don’t cheat. I win because I’m a badass and take no prisoners,” Leo said.

“Yeah, and who’s still whining about the time we played Boggle. At the Big Brothers program at the library. With the disadvantaged kids we worked with.”

“There are no words that start with x besides x-ray. You won with a fake word.”

“It was a real word, and my little brother won a bike, thank you very much,” I said.

“Yeah, an ill-gotten bike you won for him by making up words.”

“Xenial is not a made-up word. Neither is xenophobe,” I pointed out, “There are plenty of words that start with x.”

“What I want to know—not to get in the middle of a decades-long feud apparently—is who the hell puts the letter x in a Boggle game for kids?” Madison said.

“That’s a fair question,” Noah said. “I wasn’t there to witness the legendary Boggle incident. I did chip in on the bike for Leo’s Little Brother because Leo thought the kid was robbed.”

“I’m an electrician,” Leo said, “Word games are not exactly my strong suit. I can spell and everything, but I hated for the little guy to lose out on a new bike because he was saddled with me instead of Mr. University here.”

We all laughed so hard that we never got around to playing a board game. It was late. We’d finished the wine. I had an early conference call at work, so I broke up the party and said good night.

Leo produced a duffel bag and announced he wasn't going to miss out on everything by being the only one not bunking in my loft. We all had a good laugh, and I told him to use the room he sometimes crashed in. He said he'd get an early start as well since the oven delivery was in the morning.

Madison hugged each of us in turn and giggled, "I feel like Snow White kissing the seven dwarves good night."

"Thanks," Noah said wryly, "nothing makes me feel like an alpha male like being compared to an animated bald midget."

"Good night Grumpy," Madison said.

LEO

It was getting late. I stopped by Madison's room and knocked on the door. She called out for me to come in. When I opened the door to one of Ethan's predictably beautiful guest rooms, Madison was putting stuff from a bag into the nightstand drawers.

"I just wanted to let you know that delivery was supposed to be at eight, first thing on the docket, but I got a text the oven won't be there till nine-thirty," I said. I rubbed the back of my neck and grinned at her. "I know it's a delay, but we'll get the installation done as quickly as possible. And if you're interested, I'm going to the farmhouse this weekend to do a little work and I'd love it if you'd go with me. I want to show you an old place and what I'm trying to do with it."

"I'd love that," she said.

"It's good to see you settling in. I'm glad you came here to stay till all this crap with Noah's ex dies down."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Isn't it bad luck to say 'dies' when one of us is being stalked by a literal psycho?"

"I don't know if she's a psycho. I'd just call her a weirdo at this point."

"Because she's stalking your brother or because she decided to stalk him instead of you?" Madison quipped.

"If she'd met me first, I'm sure I would've been her number one target," I preened, joking around with her. "But it's a serious situation and I'll deny it if you tell him I said so,

Ethan's right. He's in a safer neighborhood and it's a security building. It's the smart thing to do."

"Well, he did say he's the brains of this outfit," Madison said.

"I know you're joking but he probably did say that, or he would," I said with a grin. "I think the three of us would agree that if Ethan's the brains, Noah's the heart and that makes me ___"

"The loudmouth?" she teased.

"The body," I said, "Isn't it obvious?"

She made a show of looking me up and down and giving a comical shrug, "I guess you're okay." The mischief in her eyes made me want to laugh, but I rolled my eyes.

"Okay? Then I guess I'll have to show you exhibit A," I said.

"If exhibit A is your dick, I'm going to be really annoyed. I once went out with a lawyer who offered to show me his briefs and thought that was cheesy. But, exhibit A? In your line of work, shouldn't it be showing me the fuse box or something?"

I reached back and grabbed my shirt, dragged it over my head to let her check out the eight-pack of which I was so proud.

"Whoa," she said, her voice low. "You really spend a lot of time at the gym. Do you have time to show me this or should you be lifting something or doing sit-ups?"

"I don't do sit-ups. The plank is more effective."

"How long have you been like this?" She breathed.

"You make it sound like I have a disease or I'm a mutant or something."

"You might, I don't know. I've never seen anything like this in real life. I thought they used CGI in the movies when Wolverine and Thor were this ripped. I take it back. It's obvious. You're the body," she muttered, distracted, with her

fingers hovering near my abs. Her eyes flicked up to mine and there were spots of pink on her cheeks.

“Is it okay if I touch you?” She asked. I nodded, almost unable to say the words. It felt incredible to be the man she was looking at with undisguised want. It made me want to sink to my knees and pleasure her for the favor of that expression on her face, the appraising look that bled over into wonder and yes, please. Meanwhile, I watched her eyes tip over into darkness as I kissed just in front of her ear, then dropped my lips to her neck and sucked there. She wanted me there and tilted her head to give me better access.

She slid her fingers into my hair. That head flared between us as it never failed to do. It was like back in her coffee shop where we’d nearly ended up on the floor. But here there was a bed, a door with a lock on it if we chose to use it.

Madison shoved the bag of her things to the floor and reached for me in earnest. She was a woman who knew what she wanted, and I was a man who knew how damn lucky I was.

The same scorching fury of need seized me when we kissed, the ache that was a torment I yearned for. I cupped her face in my hands, forcing myself to slow down, to be gentle when I wanted to grab and bite and claim. Her breath gusted in gasps whenever we paused, and I breathed a laugh at how I was panting like I sprinted up ten flights of stairs.

“Oh my God,” she groaned when she felt my bare hand slip up her shirt. I swept my thumb along her rib cage and felt her tense, detected the flutter of sensation that made her squirm.

I licked and sucked at her neck. Madison ran her hand down my back, and I flexed and bunched my muscles shamelessly to show off for her. She bit her lip, her eyes flicked open and met mine. She gave a saucy smile that shot straight to my hardening length. That suggestive look in her eyes ratcheted up my arousal and made me grapple for self-control. I wanted this to last, wanted our first time to mean

something more a quick screw because all of a sudden I had the willpower of a sixteen-year-old girl.

I murmured her name, how much I wanted her, how I was trying so hard to take it slow.

“What if I don’t want it slow and easy tonight?” she said, her breath hot on my ear. My arms tightened around her before her words even registered. I dropped my face to her chest and she rubbed against my thigh, trying for the friction and contact she desired. I released her nipple reluctantly to strip off her shirt and jeans. Immediately I reached for her after and cupped her sex with my bare hand. Her eyes locked on mine, and she gave a nod. My fingers curled, sweeping aside the fabric of her flimsy panties to stroke her hot, slippery folds. I groaned again at the proof of her wetness, the slickness that awaited me. Madison’s hands were in my hair, drawing me back onto the bed with her. My knee braced between her legs as I levered myself above her with one arm, my other hand busy between her thighs. She tossed her head back and forth, eyes shut, lips curled almost painfully, the wrinkle of concentration between her brow as I rubbed my calloused thumb over her most secret bud of nerves. I felt her womanhood—a silly and serious word for such a primal act—but it was nothing like I’d felt before. No vulgar term matched what I touched. No filthy word encompassed the reverence that flooded me at touching her this way for the first time.

I dipped my head and kissed her mouth, my fingers coaxing between her tight inner lips while my thumb kept up pressure where she needed me. I sank my middle finger inside her passage, going deep and curling to brush the hidden pleasure spot that made her go rigid and cry out and ride my hand with a fury something like abandon. Sweat slicked my back and chest as I worked her, craving her climax more than I’d ever wanted anything in my life.

I withdrew my finger and parted her to push two fingers inside, the thickness of the invasion meant to startle her into letting go, letting her orgasm happen. But her eyes flew open at a knock on the door. Noah peered in, saw us sprawled on top of the comforter, my fingers knuckle deep in Madison’s

bare body. I looked back at her, and saw a slow smile spread across her face.

Her voice was breathless, barely a gasp. “Why don’t you ask your brother to join us?”

I grinned and Noah said, “You don’t have to ask me twice. I’ll text Ethan.”

Noah had stripped down to his boxers in seconds and was on the bed beside Madison. He took her hand and placed it on his face. He kissed her palm, and she met his eyes, sliding her fingers into his hair. Noah kissed her wrist and her arm while I flexed my fingers inside her snug passage. Ethan burst through the door in an obvious hurry.

“Yeah, that Zoom call had to end quickly,” he said, taking in the scene before him.

MADISON

The look on Ethan's face when he entered the room was enough to stop my heart, which was racing already. I was trembling all over, barely holding myself together, and he walked in. I knew how I must look, stripped down to my panties and sprawled on the bed with Noah beside me and Leo crouched over me, both shirtless, both lavishing my keyed-up body with their full attention. Something cracked open in my chest when he met my eyes. I felt relief, that we were all here together, that now it was complete, and I could relax. Tension left my shoulders and chest as I sagged into the mattress. He removed his tie and unbuttoned his shirt, eyes never leaving mine.

"Thanks for the text. I wouldn't want to miss this. You look like a debauched goddess lying there, or like my wildest dreams."

"Or my—dreams," I managed to gasp with Leo's wicked fingers between my legs.

"Baby, it's our dream, too," Leo managed. Noah's mouth claimed mine, those sweet drugging kisses of his that deemed to drag me down into a blissful swirl of color and taste. His tongue teased mine and my nipples hardened even more in response. They puckered to tight peaks. My eyes drifted shut, but I knew Ethan's touch on my bare leg.

Leo took away his fingers, but before I could protest, a hot, wet tongue swept along my slit. I arched off the bed with a shriek at the new sensation. Leo's fingers teased my opening

while Ethan licked my most sensitive place. Noah's mouth closed over my aching nipple. The onslaught of pleasure made my vision go red. I raked my nails down Noah's back, gripping Leo's hair with the other hand as I came apart in the most intense orgasm of my life. I'd never come so fast, so hard, so deeply. I felt like the near-painful spike of pleasure had been ripped out of my very soul.

I dropped back onto the bed, stunned by the climax that had gripped me and torn through me mercilessly, thanks to their wicked ministrations. I looked from one to the other of them, and I couldn't bring myself to feel embarrassed at all. I met Leo's eyes, and he dipped his head to kiss my lips. Noah kissed me again, a teasing nip, and when Ethan kissed my mouth, I tasted myself on his tongue. Groaning, I slid my tongue into his mouth for more. He joined me on the bed, his body stretched out beside mine, and we kissed, touching each other, exploring. While he caressed my sensitive nipples and licked and explored my mouth, Noah spooned behind me, drawing me back against his chest. I felt his erection against my ass and rocked my hips back against him teasingly. His palm slid across my belly and his fingers found my clit. I was tender there and his probing touch was almost more than I could bear. I shifted against his fingers to shy away from the pressure, but his touch moved down and speared me with his finger. I clenched around him involuntarily, the shock of his invasion and the way it felt so perfect undid me. I rocked back against him. He took the cue, wrapping my leg back over his.

The broad tip of Noah's perfect cock brushed my sex. I pressed back against him, wanting it all. His hand on my breast flexed and I was pinned, unable to writhe or shift. I was trapped between them, Ethan's full body caress, his lips sucking at my neck in a spot that sent hot waves of desire down my belly and Noah's cock ready to pierce me from behind. Feeling pinned, keyed up, desperate, I reached out and grabbed Ethan's cock, stroking the hard shaft that poked through the fly of his boxers. He bit my neck a little too hard as his cock thrust into my grip, the slight pain balancing out the extreme pleasure. I needed that to hold, to stroke and squeeze as Noah thrust forward, parting me, spearing me. I let

my forehead press into Ethan's shoulder as Noah bore down into me with thrust after thrust and I rocked back to meet them. I let the broad, hot erection hit all the right places while I met Ethan's mouth with mine and stroked his cock, jerking him off with eager fingers, matching my pace to the rhythm of Noah's thrusts inside me. When Ethan covered my mouth with his, giving me a hard, deep kiss, he spilled in my hand and across my belly in a hot rush. I cried out in the pleasure of it and pushed my hips back to take more of Noah. Ethan rolled onto his back, spent, while Noah turned me onto all fours and lifted my hips so he could kneel behind me. I propped myself on my elbows, my ass in the air on full display for him. He dug his fingers into my hip to hold me steady for his hard thrusts.

Leo was watching, working his hand inside his boxers. I couldn't resist. My vision was hazy with arousal, but I crooked a finger at him to beckon him closer. He followed my command and leaned in to kiss my lips at the awkward angle. I shook my head and reached for him, for his boxers. Let me, my eyes said to him. He pushed his boxers down and let his big cock bob free. I tried to reach for him but needed both arms to hold myself up.

Noah sat back on his knees, drew me back onto his lap so he could rock into me while I sat back against him. Leo rose up before me and I put my hands on his lean hips. I bent my head and kissed his cut abs, making out with his stomach for a minute while he caressed my scalp. Then I took his cock in my hand and parted my lips. I kissed the tip, the broad head where fluid gleamed at the slit. I tasted it, salty and sweet, and took him in my mouth. Leo swore as I sucked him, my mouth loving the shape and size of him, the power I felt as I worked him with my tongue and lips. My cheeks hollowed as I sucked him and he gripped my hair a little too hard, the sting in my scalp making my clit pulse as Noah continued to fuck me from behind.

I held up my hand to stop for a moment. I let Leo's erection free of my mouth a little wistfully. I slid off of Noah and turned to kiss his lips. He bent me back over his arm and plundered my mouth, his fingers between my legs, rubbing the

wetness there and spreading it around. I rubbed against his hands helplessly, loving the way he knew my body already.

“Just show me what you want, baby,” Noah said in my ear. I kissed him back, then reached for Leo. I straddled his lap. My mouth on his ear, I whispered, “I need you inside me.”

I reached down to notch his thick, perfect cock at my entrance. There was no need to guide him. He was there, pumping into me hard. He surged up into my hand, desperate and fucking me urgently like it was his last chance, like he'd never get to have me like this again. He wrapped his arm around me and held me flush against him.

The rhythm he set was wild, like he couldn't hold back once he finally had me. I hoped that was the reason because I'd felt like I'd go blind with needing him. This was what I'd needed from him since the first day we met. The primal joining of our bodies, slick with sweat and want. His arms closed around me. That intense kiss that started with a brush of his lips on mine and always ended up with one of us wondering if a hundred years together would be enough—he gave me that kiss that was, in itself, more intimate than any sex I'd ever had before I met these men. Now I reached between us to hold his cock, the same one I'd been sucking moments ago. I drew back, going still, my hand on his chest. He met my eyes, his face a twist of anguish and desire. I whispered in his mouth to wait a second. Just wait, I said. He nuzzled my lips with his, the restraint making him swallow hard, his jaw tight.

“I want to savor this,” I said.

I slid down the length of him, taking in every inch, feeling my body stretch and shift to accommodate his size. I worked my wetness down the length of him, I knew when I had six inches in, then seven, then bottomed out with at least eight. I shifted on top of him, took his hand and placed it on my belly down low. “Do you feel that?” I whispered with awe, “You're so deep inside me I can feel it here.

Noah came up behind me and drew me back against his chest, his hands on my breasts, my belly, plucking my nipples

and pinching them, the sharper sensation giving an edge to my pleasure. Leo cupped my face and kissed my lips and began to move, anchoring my hips to him so he was buried balls deep inside me and could rock us both to oblivion with the friction of his body grinding into my clit. The slowest, most overwhelming orgasm built in a terrifying knot, a roaring power that threatened to sweep over me and ruin me. I tried to twist away from him at the last moment.

Noah was behind me, anchoring me to his chest, our sweat mingling. He formed a V-shaped with his fingers and pressed it to my clit, rubbing up and down in time with the thrusts and spreading me wider so I felt even more of Leo's dick inside me. Their powerful rhythm took over my senses, hijacking my body for their pleasure and for my own. It was Leo filling me, his fat cock drilling into me bareback while Noah made love to me with his fingers.

I looked around for Ethan, half frantic. He sat up and joined us, his hand reaching out for me. I took his hand and drew him in. I needed his kiss. The overwhelming pleasure that bubbled up in me that threatened my sanity couldn't find completion until I had all three men on me. He reached for me, dipping his head, and captured my lips with his. He licked my upper lip and then slid his tongue in my mouth full and lush. That was when I came. Shards of lightning ripped through me, my body pulsating and writhing around, riding my lovers, and crying out an earth-shattering completion when Leo shot out inside me. The hot gush of his orgasm shot into me as he threw his head back and roared. I ground into him, wanting every drop. Then he kissed my cheek, slipped out of me and Noah turned me around facing me. He bore me down into the mattress and penetrated me, his own erection so huge by then with trying to hold out that I gasped at the pressure and opened my legs wider to take more of him. I was so wet and slippery with arousal that I could take him though I was tender.

Ethan lay beside me, and Noah covered my body with his, impaled me and then rocked, aligning our bodies so his pelvic bone pressed deliciously against my clit with each heavy thrust and jolt. I spread my legs as wide as I could to take him and

gave a sharp cry with every forward push, every rock into my tenderest, most overwrought place.

Pleasure whipped through me like the jerking of a live wire, uncontrollable and dangerous. I squeezed my eyes shut, reached my arms above my head. Ethan held my hand, wound our fingers together. He took the tip of my thumb in his mouth and teased it. Noah came inside me with a sharp in-drawn breath, no roar for him. All his power went into that magnificent final thrust that pushed me across the bed. I gathered him in my arms and held him as we spiraled down from the powerful climax we'd shared. Then I rolled onto my side, feeling spent, drained, and satisfied. But I needed one more thing. "Ethan," I said hoarsely, "Please. Come here."

He looked at me incredulously. Any girl would've been happy to have one of them, much less all three interested in her. But it was truly a lucky woman who got to have all three of them in the same night.

"Are you sure?" he said, looking at me with concern on his face but a high flush on his cheeks.

"I'll never sleep if I don't have all three of you. You wouldn't want to be the reason I get insomnia, would you?" I teased.

"Never," he said slyly and gathered me in his arms, "You've worn out a line of men servicing you. It would be an honor to join their ranks. But you did seduce me already," he said, indicating his two brothers lying across the bed exhausted.

"That was nothing. Just a warmup," I said, all bravado. He grinned at me.

Ethan gathered me into his arms and held me, touching my face, my lips and cheek. He tucked my tangled hair behind my ear affectionately and kissed my forehead. His fingers traced the line of my throat, the swell of my breasts, the curve of my stomach. He paused and met my eyes.

He surprised me by taking my hand and pulling me to my feet. He nodded to his brothers who both rose as well. One

looked in my partly filled dresser drawers while the other went into the bathroom and started the taps in the big tub. I looked at Ethan, puzzled.

“We made a mess of you, love. Now we’ll clean you up. I won’t have you waking up sticky and stiff. You’re our lover. It’s a matter of pride,” he said smoothly.

As hot water poured in and Leo poured in bubbles, I lingered by the edge of the tub. Ethan hugged me from behind and kissed my shoulder. I looked back at him, uncertain.

“I didn’t—” I hesitated, feeling.

“You did. I’m yours. We all are. Go ahead and get in the water. I’ll claim the privilege of washing you.”

I sank into the warm water, jasmine scented bubbles enveloping me. I was sore in some strange places and needed to stretch out in the tub. As I did, Ethan cleaned me with a warm washcloth, his hand disappearing under the bubbles to cleanse me. He lingered over every inch of my body. Then he let the water drain out and helped me to my feet with a kiss before wrapping me in a towel. Drowsy and relaxed, I got into my pajamas and leaned against his shoulder as he walked me to bed. I slide between the sheets and let him tuck me in.

“Will you stay?” I asked. He smiled and nodded. The other two were already drowsing. I slept so easily surrounded by these men who were quickly becoming my home.

NOAH

Leo was unloading the new oven at her shop, which was closed for the rest of the week. Ethan had a meeting. It was left to me to let her sleep and then rouse her around eight-thirty after our late night to see if she wanted breakfast before we went to the police station.

“Good morning,” I said softly. “I can make you some French toast if you want. We have about an hour and a half before we’re due at the precinct to apply for an order off protection.”

She nodded and stretched, climbing out of bed. A few minutes later she came out of the bathroom, hair freshly brushed and pulled back, a robe tied at the waist.

We sat together at the table as she ate the oatmeal she opted for instead. I brought her coffee and drank a cup myself.

“This may just make me more anxious,” she mused, sipping it.

“I know, but it’s something to do. I’ve been jumping out of my skin since dawn,” I confessed.

“No reason to. None of this is your fault. The authorities will see that and grant you the order. Now every time that we think we even glimpse her, we’ll call the police. That will establish a pattern and she’ll get hassled by the cops. Ideally, she’ll get sick of it and back off.”

“And if not?”

“She’ll be arrested,” I said grimly.

“Don’t tell me you still feel guilty for this,” she said, “You’re letting the police do their job. She shouldn’t be allowed to terrorize you and anyone who speaks to you.”

“You more than spoke to me last night,” I said archly. I kissed her cheek. “You changed everything.”

“So did you. This is nothing like I’ve ever experienced, Noah. It’s so new and so beautiful. Please promise you’ll tell me if I make a mistake or if I hurt anyone’s feelings. I can’t stand to mess this up.”

“We’re not experts. We’ll figure it out as we go along. This isn’t a thing we do like going to the driving range, Madison. We all have feelings for you. This is new and we’ll make it work however we need to. What matters to me, to all three of us, is you. That you feel safe and cared for and connected.”

“It’s so much more than that. I do feel those things, but I went from being alone apart from my work to having all three of you here for me, listening to me, having fun with me, making me feel so important to you.”

“That’s barely even what you deserve, beautiful,” I said sincerely. “Being with you last night was one of the most profound things that’s happened in my life. No regrets. I loved holding you, touching you, getting to explore your body and learn what makes you tick, what makes you melt in my arms.”

I think it’s a wonder I can stand up and walk today—I felt like you all just gave me so much attention and pleasure and... melted my whole heart.” She said, blushing, “I feel like I ought to be hiding my face in shame or something, but I feel like everything just glows now. Like I’m not alone anymore and you know me, all three of you, as deeply as it’s possible to be known.”

I kissed the top of her head as I went to refill her coffee cup. When I set the cup down, she caught my wrist.

“Hey,” she said softly, “are you okay? I know you didn’t want to involve the police. But you deserve to be safe and not

have to change your routine constantly out of fear that she's going to show up and harass you.”

“And the people I care about,” I said, suddenly tired. I sat down and reached for her, pulled her into my arms. We held each other for a few minutes, until I felt the tightness leave my chest. She kissed my cheek and my neck, stroking my hair.

“We should get ready,” she said and tore herself away.

Half an hour later, we were sitting in plastic chairs with clipboards and cheap ink pens, filling out stacks of paperwork. An order of protection was a lot less about confessing your detailed and embarrassing situation to a gruff but sympathetic cop and more about filling out the right forms thoroughly. Madison finished first because she had only the text messages to report. She waited for me, reading on her phone while I described incidents from months ago leading up to the most recent. I rubbed my forehead, tired of thinking about all of it. The officer at the desk looked over our forms, nodded and said they'd be in touch if there were any questions.

Two hours in a plastic chair and developing some old school writer's cramp was a lot less decisive than in the movies. I dropped Madison off at the loft to work on a recipe and went into the office to get a half-day at work.

She messaged me later with a picture of a pie. “Is it silly that I want to make a big family Thanksgiving dinner for us all?” she messaged.

I felt a squeeze in my chest, knowing she'd never had a family to cook for and celebrate with before now. “It's not silly. It's very sweet. We'll help however we can,” I promised. Then I messaged Leo and Ethan to give them a heads-up on her idea. Thanksgiving together was important to her, and I wanted to make sure we supported her in that. They were both on board. It got me out of my head over the restraining order, just thinking about standing around drinking wine in a cinnamon-scented kitchen, waiting for the pies to bake with Madison and my brothers. Surely, we could find some way to pass the time...

ETHAN

The order of protection was in place. There had been no red flags since Noah and Madison moved into my loft. Everything was going better than fine. I loved waking Madison up with my mouth between her legs, loved sampling the rosemary and date scones she was working on, debating the merits of chess versus backgammon with my brothers. My life, which was already excellent, had become incredible in a short time.

Which is to say I wasn't surprised when the other shoe fell. The head of security came out to speak with me in late November. It had been, of course, only the calm before the storm. A manila envelope, my last name printed neatly. Inside, photos of Madison getting on the elevator, another of Noah leaving the building. A third image of the two of them walking hand in hand, livid white scratches obscuring Madison's face where someone—where Noah's stalker—had used a key or her nails to claw at the picture in rage. The note said that the new girl had to die.

In other words, happy damn Thanksgiving week to us.

As soon as I was upstairs, I ordered them to pack their bags. There wasn't time for discussion. We were going to the farmhouse. I wanted my family out of the city for the holiday weekend. The crazy woman would have too much time on her hands to make trouble and she was already closing in. I showed the photos to my brothers. They immediately swore and agreed with me that we had to leave.

Madison put up the sole protest, “It’s a picture of me. Big deal. I used to draw devil horns and mustaches in my yearbook on the girls I hated. I never tried to kill anyone. She’s mad. She’s lonely. She’s a little nuts. There’s no reason to run away from the city. Besides, I just got the shop open again. I don’t want to waste the whole weekend and everything I baked.”

“Baby, we’re going to protect you. You have to let us,” Leo said.

“Madison,” I said, clearing my throat, “do you want to agree to go to the farmhouse and make the feast there or do you want to have to listen to a long dull speech about your safety beforehand?”

“Okay, fair point, Ethan,” she said with a wry look, “Help me get the food packed up for the feast. I’m not letting this ruin our celebration.”

We helped her locate every item and every ingredient she needed and packed them according to her instructions, which took at least an hour. I chafed at the delay, but Noah elbowed me and reminded me that she was going along with the weekend away and that I could be patient until she had everything. I tried not to complain about the delay.

We drove out to the farmhouse and arrived after dark. By the time we’d unloaded the groceries, Leo had a fire going in the fireplace. It wasn’t long before we all crashed.

LEO

“Are you taking another picture?” Madison laughed. I nodded. I’d taken dozens of them all weekend. It had been a perfect time to show Madison the house I’d worked on with such devotion. It was not finished, but the bones were there, and the drywall was mostly in. The kitchen was finished and one bathroom. The HVAC was up to date as well. It made for comfortable living since we were without a bed. I had been dying to show her why I loved the place so much. I pulled her up the stairs and took her all the way to the attic to let her see the view out over acres and acres of fields, now a scruffy yellowish green-gray.

“In summer it’s so green you won’t believe it. And in early October—that one there—sunflowers,” I said proudly. She smiled up at me, “I can’t wait to see them.”

“You will. You’ll be here,” I told her.

Madison conscripted all three of us into service working on the feast. Trimming, basting, chopping, stirring—we learned to do it all. By the time the turkey was roasting, and two pies were in the oven, I asked Madison if she needed a nap.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind relaxing for an hour or so. Anybody want to relax in my room? I could really use a massage.” She said archly.

It was a wonder we didn’t trample one another.

Madison's room had the only real bed so far. The rest were equipped with air mattresses or a sleeping bag.

"You act like I'm a princess," she said, "it's only fair I share the bed."

"You're our princess," Ethan had said, and I scooped her up in a fireman's hold and ran up the stairs while she squealed.

I deposited her on the bed and Noah told her to lie face down while we gave her a massage to thank her for all the hard work she'd done in planning and cooking our Thanksgiving feast.

"It's a chance for us to show you how much we appreciate you," Ethan said.

"Wait, you mean slicing your own knuckle with the potato peeler wasn't enough gratitude?" Madison teased.

"I could have bled to death," Ethan deadpanned.

"And I performed life-saving first aid by getting you that Band-Aid," Noah said.

Soon we had her stretched out across the bed, stripped bare and enjoying the way six hands could melt away her tension.

"Mmmm, right there," she said as I kneaded her shoulder.

"What about here?" Ethan said as he licked between her legs. I felt her tense and then she lifted her hips, tucked her knees beneath her and sighed happily. I kept rubbing her shoulders and arms and Ethan teased her with open-mouthed kisses on her sex. When I saw that her fingers were scrabbling along the sheets for something to grip, I moved around to her head and caught her hands in mine. She lifted her head and looked at me. She said my name pleadingly. This was my dream, this farmhouse I was restoring, this woman who wanted me, the closeness in this room, the knowledge that we protected our own. She wrapped her arms around my hips and laid her face in my lap. I knew what she wanted by now.

I turned her on her side, slid into bed beside her and spooned up behind her. I kissed her shoulders, whispered to her and held her against me. One of my brothers would kiss

her mouth, the other would lie down facing her and move between her legs. I would anchor her, wrap my body around hers and hold her close, speak to her and sometimes give directions as she let them wring the last pleasure out of her body for one day. We worked together seamlessly, a team designed to give her the caresses and orgasms she deserved, never comparing ourselves, never giving a thought to who played which part this time. She let us know with small words or gestures what she needed most. We were each glad to step up and be who she needed at the time.

By the time we were all spent and drifting off into a nap, the loud oven timer began to blare. We exchanged a look, none of us wanting to go check the oven or to wake her up. So, we decided that Noah would check the pies and the rest of us would sleep until the turkey was done.

If it hadn't been for the fact that he tried to defrost the marshmallows for the topping of the sweet potato casserole, it would have been fine.

Instead, the leisurely sated nap turned into a scramble to find out what would clean exploded marshmallows from practically every surface in the kitchen.

“Defrost is for frozen things,” I said irritably to Noah.

“That is so sticky....” Madison said with dismay. “Why would you even think to put them in the microwave?”

“Well, they're so good when they're gooey,” he said, and we chuckled.

The mess was extraordinary. When we finally finished scraping goo out of every crevice in the kitchen, the turkey was done. I did the mashed potatoes, and Ethan put rolls in the oven while Madison showered to wash the marshmallow out of her hair.

Noah opened a bottle of wine and poured, I carved the bird because of my superior dexterity—although Ethan suggested that unless we were wiring the turkey to light up I was no more qualified than anyone else—and Madison gave the blessing over the food.

“This year, I have more to be thankful for than I could ever have dreamed of,” she began. “I’m not even talking about the new convection oven in my shop.” She smiled and squeezed my hand.

We had all joined hands spontaneously because it felt like the right thing to do.

“Last year on this day I volunteered at a soup kitchen to reach out and help others so I might feel less sorry for myself, less lonely. An old man complained about my green beans being too salty until I scraped them off his plate into my hand and stomped away. This year, I am the luckiest woman in the world. Even with burnt marshmallow stuck between my fingers. And I have all of you to thank for it. I have a family now. A real one, where we care for each other and protect one another and roast each other viciously over board games. I mean it, guys. I have everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Three boyfriends and no topping for the yams?” I wisecracked.

“Keep talking and no pie for you,” Madison teased. “Don’t wreck a beautiful moment.”

“If you don’t want smartass commentary, why’d you invite me?” I said.

“It’s your farmhouse...” Noah said.

“Okay, that’s fair,” I said, “and joking aside, I love this Thanksgiving and everything we have to look forward to. I’m especially grateful to you, Mad, for making a family dinner happen in the midst of chaos.”

“That’s what family is, right? Celebrating each other in the midst of chaos?” Ethan said.

“Exactly,” I replied and picked up the knife, “Now who wants a drumstick?”

When Madison took a turkey-induced nap on the couch, we scrolled through our photo streams and chose pictures from the weekend to include in a photo book for her.

“I think we should make it special. Some kind of holiday togetherness theme,” I said. “Ethan, you’re a designer. You can make a good-looking scrapbook, I bet.”

“I design buildings. I don’t do scrapbooks,” he said.

“We have to do, what, sixteen pages? According to the app, the book needs sixteen pages. We each do five pages and then one collage page at the end. We do it as one project on the app, so we don’t reuse the same photos.” Noah took charge.

“You’ve got project manager energy,” Ethan quipped.

“I’m aiming for partner. Surely, I can facilitate a successful scrapbook,” he said. We all set to work flagging the pictures we wanted to include in the book we were making to surprise Madison. She’d love it—a sentimental memento of our first Thanksgiving together.

MADISON

I put together a grand re-opening for the shop the week after Thanksgiving with help from the guys. Ethan donned an apron and served coffee and scones while Noah worked the register. We had so much business. The worries I'd had about losing my standing orders and customer base after the brief closing were a thing of the past. In fact, the weekdays were so bustling with business that I had to turn down several large orders because of staffing. I had three part-time workers and needed to add at least two more, preferably by getting Jacie or Marco to commit to full-time so I could train them as a manager.

Day after day, we sold out of muffins before nine, and the scones were quick to follow. The only time I had leftover scones was the day of the failed sage and lavender experiment. They smell bad when you put them together. It was a lesson learned. I started making some savory rolls—a sausage roll, a chicken curry roll and a garlic eggplant one. I offered them as a to-go special twice a week. The second day I had calls about ordering a platter of them for a luncheon or a meeting. I didn't have enough ingredients on hand and not nearly enough help to do the pastry and get them ready in time. There were even more lost orders because of staffing.

I posted a help-wanted sign and interviewed potentials. Having people come in at six a.m. for an interview really weeded out the ones who weren't willing to get up early and work in a shop, that was for sure. I hired two college kids on a Wednesday, and one had quit by Friday at eight in the

morning. I was scraping by with barely enough help. Then I took on a big order for three trays of chicken curry and eggplant rolls.

The next morning, I had asked Jacie to come in early to help roll pastry. At four in the morning my phone rang while I was getting dressed for the day's baking. It was her. I groaned and answered the phone. It turned out the cough she'd been taking lemon calendula lozenges for turned out to be mono. She'd be out for three weeks. I told her to feel better, not to worry about it. Then I panicked. We hadn't even opened for the day before I told my remaining recent hire to find a different job. He was fifteen minutes late again. Fourth time, it turned out, was not a charm.

A flood of customers awaited when I unlocked the doors. Marco and I served and rang up as fast as we could. Still, the line stretched out the door and I felt uncomfortably like people were restless at the slow service. I gave away some dreidel sugar cookies in apology for the delay. Frustrated, I had to close early after running out of scones and muffins. I set Marco to work cleaning up while I made a batch of pastry for the rolls.

I kept the front-of-house lights on because I had an assortment of cookies and tarts that would be picked up at noon. When a woman knocked on the door, I let her in.

"Hey, thanks for coming early. The tarts are boxed separately," I indicated the boxes on the counter."

"Oh, I'm not here for a pickup. I love your muffins, and I saw the help wanted sign in the window. Are you taking applications?"

"Yes, we are. I'm Madison," I said, impatient but trying to be friendly.

"Good to meet you. Are you the genius behind those chocolate cherry muffins? I'm Lillian."

"I created the recipe. I'm glad you like them. I'd love to chat about my favorite subject, but I'm in the middle of a huge order right now. That's why I closed early. You can write your

information on this, and I'll be in touch later in the week." I said.

She thanked me, wrote down her details and left with merciful speed.

"You didn't waste much time on her. Did she have dirty fingernails or something?" Marco remarked.

"No, I just don't have time to deal with anyone who isn't actively helping. Hint—" I said pointedly, only half joking.

"Sorry, I'd say I was on a coffee break, but this is a coffee shop," he said, "and I don't smoke. We'll say it was a standing around break. I finished sweeping."

"Good, now grab the pink sticky note off the pantry door and follow the recipe to make up the eggplant filling. Lots of chopping, everything has to be uniform."

"Use the mandoline slicer?"

"Absolutely," I said, "Just use the gripper so you don't slice off a finger."

I made it another two hours before I called the number on the notepad and asked if Lillian could start on a trial basis the next day. I stayed super late finishing the rolls, each a glossy golden brown as I packed them in parchment for morning pickup. With a sigh, I rubbed my neck and promised myself a long hot bath at home.

Lillian turned out to be a lifesaver. She was friendly and cheerful and knew how to operate a cash register with a cantankerous card reader. She made small talk with customers who were waiting on Marco to bring their coffee to go and kept the checkout line moving at a good clip. It left me time to connect with my customers, to ask about their new home, their new dog, or their dad's surgery. My favorite part of the business was bringing joy to the lives of people I got to know through my love of baking. I'd missed that in the last few harried weeks. It felt good and I was thankful.

After we closed, Lillian agreed to stay for a cup of coffee and one of the chocolate muffins I'd saved for her.

“You made a huge difference this morning in how smoothly everything went. I can’t thank you enough for being a quick study,” I said, sipping my coffee and sinking into a chair.

“Thanks. I was pretty nervous when that crowd poured in around eight. I thought, hey we’re done with the early rush—then here comes another wave.”

“I know it can be a lot. I’m really lucky to have so much repeat business since it’s time for holiday festivities at a lot of small businesses. They order muffins and scones and things for their staff. I spend a lot of time filling those orders and with the staffing glitch recently, I’ve been chained to the mixer almost.”

“I’m glad I could give you a break. I only freaked out once, which isn’t bad for the first day, right?”

“That man tried to pay you with change only. It’s a legitimate freakout,” I said to her warmly.

“This muffin is amazing. Thanks for saving me one.”

“Anytime. Thanks for pitching in on short notice,” I said.

She told me a little about herself—moved to the city from a smaller town to be with her boyfriend who’s now an ex, didn’t like office temp work and now wants to branch out. Maybe considering culinary school down the road. I paid her in cash for the day and had her fill out payroll forms. I felt a lot lighter just knowing she’d show up for work the next day and be efficient enough that I didn’t have to do three things at once. I hadn’t realized how tiring it was to be short-staffed until I had a morning when I wasn’t. I finished my coffee and got to work on another batch of muffins for the nail salon’s holiday open house tomorrow morning.

NOAH

Leo made chili for supper—one of the two things he cooks—and we sat down for a meal together. It had been almost a week since we all sat at the same time and ate. Everyone had meetings, project deadlines or, in Madison’s case, big holiday orders to fill. Half the time she was in the kitchen till eleven or so just wrapping up the next day’s baking. I had lent a hand on some gingerbread and fruitcake muffins yesterday—fruitcake is just never good in my opinion. Making it muffin-shaped doesn’t hide the fact. I did get into rolling out the dough for the cinnamon rolls though.

Over supper, we caught up on each other’s lives. Ethan got the bid on the rich people’s unique Hamptons home as anticipated and the couple in question liked his ideas so much that they increased the budget. He was having a blast working out the details. I had a final pitch coming up for partnership. Madison would be glad if she never had to bake another sausage roll.

“I love that the neighborhood was glad to have the shop back open, and I’m happy to have the business, but the holiday catering thing is killing me. If it weren’t for Lillian, I’d be in the hospital somewhere on an involuntary 72-hour psych hold by now.”

“Lillian’s the new girl, right?” I said.

“She’s more of an angel than just a new girl,” Madison said, “She’s so much help I can’t do without her. She made little origami stars in magenta and pale green, and they’re

lined up on the top of the display case. She's got them on the windowsill and strung some in the front window on fishing line. So, it looks festive even though I haven't had a chance to decorate for the holidays with all the electrical and oven problems. I should probably run to a dollar store and toss some ornaments in a bowl or something, but this is so much homier."

"Origami?" I said, my mouth going dry.

"They are so pretty. She tried to show me, but she goes so fast it's like magic," Madison said.

"Tell me what she looks like," I said, suspicious.

"She looks like a person, okay? She's my friend," she bristled, defensive.

"Then just tell me what she looks like or show me a picture."

"I don't have a picture of her, and I'm not going to snoop her socials to get one for you because you're acting weird and overprotective. I get that you're stressed out, but I don't like the way this is going."

"Sorry," I said, "the origami thing is a red flag for me. Because Olivia was into origami, or she had been in the past. She had a bunch of birds and stars and crap on her windowsills."

"There's more than one person in the city that does origami, Noah," she said with a half-smile, "I'm fine. I may even go take an extra shower. I swear even if I wash my hair, it still smells like meat!" she grumbled.

I leaned over and kissed her head. "Yeah, sausage, a hundred percent," I said. "Nothing sexier on Earth." She rolled her eyes.

"If the sausage bothers you that much, why do you have it on the menu?" Ethan said. Madison walked over to the table where he sat and joined him.

"It's the most popular. But with any luck, I can train Lillian to make the sausage filling tomorrow. She's not a natural at

pastry but neither was I. Lamination is tricky. If the butter isn't completely frozen, it's a mess. Anyway, I've got Marco where he can do the eggplant filling which is really chopping intensive and tedious. Takes forever."

"I hope you charge more for the tedious one," Ethan said.

"No, it doesn't have meat—the ingredients are cheaper. So I charge less per dozen."

"Labor costs," I said, joining them, "If the eggplant takes that much longer, mark them up."

"You're probably right," she sighed. "But I priced all my platters already in the newsletter."

"All it takes is a quick note that, due to pricing increases for quality ingredients and the prep time required for each handmade pie, the updated price list is as follows," I offered.

"Oh! I like that. Say that again slowly so I can put it in my Notes app and type it up later," she said. I repeated it for her and gave a sigh I couldn't hold back.

"Interviews with the board stressing you out or is it the psycho ex?" Leo said.

"All of it, I guess. I'm fine. I'm okay," I said.

"You don't have to say you're fine. Do you remember my appendix? I kept going, no I'm fine, quit fussing about it, I said I'm fine! Next thing I know, my macho ass is whimpering for pain meds in the ER and saying I don't want to die."

"I was there, man," I said, "You scared the hell out of me. You're never allowed to get sick again."

"I should've said, hey, maybe this isn't because I had chili last night—maybe the pain that feels like a flaming poker jammed in my side is a bad appendix."

"That's specific," I said, "But I'm pretty sure I don't need to go to the ER. I'm having a hard time concentrating at work or on anything really. I think I brushed my teeth five times yesterday because I kept forgetting if I'd brushed them or not," I admitted.

“Bright side, your teeth will look amazing,” Leo said, “You can talk to me if something’s bothering you.”

“I know. I just don’t want to talk about it or think about it at all. I wish I could just wake up and find out I imagined it and there was never anyone stalking me.”

“Yes and no,” Leo said, “Yeah, I wish that woman didn’t follow you around and harass you and menace everyone. But that was what motivated you to go to a new coffee shop one day. That’s how you met Madison.”

“I can’t give Olivia credit for that. I think Madison would have been in our lives somehow no matter what. We would have found her, or she would have found us. I think that was meant to be,” I said.

“You’re right. I like that better,” he said.

Madison wandered back from the kitchen and lamented that the amazing new employee Lillian wasn’t going to be able to work tomorrow.

“I’ll miss her. I mean, I know she just started, but she’s really nice, and she makes my life easier.”

“Is she sick?” Leo said.

“No, it’s just a hard day for her. She lost her sister in a car accident, and it was five years ago tomorrow.”

My head shot up from where I’d been checking my email.

“Her sister?” Suspicion sent a chill through me. “What was her sister’s name?”

“Let me look,” she said, scrolling back through her texts. “It was something pretty. Just a second... Francesca.”

“Madison, that’s my ex-girlfriend. The stalker we have an order of protection against. You need to tell her not to come back to work for you. I mean it.”

“What? That’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever said, Noah,” she said, “She’s not Olivia Rade. Her name is Lillian Potts, she’s not even from here and she’s an excellent employee so far. Why would she have anything to do with your ex?”

“Because Francesca Rade was three years younger than Olivia and lost control of her car while she was texting and driving and died in a one-car accident on the way home from a weekend in Boston five years ago. I didn’t know her then, but Olivia told me all about it. It was really hard on her, of course. But you have to get rid of this woman. She’s pretending to be someone else to get closer to you. She’s violating the order of protection by being there at all, and she’s going by a fake name. Call her and tell her not to come back. Please,” I said, exasperated. I knew part of the reason I was irritated with Madison was that I didn’t like how close Olivia had come to her.

“Look, I hate that you’ve had such a hard time with your ex, but not everybody has an ulterior motive. This is just a woman named Lillian who likes my muffins and started working for me—”

“And coincidentally shares the same terrible sibling loss story as the ex who is stalking me? Think about it. I realize that if she could make the sausage filling, you’d probably insist on keeping her on staff because who cares if she follows me and takes photos of me and of you and makes threats, right? Jesus, Madison, you can’t be serious. We can’t keep you safe if you’re going to act like there’s not a problem.”

I pulled up my Instagram tagged photos and found the one she posted when we were at a party together during the brief time we dated. “Is this Lillian?” I demanded, shoving the phone at Madison.

“Shit,” she breathed, “Yeah, that’s her. Shit.”

Madison sat down and dropped her head into her hands. “I’m sorry, Noah. You were right. I shouldn’t have pushed back when you said it was your ex. Of course, it’s your ex, because why would someone that nice and helpful come work for me for minimum wage and the occasional slightly burnt sausage roll. I should have listened. I just didn’t want to believe it.”

I nodded. “I didn’t want to believe it either.”

“She got a job at your shop and got in under our radar,” Ethan said, “That means we need a better radar. You’ve got to let her go.”

“You don’t have to talk to her,” Leo said, “we don’t want her to know that you know it’s her. Just leave a message or something telling her you’re taking tomorrow off.”

“She’ll never believe that—” Madison said, “unless I tell her I’m sick.” With a nod, she picked up her phone and typed out a message. “There. I told her I’m not opening tomorrow. That I hope I don’t have mono or something.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking her hand, “Do you have the orders made for tomorrow?” She nodded. “We’ll deliver them. You don’t need to open or go in or anything. I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“I feel stupid. She really had me going,” she said miserably.

“Don’t. It’s not like you’re supposed to ask, ‘hey are you by any chance my boyfriend’s stalker?’” Leo said. “None of this is your fault. Or Noah’s fault,” he cut his eyes to me and practically stared me down till I nodded my agreement even though I felt responsible.

“Which one of you can pull the security footage from the shop?” Ethan said.

“I can,” I said, and went to his laptop. I sat grimly and watched black and white video shot from the ceiling camera in the shop—images of Madison happily talking with Olivia while she worked. It was a gut punch, seeing the pair of them together, knowing that I was the one who’d brought this into Madison’s life.

I looked over at Ethan. He shook his head.

“What?” I said.

“Stop thinking what you’re thinking.”

“Oh? And what am I thinking?”

“That maybe Madison was better off lonely than with us and having a stalker now. It’s bullshit. You blame yourself for

everything, but not this time,” Ethan said gruffly.

I drew a long breath and emailed the footage to the police officer we were told to contact if she violated the restraining order.

ETHAN

Of all the shitty timing.

“I leave tomorrow for the conference,” I told Leo grimly. “I’m reluctant to leave town with things the way they are.”

“You mean because the stalker got into Madison’s shop, and you don’t want to tell Noah because he’ll feel even guiltier.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve already talked to a private sector security firm about protecting the two of them until this woman is in jail. The point is, I don’t want to be at a distance if anything happens.”

“I’ll give you credit for putting it that way instead of saying you needed to be in town to protect us.”

“I’m an architect, Leo,” I said, “I realize I’m not an MMA pro. I can make phone calls and set up security details and stay informed about the situation. I can ask Judy to put pressure on the DA about resolving this. I didn’t plan to stockpile rocket launchers and make noise about how she should come and get us.”

“That’s good to know,” Leo said. “You have to go. You’re giving the keynote. You were excited about it and made us watch the whole slide deck twice.”

“So I heard from Judy, she said they’re calling it her first offense and she’ll pay a fine and get a warning not to go near us again. The cops aren’t going to arrest her, Leo.”

“Fuck.”

“My words exactly,” I grunted.

“I’ll hang out at the shop if you want, keep an eye out.”

“I wasn’t asking you to watch them. I wanted your opinion on going.”

“You got my opinion. You should go.”

“Okay,” I said.

I confirmed my travel arrangements and did an online check-in for my flight. Then I went to talk to Noah while Madison showered. He agreed with Leo but with a side of guilt that I had to worry about it.

“I’m going to ask her to come with me. Maybe she’d like the weekend away and she’d be out of sight around here.”

“Out of danger, you mean,” he said, “she’s got a brunch on Sunday. She won’t go.”

“That was before she found out Olivia was the new hire. Maybe she’d like to distance herself from the shop for a few days.”

“Good luck,” he said.

When Madison emerged in her robe, I asked her to have a seat.

“Okay, but I’m fine. I’m disappointed that she fooled me, but it’s good that we figured it out before she could sabotage the new oven or something just to get back at me for dating Noah. It’s sweet of you all to check up on me, but I’m not upset.”

“I wasn’t being sweet,” I admitted, “I’m giving a speech at a conference in Chicago this weekend. I wanted to invite you to come along. The suite’s comped because I’m giving the keynote and it’s a nice place. You could go to the spa, see the sights, have a weekend away.” I said.

“No thank you,” she said, “It sounds like a fun weekend, but I have a big order for a bridal shower on Sunday. I can’t

miss it. The commission on it is huge, and I gave my word that I'd do it."

"Okay. If you change your mind, let me know," I said. Madison took my hand and held it, her pretty eyes serious on mine.

"We'll be okay here. You can stop worrying. I know you give Noah crap for blaming himself, but you think you have to carry the weight of the world, too."

"What about me?" Leo said.

"You're good with electrical stuff," she quipped, and Noah and I howled with laughter.

"She roasted you. We're the deep thinkers with existential dilemmas. You change the lightbulbs." Noah said.

"When do you leave?" she asked.

"Early. I've ordered a car."

"Then I'll tell you to have a good trip now, and I'll miss you," she said. She took my hand and held it.

I couldn't help leaning in, kissing her like she was my sweetheart, and I was going to war. I gathered her in my arms and held her, warm and pliant from her bath, wrapped in her soft robe and naked beneath it. My body stirred against hers and when her fingers curled around the back of my neck, I hardened in response.

"We could all wish you bon voyage," Leo said, "Or I could change some lightbulbs for you."

I stood and drew Madison to her feet, not breaking the kiss. My tongue swept into her mouth, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. I bent and caught her in my arms, lifting her and carrying her to my room, ignoring my brothers' offers to go with us. I kicked my door shut on them and had her all to myself before I had to leave.

LEO

We had made the delivery run for the bridal brunch, but now she wanted to make mini quiches for the Monday lunch special.

“I’ll take you to Costco, buy a big old box of the frozen ones. Sell those. Heat ‘em up in the microwave. Do that, and we can go take a nice long shower at home instead of hanging around here.”

“Tempting, but I don’t resell frozen foods here.”

“Maybe consider it is all I’m saying. We’ve been here a long time,” I said.

She rolled her eyes and turned the mixer back on.

“It’s not just lightbulbs. I’m good at hustling scones too,” I said as I counted and boxed a batch.

“You’re a good man to have around, I told you that from the start,” Madison said, “but I have to get these done.”

“I was so good this morning. I got up at five, on a Sunday, and drove you to the shop,” I said.

“I appreciate it. And you and Noah were right that I was too wiped to drive home last night by the time I had the chicken curry rolls done. Thanks for giving me a ride. But I can drive myself home. Got my keys and everything,” she said.

I leaned in as if inspecting the keys, she held up and I slid my arms around her from behind.

She swatted at me playfully as I took her breast in my palm. She dodged away but the flirting and teasing had gone on all morning. “Come on, I promised Ethan that I’d stay close this weekend.”

“I don’t think he meant you should stay this close,” she said.

I bracketed my hands on either side of her at the counter. Madison, despite her protests, leaned back against my chest and let me kiss her temple, her cheek, then her neck. I ran my hands up her arms, feeling her shiver in response to my sensuous touch. She canted her hips back, rubbing against my erection. I growled and nipped at her earlobe. She rocked back against me again and it was all I could do not to push her leggings down around her ankles and bend over the counter. Again. She turned to look back over her shoulder and let me catch her lips, sip at them, and tease us both with quick, sexy kisses.

“Ah, you’ve *got* to get out of here, Leo,” she groaned in frustration.

“Why?” I said innocently, my hands roving over her belly and up to the nipples that strained against her t-shirt. I’d thrown her bra somewhere a few hours ago when I had her against the glass display case.

“Maybe it’s the fact that I still need to get the glass cleaner to clean the smudge my bare ass left on the display case this morning. Or the fact that every time I’m almost done with a batch of *anything*, you get bored and get in the way.”

I rubbed her nipple, and her eyes drifted, indulging the lush strokes and tugs of my fingers. I sucked her neck and drew a ragged breath. I knew what I was about to do next. She loved to ride my fingers, and I couldn’t resist giving it to her. I think she got off on the callouses, my work-roughened hands stroking her slick, tender folds. She had two more batches of tarts to assemble. I dragged myself back from her and put my hands in my pockets.

“Okay,” I said breathlessly, “you’re right. I’ll go.”

“Get out of here. You’re a distraction,” she said, her voice playful. But her eyes were dark with lust when she looked at me.

“Fine. I admit when I’m wrong. I can’t hang around here and be helpful for long. I have to take breaks. Dirty ones,” I said. “Although if you could use a hand—see what I did there?” I smirked as she rolled her eyes, “remember how quick we got the mini quiches done after I ate you out on the table? Maybe just a quick break and I’ll be re-energized and get back to work?”

She shook her head, “No thanks. I’d love to stop and play, believe me. There’s nothing I’d love more. Except barbecue chips. I’d probably commit murder for a big bag of those.”

“Really? You mentioned those last night too. I thought you were just overtired and thinking about junk food.”

“I was, but I can’t get them off my mind. Like, if you gave me a choice, do I want all this baking to be finished and packed up magically or do I want the chips, I’d pick the chips,” she said.

“Are these special chips? Or just regular ones?”

“I like the Lay’s kind. Just regular, sweet and spicy barbecue chips.”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you eat chips more than like one time. Is it all the baking sweet stuff, you just want something salty after being surrounded by this all day?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I just know that I’m going to eat a whole bag of them, like a family sized bag after I’m done here.”

“Okay, live your best life,” I teased and kissed her forehead, “Lock the deadbolt, okay?”

“I will. And I’ll let you know when I’m on my way home.”

“Home, the barbecue chip factory so you can rob the place, whatever,” I said. I brushed my lips against hers, “I love you, baby.”

“I love you, too.”

“Not as much as you’d love me if I had chips, right?”

“At least I can keep you humble that way,” she grinned.

When I was on my way home, Noah called.

“Hey, what’s up?” I said.

“The cops can’t find Olivia, that’s what. She’s supposed to stay away from us, but she isn’t supposed to fall off the grid. A neighbor called for a welfare check because they hadn’t seen her in a couple days. She’s not at her place, but her car’s there. The security guy that Ethan hired said there’s no activity on her credit card, but she took some serious cash out on Friday afternoon.”

“Shit. What’s she up to? Listen, I’m gonna call Ethan. We’ll just take Madison to the farmhouse till the cops track Olivia down. Can you do that with the partnership on the line?” I said.

“I’ll have to. My boss knows the situation, and I have personal leave I never used. I’ll just give them a call. Have Ethan meet us there after his conference, okay?” he said.

“Okay, I’ll tell him. We got this under control. Don’t stress yourself out,” I told him.

I called him, then left Madison a voicemail about what was going on. I went to the loft and started throwing stuff in a bag. Then I called Madison to see how much longer she’d be. I felt antsy knowing Olivia was in the wind and Madison was on her own at the shop.

“I’m leaving now,” she said, “I just locked up, and I’m gonna stop for some chips. Then I’ll be home. I’ll meet you guys at the loft and we can decide what to do from there.”

“Okay but what if we want to share the chips?” I said.

“Then I’ll have to be faster than you, cause I don’t want to share these,” she laughed.

I heard her get in the car and heard the seatbelt click. She turned on the ignition and I said, “Leave me on speaker, okay? I’ve got a weird feeling, I’m nervous all of a sudden.”

“You? You don’t get nervous. Remember, the other two have existential dread. You’re good at fixing lightbulbs,” she joked.

“Anything you want me to pack for you before you get here? Phone charger? That black lacy thing I like?”

“Hey, I’m open-minded, if you wanna wear my black lacy nightie, you go right ahead and pack it,” she said, “uh, Leo, why won’t my brakes work?” Her voice climbed higher, freaking out. “Something’s not right. I’m pumping them and they’re just—” she screamed, and the call cut off.

MADISON

I woke up aching and confused, squinting at the bright lights in my eyes.

“Hey,” Noah said. I blinked and saw him and Leo bending over me. Everything was bright and the room was cold. “You’re in the ER,” he said.

Fear ran through me like ice. I grabbed his hand. “What happened to me?”

“We were on the phone,” Leo said, “and you were headed home. You said your brakes didn’t work right. You screamed and then the call cut off. Took ten years off my life hearing you scream that way. I called 911 and drove toward the shop till I found you. The ambulance had just got there. You’re going to be fine. Bumps and bruises and maybe a headache. You’ll be sore tomorrow, but we are lucky it was a low-speed crash. That’s what the doctor said.

“They got her, Mad,” Noah said, “The cops on the scene found a GPS tag on your car. Olivia must have put it there when she worked at the shop and had access. She was nearby, and they caught her, just standing across the street watching your wreck she caused. I’m so sorry, baby. I’m sorry she did this to you. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said.

“She’s locked up and she’ll stay that way till her trial,” Noah said.

I nodded, wincing a little at the headache.

“I got you these,” Leo said.

He grabbed something off a plastic chair and put it on my narrow hospital bed. Six little bags of BBQ chips.

“I cleaned out the vending machine on this floor,” he said, “Least I could do.”

“Thank you, oh my God.” I said, and ripped open a bag. “Oh, these are good!”

Noah reached for one and I swatted at him playfully. “Don’t try it, brother, you’ll lose a hand.” Leo warned.

The doctor came in and a nurse told the guys to clear out. He went over test results and said I needed to take it easy for a day or two. “You need to set up an appointment with your gynecologist. If you don’t have a doctor, we can refer you and get you in this week.”

“Why? Is it to do with the wreck?” I said, worried.

“No, not at all,” the doctor smiled. “I assumed you knew, and having been unconscious when you arrived, you couldn’t let us know. You’re pregnant.”

“What?” I said. I was stunned. “But, I’m on birth control.”

“Did you miss any pills in the last couple of months?”

“I moved recently, and things were a little hectic that week. I may have missed one, but that’s all.”

“Where was it in your cycle, week-wise?” He asked.

“I don’t remember.”

“Did you double up the next day when you realized you missed it and abstain from sexual activity for at least a week afterward?” He asked. I blushed and shook my head. I hadn’t abstained for an entire day in the last few weeks.

“There’s your answer then. Do you have an ob-gyn?”

“Yes, I see Dr. Gates at the clinic on Maple.”

“Set something up this week then and get some prenatal vitamins in the meantime. Everything all right? Would you like to speak to a counselor?” he said.

I shook my head, “No, it’s just unexpected. I’m not sure how to handle it.”

“Do you need anything? We have a social worker on call who has resources we can contact if you need temporary housing or if you are unsure how you feel about the pregnancy.”

“No, thank you. I always wanted to be a mom. I just thought I’d plan it more,” I said with a giggle. I giggled. I felt giddy, bubbly with excitement. I was having a baby!

I just wasn’t sure how to tell the Foster brothers I was pregnant with their child. It was such a new relationship, and everything had been dramatic with the stalker, the intensity of moving in together, the danger. What if they didn’t want to have a child with me? They had been open-minded, accepting, loving, but that was when it was wild and fun. This was serious and pretty permanent. A nervous flutter intruded on my joy, and I shut my eyes against the bright lights.

Noah and Leo took me home and I went to bed. I was exhausted and emotional, and a nap seemed like the best idea. Both of them lay down with me, held me close and told me how happy they were that I was okay, how scared they’d been to lose me. I lay there in their arms and couldn’t help a few tears escaping before I slept.

When I woke up, it was to Ethan’s arrival. He hurried in and found us sprawled on the bed. He knelt beside the bed and took my hand.

“Seems I’m always late to the party,” he said softly, “Thank God you’re okay.” I nodded, tears in my eyes, and reached for him. He kissed me and wrapped his arms around me. “Jesus, if I ever lost you...” he said.

“I’m okay,” I said, “I’m just hungry. Leo, where are my chips?” I said. He mumbled sleepily. We went to the kitchen, and they heated up a rotisserie chicken and made baked potatoes while I sat with strict orders to put my feet up and watch *Bridgerton*. I would’ve laughed but I kept touching my belly and thinking of the sweet baby curled up growing inside

me. Their baby, our baby. I wanted this so fiercely, but I was afraid.

While the food was cooking, they hovered around me and fussed and fluffed pillows, got me a blanket.

“Now that I have you together,” I said, “I have to tell you something. I’m nervous so just let me finish, okay?”

They sat down, Noah on the couch by me, pulling my feet into his lap, and the other two on chairs nearby.

“What’s wrong?” Ethan said.

“Nothing’s wrong. The doctor just told me something today that I didn’t expect. And I wasn’t sure how to say it.”

“We’re with you, baby. No matter what. Whatever it is, we’ll get through it,” Leo said. “I bet Ethan designed a building for some great specialists or something and we can use those contacts to get whatever help we need.”

I gave a watery smile. I didn’t realize I was crying already. Noah took my hand. “We’ve got you, baby girl,” he said.

“Or boy,” I said with a silly grin. “I’m pregnant.” I looked from one to the other, their astonished faces. All at once, the joy dawned on each one. Leo was on me first, kissing me, picking me up off the couch and spinning me around.

“We’re having a baby!” he said, “I’ll be damned!”

He set me on my feet at Noah’s admonition to be careful with me since I’d been in an accident. I turned into Noah’s arms. He kissed me soundly, whispered that he loved me, they all did, that they were so happy. Ethan grabbed my hand, pulled me into his lap and kissed me.

“You are the most amazing woman,” he said, “I can’t wait to have a baby with you.”

“You’re not... worried about whose it is?” I said, bashful.

“It’s our baby, Madison. All four of us together made this miracle. I’ve never felt so honored in my life. Thank you.”

“We never thought that far ahead,” Leo said, “but I wanted to be a dad. What I want to know is how you feel about it,

Mad.”

“I’m good now that I know you three are happy about it. I was so happy when he told me that I giggled. I bet that was a first for him, telling somebody they’re pregnant and they giggle.”

“If it weren’t for the car accident, and the fact that we were all scared to death of losing you, this would go down as the best day of my life.”

“So far,” I told him. “The best day of your life so far.”

NOAH

I hired an attorney late in the game. He assured me that I didn't need legal representation in the stalking case, just to give a deposition.

"I didn't hire you because I'm afraid of the cops," I told him, "I hired you to keep my pregnant girlfriend out of the courtroom. She was injured in the car accident caused by my ex. I won't have her facing her attacker and having to discuss the whole situation in front of a judge. You'll be there to make sure she can either videotape her testimony or be spared entirely. I'm great with numbers, but I need an expert to be pushy with the legal system."

"Then you've got the right guy. I'll do the song and dance about how she's suffered enough and wants to get on with her life and become a mother, to protect the pregnancy. She won't have to step foot in a courtroom or see the perp again. I looked over the preliminary hearing docs this morning. She's going to jail for a long time."

"Good," I said. Part of me wished I could say something generous about how I hoped she'd get the help she needed, but the fact was, I didn't care anymore. Not after she cut Madison's brakes and put her life in danger. Put our baby's life in danger. My fists clenched at the very thought.

"Free advice, not so free I guess—try not to look like you're ready to murder everyone in the room during questioning. You've heard of resting bitch face? You've got

resting homicide face right now. Tone that down before we go to the station,” he said.

I rolled my shoulder, making an effort to look calm and neutral instead of looking like I could burn the place down after they didn't arrest Olivia for taking a job at the shop under a fake name. If they'd acted on the violation of the order of protection the way they should have, there never would have been a car accident, I thought angrily.

I gave my detailed statement. The DA's office was eager to have her appear in person to give a statement at the preliminary hearing. My lawyer shut that down. By the time we left, they'd agreed to accept a phone interview and a sworn statement from Madison, and if Olivia didn't take a plea bargain—which she'd be stupid not to do—then a videotaped victim impact statement would be sufficient. They had testimony from the first responders on the scene, from the officer who had handled the order of protection. There was plenty of credible proof she was guilty, and I'd succeeded at least in keeping Madison from having to relive that ordeal in court.

On my way out of the station, I got a call from work. Then I had my secretary reserve a table for four at a Michelin-starred restaurant to celebrate.

When we were seated at a private table in the small jewel box of a restaurant, I ordered the tasting menu for us all and proposed a toast with sparkling cider.

“To all the luck that brought us here today as a family,” I said.

“To the newest partner at the best financial firm on Wall Street,” Ethan added. I ducked my head in acknowledgment.

“To Madison who is a hell of a tough cookie for a pretty girl,” Leo said, “Tough cookie. See what I did there?” and Madison groaned at the pun.

“I bake muffins. Although I've retired the sausage rolls from the menu since the baby really doesn't like the smell.

And so, this brings me to my toast. To the littlest Foster, because this baby makes five.”

We all drank to that.

“The reason I brought you all here tonight, besides a celebration we all deserve, is that I have a proposal. And a chart.” I brought out the chart to prove my point. “We spent several weeks living together in Ethan’s loft and it worked out well. There wasn’t any fighting over the bathroom or anything,” I smirked as Leo laughed because there were four bathrooms in the loft.

“Are you complaining about the bathroom?” Ethan said.

“No, the place is great. I’m just not sold on it as the best place to raise a baby. My idea is this—we pool our resources and find a place we can share. That way we can live together as a family, go to the farmhouse on the weekends so the baby can run around outside and learn to help Leo sand things—because let’s face it, he’ll still be working on the place when the kid’s in kindergarten...” I chuckled and Leo rolled his eyes at us.

“This is where the chart comes in. Because a finance bro is only as good as his data. The initial investment will be substantial, but we all have good credit and the earnings to remodel as we see fit to make the place right for us. In the long run, we save on rent and utilities and let’s face it, no one wants to live apart from Madison’s pumpkin caramel muffins.”

“You made a chart,” Madison said, beaming, “It’s adorable.”

“Is that a yes?” I said.

She nodded, “Yes! Of course, I want to raise our baby as a family. And that has to be the cutest way anyone’s ever asked a girl to move in with them.”

“Thanks. I did what I could without a slide deck and a projector,” I said.

“I’d like to get a closer look at the numbers on that chart, Ethan said.

“Quit trolling him. It’s not like you don’t want to live with us all. You probably want to design the damn thing,” Leo said.

“I didn’t think that was in question,” Ethan said, “It’s a wonderful idea. Although I’m not sure about that chart.”

“Go ahead. Make fun of my chart that I brought into a fine restaurant, but Madison says it’s adorable.” I said with a grin.

ETHAN

I had a couple of days practically free at work while my assistant scrambled to deal with a supply chain issue that could delay the entire build. I used the time wisely. I combed through my favorite listing sites for a suitable place, a property that would provide the space we needed as a growing family with the right location. It needed to be near Madison's shop and not too far from a good park and some green spaces.

Admittedly, my standards were exacting. There were buildings I didn't like and wouldn't consider because of when they were constructed and the problems characteristic of their age or style of construction. After hours of research, there were only a handful of possibilities I'd consider. I took a break to go to the gym after spending so long sitting in front of the computer. It had been tedious work, but it would be worth it to find the right home.

There were six on my short list, but when I plugged their details into the matrix I'd developed, half of those were disqualified. One had a desirable vantage point toward a more exclusive building across the street and had become a known haunt of paparazzi trying to get a good shot of a famous resident. I had no intention of fixing up a home for us only to have some tabloid photographer spring out and drop their coffee cup on my baby's stroller while they angled for a closeup with their telephoto lens. There was no way we wanted to deal with a bunch of loudmouth, vaping paps clustered around the corner of our building watching the place across the street and getting in our way.

Another I eliminated because the building wasn't completely nonsmoking. The third failed my matrix because there wasn't a Montessori preschool with good ratings nearby. That narrowed it down to three options. I contacted a realtor and made arrangements to view them myself. By the second afternoon, I'd done my walkthrough. The ceilings in one were annoyingly low even for a pre-war build and the acoustics were not ideal—I could just imagine Leo walking through the kitchen in his boots for an early job, and the sound carrying awkwardly to wake the baby. Whichever of us had been up all night with the baby would fly into a sleep-deprived rage and send Leo running for his life while the rest of us tried to soothe a cranky little one who was startled awake. The second one was pending sale, and the realtor told me that it was off the market. “It was an excellent offer, and I know the seller. She'll accept it. No reason to visit that one, darling.”

The last one I viewed was perfect, by which I mean I knew what I could make of it. The location was excellent, the building itself had been designed by a favorite architect of mine in the fifties. Multiple units were for sale following the death of a longtime resident which prompted her two adult children to list their own neighboring apartments as well and decamp uptown. If we could secure all three units, I could join them to form a spacious family home with plenty of natural light and play space. They occupied an upper floor with double-glazed windows for added quiet to safeguard everyone's sleep. I was already sold on the space, ideas spinning in my brain.

After I went over every detail with the realtor, I Facetimed my brothers from the lobby of the building. “I've found the place,” I said.

“That was fast even for you,” Noah said.

“Think about it,” Leo put in, “there's maybe two neighborhoods in this city where he'd consider living. That's not a lot of choices.”

“True,” Noah said. “How much did we bid?”

“I didn't put in a bid without consulting you,” I said.

“We trust you,” Leo replied. “And we talked budget. I can do some of the work myself if it needs an upgrade. Is there a problem?”

“No, I can get it within our budget, but the remodeling to join three units will take more than we discussed.”

“We budgeted conservatively on what we’d get for the loft and my apartment, both of which will probably sell for more, plus you have a massive commission coming in a few months from that residential project, and I have some stocks in my portfolio I’m willing to liquidate to chip in on the remodel,” Noah offered. “Besides, we can get a loan to handle part of the remodel and pay it back quickly. Most people pay high rent in this city or else they have a mortgage. We’ll be fine.”

“I agree. I want to show it to you before I make the offer,” I said, and took them on a FaceTime tour, detailing which walls I wanted to remove and which rooms I’d reconfigure for a different purpose. They were both on board before I’d even finished showing them around.

“I say we surprise her,” Leo said, “She’ll have input on how it’s set up and what goes where, all that, but this way, it’s just done. We found the right place, snapped it up, and we can get to the good part.”

“This is already the good part,” I told him, “All of this. Getting to pick out a place to raise a family together. A baby on the way.”

“Yeah,” Noah said, “The good part already started.”

I called the realtor and put in our bid. The sellers accepted two hours later. I texted my brothers the good news and headed back to my office. I worked all that night and into the next day working out a preliminary design with a floor plan. I used the new software to craft a 3-D walkthrough projection so Madison would be able to see what it was meant to look like. From here we could fine-tune the layout and dimensions of the rooms together to determine what worked best for us. The main thing was that I wanted this to be a dazzling reveal, a magical experience for her. It was more than a starting point

for the remodeling project. It was a preview of the home we'd build for our child.

I'd like to say I put the finishing touches on it lovingly, but my head ached. I'd been surviving on strong coffee and force of will by the time I was done. I watched the projection with eyes burning from being awake for thirty hours and felt a surge of pride. I messaged Leo that I'd take a shower and change at the office to meet them at the building with Madison in an hour.

They met me in the lobby and Madison was asking a hundred questions.

"Of course, you're behind this," she said to me, "over there doing your enigmatic smile."

"Thanks for noticing," I said. I took her in my arms and embraced her, my whole body warming, the tension loosening. "I missed you. Both of you," I said, stroking her still-flat belly softly. Her eyes softened and she kissed me. The intimacy of it was almost more than I could bear in a semi-public place. I took her hand and nodded to Noah. He took the blue Tiffany & Co box from his pocket and offered it to her. She glanced from one of us to the next and back to the box before she untied the satin ribbon.

Madison found the silver keychain nestled in the box, and a key was already attached. We led her to the elevator. "We have the entire fifth floor. We're going to join three units to make one big apartment with plenty of room for everything we need," I told her.

"It's ours?"

"Yes," Leo said, "And I'll be in charge of lightbulbs. It's already decided."

"And rewiring and figuring out the lighting configurations," I added.

Madison unlocked the door to the first unit, and I led them on a tour of all three. She admired the hardwood floors, the crown molding. Leo liked the high ceilings and pointed out that the HVAC system was nice and quiet. Noah liked the

southern facing windows in one corner for an office. We made our way through the three apartments and Leo got the notification for the Uber Eats. We sat on a blanket in the third apartment and had a picnic of Chinese food and sparkling cider... and BBQ chips.

“I miss sushi,” Madison said, “but I definitely love that these chips are good with anything.”

“You ate them after your oatmeal this morning. I saw you,” Noah said.

“Don’t be so close-minded. You’ve never tried it,” she laughed.

“Only because you’d kill me on the spot if I went after your chip stash,” he teased.

When we were done eating, I took out my laptop and the projector. Leo got up and turned off the lights—“See,” he said, “I’m in charge of all lighting decisions.”

I played the simulation, the 3-D view of what the space would look like, where the kitchen was, the bathrooms, the bedrooms. Madison gasped.

“It’s so beautiful. How did you do all this?”

“We have a software program at work,” I said modestly, “It gives the client a way to envision what the finished space will be like.”

“I love it,” she said, breathless. “I can’t believe we get to have all this. That this is what my life is going to be. I have my shop, the men I love, our baby on the way, and this beautiful home. Thank you for making all this a reality.”

We hugged her and watched the model play through.

“I love how the nursery is so big and opens into my bedroom. I think it would be good to have the nursery with east-facing windows. That way the sun isn’t streaming in at naptime.”

I made a note of the preference, and we talked about what we thought would work and what might need to be changed. I reveled in their excitement, with how happy my family was

with the home we'd found and the ways we could make it our own.

"How many bedrooms do you think?" Noah said.

"That's a question for Madison," I said. "How do you feel about having more kids?"

Her pretty face broke into a grin.

"I'd like to have more. I've always wanted a family, and I want more than one baby for sure. What do you guys think?"

"That we better find out if Costco has barbecue chips," Leo said with a chuckle.

"At least three kids," Noah said decisively, and I nodded.

"There are three Foster brothers, so I'd say three is the magic number," Leo said.

Madison beamed, "I wouldn't mind having a little girl, too," she said, "So maybe three, or maybe we try for four."

I looked around at their smiling faces as we sat on the floor of our new home, talking over our future, and couldn't imagine being happier.

EPILOGUE

MADISON - THREE MONTHS LATER

“I don’t know,” I teased, “If I get a babymoon like this, maybe we’ll have to think about having more than four kids.”

I slipped off my sandals and wiggled my toes in the sand luxuriantly. The Caribbean getaway had been Noah’s idea. One of the partners in his firm offered us his vacation home for the week. It was a beachfront villa, gorgeous and romantic. We fell asleep to the sound of crashing waves every night. We ate fresh local fruit and sipped guava nectar with breakfast. I splashed in the ocean and had a fabulous prenatal massage and facial at a resort spa nearby.

It was our last night before going home. Ethan had ordered a lavish meal from a local restaurant and Leo set up a candlelight dinner on the beach for us all to share.

“See, I used the glass lanterns from the porch to put our candles in—shields the flame from the ocean breeze,” Leo said.

“Resident lighting expert right there,” I said, kissing his cheek, “It’s perfect.”

I stroked the curve of my rounded belly affectionately, savoring the silky fabric of my sundress. We talked over the wonderful time we’d had relaxing and sightseeing.

“We can all rest assured that the baby will have all the straw purses, sun hats and handmade baskets he could ever need,” I said, “Thank goodness we went to the market in

town.” Everyone smirked at me. My enthusiasm for the local handicrafts had been a running joke for days.

“I’m sure that big straw bag will be great for him. Who wouldn’t want a diaper bag that doubles as a tropical souvenir?” Noah said, “And there’s the added bonus that the splinters from the bag can stab us every time we reach for the wipes.”

“It’s not for diapers,” I said, “It’s a beach bag.”

“And we go to the beach so often in Manhattan,” Ethan said wryly. “I see trips to the Jersey shore in our future.”

“Or the farmhouse.”

“You mean the farmhouse that has a pond?” Leo put in, “The pond I’ve been having nightmares about for a month because I dreamed that the baby toddled too close to the edge and fell in? No. We don’t need a beach bag for that. We need an electrical fence around the pond.”

“Are you suggesting that we won’t be watching him closely or that you want to electrocute the baby if he veers toward water?” I said.

“Neither. It just scares the hell out of me.”

“We’re going to take good care of him. We’re fencing the backyard, remember?”

“Yeah, but what if he’s a climber? I was a climber by the time I was three.”

“You didn’t have four parents watching you like a hawk all the time,” Ethan said. Leo smiled sheepishly. Of the four of us, he turned out to be the worrier.

“I’ve been thinking about names,” I said.

“We have four more months,” Noah said. “There’s no rush.”

“There is if you want to start monogramming stuff,” Ethan said, “The straw market was just a gateway drug on the way to full-on nesting mode. Buckle up, brother.”

“What did you have in mind?” Noah said.

“Well, I thought about Stewart for a middle name, you know, my last name. But I also really like Maple.”

“The syrup?” Leo said.

“The tree?” Ethan said.

“My shop. You know, my first baby. Maple is a beautiful, strong middle name.”

“What’s the first name?” Noah said. “Don’t say Muffin. Please don’t say muffin.”

“Sausage roll?” Leo said.

“Eggplant.” Ethan quipped.

I rolled my eyes at their wisecracks. “I had a couple of ideas. I did consider your suggestions—mostly pro bowl players from the Jets, by the way,” I said, lifting an eyebrow. “But I didn’t think Gastineau Maple Foster was—”

“A name for a crappy craft beer maybe,” Leo said. “Which one of you jokers liked Mark Gastineau? At least I went for Namath.”

“He was a controversial figure in sports, but he’s a legend,” Ethan said.

“I should’ve known it was you,” Leo said.

“I didn’t suggest a football player’s name,” Noah said.

“Jet? You picked Jet, like the name of the team,” I laughed.

“Jet Foster is a cool name,” he said.

“Jet Foster, space cowboy?” Ethan said.

“Gastineau?” Noah returned and Ethan shrugged good naturedly.

“I thought William would be good.”

“That’s our grandpa’s name,” Leo said.

“The one who had the farmhouse, I know. But, I’m not sure you knew this—it’s also Joe Namath’s middle name!” I said, playing the ace up my sleeve with a crow of victory.

“Yeah, that’s perfect,” Noah said. “I’ll concede. It’s cooler than Jet.”

“It’s perfect, Mad,” Ethan said and kissed me.

Then, Leo let out a whoop and raised his cider glass. “To Madison and to the newest member of the family. William Maple Foster.”

We toasted to the baby and Ethan leaned over and whispered, “That’s so thoughtful and beautiful. Except for Maple. Not sure about Maple.”

“Really? After you suggested freakin’ Gastineau?” I snorted and we all laughed.

“I love all of you. Even if you do like weird names,” I said.

“Okay, maybe Namath was the greatest first name, but he was an incredible player,” Leo said, “Now dance with me. Right here on the beach. We downloaded that instrumental thing you like from Bridgerton and everything.”

Sure enough, the elegant string arrangement poured from the speaker of Noah’s phone as we stood up to dance barefoot along the shore under the moon. I shut my eyes for a minute and let the perfect moment wash over me, the sound of the waves and music mingling together with the laughter of the men I loved. It was a perfect starlit night on the beach, a perfect end to the tropical babymoon and beginning of the rest of our lives together.

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CARMELA

Big Danny T's was the best bar in town, and my favorite place to unwind. Especially now that I was going to have Trevor with me. I could only imagine how much better that was going to be.

We had been dating for a few months now, although we probably weren't as far along on the relationship as most people would have been by now. Mostly because he lived in a different town, and we conducted a lot of our relationship long-distance. Late night phone calls and check-ins through text and chat apps kept us in each other's everyday lives even when we couldn't see each other.

Now that I had him with me, and it was time to finally introduce him to my friends.

Some of them were a bit miffed they hadn't met him by now. Jade had given me shit about it, insinuating that I was hiding him from them for some reason. It was ridiculous, but she was kind of right. I was hiding him, but only because I wanted him to meet them in a way that they could all hit it off. A way that we could all be comfortable and in our element.

We were both in our late twenties, but he maintained so much of that swagger that men tend to have before they hit forty. He was different. A little dangerous.

Sometimes maybe a little too much.

The relationship hadn't been perfect, but really, whose was? The combination of the distance and the lack of mutual

friends had put extra strain on us that led to some sarcasm or tiffs between us. I tried to overlook them, chalking them up to the kinds of things that are bound to happen when two people try to stay committed to each other even if they couldn't see each other all that often.

This was a big step, and I was nervous. Introducing my friends to Trevor meant that I was asking for their feedback. I knew they would give it to me straight too. If they thought he was no good, they would let me know. But I wanted them to like him so badly, and I was just sure they would be fine.

As Trevor drove, I sat in the passenger seat, giving him an overview of each of my gal friends. I provided him with a head's up cheat sheet as to what he should expect, not that he seemed particularly interested.

"Also, please don't forget, Jade has that scar down her arm that she's very sensitive about. If you see it, don't mention it."

"Uh huh," he said, fingers tightening around the steering wheel.

"Oh, and remember how I told you Jess was blonde? She's not anymore. She's a redhead, and she is desperate to have everyone believe that's her natural color. I told her no one would believe that for a second, but you know, you just have..."

"I got it," he said. His tone had a sense of finality to it. "You don't need to go over all this again. I've heard it. A hundred times."

"Not quite a hundred," I joked. "Maybe ten."

"Enough," he said. "Enough times."

"Fine," I said, straightening up in the seat and turning to look out the window. "Turn right up here. Not this stoplight, the next one."

"I have a GPS," he grumbled.

"I know, but it's telling you to go in the entrance from this road on the side, which is always packed, and accidents

happen there all the time. It's faster and safer to go right up here."

Trevor didn't respond, but his fingers tightened a little harder around the steering wheel. Part of me wished I had driven my own car rather than have him pick me up. Then he just would have followed me, and if things got too weird, he could escape if he needed to, and I could make a slower, more natural exit afterward. But that wasn't what Trevor wanted. A united front, he called it.

"I know I keep going over stuff with you," I said. "I'm sorry that it's annoying. I just want them to like you as much as I do."

The fingers released a little from the wheel, and he turned to smile at me. I returned the smile, even if we were blowing right through the stoplight, I'd told him to turn at.

As I thought, the turn into Big Danny T's nearly caused a wreck, and Trevor let out a string of curses under his breath. I shook my head and tried to keep from saying I'd told him so.

We parked and headed inside, excitement clenching my belly as I saw my friends in the distance. When they caught sight of me, the squeal and careful running in heels to get a hug was followed by the introduction of Trevor to the group.

"This is Jade," I said, pointing out my gorgeous, dark-haired friend. "This is Jess and her boyfriend, Ronnie. And this is Gary and Tom."

"Hey, nice to meet you guys," he said, shaking hands and flashing the megawatt smile that had caught me off-guard and made heat rise up my neck when I first met him.

He was as charming as I'd hoped, and everyone seemed to think he was fun and personable. Jade pulled me aside at one point to tell me how great it was that she and he had so much in common, which surprised me. Apparently, she had family from his hometown, and they knew some of the same people. They were both soccer fans and liked the same bands that I personally found to be a bit pretentious.

“He’s cute too,” Jade said, elbowing me in the ribs. “Does he have a brother or something? Hook a girl up.”

“What about that guy you were seeing?” I asked. “The one from Austin.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not as good at the whole long-distance thing as you are.”

We laughed and linked arms as we headed back to the stools. The guys were taking shots of something, which meant I was going to be dealing with a very drunk Tom in a few minutes. He was a great friend and a wonderful, soft soul, but the man had the alcohol tolerance of a mosquito. Liquor went directly to his brain, and before too long he was stumbling and giggling and incapable of controlling the volume of his voice.

We sat at the bar, me on my favorite stool, chatting and talking and getting to know each other for a few hours. Secretly, I hoped this was the beginning of something. The beginning of Trevor thinking that Murdock, Texas was better than where he was in Greene. The beginning of Trevor thinking that there really was something long-term here, and that maybe moving here would be the best way to take the next step in our relationship.

The more he got along with my friends, the better, and the easier it would be to convince him to come. With every laugh, with every smile, I thought for sure that I had pulled it off.

Six Months Later...

The same stool.

The same bartender.

Even the same damn dress.

Everything else was different.

This time, I was sitting at the bar all by myself. All the joy and fun that Big Danny T’s normally brought was gone. I was

sad and angry and a ton of other emotions that equaled abject misery.

The drink in front of me was mostly untouched. I'd thought that alcohol would help me forget, but now that I was sitting in the bar, all the memories of the last couple of months came rushing back to remind me of how dumb I had been. How angry I still was. And how alcohol never seemed to make any of those things any better.

I picked up my plastic sword stirrer and jabbed downward. Another miss. The cherries moved in the pink, fizzy drink, sliding away. At first, I had been attempting to spear the cherries and eat them, but after ten minutes, it became just another mindless distraction.

Here I was failing. Failing even at stabbing cherries. How freaking appropriate.

“Hey there, stranger.”

Slowly, I turned around and found myself staring at a wide, muscular chest inside a tight T-shirt with a gym logo on the breast. My eyes protested the instruction to move up, but eventually followed and led to a thick neck, broad shoulders, and a gorgeous face on top. Short black hair and a wide pearly-white smile inside a five o'clock shadow.

I recognized Mark Murphy from years before, a good friend of my brother's growing up and a boy that I had seen many times before he moved away.

Now years later, here he was. Standing in front of me, the dulcet tones of his velvety voice bouncing around in my ears and making my breath hitch in my chest.

Mark sure had grown up.

MARK

It took a few moments to recognize her when I first saw her at the bar. I moved from my seat in the corner to a stool across from her to make sure, sipping casually on my longneck beer and watching her stab a cocktail sword into her drink. She looked lonely. And sad. Also, drop dead gorgeous.

The last time I'd seen her, she was a teenager. Skinny and a bit mousy with an overbite, she was still cute back then. I was eighteen and friends with her brother, and about to head off to college. She was fifteen and just starting to figure out how to navigate the piranha-filled waters of high school. Even though it was silly and there was an age difference, I'd had a little crush on her. Too bad she was my buddy's sister.

Now she was grown up. Like, very grown up. Big, pouty lips pressed together in concentration as she used her long fingernails to clench the sword and stab again, unsuccessfully. She sighed, her surprisingly large chest pushing at the thin blouse, making my stomach clench and my eyes dart away.

I had to talk to her. I couldn't help myself.

I walked around the bar, up behind her, and took a deep breath.

"Well, hello, stranger," I said.

She turned around slowly, and her gaze floated up to mine in confusion. Her big, brown eyes narrowed after a moment, and her lips parted. I was drawn to them. I wanted to taste the cherries on them.

“Mark,” I said.

The confidence I had gone into this conversation with faded quickly. She was still looking at me like she had no idea who I was or why I would be talking to her.

“Yeah, I remember who you are,” she said. “I just didn’t know you were back in town.”

The look on her face had faded from confusion to almost annoyance. I was seriously starting to second-guess my attempt at talking to her, but I was in too deep now. I had to at least see this thing through to the end.

“Well, not really so much back in town,” I said. “Just here visiting Pops.”

“Pops?” she asked.

“My dad,” I said. “The town doc, Dr. Murphy.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “Of course. I forgot you were his son.”

“Ah,” I said. “Yeah, he’s not feeling well, so I came back into town for a few days. I just got in and thought I’d swing by the old stomping grounds and grab something to eat.”

“Oh,” she said. “Do you want to sit here?”

“Yeah, that would be great,” I said, suddenly feeling a bit more upbeat. Even if she wasn’t still fully remembering me, at least she hadn’t told me to get lost. “You know, the cherries are usually easier to stab when you drink the liquid first.”

It was an attempt, and a poor one, at striking up conversation. As soon as it was out of my mouth, I realized that perhaps criticizing her drinking choices and methods was not a good look. But she didn’t seem to mind, shrugging and picking up the sword again to take another attempt.

“I was just lost in my thoughts,” she said. “I was supposed to be here with my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” I asked, a sudden heavy feeling filling the bottom of my stomach. Heat went up the back of my neck. I was going to need an exit strategy, apparently.

“Ex now,” she said. “We were supposed to be getting engaged.”

“Supposed to?”

“Yeah,” she said, stabbing again before tossing the stirrer aside and taking a big, deep sip. “We were talking about getting married. He led me to believe that he was going to ask me soon. Today should have been our anniversary, and we had planned this trip back here. We were going to come to Big Danny T’s. I was positive he was going to propose.”

“What happened?” I asked. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I don’t care,” she said, downing the rest of her drink and signaling the bartender for another. “He left me for my best friend.”

“What?” I asked.

“Well, he didn’t say that in so many words. But it’s what he did,” she said. “A couple of months ago he just calls me out of the blue and says he needs his space. So, I figure he’s just getting cold feet about the whole thing and say sure. You know? Just let him have his damn space. I get that. It’s a big life choice to get engaged.

“Then he calls me again like three days later, and I’m thinking he’s come to his senses. Instead, he goes on and on about how he supposedly hadn’t been happy with me for a long time and said he was done. Just done. Like it was nothing.”

“Oh no,” I said. “I’m so sorry.”

“You haven’t heard the worst part,” she sighed. “Two days later, I get a call from a friend of mine, and she says she saw him around town. With my best friend. Or who I *thought* was my best friend. Traitorous bitch.”

“Whoa,” I said, having not expected a life story and now receiving what sounded like a prequel to an episode of one of those shows about why women murder. “Do you think they were together before he broke up with you?”

She nodded.

“I mean, it’s possible they weren’t,” I said. “I’m sure he just kind of stumbled into it with your friend. I don’t think your friend would do you dirty like that, right?”

She shrugged. “I don’t really think that’s a possibility,” she said. “He cheated. With her. She was probably at his house when he called and said he needed space.”

“Yeesh,” I said. “I am so sorry to hear all that. No one deserves that kind of bullshit, especially someone as beautiful as you.”

She paused, the glass of her refilled cherry-bottomed drink halfway to her lips. She smirked.

“Uh huh,” she said. “Right.”

“It’s true,” I said. “You’re gorgeous. Anyone who cheats on you is a moron.”

“Well, here’s to morons then,” she said, holding her glass out. “There sure do seem to be a bunch of them.”

“And may no more of darken your door,” I said, clinking our glasses together.

“Amen,” she agreed, tipping her drink back and almost emptying it in one go.

“So other than all that, how have you been? Do you still live in Murdock?” I asked, eager to move away from the subject.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m a lawyer now. Mostly deal with family law and real estate, that sort of thing. All the boring stuff.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” she laughed. “There’s nothing sexy about family law, trust me. It’s not like *Matlock* where I passionately argue cases in front of a jury.”

“I can’t believe you just equated speeches by Matlock to being sexy,” I laughed.

Finally, a real smile seemed to cross her face.

“Yeah, well, maybe it was the seersucker suit,” she said.

“Maybe,” I said. “I’m just shocked you remember that show.”

“Dad loved it,” she said. “Watched it all the time before wrestling. I always caught the tail end of it because I’d watch the matches with him.”

“I see,” I said.

“Are you going to see Camden while you’re here?” she asked. “I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

“I’m planning on it actually,” I said. “Every time I swing into town, I go by the ranch.”

“Weird that I didn’t run into you then,” she said.

“Yeah. A couple of the other guys in our little crew moved back already. Ryan’s here, and Graham too. Apparently, he coaches at the high school.”

“The famous ballplayer?” she asked. “He came by the ranch just the other day, actually.”

“We have a little group text chat,” I said. “I think Graham is the only one who ever says anything in it other than Camden. I’m more of a lurker, so anytime I pop up they ask when I’m coming to visit. Now I’m here.”

“Well, I know Camden will be glad to see you,” she said.

“I’ll be glad to see him,” I agreed. “And I’m glad I got to see you too.”

The faintest hint of a blush went up the side of her face as she took another sip of her drink. We stayed there, chatting, and polishing off a few more drinks as we talked. As we spoke, she seemed to loosen up, and some of that girl I remembered from being fifteen and hanging around the house was showing up again.

“Do you see the guys often?” she asked. “I know Camden talks about seeing one of you boys every couple of weeks.”

“It’s tough,” I said. “The guys have gotten together in different places, but I should have gotten back here more

often. It would have made Camden happy for sure. And my dad.”

“You didn’t tell me what you did,” she said. “As a job. Why did you leave Murdock, other than it being... well, Murdock?”

“College,” I said. “Then medical school.”

“Oh,” she said. “You’re a doctor? Like your dad?”

“A doctor,” I agreed. “Not much like Dad, though.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, stirring her drink. She had long since stopped stabbing the cherries, content to pull the stem up enough to pull one out and bite it.

“I mean he’s this wildly loved and respected doctor in a small town, and I’m some schmuck living in a big city who patients only ever see when there’s an emergency.”

“Ahh,” she said. “Where did you go?”

“Austin,” I said. “Then Dallas, then Austin again. I love the big city lifestyle. When I finished my residency, I just stuck around and kept building my career. I worked in some city hospitals doing emergency room stuff for a while and then started aiming more toward my specialties. I moved to Dallas for an opportunity, then back to Austin when they offered me a better position.”

“So, like your Dad, just in a high population place,” she said. “Got it.”

“I guess,” I said. “I see a few dozen more people in a day than he sees in a week, and no one knows my name, but sure.”

“I know your name,” she said. “Mark Murphy.”

I nodded. “That’s me. Just a weird Irish kid from Texas, struggling with being too tall in elementary school and too nerdy in middle.”

“You seemed to be looking fine in high school,” she said casually, then turned beet red. She turned her face toward me, her lips partially around a straw. “I mean doing fine. Doing fine in high school.”

I laughed and shook my head. “Nice recovery,” I said. “At any rate, it’s nice to come back home once in a while, you know?”

“I live here,” she said. “I don’t get to come back home because I can’t ever seem to leave this damn place.”

“Then I should get the hell out as fast as I can, shouldn’t I?”

“As fast as you can,” she repeated, serious for a moment.

“Well, I enjoy coming here to visit,” I said. “It’s always nice to run into someone you haven’t seen in a long time and get a chance to catch up.”

“Likewise,” she said.

* * *

****End of Preview****

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* * *

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