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# TIED UP

KATI RAE

*Me*  
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*To Jade, Eve, and Margot for being my muses.*

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## BEFORE YOU READ

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## PROLOGUE

### - CAT -

I'm not exactly sure when I started to have feelings for Evan.

But I do remember the first time we met. It was orientation day for our freshman year of college, and both of us were wide-eyed with equal parts excitement and terror. As luck would have it, he took the seat next to mine in the auditorium, and from the moment we said hello, it was as though we had been best friends our entire lives. And for the longest time, I never saw him as anything more than that.

That is, until I had my first sex fantasy about him.

It sort of crept up on me out of nowhere. We'd been friends for so long, and I'd had crushes on other people—people he encouraged me to date—that the thought hadn't even crossed my mind.

Until he walked into my imagination naked, pulling me into his embrace to kiss me with a passion that set my body aflame.

It was weird the first time I touched myself while thinking of him. It felt like I was crossing an unspoken boundary between us which implied that it wasn't okay to get off on mental images of your best friend. So I locked it away somewhere secret, somewhere safe, and told myself to never do it again.

But then I did it again. And again. And God, did it feel good.

Once the idea of *us* entered my head, it was impossible to forget. It was like a lightbulb switched on in my brain,

enlightening me to the fact that Evan and I made perfect sense. We already had built a solid foundation as best friends, so all that was missing from our relationship was the sexual component. At least, that's what I thought.

It just turned out he didn't see it that way.

Evan sits at a table in the shade of the student union building, his brow knitted together as his blue eyes scan the pages of a Dan Brown novel. When he lifts his arm to run his hand along the back of his neck, I imagine my own fingers lacing into his thick, dark hair and pulling him down for a kiss.

It's a warm spring day, and now that finals are over, the quad is full of students relaxing on the lawn. A frisbee glides over my head as I approach Evan's table, my heels clicking against the concrete of the sidewalk.

My hands feel clammy so I rub them on my skirt, pretending to smooth it out as my heart hammers against my rib cage.

When I take the seat across from him, he glances up from his book.

"Why are you all dressed up?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Nevermind. Are you hungry? I haven't had lunch yet."

"I don't have much of an appetite right now."

He quirks an eyebrow at me. "I don't think I've ever heard you say 'I'm not hungry' in the four years I've known you. Are you feeling okay?"

Right now? I think I might throw up.

"Actually," I say, "there's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Okay. What's up?"

It's now or never. Graduation is tomorrow, and it's time to tell him how I feel. I want to break down this invisible barrier between us and cross the line into new territory. It's taken me a

long time to work up the courage to reveal my true feelings for him, and if I don't say anything now, I think I might get crushed under the weight of this secret.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asks. "You look so serious right now."

Surely, he feels it too, right? All those late-night study sessions and text exchanges, the thousands of hours we've spent together hanging out just the two of us...I mean, he has to know that at some point my feelings have grown beyond friendship.

This shouldn't come as a surprise to him.

But I can't look him in the eye right now. Am I about to make the biggest mistake of my life by confessing my feelings? I'm about to change the direction of our relationship forever; that much is certain.

I just don't know if it's going to bring us even closer together or drive us completely apart.

"Cat, you know you can talk to me about anything."

As I wring my hands in my lap, I take a deep, shuddering breath, trying to steady my nerves before I speak. Maybe I should wait until after the graduation ceremony.

But I'm not sure I can handle this anxiety much longer as I worry about whether or not he feels the same, or if he could come to feel the same way about me.

"Hello? Earth to Cat."

He waves his hand in front of my face as I sit in tortured silence.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm just nervous, I guess."

"Nervous? With me?"

He lets out a low laugh that melts my heart all over again as he settles back against his chair.

"Come on," he says. "What's this really about?"

"I like you, okay? There. I said it."



“Aw, thanks. I like you too.”

“No, Evan, that’s not what I mean. I really, *really* like you.”

The relaxed smile on his face falters as realization sets in. He blinks at me for a long moment before shifting in his seat and crossing his arms.

His body language is clear as day: he’s closing himself off from me. He’s disgusted by my confession, by the very idea that we could be more than just friends.

“I, uh...wow. I’m not really sure what to say.”

My heart drops into the pit of my stomach as a numbness spreads all over my body. I know where this conversation is headed, but still, I press further, grasping at straws in a desperate attempt to convince him that we belong together.

“Look, I know this is a lot to hear, and I get it if you need some time to process this. But we’ve been friends for so long, so it seems like the natural next step is for us to grow closer, you know?”

“I thought things were strictly platonic between us?”

I scoff.

“Oh, come on. Do you usually stay up all night texting other girls?”

He lets out a sigh, averting his gaze to the ground, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob up and down as he swallows.

“Look, I think you’re great,” he says. “I just don’t think we’re compatible in that way.”

“We’re compatible as friends, so why not as more?”

I want a reason, a logical explanation for why he’s turning me down, because it’s not adding up in my head, even as I feel him slipping further and further away.

“I just see you as a friend, and that’s all. I’m sorry.”

A tightness grips my chest as hot tears prick my vision, making Evan’s face grow blurry. It feels like everything is falling apart around me, but I’m the one holding the hammer.

Why did I have to go and open my mouth? I've never regretted anything as much as I do right now.

"No, I'm sorry," I say, rising to my feet. "I shouldn't have said anything. Forget what I said."

I can't stay here another second, not with that look of pity on his face.

As I turn my back to him, I wish he would ask me to stay. I wish he would tell me that he's been in love with me all along, that he wants us to be more than friends, too.

But he doesn't say a word. He just lets me go to deal with my unrequited feelings and complete humiliation—alone.

Am I that easy to get rid of? Did I really have so little an impact on his life that it's just easier to let me go than to salvage our friendship?

I keep my phone on me the rest of the day, but I never hear from Evan. Not a single call or text to see how I'm holding up or to make sure we're cool. Hell, even pretending like nothing happened would be better than this.

The truth is evident—I have destroyed our friendship beyond repair. There's no coming back from this, not after what I admitted to him. How can I ever look him in the eye again? Things will never be the same between us, and both of us know it.

The next day, I don't see Evan at the graduation ceremony. I plaster a smile on my face for the sake of my parents, but the last thing I feel like doing is celebrating.

So, in a wine-fueled fit of disgrace and tears, I sit alone in my room later that night and purge him from all my socials. It's time to begin a new chapter of my life as I head out into the world with a degree in one hand and the pieces of my shattered heart in the other.

A life that doesn't include Evan in it.

# CHAPTER ONE

## - CAT -

### **Five Years Later**

God, I'm afraid of heights.

My knuckles are white from gripping the steering wheel as I navigate my car up the steep, winding roads into the San Bernardino Mountains. There's another car riding my bumper behind me, but there's nowhere for me to pull over because it's only a concrete railing between me and the sharp drop over the cliffs, which sets off several worst-case scenarios in my mind.

Each involves losing control of the car and flying off the edge to my early death.

"Jackie, there's no one else I'd be doing this for except you," I mutter.

The only reason I'm making this treacherous drive—by myself, I might add—is because my best friend decided to have her wedding in a scenic mountain lodge. And as her maid of honor, I don't have the option to skip out this weekend.

But there's no way I'd miss this. I've spent the past six months devising this weekend's parties and rehearsal dinners with timelines and meticulous planning. This weekend will go according to plan if I have anything to say about it, so Jackie can have a stress-free wedding.

One day, when it's my turn to tie the knot, I know Jackie will do the same for me.

When my car rounds the corner into town, leaving the rocky cliffs behind, I feel relief wash over me.

I've never been to Lake Arrowhead before, but it's like I've left California behind and spirited away into a German mountain village. *Fachwerk*-style buildings line the main road, along with the mountain lodges and A-frame homes tucked away in the thick forest of pine trees. The sky up here is so blue, and somehow, the clouds seem a little closer than they do anywhere else in the world.

I pull into the resort, eager to get out and stretch my legs after the long drive from Phoenix. As soon as I pull into a parking spot, I grab my phone and text Jackie.

*Me: I'm here!*

When I open my car door, I'm hit with a blast of cold, crisp air, which sends a shiver down my entire body as my nipples pebble against my bra.

I mutter a string of curses as I make fast work of grabbing my suitcase and purse. My legs scurry as fast as they can carry me toward the building as goosebumps erupt all over my arms. In my mad dash through the door, I hear my phone ping as I step into the sprawling lobby, where there's a roaring fire in the stone fireplace.

My cheeks are burning from the chill as I struggle to catch my breath. I feel out of place in my yoga pants and t-shirt as classical music tinkles through the bustling, well-appointed lobby.

After fishing for my phone in my bag, I see a text waiting for me.

*Jackie: YAY! Come up to room 3126. I can't wait to see you!!!*

There's a large group checking in at the front desk, with long lines of people waiting for an available agent. An older gentleman walks past me, his eyes drifting down to my t-shirt.

Crossing my arms, I decide to check in later when they aren't so busy and head straight for the elevators.

It takes some time to find my way through the quiet corridors of the resort, but I manage to hunt down Jackie's room and knock on the door. It isn't long before I'm greeted by a mass of flaming red hair flying at my face, followed by a high-pitched squeal.

"KITTY CAT!"

A huge grin stretches across my face as I pull her in for a hug. She's so small that I pick her up and spin her around, with both of us screeching and laughing all at once.

When we break apart, she grabs my hand and leads me into her room, allowing the door to shut behind us.

Crossing over to the windows, I look out at the incredible view of Lake Arrowhead, with a thick forest of evergreens on the opposite bank.

"Wow," I say. "You didn't mention that you had the best room in the whole place."

"Well, we decided to splurge on a suite, since we'll be staying here all week for our honeymoon. Wine?"

"Is that even a question?"

Jackie pours us both a glass of merlot and invites me to sit on the sofa, where she settles back into the cushions.

"I wish we lived in the same city," she says. "We have so much to catch up on since the bachelorette party."

"You're the one that decided to move away after college, remember? You could have stayed with me in Phoenix."

"If it wasn't for Drew's job, we'd totally move back. L.A.'s so expensive."

"Whatever, you get to visit the beach every day. I'm jealous of how tan you are."

We burst out into a fit of giggles while we sip on our wine and stare out over the sparkling lake. I glance over at Jackie, and I can't help but envy the pure look of happiness in her eyes. Ever since we graduated college five years ago, I knew that she and Drew would get married eventually. They fell in love at first sight, and they've been inseparable since.

I wish I had a love like that.

"Do you want to go over the schedule?" I ask, trying to keep my thoughts from spiraling to that lonely place.

Jackie laughs as I reach into my bag and pull out a large binder of paperwork.

"What would I do without you, Cat?"

"I know, I'm the bestest friend ever," I say. "Anyway, here's your copy of the agenda, and I've printed some for all the bridesmaids and groomsmen. I also have extra for the family members."

"We're going out tonight?" she asks, glancing over the paper I hand her. "How did you find a nightclub here?"

"Uh, it's not exactly a nightclub. More like the only brewery in town open past eight o'clock. But I figured we needed to kick off this weekend right with dinner and a few beers."

"You'd better not give me a beer belly. I have to fit in my wedding dress on Saturday."

All I can do is laugh and shake my head. Jackie is one of the tiniest people I know, and I've always been a bit envious of her slim figure. The idea of her looking anything less than perfect in her wedding dress is ridiculous, so I press on with the schedule.

"Tomorrow, I have a spa day planned before the rehearsal dinner. It'll be just you, me, and the other bridesmaids. I invited your mom, but she said she hates people touching her feet?"

Jackie snorts.

"Yeah, my mom doesn't do pedicures or massages. But she'll have her hair and makeup done with us on Saturday, along

with Drew's mom."

"And I confirmed the sendoff brunch for Sunday with the hotel, so all the times on here should be correct. We'll all head out after that and leave you and Drew to enjoy your honeymoon in peace."

"You are seriously the best, Cat. I would have been an absolute disaster without you. You've always been so organized."

"Everything's going to be perfect, okay? So don't worry about a thing. You deserve the greatest weekend of your life, and I'm going to make sure that happens."

Her green eyes begin to sparkle with tears, and she sets her glass down to wrap me up in her embrace.

"Thank you so much for everything. I've always imagined you by my side at my wedding. I just can't believe it's finally happening."

Taking a deep breath, I try to keep my own emotions in check, so I give her one last squeeze before leaning back.

"By the way," she says, wiping her eyes, "I'm going to make sure you catch my bouquet. I want us to start planning your wedding A.S.A.P."

"You're forgetting I need a boyfriend first before I even think about getting married."

"We'll work on that this weekend," she says. "Brandon's really excited to see you, you know."

She gives me a not-so-subtle wink and pokes my side.

"Brandon Kudrow? From college?"

"Yeah, he's one of Drew's groomsmen. And he's always had a bit of a thing for you."

"Um, hard pass. He's not my type."

"How many shots will it take to change your mind?"

I shake my head as I sip on my wine. However, I notice Jackie's smile falter as she grows quiet.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well,” she says, “you know Evan is going to be at the wedding too, right? He’s Drew’s best man.”

Ah, yes. *That* minor detail.

“It’s not going to be weird this weekend, is it?” Jackie asks. “I mean, that was so long ago, and you two never actually dated, so—”

“No. It won’t be weird at all.”

I had a long, lonely drive up here to think through my first encounter with Evan, and in every scenario that played out in my head, it was awkward as hell. What do you say to a person you haven’t spoken to in five years? Especially when you consider where we left things off.

Of course, it’s going to be weird. How could it not be?

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## CHAPTER TWO

### - EVAN -

As I pull up to the Airbnb rental, I nod with satisfaction. Three nights kicking back in an A-frame house on Lake Arrowhead is just what the doctor ordered.

Work sucks, I'll be honest. Some days I want to quit the corporate lifestyle and buy a cabin in the woods, just like this one. There's nothing keeping me in Phoenix, so I'm not sure why I haven't found the balls to leave.

When I step out of my car, I take a moment to breathe in the fresh mountain air through my nose. The crisp breeze sends a pleasant shiver up my arm, and I feel reenergized just by being here.

Once I grab my duffel bag from the trunk, I head up the front walk onto the wooden deck. The outdoor space has a fire pit and Adirondack chairs just steps away from the lakeshore.

I can't wait to crack open a beer and hang out here.

Checking my phone for the key code, I open up the front door to find the interior is more spacious than the photos online. The front windows come to a sharp point two stories above my head, giving me an unobstructed view of the lake and the forest surrounding me. The trees are so thick that I can't even see my neighbors.

The walls are covered in exposed wood paneling, and even though the rustic furnishings are kitschy and mismatched, it

gives the house a lived-in, cozy feel.

I head through the kitchen down a narrow hallway, which leads into a bedroom in the back where I drop my bag. There's another bedroom in the loft, but I'm giving it to Drew while he stays with me for the next two nights until the wedding.

I pull out my phone and give him a quick call to get his ETA.

"Hey, man," he answers. "I just got to town and stopped at the market. What all do we need?"

"You're not buying groceries. This weekend was supposed to be my treat, remember?"

"You're letting me crash for free, so supplying the food is the least I can do. You think a 24-pack of beer will be enough?"

"For just the two of us? Seems a bit overkill."

"Go hard or go home, dude."

I can practically hear him grinning through the phone.

"Well, if you're already there, can you pick up some snacks and stuff for breakfast?"

"Aye, aye, captain. See you soon."

Hanging up the phone, I shake my head and start unpacking. I need to hang my suit before it wrinkles, and I pull out a jacket to wear outside.

By the time Drew pulls up to the house, I already have a fire roaring in the pit on the deck.

"Evan!"

Drew hops out of his Jeep and climbs up the steps two at a time. When he reaches me, he pulls me in for a hug, clapping me roughly on the back before releasing me.

"The big day's finally arrived," I say. "How's it feel?"

"Jackie and I have been living together for years now, so we're just making things official, really."

"It's a pretty expensive way to make things official."

"What Jackie wants, Jackie gets. You know how she is."

“Yeah, you’re whipped.”

He punches my arm, wearing a stupid grin on his face.

“Come help me unload my stuff.”

I follow him over to the trunk, where we start unloading his bags, along with the groceries, into the house.

“How are we supposed to eat all this food in one weekend?” I ask, staring at the food piled on the counter.

“Better to have too much than too little. Oh, and before I forget, here.”

He fishes out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to me.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the schedule for the weekend,” he says. “I’m supposed to pass them out to the groomsmen. And Jackie said that Cat’s going to get bitchy if anyone’s late, so don’t piss her off.”

I do a double-take. It’s been years since I heard that name, and the sound of it is jarring on my senses, like being electrocuted awake.

“Cat’s here? Cat Gallagher?”

“Uh, yeah, dude. She’s the maid of honor.”

“You never mentioned that.”

“I didn’t?” He shrugs as he grabs a beer off the counter, and he pops the tab before heading back outside. I do the same and follow him out.

Drew settles back into one of the chairs, pinning me with a mischievous look.

“What happened between you two anyway?”

“Me and who?”

“You and Cat,” he says, rolling his eyes. “You used to be inseparable back in college. Jackie was always jealous of your friendship, actually. We had a running bet about when you two would start dating, but you never did.”

“We were just friends, that’s all.”

“Guys and girls can’t be ‘just friends.’”

“Well, we were. But we fell out of touch after graduation. That’s it.”

I take a sip of my beer and stare out over the lake, but I can feel his eyes on me.

“Do you think you might *reconnect* this weekend? If you know what I mean?”

Glancing over at him, he gives me a crude wink.

“Cat and I are just friends. Don’t make things weird.”

“Okay, fine.” He throws his hands up in the air in surrender. “But at least let me find you a hookup this weekend. You’ve been single the entire time I’ve known you, and this weekend’s all about having fun.”

“I don’t need you to set me up.”

“What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t get you laid at my wedding?” he asks. “Jackie has a lot of single friends, and they’ll all be dressed up and looking for a dance partner. There’s something about weddings that makes people desperate. There’ll be plenty of opportunities this weekend, so take advantage of them before you settle down for good.”

“Are you just trying to live my bachelor lifestyle vicariously through me?”

“Maybe,” he says with a grin. “I’ve been with Jackie since we were freshmen. I love her, and there’s no one else I’d rather be with. But I’ll admit, I enjoy hearing about all the fun my friends are having. But you never have any fun.”

That’s not true. But Drew doesn’t need to know what I get up to.

“Sorry I’m such a massive disappointment,” I say. “Looks like you’ll have to rely on Brandon and Joe for the gory details.”

“Don’t think I’m giving up that easily. I’m going to make it my personal mission to get you laid this weekend. You need it.”

Taking another sip, I shake my head and chuckle. He's going to be wasting his time this weekend because he has absolutely no clue what kind of girl I need.

And I'd prefer it to stay that way.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### - CAT -

Our taxi takes Jackie and me to Lake Arrowhead Village, a shopping area along the lakeshore. We get off at the brewery, which looks like a German beer tavern with a chalkboard sign out front and bistro lights over the patio. Coffeehouse rock greets us as we walk through the doors, giving the place an eclectic vibe.

It's packed, and I'm assuming it's because this is one of the few restaurants in town open after dark. We manage to find a table inside and take our seats until the other bridesmaids join us.

"I'm sorry I couldn't take you to a nightclub or something," I say, leaning in across the table. "This was the best Yelp had to offer."

"No, this is perfect. We already did the crazy girls' trip to Las Vegas for my bachelorette party, so I'm actually looking forward to just kicking back tonight."

We both put in an order for craft beer flights and glance out the window at the scenic views. The sun is setting beyond the horizon in the distance, casting shades of pink and purple across the reflective water.

"Isn't this place beautiful?" Jackie says. "I wish it wasn't too cold to sit on the patio."

“Why did you decide to get married in December? I mean, isn’t this place more of a summer destination?”

“Because we wanted to get married on the anniversary of when we said ‘I love you’ for the first time.”

“You two are so cute it’s gross.”

I mimic barfing sounds at her across the table, which makes her burst into laughter. However, I don’t see the other two bridesmaids enter the restaurant, and just as I’m fake dry-heaving, they make their presence known with questioning looks.

“Vanessa! Layla!” Jackie grins, standing up to hug them both. “I’m so happy you’re here. Are you hungry? We were thinking of ordering some dinner with our beer.”

Layla, Drew’s younger sister, comes over and wraps her arm around my shoulder. She came into college as a freshman when we were seniors, and we took her under our wing and became good friends.

But Vanessa is the one I’m not so sure about. My first encounter with her was when we all went dress shopping with Jackie, and again in Las Vegas during the bachelorette party. But so far I’ve gotten the impression that she doesn’t like me all that much.

The feeling is mutual.

She only says hello to Jackie, ignoring me entirely as she takes her seat beside the bride. It’s a subtle power move that signals herself as the new BFF in Jackie’s life, and it’s obvious she considers herself my replacement. Jackie and I live in different cities now, so we’ve both had to establish new friend groups locally—and for some reason, she chose to associate herself with Vanessa.

As she flips her long, dark hair, I really don’t get what Jackie sees in her. We used to make fun of girls like her, but I suppose if you live in L.A., you have to hang out with L.A. people. And to further the stereotype, she’s opted to wear a bodycon dress that fits more in a nightclub than a brewery, and if I had to guess, she picked it to show off her fake boobs.

It takes every ounce of willpower not to roll my eyes.

“So, ladies, who’s up for some shots?” she squeals, earning her a couple of annoyed glances from nearby tables.

“I think I’ll just stick with water tonight,” Layla says. “I’m the DD, after all.”

“And I’ll just stick with beer,” I say.

But Jackie has other plans.

“Yes! I’ll totally do shots with you!”

So much for a relaxing, low-key evening.

“Oh, by the way, I brought you these.” Vanessa reaches into her purse and pulls out a pink sash that has the word “Bride” scrawled across it in curly lettering.

“Oh, you didn’t have to do this,” Jackie says, but she giggles with delight as Vanessa pins a small, mesh veil into her hair. “You guys already did this for my bachelorette party.”

“But everyone needs to know you’re the bride-to-be,” Vanessa says, draping the sash over her shoulder. “We need to make this night special for you!”

It feels like a slight dig at me, as though I haven’t done a proper job as maid of honor. It’s getting difficult to mask my annoyance, but I bear in mind that I’m here for Jackie—I don’t need to cause drama for her.

By the time our entrees arrive, Vanessa and Jackie are already three shots in, and Jackie’s ordering another beer flight. I really hope she doesn’t have a hangover for our spa day tomorrow, so I keep sliding glasses of water for her across the table.

“Alright, ladies, who’re our wedding lays going to be?” Vanessa asks. “I am single and ready to mingle. Layla? Cat? Do you two have your sights set on any cute guys to hook up with this weekend?”

“Uh, not really,” I say. Layla shrugs beside me.

“Ooh, girls, check out that delicious piece of man candy that just walked in.”



All of our heads turn toward the door, and my heart drops into my stomach at the sight of a familiar figure.

Evan. Fucking. Simmons.

Drew follows in close behind, along with the other two groomsmen—but I don't even notice. Even though I imagined this reunion so many times and planned what I was going to say, my mind goes blank and I forget everything I rehearsed.

My brain is screaming at me to run, but my muscles won't move an inch. I'm completely immobilized in my chair.

"Drew!" Jackie shouts, leaping to her feet. "I didn't know you'd be here, too!"

She rushes over and flings herself into his arms, wrapping around his neck to kiss him. The other guys chuckle and step around them, heading toward our table.

When my eyes meet Evan's, a jolt of fear courses through my body. His intense, blue gaze widens with recognition, but the tension is too much to take and I glance down, finding a sudden interest in a scratch on the table.

"Hey, boys," Vanessa says.

She waves them over to sit with us. Everyone exchanges greetings and shakes hands, but I'm silently praying that Evan won't sit next to me.

"Hi, Cat."

With a start, I look to my right to see Brandon pull up a chair with a grin on his face. "It's been a long time. You look great."

Thank you, Jesus! Maybe I can focus my attention on Brandon so I don't have to talk to Evan. A perfect distraction.

"Looks like you ladies already got the party started," he says, glancing at the empty shot glasses on the table. "What're you having?"

"I'm just sticking with beer."

Although now that Evan's here, I just might switch to the hard stuff.

While the guys put in their drink orders with the waitress, I steal a glance at Evan. He looks mostly the same as he did in college, although he has a bit of stubble along his jawline now. It suits him.

He's sitting beside Vanessa, and it's clear that she's found her next man crush.

I wish I could disappear under the table.

"I can't believe we came to the same spot," Drew says, draping his arm around Jackie's shoulders. "What a coincidence."

"It shouldn't be," she says. "Cat's agenda said we'd be here."

"Oh, uh, I only glanced at it. Sorry, Cat. Thanks for putting it together, though."

"No problem. Happy to help."

I force a smile at him, but I think it comes off as more of a grimace. Drew turns back to Jackie, while Brandon is busy chatting with Joe and Layla. And then there's Vanessa and Evan, who are acting like the rest of us don't exist.

And here I am, sitting awkwardly at the table, not a part of any conversation.

Before the waitress has a chance to walk away, I grab her attention.

"Actually, can I have a shot as well?"

I'm going to need all the help I can get to make it through this unbearable disaster of an evening.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### - EVAN -

I could kill Drew. Didn't he know that the girls would be here? Granted, I could have checked Cat's schedule too, but that's beside the point.

Either way, we're here now, and it's just as awkward as I thought it would be. From the moment I locked eyes with Cat, she made it pretty clear that she wanted nothing to do with me, so I grabbed a seat at the opposite end of the table.

"I'm Vanessa, by the way. I'm one of Jackie's bridesmaids."

The girl next to me extends her hand, and for a moment, I'm afraid to shake it. Those manicured claws look like they could draw blood. But I accept, which makes her smile and bat her eyelashes at me.

"I'm Evan. Best man."

After putting in an order of food and a beer, I can't help but glance over at Cat. She's focused on Brandon right now, and for some reason, I don't like it. It was no secret that Brandon had a thing for her back in college, but I thought he gave up when she never showed any interest.

But now, she seems to have warmed up to him quite a bit.

"Drew never told me he had such a good-looking friend."

I turn my attention back to Vanessa, who's leaning in rather close to me.

“Good-looking? You give me too much credit.”

“Not at all. I mean, I could get lost in those blue eyes of yours, and I just can’t resist running my fingers through that dark hair...”

To my surprise, she skims her long fingernails along my scalp and gives me a seductive smile.

I don’t miss the hint. It’s obvious she’s interested, and I guess she’s pretty enough. Vanessa isn’t the type of girl I normally go for, but I can’t help but wonder if she’s a bit of a freak in the bedroom. In my experience, girls like her are usually open-minded, so she might not run screaming for the hills if she knew my...preferences.

Maybe this is the lay that I need this weekend. It will at least get Drew off my back if he sees us flirting.

It’s easy to pretend that I’m into Vanessa because she spends the evening doing most of the talking. However, I keep glancing over at Cat, where a line of empty shot glasses sits in front of her on the table. Three, four, five...

Cat slides out of her seat, bumping the table as she steadies herself. Everyone turns their heads to look at her, but she just grabs her coat and storms outside.

“What the hell is her problem?”

Vanessa’s scoff irks me, so I untangle my arm from her grip.

“She’s just a bit drunk. I’m going to check on her.”

My tone comes off a bit more clipped than I had intended. Grabbing my jacket, I fling it over my shoulders and head outside, feeling everyone’s eyes on my back.

The sun has disappeared beyond the horizon, revealing a clear, starry sky up above. Reflected off the lake are the bistro lights which line the sidewalks of the village— illuminating Cat’s lonely figure leaned up against the railing.

It’s so chilly that I can see my breath in front of me. I’m acutely aware of how quiet it is compared to the loud music and conversations inside, which seem to go silent as soon as

the door closes behind me. My footsteps echo against the concrete as I approach Cat from behind.

“Hey, are you okay?”

When her hazel eyes turn onto me, I’m shocked to find how icy they are. She regards me with an indignant expression for a moment before turning her gaze back to the dark lake.

“I’m fine.”

I wait for her to elaborate, but instead an uncomfortable silence falls between us. For the first time in a long while, I’m able to really see her, and she hasn’t changed much from what I remember. Her shiny, brunette hair falls to her shoulders in waves, and I can smell her familiar shampoo from here. She’s dressed stylishly casual, like always, hiding her curves that she was always so ashamed of.

I never understood why she chose to shy away from her beauty like that. But a part of me is glad that she’s still the same old Cat that I remember, even if she’s a bit more guarded than before.

“Look, I don’t want things to be awkward between us this weekend,” I say.

“Me neither.”

“Okay, then maybe we could try to be friends? I miss you, Cat.”

Releasing the railing, she turns her entire body to face me, scoffing as she crosses her arms.

“You miss me? Seriously?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“If you missed me, then why haven’t I heard from you in five years?”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” I say. “You didn’t reach out either.”

She turns back to face the lake, refusing to meet my gaze. I sigh.

“I just wish we could go back to the way things used to be when we were friends,” I say.

“I don’t think we can. There’s no coming back from that.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I really am. I never meant to hurt you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a little too late for that.”

She pushes past me and heads back inside, leaving me alone and feeling like a total asshole in the cold.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### - CAT -

My eyes flutter open, revealing a stunning view of Lake Arrowhead through the window. The morning sun is shining bright across the lake, creating a sparkling pattern across the blue surface.

I move to stretch my arms above my head, but I regret it right away. After being pressed up against a leather sofa all night, I have to use caution to peel my skin from the fabric.

Wait, why am I on the sofa and not in the bed?

Sitting up, I glance around and realize I'm in Jackie's suite. Memories of last night come flooding back, with Layla driving us back to the hotel, and Jackie insisting on a sleepover with her maid of honor.

But Vanessa stayed behind with the guys, and she made it clear that her goal was to sleep with Evan this weekend. In fact, she told Layla not to wait up for her, since they're sharing a hotel room.

Did Vanessa go home with Evan last night?

No, Evan's not that type of guy. He wouldn't sleep with some random girl he'd just met...would he?

I've never known him to do that, but I feel like I don't know him at all anymore.

“Good morning!”

I glance up to see Jackie plodding into the living room wearing a fluffy, white hotel robe. She takes a seat at the opposite end of the sofa, and her demeanor is much too chipper this early in the morning.

“Are you hungry?” she asks. “I can order room service for breakfast. What sounds good to you?”

“Anything greasy.”

I feel awful, and I’m not sure if it’s due to my hangover or Evan.

“Let’s get you some eggs to soak up that alcohol,” Jackie says. “But I’m going to stick with something light. I need to fit into my wedding dress tomorrow.”

“You had just as many shots as I did. How are you so perky right now?”

“Actually, you had way more than anyone else,” she says, giving me a pointed look. “You insisted on sticking with beer until Evan showed up. Care to explain?”

“No, I do not.”

“Fine. By the way, Brandon asked me for your number while you were outside with Evan. I told him he needed to ask you himself.”

“That’s going to be awkward when I tell him I’m not interested.”

“Why not? Brandon’s a good-looking guy, and he’s always been crazy about you.”

“I just don’t feel the same way about him.”

“Because you’re still hung up on Evan?”

“Ugh, I’m way too hungover to deal with guy drama right now,” I groan. “Let me see that menu.”

Once we put in our room service orders, Jackie lets me hop in the shower and get ready for our spa day. I still need to check



into my room, so once I'm finished with breakfast, I drag myself down to the lobby.

Pulling out my driver's license and credit card, I hand them over to the guest service agent.

"I'm checking in."

She takes my license with a smile and starts typing away at her keyboard. However, her smile begins to falter, and after a few moments, she glances up at me with an apologetic expression.

"I'm sorry, but you were due to arrive last night. I have you marked as a no-call, no-show."

"Oh, I was here, but I stayed with my friend in her suite. She's got a block of rooms with her wedding party listed under Jackie Kilgore."

"I can see that, but because you didn't check in last night, we gave your room away to a walk-in guest."

"Can I book a different room, then?"

"I'm sorry, but we're all sold out. We have a convention here at the hotel this weekend that has us completely booked until Monday."

"But I booked a room here. Where else am I supposed to stay?"

"I apologize for the mix-up. I can go ahead and refund your deposit, but unfortunately, that's all I can do."

Damn it, I'm really fucked.

After the front desk agent issues the refund, I roll my suitcase over to a plush chair in front of the fireplace. I pull out my phone and start looking for nearby hotels in the area to make a new booking.

But as I scroll through, it looks like every hotel is sold out. And judging by how busy the lobby is, this convention booked out every room in town.

Maybe I can find an Airbnb. I quickly navigate to their website, but their search is also showing no available rentals.

Panic begins to set in as I realize I have no place to stay. Maybe Jackie will let me crash with her tonight, but after the wedding tomorrow, I can't intrude on her honeymoon with Drew.

Think, Cat. THINK.

I spot Layla coming out of the restaurant at the opposite end of the lobby. I check the time and realize we're all due to meet at the spa in ten minutes, so I jump from my seat to catch up with her.

Layla is rooming with Vanessa, which is the worst option available to me. But it's the only option I can think of besides sleeping on the streets.

"Layla!"

She pauses, glancing around the lobby. When she sees me flagging her down, she smiles and waves.

"Hey, Cat. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Well, not great. It turns out that they sold my room, and every place in town is booked up."

"Oh no, what are you going to do?"

Would sleeping out on the street be so bad? The idea of sharing a room with Vanessa makes a freezing cold night on the sidewalk look more like a cakewalk.

"Actually, I was wondering if you would mind if I crash in your room? I can probably stay with Jackie tonight, but tomorrow night I've got nowhere to go."

"I'll have to ask Vanessa, but I don't mind," she says. "It'll be a tight squeeze, but we can make it work."

"Thank you, Layla!" I squeal, giving her a tight hug. "You're a lifesaver. By the way, where is Vanessa? Didn't she come down with you?"

Layla smirks, leaning in to whisper to me.

"She didn't get back until almost three a.m. She was still asleep when I left the room for breakfast."

My stomach churns. It sure sounds like Vanessa slept with Evan, even if she didn't stay the whole night.

Jackie is already waiting for us in the spa lobby when Layla and I arrive. The new age music is doing nothing to calm my emotions as we wait for Vanessa.

"Hey, Jackie?" I ask. "Would it be alright if I stay with you another night?"

"Sure, what's up?"

I explain the mix-up with the rooms, and how I'm figuring things out with Layla and Vanessa for tomorrow.

"Of course, you can stay with me," she says. "There's no one I'd rather spend tonight with before my wedding day."

Relief washes over me, although I'm still on edge about having to spend a night in Vanessa's room. Speaking of which...

"Should someone call her to see where she's at?" I ask. It's fifteen minutes past our appointments already, and there's no sign of Vanessa. The spa attendants are waiting on us, and it's cutting into our massages.

"Let's just get started without her," Layla says. "She can join us for the mani/pedis later."

Right on cue, Vanessa decides to make her grand entrance, wearing a messy bun with a cup of coffee in hand.

"Sorry I'm late," she says, although she doesn't look very apologetic to me. "I had a little too much fun last night."

The wink she gives makes my blood boil. I completely forget the predicament that I'm in, that I need something from her, and all I can think about is her and Evan in bed together.

He wouldn't sleep with me after knowing me for four years, but he meets Vanessa and fucks her the same night? How is that fair?

"I made the schedule for a reason," I say. "We've been waiting for you, which is cutting into our massages."

"Jeez, calm down. So what if I'm a few minutes late?"

“You’re here for Jackie, remember? You’re not here to party all weekend and stay out all night. You’re a bridesmaid, and the least you can do is show up on time.”

“Hey,” Jackie says, stepping between us. “It’s okay. Let’s just head inside.”

Vanessa narrows her dark eyes at me for a long moment, her hand on her hip as she stares me down. Jackie’s refusing to meet my gaze, and Layla seems entirely too preoccupied with the waterfall trickling down the wall.

A tense silence falls over the four of us, and it’s obvious they’re all blaming me for ruining the mood.

But once our standoff is over, Vanessa gives Jackie a big, fake smile, linking arms with her.

“Yes, let’s head inside.”

Sleeping out in the cold is starting to look pretty good right now.

## CHAPTER SIX

### - EVAN -

I haven't had a hangover in a long time.

The sunlight is streaming in through the window and hitting my face, which makes me groan. To prevent my throbbing headache from getting any worse, I reach for my pillow and press it over my eyes to block the light.

If I don't eat now, I'm going to throw up.

It takes every ounce of willpower to crawl out of bed, and I grab a pair of basketball shorts before stumbling out into the hallway.

"Hey, there, sleepyhead."

Drew's voice is grating on my ears as he grins at me from the kitchen. I smell scrambled eggs and bacon, which makes my stomach growl with a sharp hunger.

"Here, let me fix you a plate. You look like shit."

"I feel like shit," I say, dropping into a chair at the kitchen table.

As soon as he sets the plate of food in front of me, along with a tall glass of water, I begin to eat with slow, small bites.

"You seemed to have a great time last night." Drew smirks at me as he sits down, popping a piece of toast into his mouth.

“What the hell happened? How did we even get back from the brewery?”

“Joe was sober enough to drive us all home.”

The last thing I remember is coming back inside after my conversation with Cat. Once I started ordering shots for everyone, things got hazy from there.

“Did I do anything stupid?” I ask.

“No. Even when you’re drunk, you’re a mystery. It’s so annoying.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“What happened to the girls last night?”

“They left pretty soon after you and Cat came back in, although Vanessa hung back with us,” he says. “What happened out there?”

I take a bite of scrambled eggs, buying myself some time before I have to answer.

“We just caught up for a minute.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. Everyone saw her storm in after you talked. That’s when she asked Layla to drive her back to the hotel.”

“You think Cat left because of me?”

“Yeah, I do. And that’s when you switched from beer to shots. We closed down the bar at two a.m, but you definitely went the hardest.”

I take in a breath through my nose, keeping the nausea at bay.

“Look, man,” he says, “if there’s some unresolved feelings there between you and Cat, I think you should figure it out this weekend.”

“Cat’s not my type. She’s just...a girl I used to be friends with.”

Drew leans in across the table.

“Then who is your type? Vanessa? She was all over you last night. I bet you two could have some fun this weekend.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Dude, she was practically throwing herself at you. I’m surprised you didn’t bring her back with us.”

A drunk lay is not an option for the type of sex I’m into, but I can’t tell Drew that.

“Look,” I say, “if I promise to pay a little attention to Vanessa this weekend, will you get off my back?”

Drew leans back in his chair as a wide, satisfied grin spreads across his face.

“Yeah, I’ll stop bugging you.”

“Great.”

“I just want you to have the type of relationship that Jackie and I have. You’ve been single ever since I met you. It’s not right. Look, if you’re gay, you know I won’t judge—”

“I’m not gay.”

“Okay,” he says, throwing his hands up in the air. “Whatever you say.”

“I’m not. I just haven’t found anyone I’m compatible with yet.”

“I think you’re too picky. Maybe you need to lower your standards a bit.”

I muster an obvious eye roll in his direction before standing up and taking my plate to the sink. I’d rather he think I was gay over knowing the truth about my sexual appetites.

“Let me know if you need me out of the house tonight,” Drew says with a wink. “I’m happy to go hang out at the brewery for a few hours to give you some space.”

“Whatever.”

Picking up a piece of bacon from the counter, I chuck it across the kitchen at him, but he’s too quick. He catches it in his hand

and pops it into his mouth with ease, giving me a triumphant grin while he's at it.

"I'm going to nurse this hangover in bed," I say.

"Sweet dreams."

I wave him off as I drag my feet down the hall. Once I shut the door behind me, I make my way over to the bed and flop down, burrowing my face in the pillow. I know Drew's just looking out for me, but whenever the subject of sex comes up between us, I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around him to not out myself as a kinky freak.

But maybe he's right. Vanessa made a point to signal her interest in me, and she seems the type to be adventurous in the bedroom. It's been a while since my last encounter, and I brought some equipment along in case I met someone else on the scene.

I crawl out of bed and make sure to lock the door before opening the closet. Inside is my large duffel bag, which I unzip carefully, as though the zipper would give me away to Drew if he heard it.

It's ridiculous, I know. But I need to be careful while he's in the house.

I lift out a pair of handcuffs, along with my spreader bar, and line them up on the bed. Staring down at the two pieces, I know they have the potential to out my lifestyle if they were found.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to bondage.

A dark thought creeps into my head, and I don't like to dwell on it. But it pops up from time to time, even after all these years, and I guess seeing Cat has me wondering again.

How would she react to all of this? If she knew what was good for her, she'd run. Cat was a virgin for as long as I knew her in college, and a part of me wonders if that's still the case.

If I was into vanilla sex, I'd be all over Cat. But I am who I am, and even though Cat and I are compatible in every



possible way, there is one exception to the rule, and that's my dealbreaker.

She can't handle this lifestyle.

For me, it's not just about a pair of handcuffs to spice things up in the bedroom. This is a sexual need of mine, and the depths of my depravity go far deeper than any of my friends could possibly imagine. I can't get it up without seeing my partner tied up and immobilized, handing their trust to me, completely at my mercy, surrendering their control...that's just the way I've always been programmed.

Cat deserves roses and champagne, to take it slow with a patient partner that can help her figure out what she likes. And as much as I wish I was that guy, I know I'm not. Bondage isn't something you just introduce to your partner for their very first time. I know Cat well, probably better than anyone, and I know that scenario is too much for her to handle.

Unlike Cat, Vanessa gives off the vibe that she's experienced in the realm of sex. When you've been on the scene for long enough, you learn the signs of who would be a willing and consensual participant, and who would think you're a psycho.

Vanessa seems like a viable option. But the spreader bar might be a bit too much right out the gate.

Setting the handcuffs on the nightstand, I return the spreader bar back to my duffel bag, and I make sure to shut the closet doors.

With a groan, I plop back down onto my bed, anxious to recover from this hangover before the rehearsal dinner tonight. I'm not eager to be in Cat's presence again when it's obvious how much she despises me.

I wish we could go back to the way things used to be before she declared her feelings. But it just goes to show that men and women can't ever be just friends.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### - CAT -

After our bodies are massaged and our nails manicured, it's time for us to head back to our rooms. The ceremony rehearsal is in a few hours, and the wedding venue is in the neighboring town of Crestline.

I'm about to remind the other bridesmaids to keep an eye on the time, but I decide against it. There's been a weird vibe toward me from the other girls all day, and something tells me it's best to keep my mouth shut.

Jackie and I head into the elevator to go upstairs.

"Do you feel relaxed and pampered for your wedding tomorrow?" I ask.

"Yeah."

Her clipped tone takes me by surprise. She sure doesn't sound relaxed.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Are you stressed about tonight? About the wedding tomorrow? Because if you need to delegate anything, that's what I'm here for."

Jackie lets out a sigh as the elevators open, and we walk into the hallway together.

“I’m not stressed about the wedding.”

“Okay, then what is it?”

A silence falls between us as our footsteps echo in the quiet hallway. It isn’t until we get back to the suite that she turns around and pins me with a guarded expression.

“Did you really have to go off on Vanessa like that this morning? She wasn’t even that late.”

“What do you mean? I made the schedule for a reason. Vanessa chose to sleep in, which cut into your massage. It was disrespectful toward you, and someone needed to call her out on it.”

“I’d rather us all just get along and not have any drama, and besides, Vanessa apologized to me later. So can you at least try to be nice to her this weekend?”

“What’s this really about?”

“It’s obvious you don’t like her, okay? It’s just a vibe we all picked up on, even on the bachelorette trip.”

“A vibe you picked up on?” I repeat. “Or did Vanessa tell you this to start shit behind my back?”

“See? It’s totally obvious.”

“Look, Vanessa isn’t the type of person I usually hang out with, but I’ve been cordial to her since I met her. I’m sorry if I made things awkward today, so let’s just forget it and move on.”

Jackie sighs, her expression softening a bit.

“Fine. Just stop being such a Nazi about the schedule, will you?”

I’m about to protest about how I organized this entire weekend for her. I definitely went above and beyond the call of duty as her maid of honor, and the way she’s taking Vanessa’s side feels a bit like a stab in the back.

But it’s her wedding, so I decide to hold my tongue. If anyone shows up late to the wedding tomorrow, it’s not my problem.

Even though things still seem delicate between us, I put on a smile and help her get ready. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around her, and I blame Vanessa for driving this wedge between us. After my conversation with Jackie, I can tell she said something earlier as payback for calling her out.

How the hell am I supposed to survive a night in her room? Layla's going to have to keep us from murdering each other.

After I finish my hair and makeup, I slide into my low-cut cocktail dress and perform one last check in the mirror. I'm assuming Evan and Vanessa slept together last night, so there's a vindictive side of me that wants to look as hot as possible.

I need to upstage Vanessa—and show Evan what he's been missing all these years.

“Damn, girl! You look fine.”

Jackie appears in the doorway in her white cocktail gown looking impressed by my attire. A wide grin spreads across my face.

It's the exact reaction I was going for.

The drive to Crestline is about twenty minutes from the resort, and her parents offer to drive us over in their Escalade. When we pull into the parking lot for the wedding venue, my mouth drops to the floor mats.

A charming lodge sits on the edge of Lake Gregory, nestled into a forest of pine trees at the bottom of the hill. The sun casts its bright light across the lake's surface, creating a sparkle effect as the cool breeze ripples across the water.

We pass an open lawn where the staff is setting up the rehearsal dinner near an outdoor stone fireplace. Down the path toward the shore, the trees part to create an exquisite frame of the lake, where Drew and Jackie will stand to exchange nuptials tomorrow at sunset. Gentle waves lap against the grassy shoreline, creating a tranquil little corner of nature and transporting me far away from civilization.

For a moment, I forget everything that's gone wrong today and feel a sense of peace wash over me.

“Alright, everyone, please gather around!”

The wedding coordinator claps her hands to grab our attention, and I turn to rejoin Jackie and her parents. Everyone in the wedding party is present except Drew and Evan, and I dread the thought of seeing him again.

“Drew texted they're parking now,” Jackie says, glancing at her phone. “His parents will meet us at dinner.”

“In that case, I'll bring you and the bridesmaids over here and line you up for your entrance.”

We follow her to a small grove of trees, which will keep Jackie hidden from Drew until the ceremony starts. While the coordinator scurries off to get the groomsmen in line, Jackie and Layla start chatting.

Vanessa comes to stand in front of me, her arms crossed against her chest as she wears a haughty expression on her face.

“Cat, can we talk for a second?”

Without waiting for an answer, she heads a little ways up the hill until we're out of earshot of the others.

“We should probably get back to the rehearsal,” I say. “I don't want to miss anything—”

“Layla said that you needed a place to crash tomorrow night, and that you asked to stay in our room?”

“Um, yeah, if that's okay?”

“Well, I don't think it's a good idea. Our room is really small, and there's no place for you to sleep.”

“I'm sure I can get a rollaway cot from the hotel—”

“It's just not going to work,” she says. “And for future reference, if you're going to ask me for favors, at least be nice to my face.”

Before I have a chance to respond, Vanessa stalks off toward the other girls.

Her blunt attitude takes me aback, but once the initial shock of that interaction wears off, the reality of my situation sets in.

I have nowhere to go after the wedding. My only option now is to drive back down the steep, windy mountain—in the dark, late at night—and try to find a hotel in San Bernardino.

Which means I'll miss the sendoff brunch on Sunday.

It's official. I'm the worst maid of honor ever and everyone hates me. How did I manage to screw things up so badly?

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### - EVAN -

As soon as Drew and I arrive for the rehearsal, the wedding coordinator seems to appear out of nowhere to usher us over to the ceremony site. Brandon and Joe are already waiting for us, and the coordinator lines us up in a row in front of the lake's edge. She grabs our shoulders and positions us like chess pieces side-by-side.

“Okay, guys,” she says. “You have the easiest jobs. I’ll bring the four of you out tomorrow right before the ceremony starts, and you’ll line up exactly like this. Once the bridesmaids and the bride walk in, you’ll just have to stand here until the ceremony is over, and then you’ll escort the bridesmaids out, arm-in-arm, back the way they came. Easy enough?”

We all nod our heads, making her smile with satisfaction. She turns to head back up the hill and soon disappears into the forest, presumably where the girls are at.

And that’s when it hits me: I have to escort Cat by the arm down the aisle.

Fuck.

“Hey, did you end up going home with Vanessa last night?”

I glance to my left where Joe is standing, but it wasn’t him who spoke. Brandon steps forward from the end of the line and gives me an eyebrow waggle that just screams sleazeball.

“No, I didn’t.”

“You should totally hit that, man,” he says. “She was all over you at the brewery. I thought for sure you were gonna shoot your shot. She’s pretty hot.”

“If you’re so into her, why don’t *you* hook up with her?”

I don’t even try to mask my irritation, but it seems to go right over his head.

“Nah, man, you can have her. I’ve got my sights set on Cat this weekend.”

Something about the way he says those words makes my skin crawl. It’s no secret that Brandon had a pathetic little crush on Cat back in college, but I never knew how much of a creep he actually was. Even though he’s Drew’s friend, I’ve only ever spoken to him in passing.

His outrageous behavior at the bachelor party should have tipped me off, but now that his target is Cat, something has alarm bells going off in my head.

Brandon is a total fucking dirtbag.

“Layla said that Cat didn’t have a place to stay tomorrow night,” Drew chimes in. “She’s staying in our suite tonight, but it sounds like tomorrow night she’s got nowhere to go. Something about a mixup with her hotel reservation.”

“Hmm, I have a king bed all to myself,” Brandon says. “Maybe I can be her knight in shining armor.”

“Didn’t you get the hint in college? She’s not interested in you.”

Brandon stops smiling, and all three guys turn to look at me. Drew and Joe seem at a loss for words, and Brandon’s gaze narrows dangerously at me.

“I forgot, you were always Cat’s gatekeeper,” he says. “She never went out with any guys in college because they all had to get through you first. I didn’t realize you two still had that weird friendship going on.”

“It’s not like that. Cat can date whoever she wants. I just know for a fact she’s not interested in you.”



“She seemed pretty into me last night. I’ll bet you a hundred bucks she’ll be in my bed tomorrow night. She’s not going to friendzone me like she did to you.”

“What did you just say to me?”

I take a threatening step forward, but Drew puts a firm hand on my shoulder to halt me in my tracks.

“Let’s all chill out,” he says, shooting Brandon a look of warning. “The girls are walking out now, so put your dicks away and focus on the rehearsal.”

I throw one last glance at Brandon, hoping he gets the message not to mess with me—or Cat. He says nothing as he steps back in line, and we all refocus our attention ahead.

Vanessa is already approaching the altar, and when our gazes meet, she gives me an unmistakable wink. Layla is not too far behind at the end of the aisle, and that’s when Cat appears from the forest of trees.

However, the upset look on her face takes me by surprise. I know Cat very well, and even though we’ve fallen out of touch, I know that look. Something’s happened that has her worried.

I remember what Drew just said about there being a mix-up with her hotel reservation. Is she upset because she has nowhere to go?

My immediate instinct is to invite her to stay with me, but given her less-than-friendly reception of me last night, I don’t see that going over well.

But it seems like her only alternative is Brandon, and I can’t let that happen. The pervert just admitted he’s going to take advantage of her desperate situation to get her to sleep with him, and the idea of it makes my fingers twitch with the urge to punch his smug little face.

When Cat arrives at the altar, she doesn’t meet my gaze.

Once Jackie joins the rest of us at the front, the wedding coordinator goes through a few things with the couple, but I

don't hear any of it. I need to figure out a way to keep Brandon away from Cat this weekend—and fast.

Only a few minutes pass before I realize that Drew and Jackie are heading back up the aisle holding hands. Glancing up, I realize that Cat is looking at me with those wide, hazel eyes of hers.

“You two, go!”

The wedding coordinator waves her hand in my face, snapping me back to attention. Straightening my shoulders, I walk toward the center, where I meet Cat halfway.

Without a word, I offer my arm for her to take. I can sense her momentary hesitation, but soon she weaves her arm into mine, holding on to the crook of my elbow.

I can feel her warm hand through my shirt as we set off down the aisle, and I have to admit, it feels nice. As we walk, I glance down at her face, but her gaze is set firmly ahead.

“Cat,” I murmur, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Now’s not a good time.”

I glance behind us to make sure Joe and Layla are out of earshot.

“Brandon’s been saying some...things about you.”

“I already know about his crush on me.”

“You do?”

She always seemed to be pretty clueless when it came to men. Of course, she had guys knocking down her door—because let’s face it, you’d have to be blind not to see how beautiful she is—but she never showed them any interest.

“You should be careful around that guy,” I warn her. “He said he’s planning on sleeping with you this weekend.”

“That’s not really your concern, is it?”

“I mean, no, I guess it isn’t, but I thought you should know what a creep he is—”

“I can take care of myself, thanks,” she says. “Besides, it’s a little too late for you to show any interest in who I date.”

Before I have a chance to respond, she unhooks her arm from mine and hurries ahead to where Drew and Jackie are waiting.

As we all make our way up the hill toward the rehearsal dinner, I notice Brandon jog to catch up with her. She immediately starts to engage in conversation, and when she turns her face up to smile at him, panic sets in.

I just warned her about him, so why the hell would she give Brandon the time of day?

At that moment, she turns to glance at me over her shoulder, and our eyes lock for a split second. Her expression is unreadable, but as soon as she turns back around, she slips her arm through his.

She’s making sure I see them together, doing the exact opposite of what I just told her to do just to piss me off.

And I have to admit, it’s working.

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## CHAPTER NINE

### - CAT -

I'm really not sure what to make of Evan's concern for me. It was not the conversation I was expecting to have with him, and to be honest, it was a little weird.

The moment he rejected my feelings for him, he forfeited any right to tell me who I should and shouldn't date.

So why now? Why is he warning me about Brandon?

Brandon isn't really my type, but here he is now, showing interest in me. It's more than I can say for Evan.

As I glance back over my shoulder and spot him watching me, the only explanation I can come up with is the one that makes the least sense: he's jealous.

But that's ridiculous. How can Evan be jealous of Brandon when he doesn't have any feelings for me? He made that very clear on that spring day five years ago. If he was genuinely concerned for my well-being, we'd still be friends.

Maybe I'm being petty by using Brandon to get back at Evan. But I'm not going to let him or anyone else ruin my weekend.

I'm going to have the time of my life flirting with Brandon, and maybe I'll get a little action too. It's been a while.

The wedding venue has set up an elegant tablescape for twelve on the lawn. Dozens of candles in glass vases line the center of

the table, creating a romantic ambiance as the sun begins to set in the sky above.

Heaters are set up around the table, although the large, outdoor fireplace is already crackling. I tug on Brandon's arm and pull him toward the end closest to the fire, hoping that Evan will get the hint to sit far away from us.

But he doesn't. Instead, he sits directly across from me. He pins Brandon with a menacing stare as he crosses his arms, settling back into his chair.

As the others start taking their seats, Vanessa comes over and wraps her possessive claws on the back of the chair next to Evan.

"Is this seat taken?"

Her voice comes out like a seductive purr, which makes me want to gag. However, her attention is focused solely on Evan, who shrugs in response.

Okay, did those two sleep together last night or not? Going off of Vanessa's behavior, it sure seems like it, but Evan doesn't pay her any attention.

I have no clue what's going through his head right now.

When the servers bring out the first course, they place a bowl of French onion soup on each of our place settings.

"Mmm, this looks so good," I say to Brandon. "Hot soup on a chilly night sounds perfect."

"If you're cold, I can warm you up."

It's definitely a line, so all I do is give him a noncommittal giggle. It's enough to put doubt in Evan's mind about how I received it.

And judging by Evan's sour look, it worked.

The rest of dinner passes by without incident, with Brandon keeping me occupied with conversation. It's not lost on me how he's inching his chair closer over the course of the evening, but I'm not ready to draw the line with him just yet.

Vanessa tries numerous times to engage Evan, but once she catches on that he isn't in the mood to talk, she gives up and turns to talk to Layla instead.

"Hey, Drew told me about the mix-up with the hotel," Brandon says to me. "I can't believe they gave your room away. Want me to talk to the manager for you?"

"It's okay. There's a big convention at the hotel, so there's nothing they can do."

"I heard you're staying with Jackie tonight, but what are you going to do about tomorrow?"

Before I answer, I glance over to make sure Vanessa is distracted. I don't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing how desperate my situation is.

"I'm going to have to leave after the wedding tomorrow night. Head back down the mountain to San Bernardino and try to find a hotel down there."

"Cat, you can't do that. You shouldn't drive down those steep roads all by yourself in the dark, especially after you've been drinking."

"I know, but I don't have any other options. Every room in town is sold out."

"Well, I have a room at the hotel, and you're more than welcome to stay with me. I'll even let you have the bed while I sleep on the floor."

He gives me a wink as he waits for my reply. I'm sure he'd love for me to spend the night with him all alone in a hotel room, and if I tell him yes, I'm sure he'll expect things to heat up between us.

But would that be the worst thing? I need a room for the night, and he's offering it. And if I have a drunken liaison with him, that could end my dry spell—with the added benefit of getting Evan out of my system once and for all.

"I might take you up on that offer," I answer. "Can I let you know tomorrow?"

"Absolutely, sweetheart."

Once the entrees are cleared, I excuse myself from the table and head inside the lodge. I wander around the empty venue looking for the restroom, where I stumble into the reception hall by accident.

It's a spacious room with lots of timber and stone features, and the chandeliers overhead are made of deer antlers. The floor-to-ceiling windows stand two stories tall, overlooking the lawn where the other guests are sitting. A huge, stone fireplace stands at one end of the hall, creating a rustic, yet elegant atmosphere.

I pop into the restroom for a minute, but when I reemerge, there's a figure standing near the fireplace.

"Evan? Did you follow me in here?"

With an apologetic look on his face, Evan takes a few steps closer to me, closing the distance between us.

"I wanted to talk to you alone," he says. "You need to listen to me about Brandon. He's a creep, and—"

"I already told you it's none of your business."

Spinning on my heel, I take a couple of steps toward the door, but a hand on my wrist stops me in my tracks. Evan turns me around to face him, keeping a firm grip on me as his blue eyes bore into mine.

"During the rehearsal, Brandon was bragging to the other guys about how he was going to sleep with you this weekend. He's planning on using your rooming situation to his advantage. Do you really think he's going to be a gentleman and sleep on the floor? You're playing right into his hand."

"Don't you think I know that?" I yank my hand from his grip. "So what if he wants to sleep with me? Maybe I want to sleep with him, too."

Evan does a double-take, staring at me as though I've lost my mind.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?"

"Why not?"

“I mean, well, uh...” Running his hand through his dark hair, he bites his lip.

“Well?”

“Come on, Cat, don’t make me say it.”

“Say what?”

“Are you still a virgin? If so, a guy like that shouldn’t be your first.”

It takes a moment for his words to sink in, but when they do, I can’t help but burst into laughter. Clutching my side, I’m so overcome with humor that I double-over.

“What’s so funny?”

“You think I’m still a virgin at twenty-seven?”

The way his cheeks turn beet red makes me laugh even harder, and it takes a minute for me to recover.

“Evan, that ship sailed long ago.”

“Got it,” he says, averting his gaze to the floor.

“I’m not the innocent little girl you remember,” I add. “Quite the opposite, in fact.”

Evan’s head shoots up to look at me once more, and the expression on his face has a sobering effect. My laughter subsides as I stand up straight, and something tells me that he’s seeing me differently than he’s ever had before.

Like he’s seeing me as a woman for the very first time.



## CHAPTER TEN

### - EVAN -

“I’m not the innocent little girl you remember. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

The tone Cat uses as she says those words, full of seduction and confidence, takes me by complete surprise.

But what’s even more surprising is that I can feel my dick twitch in my pants.

I’ve always found Cat attractive, but I never allowed myself to think of her as more than a friend. We just weren’t compatible in a sexual way, so I set up a clear boundary to make sure neither of us got hurt.

But now, I’m wondering if I’ve had it all wrong. Her self-assurance in this moment makes me see her in a completely different light.

Cat Gallagher is all grown up.

Could she be open to the idea of my kink? If she could accept that secret part of me, then this has the potential to change everything about our relationship. The one barrier that stopped me from having her is now called into question, and if that’s the case...

She’s emanating cool confidence as she watches me squirm, laughing at my stupid assumption that she’s still a virgin.

*Quite the opposite, in fact.*

What have you been up to these past five years, Kitty Cat? I'm dying to know.

"Are you really that surprised?" she asks, placing a hand on the curve of her hip. The way that dress hugs her waist draws my eyes down.

"Huh?"

"Did you really expect me to remain a virgin all this time? I mean, come on."

"You're right. That was stupid."

I can't believe I assumed that she would still be the sweet, innocent Cat I used to know, the one that ran away from me in tears after she confessed her feelings for me.

I'm starting to really regret that decision right now as I watch her hand rest on her hip, wishing it was my hand touching her instead.

"We should get back," she says. "They're going to wonder where we're at."

They? Oh, right. The rehearsal dinner. Where Brandon is waiting for her.

She was just telling me that she planned on sleeping with that douchebag tomorrow night. The Cat I used to know would never entertain the thought of exchanging sex for a free night in a hotel room.

It's pretty kinky if you think about it.

"I'll take your stunned silence as a yes," she says, turning toward the door.

"Wait."

Once again, I find myself grabbing her wrist to stop her from leaving. What is she doing to me?

"Don't stay with Brandon," I say. "I have an extra room at my Airbnb. It's yours if you want it." *And I won't force you to sleep with me, either.*

Although, perhaps I want her to.

Now it's Cat's turn to be rendered speechless. I refuse to release her from my grip until I hear her answer, but given the icy way our interactions have gone up until now, I'm worried she'll say no.

The idea of her sleeping with Brandon, blowing his mind—and his cock—makes me see red.

She stares at me for a long moment as if trying to figure me out. But I'm not sure I know what my intentions are, either.

Everything about our friendship has changed in a split second. I don't know what to think or feel about her anymore. All my assumptions about Cat have been turned upside down and fucked sideways, and it's throwing me for a serious loop.

“Okay,” she says.

“Okay?”

“Yeah, I'll stay with you. Now, can I have my hand back?”

Glancing down, I release her wrist like her skin has just burned me. We stand there in an awkward silence for a long moment, unsure of where to go from here.

“Well,” she says, “I guess I'll see you outside, then?”

“Yeah. See you outside.”

She turns her back to me and heads toward the door, her shoes clicking against the wood floorboards with every step. I can't help but watch the sway of her hips in that tight, little dress as she walks away, making me swallow hard.

After a few moments, I realize it's just me, standing by myself in this enormous, empty hall. I don't need to use the restroom, but I can't follow Cat outside without looking like a lost puppy.

No, I'll just stand here and ponder the weight of this revelation in silence, that everything I thought I knew about Cat was a lie.

I've always considered Cat to be perfect for me in every way except for our sexual compatibility. For years, that girl was my best friend in the world, but I never allowed it to be more than

that because I knew it would ruin us. But tonight, after seeing the woman she's become, I'm realizing that we could be something more.

Maybe the timing wasn't right then, but by letting her go, did I fuck things up beyond repair? Is it too late to try again?

Just because she's had sex, that doesn't mean she's into bondage. That's definitely a risk in pursuing her. But our friendship is already ruined, so what else do I have to lose? Once she admitted her feelings for me, we were never going back to being just friends.

So the real question is, does she still harbor any feelings for me?

I find myself hoping the answer is yes.

Holy shit. I'm fucked.

I have feelings for Cat. And they came out of nowhere, hitting me like a freight train and shaking me to my core.

When I muster up the courage to walk outside, I feel like a completely different person. Everyone is standing by the fireplace, chatting and drinking, and I find myself unable to tear my eyes away from Cat. I'm seeing her in a whole new light, and everything she does—the way she laughs, the smile on her face, the alluring way she bats her eyelashes—has me wondering how I've never *seen* her before.

As Brandon comes up to stand beside her, I feel a renewed sense of jealousy even stronger than earlier. Before, I felt protective over her like a brother or a friend would react. But now, I see him as my competition.

And yet, she agreed to stay with me tomorrow night. Not with him. And that's got to count for something, right?

The rehearsal dinner draws to a close, and Drew and I drive back to the house to get a good night's rest before the long day tomorrow. I need some time alone to sort through my thoughts.

I head into my room and lock the door behind me, where I begin to strip down for bed. My eyes land on the pair of

handcuffs sitting on my nightstand, and the thought of them locked around Cat's wrists gets me hard.

Tonight is the first time I allow Cat to walk into my sexual fantasies. As I hold my cock in my hand and begin to stroke, it feels wrong at first. I'm not supposed to jerk off to thoughts of my best friend naked, and I'm definitely not supposed to imagine her tied and gagged to my bed, at the mercy of my every deviant whim and desire.

The faster I pump my hand along myself, coming closer to my release, I realize that I'll never look at Cat the same way again.

There's no turning back now, and I'm going to do everything in my power to win her back.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### - CAT -

What the hell has gotten into Evan?

As I walk away from him, I can feel his eyes on me, watching my every step. I can't help the little shudder that runs down my spine at the thought of him staring at my ass, so I make sure to put on the most seductive walk I can muster.

When I step outside into the dark, chilly night, I realize that I forgot to breathe and release the air from my lungs.

Taking a moment to regain my composure, I replay the interaction we just had over and over again in my mind. I've never seen Evan look so unnerved like that, and I have no idea what to make of it. He's never looked at me that way before, not even once, but as soon as I told him I wasn't a virgin, something changed between us.

I'm not exactly sure *how* it changed. I just feel like something has shifted. Whether it's a good or bad thing—well, that's yet to become clear.

With a deep breath, I return to the party, where the outdoor fireplace is roaring at full heat. Everyone has gathered around the fire for warmth, their faces illuminated in a soft, orange glow beneath the starry night sky.

"Cat!" Jackie calls, waving me over. "What took you so long?"

"I'll tell you later."

Her interest piques, and she gives me a silent nod in response. I've completely forgotten about our little argument from earlier, and maybe I should. I could really use her advice on this, and I'm eager to get back to the hotel to discuss it in private.

I've just agreed to spend the night alone at Evan's place. Back in college, we would crash at each other's places all the time after a long night of drinking, and it was never weird. But now? It feels like there's a lot riding on this night, and it gives me butterflies just thinking about it.

One of the servers brings me another glass of wine, and I pretend to listen to the group conversation happening between Jackie, Drew, and Layla. It isn't long before I feel another presence come stand beside me, joining our circle.

"Hey, Cat," Brandon says. "Are you cold? Do you want my jacket?"

"Oh, no, I've got my wrap, thanks."

Should I tell him I've found other arrangements for tomorrow night? I'm about to, but something stops me as a feeling of dread seeps over me.

What if Evan changes his mind? What if something happens between now and tomorrow night that ruins this new dynamic between us?

Perhaps I shouldn't say anything...just to keep my options open.

The rehearsal dinner draws to a close, and Jackie's parents are ready to drive back to the hotel. We wave our goodbyes to everyone, although Jackie takes an extra long time to say her farewells to Drew. After all, the next time she'll see him is when we're walking down the aisle for real.

When we return to the suite, Jackie turns to me as soon as the door shuts behind us.

"Okay, now spill."

"Huh?"

“Come on,” Jackie says, grabbing my hand and pulling me to the sofa. “You and Evan went to the bathroom at the same time and were gone for a while. So, what happened?”

I smile. Even with everything going on, Jackie’s still keeping an eye on me. Nothing gets past her.

“Alright, I’ll tell you, but we’re going to need a bottle of wine first.”

With a squeal, Jackie leaps to her feet to fetch us glasses. In the meantime, I change out of my dress and slip into a pair of pajamas.

Once we’re both comfortable on the sofa with glasses in hand, it’s time for me to tell her everything. I feel like I might burst with the news.

“Evan offered to let me stay with him tomorrow night.”

Jackie nearly spits out the wine in her mouth, her eyes wide with shock. It takes her a moment to recover before she can even respond.

“I’m sorry, WHAT?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t believe it, either.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I said sure. Even though Brandon already offered me a place to stay.”

“Hold on, I thought you were staying with Layla and Vanessa?”

“Well, uh, Vanessa wasn’t exactly comfortable with letting me stay with them.”

“Wow, I missed so much today,” Jackie says. “I have so many questions. So, Brandon and Evan are like, competing for you now?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure if it’s like that with Evan. Maybe he was just extending an olive branch, and he just wants to use the opportunity to become friends again.”



“I highly doubt that,” Jackie says with a snort. “Besides, do you even want to be ‘just friends’ with Evan again?”

Taking a deep breath, I mull over her question. Yeah, I miss what Evan and I used to have, but once I admitted my feelings to him, I knew I’d crossed a line I could never come back from.

I’ve spent the past five years moving on from Evan Simmons, and I thought I’d done that. But this weekend has stirred up feelings from our intertwined pasts that I can’t seem to shake.

Maybe I was fooling myself when I thought I’d moved on.

“I’m not sure we could ever be just friends again,” I say. “But I’m not sure where we go from here.”

“There’s something about weddings that gets people in their feelings,” Jackie answers with a sage nod. “My advice? You should spend the day tomorrow exploring those feelings. Dance with him. Drink with him. Go home with him and see what happens.”

“But what if we sleep together and it’s weird?”

“So? It’s already weird between you two. You can’t screw it up more than it already is.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I’m just being honest,” she says. “There’s definitely a vibe between you two. There always has been. But maybe the timing wasn’t right back then.”

“The timing?”

“Yeah. You were ready to jump into a relationship with him then, but maybe he wasn’t. You know he’s never had a real girlfriend before, even since graduation. Maybe now he’s finally in a place to settle down and get serious with someone, and who better than you? You already know each other so well.”

“I’ve changed too,” I argue. “Can you believe he thought I was still a virgin? When I told him I wasn’t, you should have seen the look on his face.”

Jackie leans forward with an eager look. “And how did he react?”

“It’s hard to describe,” I say. “But I can tell you he’s never looked at me that way before.”

With a loud screech, Jackie begins bouncing in her seat.

“Girl, he’s totally crushing on you!”

“You think? But he’s rejected me before—”

“Weren’t you listening to a word I said? Obviously, he wasn’t ready before, but now that he knows you’re this sexually liberated woman, he wants to get a taste.”

“And what if that’s all he wants?” I ask. “Just a taste? I don’t know if I can handle getting my hopes up for a one-night stand.”

“Sounds like you two have a lot to talk about,” she answers with a sly grin. “Good thing there’s an open bar for you two to loosen up and get comfortable with each other. Then you can head back to his place and talk all night long if you want. Or *not* talk.”

I take a long sip of wine, feeling more conflicted than ever. What if I have this all wrong and I’ve completely misread his intentions? What if he only wants to sleep with me to satisfy his curiosity, which he’s never shown toward me before tonight?

Or worse, what if he isn’t interested at all? I’ve gotten it wrong before, misinterpreting our friendship as something more when it wasn’t. What if I’m falling into the same trap again, assuming his stolen glances and protective nature is more than what it actually is?

I don’t think I can go through the pain of having Evan break my heart again.

The next morning, I wake up before my alarm even goes off. My eyes wander over to the empty glasses of wine sitting on the nightstands, and I realize Jackie and I passed out in her bed.

I spend a few minutes watching the lake through the window. However, the sky looks gray as clouds roll above the tops of the trees, and alarm bells sound off in my mind.

In a panic, I grab my phone and check the weather for the area, but it says nothing about rain or snow in the forecast today. Tomorrow, though, there's a 60% chance of snow, but as long as it's after the wedding, that's all that matters.

Still, best not to bring that up with Jackie. Today has to be perfect.

I roll over onto my side to face her, and I can't help but grin as I give her a gentle shake.

"Five more minutes..." she mumbles.

"Hey, Jackie, guess what?"

"What?"

"You're getting married today."

Slowly, her eyes flutter open, piecing together my words one by one. What begins as a look of confusion melts into full realization, and she jolts upright in the bed.

"Holy shit. I'm getting married today."

"How does it feel?"

"Honestly? It feels kinda weird but in a good way, like my whole life is about to change. I'm going to be Mrs. Jackie Masterson in less than twelve hours. Doesn't that sound so weird?"

"Yeah, I won't be able to find you in my phone when you change your name."

With a laugh, I stand up and head into the living room, leaving her to stew in disbelief on the bed.

We order room service for breakfast, and as I pack up my suitcase, I realize I have no sexy pajamas to wear tonight at Evan's place.

That is, if he hasn't changed his mind. Maybe he slept on it and decided it wasn't a good idea.

With our dress bags in hand and my suitcase in tow, Jackie and I head downstairs to the resort spa, where we're getting our hair and makeup done for the wedding. As soon as we arrive, the whirlwind of our day begins.

Layla and Vanessa are already in their salon chairs as we walk in.

"Oh, good, Jackie's here," Mrs. Kilgore says.

"Before you get your makeup done," Mrs. Masterson adds, "Drew sent along a little wedding day gift for you that he wanted you to open. He specifically said it's going to make you cry, so I needed to give it to you early in the day."

The four of us take a seat on the sofa to watch Jackie open Drew's gift, which is wrapped in silver paper and a white bow. It's obvious that Drew had a professional do the gift wrapping, since he's useless when it comes to that sort of thing.

However, when Jackie pulls out a journal, all of us are taken by surprise. She opens it up to the first page, where she begins to read the first entry aloud.

*"Sept. 9, 2013. Today, I met the most beautiful girl, and I think I'm going to ask her out. Her name's Jackie, and she's in my Intro to Accounting class. I think I'm in love with this girl already..."*

Jackie's face scrunches up in confusion, and she begins flipping through the journal. She stops on a page with two movie ticket stubs taped to the paper.

*"Oct. 18, 2013. Jackie and I went to the movies together tonight, and I kissed her for the first time..."*

*"Dec. 3, 2013. I hadn't meant to tell Jackie so soon, but I accidentally told her I loved her today. And she said it back..."*

Jackie's voice trails off, too overcome with emotion to continue reading aloud. With a loud sniffle, she flips through the pages to the final entry, and I peer over her shoulder as I realize what the gift actually is.

“Hold on,” I say, “was Drew keeping this journal of you all this time?”

With a nod, Jackie glances up at me with tears pooling in her eyes.

“He knew. He knew that we were going to get married. All of these entries are about me.”

She glances down at the final journal entry, trying to muster the ability to read it aloud without cracking.

*“Sept. 9, 2022. Today, nine years ago, was the day that I met you, Jackie. We’re getting married in a couple of months, so this is probably the last entry I’m going to write all by myself. From here on out, I want to fill the rest of these pages together. Whenever you get mad at me, I want you to look back on these memories to remember how I fell in love with you. And when we’re old and gray, I want us to look back on this journal filled with memories of love, of family, of happiness and sorrow, and remember what a wonderful life we shared together.”*

Tears are streaming down my face as I listen to Drew and Jackie’s love story. He knew from the day they met that he was going to share this journal with her one day, a living document of their relationship from the start, continuing on for years to come.

He was so sure of his love for her all this time, and here’s the proof.

As I clutch Jackie’s hand, sharing this moment with her, my tears reflect a mixture of emotions. I’m so touched on her behalf that a man could show a woman such love and devotion.

But I’m also envious that I’ve never experienced a love like that.

My thoughts turn to Evan. Jackie and Drew never once doubted their love, whereas Evan rejected me the moment I revealed my true feelings for him.

Even if that’s changed, do I still want him? I’m sure he never kept a journal like this with memories of me. I never held that

singular, special place in Evan's heart like that.

"Oh, goodness," Mrs. Kilgore weeps. "I think I'll need my makeup retouched after this."

"Who knew Drew, of all people, was such a romantic?" I say.

All four of us laugh through our tears as Mrs. Masterson passes around a tissue box.

The rest of the afternoon passes by in a blur, and before we know it, we're piling into the Kilgore's SUV to head over to the wedding venue.

I keep checking the sky, and the clouds seem more ominous than they did this morning.

As soon as we arrive in the parking lot, the wedding coordinator whisks us all to the bridal suite, where we get changed into our matching burgundy gowns. The spaghetti straps plunge into a deep V-shaped neckline, and the floor-length skirts have a steep slit up the side. They're tasteful while showing off our best assets, and I can't help but wonder what Evan's going to think when he sees me walking down the aisle in this.

A wedding photographer soon arrives to get staged pictures of us fluffing her gown and veil. I feel like I haven't had a chance to sit down all day except at the salon, and before we know it, we're already lining up for the ceremony to make our entrance.

We can hear the music start to play as the guests stop chattering, signaling to us that it's time.

The wedding coordinator is already sending Vanessa down the aisle when I turn to Jackie, who has her nerves written all over her face. Her dad is waiting around the corner, so when it's Layla's turn to walk, Jackie and I are left all alone.

"You okay?" I whisper.

"Yeah. It's weird that it's all led up to this moment, you know? I've been dreaming about this day since I was a little girl."

The wedding coordinator waves me forward, but I turn to Jackie one last time.

“It’s going to be perfect.”

Her lips stretch into a smile.

“Yeah. Thanks for everything, Cat. There’s no one else I’d rather have standing beside me today.”

I squeeze her hand one last time.

“See you down there.”

And with that, I step out from behind the trees.

I’m greeted with a stunning view as the sun begins to set across the lake. There must be nearly two hundred people waiting for us at the bottom of the path, each facing the circular wedding arch decorated in autumn florals and gauze linen.

Feeling bold, I glance to where Evan is standing at the very front next to Drew, and my heart skips a beat when I realize he’s staring back at me.

The way he openly admires my body unnerves me and thrills me all at the same time. It makes me feel sexy and self-conscious as my breath hitches in my throat, and the butterflies in my stomach make me feel lighter than air.

For the first time in a long, long time, I decide to throw caution to the wind, stuffing all my doubts deep down.

I’m going to give Evan a second chance. But this time, I’m going to make *him* work for it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### - EVAN -

Cat's beauty was never a question. But I've never seen her like this.

As she comes down the hill from the forest, her burgundy dress flutters behind her in the cold breeze. Although she has a scarf wrapped around her arms to keep warm, I still get a glimpse of cleavage, and I can't help but stare. Her wavy, brunette hair sweeps across her bare shoulders as her gaze finds my own, and the way her pupils dilate makes my throat go dry.

She was right there, ready for me for so long, and like the complete dumbass I am, I turned her down.

I've never been one to believe in fate. But maybe this weekend is proof that our destinies are intertwined, and that this is my second—and final—chance with Cat.

I can't screw this up.

Once she joins the rest of the bridal party up front, the acoustic guitarist begins to play a new song, signaling the arrival of the bride. Everyone's heads turn toward the forest, where Jackie appears in her long, white wedding gown. Her father guides her down the aisle, where Drew is ready to take her hand.

Cat reaches out to take Jackie's bouquet from her before the officiant begins the ceremony.



“We are gathered here today to celebrate the love that Drew and Jackie have discovered in each other, and to show our support for the lifelong commitment they are about to make...”

A lifelong commitment. I was never sure if my lifestyle was conducive to marriage, but I'd be lying if I said the idea didn't interest me. Being on the scene can be a lonely journey of self-discovery, but having someone to walk alongside me, sharing the same interests as me both in and out of the bedroom...

Unable to stop myself, I glance over at Cat, who is watching the ceremony with tears in her eyes. I've only seen her cry once before, and that was the day I rejected her feelings. But this time, these are tears of joy.

Could Cat be that person to walk by my side for the rest of my life?

I'm getting ahead of myself. What if her feelings for me have faded over the years? I haven't even asked her out and I'm already contemplating a future with her.

Who the hell even am I right now? I've never been *that* guy.

But maybe she's turning me into that guy.

The rest of the ceremony continues just like this, with me going back and forth in my mind about whether or not I even stand a chance with a girl like Cat Gallagher.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife!”

The audience erupts into cheers as Jackie and Drew kiss, and that's when the recessional music begins to play. Jackie takes her bouquet back from Cat before heading down the aisle, and I realize that's our cue.

Swallowing hard, I walk forward to meet Cat in front of the wedding arch. Without a word, I offer her my elbow, just as we practiced yesterday.

But this time, when she places her hand into the crook of my elbow, her touch sends a delicious shiver up my arm and down my spine. She's touched me so many times like this before, and I've never had this reaction to her.

I never allowed myself to go there with Cat.

But now, things are different between us. As we walk back up the aisle, side-by-side, I realize that Drew and Jackie are already being whisked away for pictures, which means Cat and I will have a brief moment alone before the rest of the bridal party joins us.

Tugging my pocket square out, I pass it over to Cat.

“Here.”

With a sniff, she untangles herself from my arm, which leaves me with an empty feeling. She accepts the token from me, dabbing carefully at her eyes with it.

“Did I ruin my makeup?”

Glancing down at her face, I notice she has a stray eyelash on her cheek. Without even thinking, I take her chin with my fingertips and brush the lash away with my thumb.

Cat’s mouth parts at my touch, and I have half a mind to run my thumb along her lower lip.

But Layla and Joe walk up to interrupt us, and Cat clears her throat as she steps away from me. She hands the pocket square back and casts her gaze to the ground.

Once Vanessa and Brandon join us, the wedding coordinator materializes around the corner to escort us away for photos. It’s difficult to find a moment to talk to Cat alone, especially since the photographer is executing his job with military-like precision, calling out different combinations of the wedding party like a drill sergeant.

When he’s finished, he releases us to join the cocktail hour while Jackie and Drew remain behind for more photographs. My eyes search for Cat, but when I spot her, Brandon is already at her side as they walk the path toward the lodge.

My eye twitches at the sight.

Before joining the cocktail reception, the first thing I do is head inside. The doors to the reception hall are closed, but the seating chart is sitting outside the entrance, propped up on a

floor easel. With my finger, I scan each row of tables for my name, hoping that Cat and I will be placed together.

Fuck. We're seated at different tables—but Brandon is with her.

How the hell am I supposed to test the waters with her if I can't get her alone? Brandon is going to use this opportunity to swoop in if I don't keep an eye out.

Speaking of which, I better go run interference on that situation.

Once I rejoin the cocktail reception, I order myself a beer while searching the party for any sign of Cat. I find her standing on the lawn with the rest of the wedding party, although Brandon is standing a little too close for comfort. Is this guy going to hover the entire night?

I head over to their group and step into the circle on Cat's opposite side.

"Oh, hey," Joe greets me. "We were just talking about our grand entrances."

"What do you mean?"

"When it's time to head in for dinner," Layla says, "the DJ is going to introduce all of us in pairs before announcing Jackie and Drew. At every wedding I've ever been to, the wedding party walks in doing a fun dance."

No one ever told me about this, and full panic begins to set in when I realize I'm about to make a fool out of myself in front of two hundred people.

"So, Evan, any ideas for ours?"

I glance down at Cat, who meets my gaze with an expectant look.

"Finger guns?" I shrug. "You know I'm a shit dancer."

Cat laughs, drawing my gaze to her eyes as they sparkle with humor.

"Some things never change. Let's keep thinking."

“Just don’t take our idea!” Joe says. “Layla and I are gonna do the Chicken Dance.”

Layla rolls her eyes.

“Okay, so it’s a work-in-progress,” Joe admits.

Everybody laughs except for me, and I can feel the sweat hanging on my brow at the very idea of dancing in front of an audience. And with Cat of all people. I’m trying to impress her, not turn her off with my pathetic dance moves.

The wedding coordinator rounds us up while everyone files inside for dinner. Running my hands through my hair, I try to come up with something quick, but I’m fresh out of ideas.

“Hey,” Cat whispers, “we’re just here to have fun, right? You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I hate dancing.”

“Then we’ll just walk in and wave.”

It sounds so lame when she puts it like that. It’s not exactly the suave image I’m trying to project to her.

When the DJ calls out Brandon and Vanessa’s names to the crowd, the wedding coordinator ushers them into the room. Everyone begins to whoop and holler as they shake their asses and twerk toward the middle of the room, where a dance floor is waiting for them.

Next up are Layla and Joe, who enter the room doing a shoulder shimmy as they make their way to where Vanessa and Brandon are waiting.

An idea pops into my head, and I turn to Cat, leaning low to whisper in her ear.

“Just follow my lead.”

“Give it up for your maid of honor, Cat Gallagher, and the best man, Evan Simmons!”

As though the DJ was announcing a championship wrestling match, he calls out our names to the entire room, which erupts into cheers. I grab Cat’s hand in mine and lead her inside,

waving to everyone as we make our way through the tables of people toward the center of the room.

If I can pull this off, it's going to be romantic as hell, but if it backfires...

Just before Cat and I stop on the dance floor, I raise her hand in the air above her head and lead her in a gentle spin. A playful smile appears on her face, and when she finishes her turn, I wrap my other arm around her waist in support, pulling her against me.

Her hazel eyes open wide as I start to lean her back, finishing our entrance with a dip. With her gaze glued to mine, I barely hear the cheering of the guests as we stay like this for just a second longer. I notice her lips parting a little as she sucks in a sharp breath, and I hope she's just as affected by this moment as I am.

Heart pounding in my chest, I pull her back up and we both give a bow. Relief washes over me as everyone's attention turns toward the far end of the hall.

"And now, introducing for the very first time, Mr. and Mrs. Masterson!"

I realize I'm still holding onto Cat's hand, but it's time for us to take our seats at separate tables. Reluctantly, I release her from my grip, and I feel a warmth spreading from my palm where we touched.

A longing sets in as she retreats to her table. Throughout the meal, I keep glancing over at Cat and Brandon, who are laughing and drinking together like they're the only two people in the room.

After the entrees are cleared, the music switches from soft romance to Top 40 pop.

"Come on, everybody!" the DJ shouts. "Let's get this party started!"

I need a stiff drink before I approach Cat. After the stunt I just pulled with our grand entrance, I might not be such a terrible dancer after all, but I still need some liquid courage before getting her on the dance floor.

With determination, I get up to make my way over to the bar when a figure steps in front of me.

“There you are,” Vanessa says, grabbing my tie. “Let’s dance.”

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### - CAT -

A horrible, sinking feeling comes over me as soon as I glance at the dance floor. An upbeat song blasts through the DJ's sound system, and I spot Vanessa grinding her ass up against Evan with the rhythm, surrounded by other couples dancing like they're in a nightclub.

I thought his intentions were pretty clear this evening. The way he brushed my cheek after the ceremony, how he held my hand during our grand entrance, dipping me as we locked eyes...

Did I misinterpret those moments in a way I shouldn't have? It wouldn't be the first time.

This feels like college all over again. I thought our close friendship had meant more to him back then, and look how wrong I was.

God, I can't believe how stupid I am. I fell for it all over again, hook, line, and sinker. I was so desperate for him to reciprocate my feelings that every touch, every glance tonight felt like something more.

"Hey, Cat, you okay?"

I glance to the seat on my left where Brandon is looking at me with a curious expression. Here I am, sitting at the dinner table staring on as Evan and Vanessa sway sensually to the music.

Well, I suppose Vanessa is doing all the work, while Evan just lets her push her ass against his junk.

How pathetic do I look right now?

“Do you want some shots?” I ask, slapping my hand on the table. “Yeah, I need shots.”

“Sure, let’s go.”

As we head over to the open bar, I glance up to see a sly grin on his face.

Brandon calls out to the bartender over the loud music. “Two tequila shots.”

The lights from the chandeliers are dimmed, making the wedding hall dark as gobo lights and lasers flash across the floor. It looks like the real party is getting started now that the sun has gone down, which means I only have a couple more hours to endure before I get to leave.

And then go where? To Evan’s house? Is he going to try to bring Vanessa home with him tonight too? Oh, my God, will I have to listen to them fucking all night long in the next room?

As soon as the bartender sets our shots down, I snatch one off the counter, downing its contents before biting into my lime.

“Uh, cheers?” Brandon lets out a chuckle before he takes his own shot.

“Another round,” I call out. “Please.”

As we wait for the bartender, Brandon leans against the bar, shifting his body closer to me.

“Hey, do you want to take some pictures in the photo booth after this?”

Before I answer, the bartender sets down the shots on the counter, and that’s when I notice Evan glancing my way.

“You know what, Brandon?” I say, lifting my shot glass to him. “Let’s go take those pictures right now. Cheers.”

With a wide grin, he clinks his glass against mine, and we throw back the shots at the same time. Once I set my glass



down on the counter, I wrap my arm in his, pretending not to notice Evan's eyes on us as we cross the room together.

There's a silly assortment of hats and accessories for us to wear, so I opt for a mustache on a stick and a bowler hat. Brandon selects a clown wig and sunglasses, and we head inside the photo booth, closing the curtain behind us.

"I'm glad it's a little quieter in here," Brandon says, throwing his arm around me.

He leans in close as the first flash of the camera lights up the booth, but his breath reeks of tequila.

"Do you still need to crash in my room tonight?"

That's a good question. I'm assuming Evan's offer still stands, but if he's planning on taking Vanessa back tonight too, then Evan's rental house is the last place on earth I want to be tonight.

"Um, maybe," I answer. "Evan also offered me his spare room, but I'm not so sure."

The camera bulb flashes once again, which takes me by complete surprise, and I blink my eyes to get the spots in my vision to go away.

"You know, Cat, I have a bit of a confession to make. I've liked you for a long time, so I'm glad we had the chance to reconnect this weekend."

He wraps his arm tighter around my shoulder and pulls me against his side. I can feel his nose brush against my hair.

Another flash of the camera catches the moment on film, but there's still one more photo left to take.

Brandon reaches his other arm toward my face, grabbing my chin to tilt it toward him, and our noses are only inches apart. The smell of tequila fills the booth, permeating my nose with a burn that makes me scrunch my face in disgust. As he leans in, I turn away, and his lips land squarely on my cheek as I squeeze my eyes shut.

When the final flash of the camera clicks, I untangle myself from his grasp in haste before darting from the booth, tossing

my accessories on the table as I go.

“Cat, wait!”

I can hear Brandon calling out after me, but I make a beeline for the bar where Evan and Joe are standing. Wrapping my arms around myself, I take hasty steps toward them, trying to put as much distance as possible between myself and Brandon.

“You aren’t going out there for the bouquet toss?” Joe asks.

I glance over at the dance floor where a group of single women are gathered in a group behind Jackie, clamoring for a spot at the front.

“No, I’d rather have a drink,” I answer. “A strong one.”

Why did I react that way? I know I wasn’t thrilled about the idea of Brandon having a crush on me, but I thought that I could settle for him as my weekend date.

Maybe I’m still holding out hope that it will be Evan, even though Vanessa seems to be sticking close to him this evening. But I can feel Evan’s gaze boring into my forehead as I stare at the floor.

Glancing over his shoulder at the bartender, Joe opens the flap of his suit jacket and pulls out a flask, shaking it with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Whiskey?”

“Joe!” I hiss. “What are you thinking, sneaking alcohol into the venue? That’s against the rules.”

“Only if you get caught.”

He gives me a boyish wink, but I reach out and pull his jacket down to conceal the contraband. Cheers erupt from the dance floor as one of the guests holds the bouquet triumphantly in the air.

“You could get Jackie and Drew in a lot of trouble, you know. Don’t pull that out again.”

“Ugh, fine,” Joe says, “You’re such a buzzkill. And here I was, thinking of inviting you to the after party.”

“What after party?”

“At Evan’s place. He’s got a sweet A-frame rental that only Drew’s seen, so we figured we’d keep the party going after the wedding’s over.”

I glance across the circle at Evan, who is making no effort to mask his irritation.

“For the record,” he says to me, “they invited themselves.”

“Great!” Vanessa chimes in as she and Layla approach. “Then it’s settled. Party at Evan’s!”

Either Vanessa didn’t catch his sarcasm, or she doesn’t care, but this means I won’t be alone in the house with her and Evan. At least Layla and Joe will be my buffer.

“Did someone say there’s an after party?”

Brandon’s voice makes me bristle as he joins the circle, clapping Joe on the back.

“Yeah, we’re all heading to Evan’s after the reception,” Layla says. “I guess I’m the only one sober enough to drive, though.”

“I can drive too,” Evan says. “But you all better have a plan to get back to the hotel because you are *not* crashing at my place.”

“We’ll need to make a beer run,” Joe says. “Do you have a folding table for beer pong?”

The six of us hang out next to the bar for the remainder of the reception. Brandon doesn’t ask me to dance or try to get me alone again—but neither does Evan.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen,” says the DJ over the loudspeaker, “make your way to the exit so we can send off the bride and groom in style!”

The wedding coordinator hands out tiny bottles of bubbles to the guests and directs us to form two lines along the sidewalk. Once we’re organized, we begin to blow a sea of bubbles into the air as Jackie and Drew appear in the doorway, grinning with pure joy as they make their way down the sendoff line.

A limousine awaits them on the curb to take them back to the hotel, but Jackie stops to give me a hug.

“Thank you so much for everything,” she whispers in my ear. “This night was perfect.”

“Anything for my bestie. Congratulations.”

“Have fun tonight.”

She steps away, giving me a wink before turning toward the limousine. Jackie doesn't know about the wild after party that has destroyed any chance of a romantic reunion between Evan and me, but there's no time to explain that.

At least one of us will be getting laid tonight, and it's certainly not me.

With one last wave, Jackie and Drew disappear into the limo, which slowly pulls away from the venue. Some of the guests disperse into the parking lot to head home, while others head inside to collect their coats and purses.

Turning my gaze up at the night sky, I notice there are low-hanging clouds obscuring the moon and stars from view. I tighten my wrap around my shoulders as I head inside.

Layla and I make our way to the bridal suite, since we promised Jackie we'd clean out any of her items left behind. However, when we step through the door, I freeze in my tracks.

Platters of food and plastic water bottles lie scattered everywhere, along with our dress bags and makeup accessories.

“Geez,” Layla says. “I hadn't realized we'd made such a mess.”

“Where'd Vanessa go?”

Her absence is noted, especially since she left all of her things behind.

“I'll text her,” she says.

We begin by picking up all the trash and depositing it into the waste bin. By the time we've finished wiping all the makeup

from the counters, Layla's phone finally pings with a response from Vanessa.

"What'd she say?"

"She says she already left with the guys for the beer run," Layla answers, rolling her eyes. "She'll meet us at Evan's place."

Throwing my makeup bag into my suitcase, I don't even try to hide my anger.

"And I'm assuming she wants us to grab her stuff and bring it with us?"

"Yeah."

We spend the next twenty minutes cleaning the suite in a weary silence. I can feel her frustration rolling off of her, and a part of me is celebrating the fact that someone else sees Vanessa for who she really is.

But that bitch is sinking her claws into Evan as we speak, and I'm stuck here on cleanup duty.

Once we've loaded everything into Layla's car, she starts the engine and turns the heat on high. Shivering, the two of us wrap our pashminas around ourselves, but the thin fabric is no match for the freezing mountain air as we wait for the car to get warm.

"M-My teeth are c-chattering," Layla says. "And I c-can s-see my b-breath!"

"I'm j-just glad to sit d-down. My f-feet are k-killing me."

I reach down to take off my heels, rubbing my frozen toes as I sit in the parking lot feeling cold, miserable, and exhausted.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### - EVAN -

I seem to be the only one sober enough to drive, so I allow Joe, Brandon, and Vanessa to pile into my car. They'd better call taxis to get back to the hotel, because I'm not going to be their designated driver all night long.

As I navigate along the dark roads toward the nearest liquor store, the three of them chat in loud, obnoxious voices, and my knuckles turn white as I grip the steering wheel in my hands.

When Joe came up with the stupid idea to host an after party at my place, he didn't even give me the chance to say no.

Drunk bastard.

Something's been bothering me all night, but I haven't found the chance to ask Cat about it. I watched her go into the photo booth with Brandon, but when she came out, she seemed upset.

If he tried something...

I glance into the rearview mirror at him, where he's laughing at something Vanessa said in the back seat. I'll be keeping my eye on him tonight, and if he doesn't behave, I'm kicking his ass to the curb.

There's only one liquor store open in town, and we barely make it in time before they close. I give the cashier an apologetic smile as Joe and Brandon load up on the cheapest beer they can find.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a wall of wine bottles for sale. In college, Cat had a favorite wine that she would always drink at parties, but I can't seem to remember the name. It was a rosé wine with a pink and white label, but that's all I can recall. What was it again...?

Moscato. It was Barefoot Pink Moscato.

Grabbing the bottle from the shelf, I add it to our haul on the checkout counter for the cashier to scan it.

"That'll be \$82.75."

"You're buying, Joe," I say. "This kickback was your idea."

With a grimace, he pulls out his wallet and pays the cashier.

"Oh, Evan, you're so thoughtful," Vanessa says, wrapping her arm into mine. "I love this brand of wine!"

What did Cat used to call this? Oh, yeah. *Basic bitch wine*.

"What's so funny?"

Vanessa's smile falters as she gives me a strange look, and I realize I'm grinning like an idiot at the memory.

"Nothing. Let's go."

Untangling myself from her grasp, I follow the guys out to the car and pop the trunk to load the alcohol. I'm hoping Cat and Layla won't get to the house before we do, so I'm anxious to get back. It's cold tonight, and I would hate for them to be stuck waiting outside.

It takes us about twenty minutes to take the meandering mountain roads back to the house, but Cat hasn't arrived yet.

Everyone files in behind me and makes themselves right at home. Brandon and Joe begin to set up beer pong on the dining room table, and Vanessa starts rummaging through the cupboards.

"Evan, where are your wine glasses?"

"It needs to chill first," I answer, snapping it off the counter.

After hiding the bottle toward the back of the refrigerator, a knock at the door makes my stomach do an excited flip.

Vanessa goes to answer it, and soon all the girls are joining us in the kitchen with Cat's suitcase in tow.

"Hey, let me take that upstairs for you," I say to her.

Cat gives me a small, relieved smile as I reach for her bag and roll it toward the staircase. I can feel Vanessa's eyes on my back as I lead Cat up the stairs into the loft.

I haven't spent any time up here—except to change the sheets in anticipation of Cat's arrival. The ceilings are high, with the wood plank walls sloping upward to touch at the top. The lighting is much dimmer, with the lamps on the nightstands giving the bedroom a romantic, cozy glow.

There's a king-sized bed against the wall with a wrought-iron headboard, which gives me all sorts of ideas...

"Wow, this place looks nice," she says. "Isn't this the master, though?"

"I'm sleeping downstairs if you need anything."

"Are you sure? You're paying for the house, so you should sleep up here."

"Don't worry about it," I say. "By the way, I wanted to ask you something before we head downstairs."

Cat tenses as her eyes grow wide.

"Um, sure, what's up?"

"Did something happen with Brandon tonight? You looked a bit freaked after the photo booth."

"Oh, that." She bites her lip and averts her gaze, shifting to her other foot. "It was just a misunderstanding. Anyway, thanks again for letting me stay here."

"Of course. My pleasure."

She turns to head toward the stairs, and my eyes drop down to the sway of her hips as she walks away from me. I want to wrap my arms around them to stop her from leaving. I'd rather spend the rest of the night up here alone with her than rejoin the party, but she's already halfway down the stairs by the time I come to my senses.



In the kitchen, the others have started a team-style beer pong match with Layla and Joe against Vanessa and Brandon. At least that will keep them distracted while Cat and I talk some more.

“Oh, by the way, Cat, I have a surprise for you.”

She follows me over to the refrigerator, where I pull out the bottle of pink Moscato and dangle it in front of her face.

“Wow!” she says. “I haven’t had this wine in years. How did you remember?”

“How could I not? It was the only thing you used to drink.”

As I pull some wine glasses down from the cabinet, I can’t help but relish how good it feels to laugh like this with her again. Things used to be so comfortable between us when we’d stay up late to play board games and eat pizza, making each other laugh all night long. We used to talk about anything and everything, and nothing was off-limits—except for what I did in the bedroom.

If there was a festival in town, Cat was always down to go with me. If she was stuck at work without a ride home, I’d be the one she would call, and I would drop everything to help her. We’d even scope out dates for each other on campus, although neither of us ever followed through with it.

She was my best friend, and being here with her now, I realize how empty my life has been these past five years without her.

Cat screws open the cap to pour our glasses, and I hold mine up in the air for a toast.

“To reuniting with old friends.”

The smile on Cat’s face falters as she clinks her glass against mine.

“Yeah. Cheers.”

As soon as we take a sip, Brandon and Vanessa erupt into celebration.

“Sounds like they won the match,” I say.

Cat and I head over to rejoin the group at the table, where Joe and Layla are shaking their heads in disappointment. Brandon gives Vanessa a high-five before throwing his arm around Cat.

“Did you see that? We’re the beer pong champions!”

Cat gives him a weak smile—which looks more like a grimace—as Brandon pulls her closer against him. I see her try to step away, but his arm holds her in place.

“Hey, man, you need to back off,” I warn.

Everyone in the room goes silent as all eyes dart back and forth between me and Brandon, who lets out a hollow laugh. He holds his hands up in the air in surrender, stepping away from Cat as he tries to break the tension in the room.

“Woah, I didn’t realize you still had a claim on her. My bad, dude.”

“No. Clearly, she not interested. *You* just can’t take a hint.”

“Oh, I get it. Cat still has a thing for you after all these years. Is that it?”

Cat opens her mouth to protest, her face turning bright red, but I step forward in between them to shield her from view.

“No, she was never interested in you, not even in college when you were following her around like a lost, little puppy.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to get close to Cat when you were scaring all the guys off,” he shoots back. All trace of humor is gone from his eyes as he narrows his gaze at me. “But I see how you are. You aren’t interested in her, but you won’t let anyone else have her. It’s fucking sick, dude.”

“I think you need to leave. Don’t ever come near Cat again, or I will beat your ass.”

Brandon takes a step toward me, but Joe grabs a hold of his arm before he can swing. I step backward, keeping Cat protected behind me.

“Let’s all cool off, okay?” Joe says. “We’ve all had a lot to drink tonight.”

Vanessa and Layla shuffle away down the hall, and Joe pushes Brandon into a chair while passing him a water bottle.

Pulling Cat into the kitchen, I glance around to make sure no one's listening. Still, I keep my voice low.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

Her tone is rather clipped, and she turns her back toward me to face the counter, where she tops off her glass of wine.

"Are you mad at me?" I ask.

"I don't know."

"You should be mad at Brandon for being an asshole, not me."

"Why do you always do this?" she asks, whipping around to face me. Her cheeks are flushed with anger as she meets my gaze head-on.

"Do what? Stick up for you? He was clearly making you uncomfortable—"

"I can take care of myself, Evan. I don't need you to fight my battles for me anymore, so stop acting jealous when you don't even want me like that!"

"But I—"

I'm about to tell her that I *do* want her like that, to lay my feelings bare in the heat of the moment, but the thing that catches my eye over Cat's shoulder makes the words stick in my throat, choking me like molasses.

I grip the counter beside me as the room starts to spin, and my stomach lurches as Vanessa approaches us, jangling a familiar pair of handcuffs.

"Holy shit, Evan," she says. "I had no idea you were such a freak. It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?"

Cat turns around, her face scrunched in confusion as Vanessa stumbles into the living room, showing everyone the cuffs in her hand. Joe and Brandon look on with wide eyes, and Layla

steps out of the bathroom, walking into the kitchen with a puzzled look on her face.

“Oh, my gosh!” Vanessa puts on an air of drama as she gasps, covering her mouth with her hand. “Cat’s staying here tonight...are we interrupting your evening? I didn’t realize you two were into this sort of thing.”

“So, there *is* something going on between you and Cat,” Brandon says. “Are you like, friends-with-benefits or something?”

“God, no, it isn’t like that.”

My voice comes out like a hoarse gasp, and my throat feels tight as I watch Cat close herself off, stepping back to put some distance between us.

Everyone is staring at me like I’m some kind of sick freak, making my forehead break out in a cold sweat.

This. This is the moment I’ve been dreading my entire life. The judgment and repulsion.

“So...you just brought handcuffs to a wedding, but no date?” Joe asks.

“What the fuck,” Brandon mutters.

“Oh, come on,” Vanessa says. “Personally, I think that’s kind of hot.”

She comes over to grab my wrist, and my body is in too much shock to protest. My feet allow her to lead me over to the living room, where she pushes me down into an armchair.

The tense atmosphere in the room relaxes as Vanessa crawls on top of me, straddling my lap as she begins to grind against me. Everyone seems eager to make light of this, lubricated with alcohol as they look on at Vanessa’s show. Joe begins to whoop and holler as Layla takes a seat beside Brandon on the sofa. They’re all drunk off their asses and laughing as Vanessa leans down to whisper in my ear.

“Forget Cat. Let me show you how much of a freak I can be too.”

My body is frozen as she wraps the chain of the handcuffs around my neck, and the others begin to cheer as she rolls her body against my chest. Joe pulls his phone out to play some rap music with a wide grin on his face.

“Drew’s missing out on the real bachelor party!”

But I’m barely registering what’s happening. The only thing I’m focused on is Cat, who’s staring at me like I’m a complete stranger.

After our eyes meet, she darts for the door, running out into the cold night as the door slams shut behind her. No one seems to notice since all eyes are on Vanessa, who’s climbing off my lap to sink to her knees on the floor. Leaning forward, she brushes her face against my thighs, eliciting howls of laughter from the others.

“Oh, my God, this is crazy!” Joe hollers, his face lit up with delight.

Gripping my knees, Vanessa forces my legs apart, licking her lips as she gazes up at me. Her hands start to run up my thighs, and as she inches closer to my zipper, I’m catapulted back to reality.

“Stop.”

I grab her wrists, yanking her off with a clear warning in my voice. Everyone’s laughter ceases as Joe reaches over to pause the music.

The room falls silent.

“Evan,” Vanessa purrs, “I had no idea you were so rough. I like it—”

“That’s enough,” I hiss, pushing her backward. “Who the hell do you think you are, going into my bedroom and touching my stuff?”

“Geez, why are you making it such a big deal?”

“Yeah, man,” Brandon says. “It’s just a party. Lighten up.”

“No, it’s not. Party’s over.”

“If you wanted to be alone with Vanessa, you could have just asked,” Brandon pushes. “Were you planning a threesome with her and Cat? ‘Cause it didn’t look like Cat was into that, or the handcuffs—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I snap. “Now get out. All of you.”

Everyone starts to gather their stuff, but Vanessa stays put, smoothing out her dress.

“You too.”

“Me?” she asks. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay? I’d let you tie me up.”

“Get it through your empty head. I’m not going to sleep with you tonight. Or ever. Get out.”

She scoffs.

“Whatever. Freak.”

The handcuffs lie forgotten on the chair behind me as everyone gathers their belongings in silence. They shuffle outside one-by-one, and I wait until the door finally shuts behind Vanessa.

I’m sure they’re all gossiping right now about what a psycho I am for carrying around handcuffs with me. This will get back to Drew and Jackie, and probably a few other mutual acquaintances from college.

*Evan Simmons: The Perverted Freak.*

My reputation among my small circle of friends will be forever ruined. I’ll always be associated with this low moment in my life and looked upon with apprehension.

But there’s one person whose opinion I care about the most, and I need to set things straight with her.

This isn’t how I wanted Cat to find out my secret. But now that it’s out there, I need to tell her how I really feel about her.

Because I don’t think I’ll get another chance.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### - CAT -

Standing on the edge of the lake, I wrap my arms around myself as I shiver. A breeze brushes up from the water's edge, sending a chill through my entire body as the first signs of snow begin to drift down from the velvety night sky.

I know I need to go inside and get a coat, but I can't bear to watch Vanessa giving Evan a lap dance.

A numbness begins to spread through my limbs, and I don't know if it's from the weather or from shock.

I'm not sure how long I've been standing here, but when I hear footsteps heading down the dark shore behind me, I know it's Evan without even turning around.

"Cat, come inside. It's freezing out here."

When I don't answer, I see him step beside me out of the corner of my eye. The only source of light is coming through the windows of the house behind us, giving me a dim glimpse of his face.

"Can we go inside and talk?"

I can't help the scoff that escapes my lips as I shake my head.

"God, I feel so stupid. So, did you just want to sleep with me to get it out of your system? Is that why you invited me to stay the night?"

“No. I know this looks really bad, but it isn’t like that, I swear.”

“Then was it Vanessa you were planning on sleeping with? If you wanted some privacy—”

“I don’t give a shit about Vanessa. I just told her and the rest of them to leave, so why don’t we head inside and talk this out? You’re freezing.”

“Then why did you bring handcuffs this weekend? Clearly, you were looking to hook up with someone, but I guess it didn’t matter who it was. Are women just expendable to you? Even our friendships are expendable the moment things get complicated.”

He grabs my arm and spins me around to face him, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“Cat, you’ve got it all wrong. This is just a big misunderstanding.”

“No, I don’t think I have it wrong,” I say. “Brandon made a really good point. You were always chasing other guys off, making sure I stayed single. I thought that meant you wanted me for yourself, but as soon as I confessed my feelings, you didn’t want me.”

“I’m sorry, that was a mistake.”

“Do you know how humiliated I was?” I shout, feeling the tears well up in my eyes. “And after that happened, you never spoke to me again. You never called. You just...let me go so easily.”

“I didn’t know how to react after that!” he says, his tone full of frustration. “You completely blindsided me that day, and after I didn’t hear from you, I thought you didn’t want to see me again.”

“How could I not? You were my best friend! If you didn’t want to be with me, that’s fine, but you didn’t even fight for our friendship. Like it meant nothing.”

“Hey, you didn’t fight for us, either. Friendship is a two-way street.”



His words sting, hitting me right where they hurt the most. Tears begin to roll down my face, although they feel like they're freezing beneath my eyelashes.

"Wow, Evan. Fuck you."

Without waiting for a response, my feet begin to stride up the path toward the house as if on autopilot. The cold air whips through my hair as tiny snowflakes land on my skin, which is covered in goosebumps from the chilly night. All I want is to get away from Evan, but when he calls my name, it only makes me break out into a run.

"Cat, wait!"

I have to get out of here. This weekend has brought up so many emotions I wasn't ready to face, and seeing Evan again makes them feel raw. It's like I'm reliving that day I confessed my feelings all over again, along with all the pain and humiliation that came with it. It took a long time for me to recover from that, and having Evan say the agonizing truth aloud reopens those old wounds that never truly healed.

Bursting in through the front door, I dart for the stairs, but Evan is hot on my heels, our footsteps pounding on the wooden steps. Grabbing my suitcase, I try to push past him to head back down, but he blocks my path.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm calling a taxi to take me back to the hotel. I'm getting in my car and driving back to Phoenix."

"You can't do that. You've been drinking."

"Fine, then I'll sleep in my car."

"It's snowing outside. You'll freeze."

"Are you going to chain me up to the bed so I don't leave?"

His body tenses up as he takes a sharp breath, his face growing red.

"Come on," he says. "Don't be like this. Can you just give me a minute to explain?"

“Well, it’s not like I have a choice,” I answer, folding my arms across my chest. “You’re holding me captive.”

“Look, just give me five minutes, and after that, you can do whatever you want. Just listen to me, okay?”

“Fine.”

With a sigh, Evan runs a hand along his jawline, and my eyes lower to the dark stubble across his face.

“Yeah, I only ever thought of you as a friend,” he says, “but only because I couldn’t let myself cross that line with you. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I didn’t want to destroy our friendship. I was always afraid that if you knew the real me, you’d want nothing to do with me. And after the way things went down, I realize now that letting you go was the biggest mistake of my life. This weekend has really thrown me for a loop, making me question everything about us, and it made me realize that I can’t just bury my feelings for you anymore.”

A fresh wave of tears comes over me again as Evan finishes. They’re the words I’ve always wanted to hear, but I can’t bring myself to trust him.

“I can’t be just friends with you,” I whisper. “It hurts too much. The only way to move forward is to either be together, or let each other go for good. Those are the only two options for us. There’s no in-between.”

I take a step back, steeling myself for his rejection.

Evan takes a step forward, closing the distance between us. He grabs my face with his hands, which are still icy from outside, and forces me to lift my gaze to meet his own.

“I want you to stay, Cat. Not because I want to sleep with you, but because I want to be with you.”

“Evan, please,” I whisper, “stop toying with my emotions like this. Just let me go.”

“No, I’m not letting you go. Not this time.”

His face descends onto mine, his lips meeting my mouth.

I always wondered what it would be like to kiss Evan Simmons, and I figured it would be slow and hesitant, exploring our emotions as we broke down the barriers of our friendship little by little, venturing cautiously into new territory. After all, it would take some time to adapt to the idea of being more than friends, adjusting to the weirdness that came with the confession of our true feelings.

But this? This is not what I expected.

His body presses up against mine as he possesses my mouth, our lips fighting for dominance. My head is spinning, and I slide my hands up his back to keep from falling, digging my nails into his shirt. A small whimper escapes my throat as he sucks on my lower lip, and I find myself gasping for air.

There's no coming back from this. Evan and I are falling headfirst into uncharted waters.

Is that why I feel like I'm drowning in him?

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### - EVAN -

When will Cat believe that my feelings for her are real? How do I make her understand that I want to be with her, that I won't make the same mistake twice?

So I do the only thing I can think of. I kiss her.

I'm not really the type of guy that kisses women. It's an intimate act that creates feelings between two people, and I never wanted to complicate things with my partners.

But I really like kissing Cat. The way her plump, pillowy lips feel between mine, how they taste both sweet and salty all at once, and the way she kisses me back—it makes me feel things I've never felt before.

My mind goes blank as our kiss deepens, and I let my body take the lead, following my instincts as I hold her face close to mine. I don't want to let go, and I show her that as my tongue traces the line of her lower lip, teasing and enticing her.

The soft moan that escapes her throat, swallowed up by my mouth, drives me wild and makes my cock strain against my pants. I start losing grip on reality, but as soon as I feel her fingers fiddling with my belt, it's like a bucket of cold water is tossed over me.

Breaking our kiss, I push her backward until she's pressed up against the wall, and I pin her wrists above her head in my

firm grip. Her eyes go wide as we gaze at one another, our ragged breaths filling the short space between our faces.

It's clear that she's waiting for me to make the next move.

"We should probably talk first," I say. "Before things go any further."

"Yeah..."

But in this position, with her restrained against the wall with my body, it's difficult to focus. With a deep breath, I release her from my grasp, taking a step back to put a little distance between us.

"Let's sit down."

She nods at my suggestion and follows me over to the bed, and the mattress dips as we take our seats. As turned on as I am right now, I know that things can't proceed between us until we clear the air about my lifestyle.

It's an exercise in self-control.

"Before we take things too far," I begin, "I need to be upfront about something. I really want to be with you, Cat, but I want to be honest about what a relationship with me actually means. I have, uh, particular needs when it comes to sex."

"You mean...the handcuffs?" she asks. "Lots of people play with handcuffs in the bedroom."

This piques my interest, and I quirk my brow at her words.

"It goes much deeper than that. Handcuffs are considered pretty tame in my world."

"And what is 'your world,' exactly?"

I try to read the expression on Cat's face as she studies me. She seems a little apprehensive, but also curious, and I know I need to bite the bullet and get on with it.

"Bondage."

Once again, I pause for her reaction, but this declaration only seems to confuse her more.

“Doesn’t everyone experiment with bondage?” she asks. “It doesn’t sound like that big of a deal.”

“In the bondage scene, I’m what you would call a rigger. I need to tie up and restrain my partner in order to get off during sex. It’s my kink, and it goes much deeper than what people see in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. That’s why I’ve always kept it a secret from you and everybody else, because if you knew how far this could go, you’d realize how fucked up I really am. And it takes a specific type of person to be compatible with that kind of fucked up, one that enjoys being tied up for pleasure each and every single time we’re intimate. That’s why I haven’t been in a long-term relationship.”

“Wait, you’ve been keeping this a secret since we met in college?”

I let out a hollow laugh.

“I’ve been like this since puberty. I remember the first time I found my dad’s porn collection in the garage. I must have been twelve or thirteen, but when I flipped through, I didn’t have a normal reaction. I searched the internet for all types of porn, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. Vanilla sex just never interested me or got me aroused. At one point I wondered if I was gay, but even that didn’t get me off. But once I discovered bondage, I became obsessed when I realized that’s what turned me on.”

I realize I’ve been staring at my hands this entire time, so when I glance up to gauge Cat’s reaction, my stomach churns. She looks pale, and a part of me wonders if she’s about to be sick all over the bed.

“Look, if this isn’t something you’re interested in, I understand,” I say. “I promise I won’t force you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with, and if you decide right now you want nothing to do with this, I’ll respect that. I’ll lock away my feelings and never mention this again. But...I still want us to be friends. I really, really miss you Cat.”

She takes a deep, shuddering breath, and I shut my mouth. I’m desperate to hear what she’ll say next, but I’m also terrified to hear her rejection.

What if she wants nothing to do with me? What if she thinks I'm a sick, perverted freak and wants me out of her life for good?

"Is that the real reason you turned me down before?" she asks in a quiet voice.

"In a way? Yeah. I figured we weren't sexually compatible, so I never let myself go there with you."

"How would you know we weren't 'sexually compatible' if we never tried?"

"This type of lifestyle isn't for the inexperienced," I explain. "And I knew you were—well, you know."

"A virgin?" she asks. "I had you to thank for that. You scared off all the guys."

My chest feels ten pounds lighter when she gives me the faintest of smiles. I'm hanging on to every single word she says, interpreting every inflection, every subtle change on her face, anything that could give me any indication of what she thinks about all of this. She's got my heart on a yo-yo string, and I feel myself bouncing from the depths of despair and shame to hope that she might give me a chance.

"You know, Evan," she says, "I'm not that innocent little girl from college anymore."

"Trust me, I've gathered as much," I answer with a snort. "I realize that now, and I'm sorry for the way I treated you when you confessed your feelings. If you were half as nervous back then as I am now..."

I let out a long sigh as a weight is lifted off my chest. Carrying this secret around, keeping it guarded from Cat for as long as I did—I never realized what a burden it actually was. But letting her in on this, I feel like we can move forward, even if it's not in the way I want us to.

"So," I continue, "now that it's out in the open, I understand if it isn't your kink. But I do hope we won't lose touch this time, because I want you back in my life in any way that you'll let me. Even if I have to settle for just being friends. But I'm not

letting you go the way I did last time. That's a mistake that I've regretted for a long time."

I've laid everything out on the table for her, leaving no more secrets between us. She is in complete control about what happens next, and I'm holding my breath while I wait for her response. She's quiet as she mulls everything over, and I can't get a read on what she's thinking or feeling.

It's an agonizing wait for Cat to pass final judgment on me.

"I want...you to show me."

My face scrunches up in confusion.

"Show you what?"

"Show me your lifestyle. Let me in and show me what bondage is really about."

I feel my dick twitch again at her words, offering a tantalizing promise that I'm desperate to accept.

"Are you sure, Cat? Because once I open this door for you, there's a deep, dark rabbit hole that's waiting for you inside. It's not for the faint of heart."

Her face changes, and all traces of apprehension are gone as she gives me a firm and resolute expression. Cat pins me with a challenging gaze, as if daring me to venture inside that door with her.

"Show me."



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### - CAT -

At first, I thought Evan was making a big deal out of something minor. But as he delves further into his erotic lifestyle, the more I'm beginning to understand that he holds a lot of shame around it.

How lonely he must be, carrying this secret around for so long and keeping everyone at arm's length—including me.

I want him to show me his world. I want to know how deep his forbidden fantasies go, even though I'm afraid of what I'll find. But I want to know Evan again, the *real* Evan, and this doesn't change my feelings about him.

It makes me want to know more.

When I ask him to show me, I can see a flash of eagerness in his eyes, but there's something else too. Something... dangerous. It's a side of Evan I've never seen before, but it sends a thrill of excitement through my entire body, making my pulse quicken before he even makes a move.

“Are you sure, Cat? Because once I open this door for you, there's a deep, dark rabbit hole that's waiting for you inside. It's not for the faint of heart.”

“Show me.”

In one swift movement, he has me on my back, pinned beneath him like a cat that's just caught its prey. I let out a sharp gasp

as his body presses down on mine, trapping me against the mattress, and the musky aroma of his cologne fills my senses.

Our faces are so close together, and my eyes trail down to his lips. I want to kiss them again, so I crane my neck to meet his mouth, but he backs away before our lips touch. I try again, but he won't allow me to get any closer.

When I see a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, I realize that he's toying with me, frustrating me on purpose.

Two can play at that game.

I grab onto his shirt to pull him closer, trying to close the distance between us. But he's too quick, catching my wrists and pinning them above my head against the pillows.

He sits up, straddling my hips as he keeps a firm hold of my wrists in one hand. With the other, he reaches up to grab his tie, undoing the knot and tugging it from his collar with a snap against the bed.

He leans back over me and ties my hands to the headboard, the silk holding my wrists together above my head. I try to slip out, but I realize I'm caught in a firm, intricate knot.

"If it gets uncomfortable at any point, I want you to tell me," he says, his tone full of seriousness.

"I'm fine."

His face relaxes again, and I swear I see a hint of pride behind his hooded gaze. He sits back up, continuing to straddle me as his fingers begin to undo the buttons of his shirt one by one, taking his time as his gaze roams my body, as if deciding what he's going to do to me next.

It makes me wet just thinking about it.

As he shrugs off his shirt, exposing his bare chest to me, I realize I've never seen him with a shirt off in all the years we've known each other. He's lean and toned, and my eyes trail down past his abs. Already, I can see a bulge forming beneath his pants, and I can't wait to discover more of his body as the night continues.

Even though I'm still wearing my bridesmaid dress, I feel exposed and vulnerable beneath him, as though his hungry gaze can see right through my clothes. But there's something I like about this feeling, of being completely at his mercy, where he could have me any way he pleases.

The way he's taking control of the situation is a serious turn-on, and seeing this new side of Evan is thrilling. I thought I knew him so well as the kind, gentle soul with a dry sense of humor, but the man on top of me right now is domineering and possessive.

He's in his element right now, and it's hot as hell.

Evan begins to pull the hem of my dress up, which sends a shiver of excitement down my spine. I feel goosebumps erupting on my legs as he exposes my skin, and finally, my dress is bunched up above my waist.

Thank God I wore sexy panties tonight.

His finger traces gentle, weaving patterns on my stomach, coming dangerously close to the hemline of my underwear. I feel my body shudder at his touch, my breathing growing shallower with each passing second as he takes his time to tease me, setting my body on fire.

Finally, his hand slips down into my underwear to brush his fingers against my sex. A soft whimper escapes my throat, yearning for him to explore further.

As if he could read my mind, he slips a finger inside of me, giving me temporary relief from the aching need between my legs. My head rolls back as I close my eyes, savoring the sensation of his touch as he begins to move in and out against my sweet spot.

"You're so wet."

His voice is low and husky as he begins to pump faster, watching me from above as I wriggle and squirm, and I can feel my pleasure mounting as he brings me to the brink of climax. I'm inching closer to the edge, but just before I fall to pieces, he withdraws his finger, leaving me empty and frustrated.

“W-Why did you stop?”

“Because I’m not anywhere close to being done with you.”

He slides down toward the end of the bed, where he reaches up to hook his fingers in the waistband of my underwear, yanking them down to expose myself to him.

Tossing them aside onto the floor, he forces my legs apart, which gives him an unobstructed view of my sex. He licks his lips with ravenous hunger, shifting himself so that he’s lying between my legs.

“I want to taste you.”

I can feel my arousal pooling all over again at the sound of his words, which sends chills of anticipation through my body.

“Then do it.”

As his head dives forward, he burrows his nose between my legs, eliciting a sharp gasp from me. His arms wrap around my thighs, holding my legs apart in a vice grip that I’m powerless to fight as his fingers dig into my flesh.

I glance down to meet his gaze, and that’s when he glides his tongue along my opening. The tip of it makes contact with my clitoris, making me gasp with pleasure. A smirk spreads across his face at my reaction, and that’s when he begins to kiss and suck at me with his mouth.

If I could slip my arms out of my restraints, I would run my fingers through his soft, dark hair, holding him firmly in place while I buck my hips against his face. But in this position, I’m completely immobilized as he ravishes me with his mouth. When I feel his tongue slip inside, probing me with quick, rapid movements, I feel myself coming within reach of the height of my pleasure.

“Don’t stop,” I beg. “Please...”

His grip on me tightens as he begins to rock my hips against his face, and I hear the mattress squeak beneath us. My incoherent moaning reaches a fever pitch as I chase my release, and when he pulls me against his mouth, thrusting his

tongue deep inside, I feel myself falling over the edge as euphoria grips my body.

I can honestly say, without a doubt, that it has never felt this good in my entire life.

And yet, when he sits up, wiping my essence off his smug face, I find myself craving more.

“I want you inside of me.”

Evan raises an eyebrow at me. My chest rises and falls with labored breaths as I stare up at him, begging him for his cock.

“Let me go downstairs to grab a condom.”

“Just pull out,” I say, my voice breathless.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Now, fuck me.”

He lets out a low chuckle, shaking his head as he shifts on the bed to remove his shoes and pants. My eyes are glued to his lower half, and when he shoves his briefs off, his erection springs forth at full attention.

I’m not sure why, but I always thought that Evan would be average in that department. He never gave off any big dick energy, but sitting here, staring at his impressive length, I’m proven wrong.

“Like what you see?”

This was always our dynamic, pushing and challenging one another. Somehow, sex has brought us back into our familiar pattern, and I’m not about to give in to his ego and let him win.

“Are you going to just sit there, or are you going to do something with it?”

“Big talk coming from the girl tied up on my bed.”

He shifts again, straddling my body once more. As he positions the head of his manhood at my entrance, he locks eyes with me, and I feel all trace of humor leave the atmosphere between us.

For some reason, this feels like a big moment, like the real turning point in our relationship, and I think he feels the weight of this moment too.

I give him a firm nod, encouraging him to continue.

When Evan sinks into me, it takes me a moment to adjust around him, and we both let out a low moan at this new sensation. Hinging forward, his mouth comes down upon mine, kissing me as he begins to move.

He takes his time at first, savoring the taste of my lips as he slides in and out, lubricated with my own arousal. His hand comes up to stroke the length of my restrained arm, trailing down to cup my breast over my dress and kneading it with his fingers.

But soon he begins to increase his tempo, going faster as he thrusts into me over and over again. Still sensitive from my last orgasm, I feel myself edging closer to the brink once more, and soon I'm breaking our kiss to cry out his name toward the ceiling above.

As I reach the pinnacle, my body shudders with an intense, searing pleasure that grips me from the top of my head all the way down to my toes. Desire explodes inside of me, leaving me feeling weightless and lightheaded, and at last I feel a complete release of tension.

Evan withdraws himself from my sheath, and soon I feel his warm release on my stomach. His ragged panting fills the quiet space between us as we both struggle to catch our breaths. I can see his flushed face above me covered in sweat, clinging to his forehead as he reaches over to untie me from the bed.

As soon as the knot releases, I feel my arms drop into the soft pillows, my muscles shaking with fatigue from being restrained for so long.

Surely, Evan is even more exhausted after his impressive performance, but rather than collapse onto the bed beside me, he brings my arms down to my sides and begins to massage them.

“Let me go get you a towel to clean up.”

His voice is soft and tender, which takes me a bit by surprise as he rubs my wrists, and he leans over to give me a gentle kiss.

He climbs out of bed and heads toward the staircase, giving me a delicious view of his chiseled ass as he walks away.

I hear him shuffling around downstairs, and I take the moment to lie back further against the pillows. I want to get out of this dress, but my body feels so heavy and relaxed that I can barely move.

Evan reappears after a few minutes with a washcloth in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He sets the water down on the nightstand before he sets to work cleaning me up, and when the warm, wet washcloth makes contact with my skin, it feels soothing.

“Do you need a snack as well?” he asks.

“No, I’m okay,” I answer with a laugh. “You can relax too, you know.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Really, it’s fine. Come here.”

I pat the sheets beside me, and he gives me a small smile as he climbs onto the bed. Once I smooth my dress down over my legs, I reach over for the glass of water to take a long sip before passing it over to him.

“I don’t think anyone has ever been this attentive to me after sex,” I say.

“Aftercare is an important step, no matter how tame our play is.”

“*That* was tame?”

He laughs. “Yeah, that was very light bondage. We can slowly introduce you to the lifestyle and push the boundaries little by little. You need to walk before you can run.”

He sets the glass of water down, propping himself up against the pillows. To my delight, he wraps his arm around me and

pulls me close, allowing me to rest my head on his chest as he rubs gentle circles on my back.

It's almost like we're in a real relationship.

"You know, I always thought it would be weird," I muse. "I mean, the first time we had sex."

"Was it weird for you?"

"No, not at all. I liked it."

A wide grin stretches across his face. "I liked it too."

"It's just, we always had this unspoken line in the sand as friends, and neither of us dared to cross it. I thought that getting over that part would be awkward and strange, but it felt...right."

"Yeah. I know what you mean. I guess we'll never be just friends after this, huh?"

"No, I don't think there's any turning back at this point."

"Good," he says. "Because I don't want to turn back."

Evan places a gentle kiss on my forehead, and the two of us settle into a comfortable silence. I can't seem to stop smiling, and I never imagined in a million years that it was possible to be this happy.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### - EVAN -

There's something to be said about a good night's rest after sex. Before I even open my eyes, I can feel a smile stretching across my face.

Cat was incredible. I can see her taking to this lifestyle like she was made for it, although I still need to ease her into things. She needs to experience the lighter side of bondage before it gets too intense.

But we have time for that.

Her soft, rhythmic breathing fills the space beside me, and I open my eyes to find her still fast asleep beneath the covers. The sunlight catches her dark hair with a hazy morning glow, giving her an ethereal quality that I can't stop staring at.

I wouldn't mind waking up to this view every day.

Reaching for my pants on the floor, I fish my phone out of my pocket. With a glance at the time, we still have two hours before we need to be at the hotel for the wedding brunch. But I'm starving now, and I bet Cat is too after a night of drinking and fucking.

Careful not to jostle the bed too much, I tug my underwear on and head over to the staircase, keeping my footsteps as quiet as possible so as not to wake Cat. However, when I reach the window, I notice all the pine trees outside are coated in white snow, which is continuing to fall from the gray sky at an

alarming rate. As I head down the staircase, I catch a glimpse at the wooden deck outside, which looks like it's hidden under a thick, white blanket.

It must have been snowing all night long, and it doesn't look like it will let up anytime soon. I do a search for "Lake Arrowhead snow alerts" on my phone, and right away a dozen news articles pop up on my screen.

*Record snowfall for San Bernardino Mountains*

*Blizzard warning in effect for Lake Arrowhead, Crestline, Twin Peaks*

*San Bernardino Mountains: Winter storm ushers in snow early this year*

I cross the kitchen to the window overlooking the sink, and as I peer out, I see that my car is buried up to the windows.

"Good morning."

I nearly jump out of my boxers at the sound of another figure in the kitchen, but when I spin around, I find Cat standing there—in nothing but my button-up shirt from last night. The hemline hangs down to her thighs, and I can see the faint outline of her black panties through the starched fabric. My eyes wander down her body to her long, bare legs, and I don't even try to hide it.

"That shirt looks better on you than it does me."

"I figured you wouldn't mind if I borrowed it. That dress was uncomfortable to sleep in."

"You could have slept naked."

A pink blush blooms across her cheeks as she glances away, biting her lip to hide a shy smile. I make a mental note to tease her more like this, just so I can get this reaction again from her.

"I'm going to scrounge up something for breakfast," I say. "Let's see what we have left in the fridge."

"Nothing too heavy," she warns me. "Gotta save room for brunch and mimosas."

“Uh, I don’t think we’re going to make it, Cat.”

I hitch my thumb over my shoulder, gesturing to the window.

While I scan the contents of the refrigerator, Cat crosses over to the sink and peers out the window.

“Do you have an ice scraper?” she asks.

“You’re going to need much more than an ice scraper to dig that car out.”

“No...no, I can’t miss the sendoff brunch!”

I can hear the desperation in her voice, so I shut the refrigerator doors and walk over to her, placing my hands on her shoulders.

“There’s a blizzard warning in effect right now. Driving through these icy mountain roads in these conditions is dangerous. I’m sure Jackie and Drew will understand.”

The disappointment on her face is unmistakable, but all I can do is pull her into my embrace.

“Besides,” I add, “imagine all the fun we can have being stuck inside all day.”

I feel her breasts rise and fall with a small laugh against my chest, and she wraps her arms around my waist. We stand just like this for a few moments as she relaxes into me.

Maybe I can do this boyfriend thing after all. Not only did I give her great sex last night, but this morning I’ve managed to cheer her up *and* protect her from going out in a blizzard. Although, I might not be able to cook her a grand breakfast given the sad state of the refrigerator.

“Drew did the grocery shopping for the weekend,” I say, stepping back. “So, we might not have much to get us through the day.”

Cat hoists herself up to sit on the counter, and my eyes flick down toward her thighs. She lets out a long sigh as she stares out the window, and I immediately recognize the look on her face because I’ve seen it so many times.

Catherine Gallagher is a meticulous planner. She always has been. It's hard to get her to stray from a plan once she's set it into motion—except perhaps a blizzard.

“We'll probably need to stay here another night, huh?” she asks.

“Yeah, at least until snow plows clear the roads.”

“Are you able to get in touch with the rental host to extend the stay?”

“Yeah, I can text him now.”

“Good. We'll just have to make do with whatever food is left around here. I'll also need to text my boss and let her know I won't be back at work tomorrow.” She lets out a long sigh. “And we'll need to call Drew and Jackie to let them know we won't make the brunch.”

Her voice is heavy with resignation, but it's the final item on her mental checklist.

As I shoot a message off to the homeowner, Cat heads back upstairs to grab her phone. After a quick assessment of our food supply, I set to work making breakfast using the remaining eggs and sausage, and I pop a couple of pieces of bread into the toaster. Our portions will be small, but it should tide us over for now.

I can hear Cat's phone ringing on speakerphone from the loft, and soon Jackie's voice answers.

“Kitty Cat! Good morning.”

“Hey, how was the big wedding night?”

She's stalling. Cat comes down the stairs as they chat about whatever girls talk about, and when she reappears in the kitchen, she sets the phone down on the counter.

“So, I don't know if you heard, but there's a blizzard warning in effect.”

“What? No, I've been, uh, preoccupied this morning.”

Jackie lets out a giggle as Drew says something incoherent in the background.

“Yeah, so Evan and I won’t be able to make the brunch.”

“Oh, that’s right! You stayed over at Evan’s. How did it go? Did you guys finally sleep—”

Cat snatches her phone and mutes the speaker button as a red blush erupts across her face. Turning her back toward me, she whispers into the phone.

“We’ll talk later... Yeah... I’m sorry again. Have a great time.”

When she hangs up, she sets her phone face down on the counter, and the two of us fall into an awkward silence.

Well, awkward for her, maybe. I’m enjoying the shit out of this.

“So...you and Jackie talked about me, huh?”

“Shut up.”

I let out a chuckle as she comes to smack me hard against my bicep, which only makes me laugh harder. Folding her arms across her chest, she leans back against the counter to watch me work.

“You’re such a jerk,” she says. “I can’t believe I’m stuck in this house with you for another day.”

“Oh, I have some ideas on how to pass the time,” I answer with a mischievous wink.

The air between us shifts, and I have half a mind to stop what I’m doing and take her right now.

But she’ll need calories for what I plan to put her body through today.

Once breakfast is ready, we sit down to eat at the table, which feels sticky from last night’s beer pong game. I feel my eye twitch in annoyance as we stack the empty plastic cups and push them out of the way.

Cat must sense my irritation because she reaches over to grab my hand.

“I’ll help you clean this up after we eat, okay?”

As we dig in, I realize this is the perfect chance to catch up. Five years have passed without a word to each other, and during that time I often wondered what she was up to.

“You mentioned you had to get back to work this week,” I say. “Where are you working these days?”

“I’m in Human Resources at a software firm right now.”

“Oh, right, you had an internship senior year doing that. Is it for the same company?”

“Yeah. I’ve been promoted a couple of times, and the pay is pretty good, so I like it. Plus, I get to plan all the company parties.”

“That sounds like the perfect job for you, bossing people around all day.”

Cat throws her head back and laughs, her eyes sparkling with humor. It feels right, sitting here with her like old times, enjoying a meal and teasing one another. A part of me was scared that we’d grown so far apart that we wouldn’t find our way back to each other, but it feels like we’re picking up right where we left off.

I still feel comfortable in her familiar presence.

“What about you?” she asks. “Did you end up starting your own app like you always wanted?”

“Uh, no. Not exactly. I’m working for an app developer right now, though.”

And I hate it.

In true Cat fashion, she’s doing exactly what she set out to do in college. She’s always been a high achiever and laser-focused on school and work, so I wouldn’t expect anything less from her.

But me? The only place I have control in my life is in the bedroom.

We finish up our modest breakfast, chatting about everything and nothing all at once. We divide up the cleaning tasks—Cat

will clean the dishes as I pick up the empty beer bottles and plastic cups scattered throughout the living room.

With a trash bag in hand, I work my way around the house in a clockwise motion, starting with the kitchen and working my way around the house.

However, when my eyes spot the handcuffs, lying forgotten on the armchair, a salacious idea comes to mind, and I feel my cock stirring with excitement.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### - CAT -

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Evan disappear down the short hallway off the kitchen.

I'm up to my elbows in dish soap and bubbles, but I find my gaze keeps glancing out the window at the winter wonderland before me. As disappointed as I am that I won't make the sendoff brunch for Jackie, I can't help but send a silent thank you up to the heavens.

Being snowed in the house with Evan for another night? The thought sends a delicious shudder through my body.

But a part of me keeps wondering how long this will last. I've never been lucky when it comes to love, and my brain is on high alert waiting for the fairytale to come crashing down around me.

What if Evan changes his mind when we go home? Cuffing season is upon us, after all. Was it just the romantic atmosphere of the wedding that drew him in?

Will Evan dump me once the magic of Lake Arrowhead disappears behind us?

My heart clenches at the thought that this could all be temporary. I can't shake the feeling that something will shatter the illusion that I'm so desperate to hold on to.

"What are you thinking about?"



Startled, I spin around to find Evan leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his bare chest in a casual stance. However, his boxer briefs are nowhere to be found, leaving his manhood exposed—and erect.

My mouth opens and closes in a pitiful attempt to respond, but all I can manage is a stupid sputter as my eyes trace the lean lines of his muscles, including the V that leads down to his erection like a sinful roadmap.

He crosses over to the sink, wearing a smug expression on his face, and he leans across me to turn off the water.

“You were just zoning out there,” he says, eyeing me with curiosity. “You good?”

My gaze falls toward the objects in his other hand.

“Are those...?”

“Handcuffs. Yes. And a condom.”

He holds up the silver metal cuffs in front of me, which glint in the light of the window. They look sturdy and durable, like something a policeman would have in the line of duty.

And they aren't fuzzy.

I gulp.

“Nervous?” he asks.

“No. Maybe?”

“Should we pick a safe word, then?”

“A safe word? Like ‘pineapple?’”

“If that's what you want to use.”

His eyes glisten with amusement, and I can tell he's holding back a laugh.

“Well, what do *you* normally use for a safe word?” I ask.

“I like the Red, Yellow, Green system. It's easy to remember when things get a bit intense. Green means go, obviously. Yellow means that things are getting a little intense, but you're not ready to stop the scene entirely. It lets me know I need to

ease up a bit. But red is an immediate hard stop, so you have the power to set the pace.”

“That sounds fine, then.”

A grin spreads across his face.

“Then shall we try them out?”

“Right now?”

I glance around the kitchen as if someone was watching us. But we are snowed in—no one is coming in, and no one is getting out.

Turning my gaze back to him, I find his eyebrow is raised as he waits for my answer.

“Yeah, okay,” I say. “Let’s go.”

I move to make my way out of the kitchen, assuming that we’re heading upstairs to the bedroom. However, strong arms catch me from behind, holding me in place as his hardness presses into my backside.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

His voice sounds like a low growl in my ear as he burrows his face into my hair. The tip of his nose grazes my neck, sending an electric hum through my body toward my pussy, which clenches in anticipation.

“Upstairs?” I say.

“No.”

As Evan pushes me into the kitchen island, I let out a surprised gasp. Before I’m able to steady myself against the countertop, I feel my hands in his tight grip behind my back. He closes the cuffs with a sharp click around each wrist, and the hard metal feels cold against my skin, sending goosebumps up my arms.

Evan lets out a low groan of satisfaction at the final click, and his erection grows thicker against me from behind.

“These need to come off.”

His hands slide up my thighs, lifting the dress shirt to reveal my panties for him. Hooking his fingers into the waistband, he

yanks them down in one swift movement, letting them fall to the floor to bunch up around my ankles.

I clamp down on my lip to suppress a moan.

When his hands return to my waist, he grips me with a firm touch as his fingers dig into my hips. The only thing left between us is the shirt I'm wearing, which rides up as he presses me into the counter with his naked body.

I am at his mercy with my hands bound behind my back.

One of his fingers reaches down between my legs, teasing my nub with slow, languid movements. I'm already wet with how turned on I am right now.

"I want you."

My voice is a hoarse whisper, filled with my need for his cock. I want him to take me in any way he deems fit because I don't want him to stop wanting me when we leave here tomorrow.

His hand leaves my mound, leaving me aching and unsatisfied. Instead, he hoists one of my legs up onto the counter, spreading my ass cheeks apart, and I feel my breath hitch.

"You want me inside of you, Kitty Cat?"

"Yes..."

I'm panting like a cat in heat right now.

There's a rip of a foil packet behind me, and I can feel Evan's hand rolling the condom over himself. My arousal is dripping between my legs as he makes me wait, taking his time as my ass is splayed for his enjoyment.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" he asks. "I won't go easy on you."

"I'm ready."

He presses down on my back, forcing me to lie on the counter as my hips arch upward. I feel the head of his erection at the mouth of my pussy as he gets into position to take me from behind.

"Do you remember the safe words?"

“Yes.”

“What are they?”

“Red, Yellow, and Green.”

“Good girl.”

He slams into me. Hard.

I cry out, and he pauses as my sheath clenches and adjusts around him. One hand is on my waist to steady me, and the other comes up to wrap around my throat.

And my cuffed hands can feel the ripple of his abs pressing against me.

Fuck, this position is hot.

Withdrawing himself to the head, he thrusts once more, balls deep inside of me. In this stance, it's searing and intense, and I feel tears prick my vision from the pleasurable pain.

After another thrust, he begins to find his rhythm with an accelerating pace. But he's relentless, and each time he pounds into me, he fills me up with his length as deep as he can go. His balls slap against me with a loud smack that echoes through the kitchen, marking his tempo like a metronome.

I'm gasping and moaning all at once from all the different ways he's punishing my body right now. His hand is at the base of my neck, and his fingers dig deeper into the flesh of my hips, holding me in place as he slams into me over and over, unyielding.

My incoherent moaning crescendos as I grow closer to the edge, my muscles spasming as they're pushed to the limit, and I pray for the one leg still planted on the floor not to give out beneath me.

And that's when it hits me—a scorching, intense orgasm that nearly splits me in two.

My head lolls back as I cry out, my body quaking as the release ripples through my limbs.

Evan goes still behind me as he lets out a low, guttural groan. His grip on my body clenches for a moment as he rides the

wave of his pleasure, but soon his body relaxes behind me. After a couple more languid thrusts, he withdraws, and I feel my body go limp against the counter.

I'm so spent that I barely register Evan moving behind me, fumbling with the lock on the cuffs. As soon as my wrists are released, I sigh with immediate relief as my arms fall forward.

Evan begins to massage my skin where the cuffs dug in and left their mark.

"How do you feel?" he asks.

"Amazing."

He lets out a low chuckle from behind.

"Do you need water?"

"Not yet. I just want to lie here for a minute."

I watch Evan through my drowsy gaze as he moves around the kitchen. He removes the condom and throws it in the trash before disappearing down the hall, but after a few moments, he returns in a pair of sweatpants.

"Come on. Let's get you comfortable."

He peels me off the counter to hoist me up into his arms. I wrap around his neck as he holds me close against his chest, and he carries me over to the sofa before setting me down again. The pillows feel soft and luxurious after lying on that cold, hard countertop, and I feel myself curl into the cushions.

Evan takes a seat at the opposite end of the sofa, pulling my legs across his lap. A soft sigh of contentment escapes my lips as he begins to rub my feet, and I realize that I would do anything to stay like this forever.

Happy and content.

I don't want to lose this.

"How deep does this go?" I murmur.

"How deep does what go?"

"Bondage. What's your deepest, darkest fantasy?"

"Why do you ask?"

“Because I want to give it to you.”

Through my heavy eyelids, I see his expression grow tense, and something dark flashes across his face. He takes a deep breath, holding it for a long moment before he exhales.

“Be patient. We have time to work up to that.”

That’s not the answer I’m looking for, so I probe him further.

“Did you bring any other toys with you?”

“They aren’t toys. They’re tools.”

“Okay. Did you bring anything else besides the cuffs?”

“Maybe.”

“Let’s use them. Tonight.”

Finally, the faintest hint of a grin appears on his face, and he starts to relax once more.

“You’re insatiable.”

I let out a small laugh as I shift on the sofa, making sure I give him a nice view of my bare ass.

Even though I’m playing it cool, I’m masking how terrified I really am. Evan has assured me that he isn’t going anywhere, but I can’t allow myself to trust this happiness which feels impermanent and fragile, and maybe that’s because we’ve screwed things up so badly before.

I’m not sure my heart can take another falling out with Evan.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### - EVAN -

Cat and I sit in a comfortable silence like this for a while until she recovers. Even though I haven't experienced being tied up for myself, I know that it can leave the other person utterly spent. Having your limbs bound into an unnatural position during a cardio workout would leave anyone exhausted and aching.

But Cat seems to enjoy it, which gives me this lighter-than-air feeling as my chest swells with pride. She wants to know how deep this thing really goes with me, and I'm not sure when I'll be ready to reveal that darkness to her. But I do believe she's ready to kick it up a notch, so I'm already plotting how I'm going to tie her up and use her tonight.

For now though, I'm content to just sit here with her—especially since I have a full view of her ass at this angle.

“Want to watch a movie?” I ask.

“Hmm, sure.”

I reach for the remote and turn on the TV, skimming through the streaming services until I find something that interests me.

When I see *Bridesmaids* pop up, I have to contain a chuckle. We used to watch this movie all the time in college, and I'm feeling nostalgic.

As the opening credits play, I feel Cat stirring beside me. She sits up, blinking with a drowsy expression on her face.

“Is this what I think it is?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

*“I feel bad for your parents.”*

I don’t miss a beat.

*“I feel bad for your face.”*

We both start laughing, and I’m glad to know I still remember our favorite lines from the movie by heart. I haven’t been able to bring myself to watch it after Cat and I had our falling out.

She snuggles up against my side, laying her head on my shoulder as I wrap an arm around her. We never used to do this when we watched movies before, but now it feels right.

I don’t ever want to let this feeling go. I don’t ever want to let *her* go.

When the movie is over, she stands up to stretch her arms over her head. The dress shirt lifts up to reveal her bare ass once again.

“Now you’re teasing me,” I growl.

I reach forward and give her a smart slap across the butt, which elicits a squeal of surprise from her.

“I’m hungry,” she says once her giggles subside. “What do you think we can scrounge up for lunch?”

“Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches? It’s not much, but there’s a bag of chips we can finish off with them.”

After we’ve made our sandwiches, we settle in once again at the dining table to eat.

“I think there’s some board games in the linen closet,” I say. “Want to play a game of chess?”

“Hell no.” She makes a sour face. “I always lose against you. It took me an entire year before I found out you were a national chess champion.”

“Fine. I’d rather play strip poker anyway.”

“But I’ve only got one item of clothing on.”



“That’s the point.”

The heat rises to her cheeks, flushing her face in the most adorable way. God, she’s fun to tease.

We eat a few more bites in silence before Cat changes the subject.

“So, you mentioned you haven’t really been in a long-term relationship.”

She won’t meet my gaze. She picks at the crust of her sandwich, pretending to be distracted by it.

“When you’re on the scene,” I say, “there are ways to get connected with girls that share your kink. But a lot of them are in it for sex, not long-term relationships.”

“So why not try dating apps like a normal person?” she asks.

“I have, but it’s hard to find people that share your kink that way. It’s always felt like I can have one or the other, but not both. I can either have a girlfriend with boring sex, or I can have great one-night stands with strangers.”

When I see her shift in her chair, I backpedal.

“That’s not to say that I can’t have both with you, Cat. I get tested regularly, and I stay safe. So, you don’t have to worry about that part. If that’s what you’re worried about.”

I sound like a fucking idiot.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I believe you.”

There’s a hint of humor in her eyes when she finally meets my gaze, and the corners of her mouth start to curl.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

“Are you saying you want me to be your girlfriend?”

“I mean, yeah. I know we haven’t defined things yet, but I’d like that.”

I’m not the type to have girlfriends, but she’s got me wrapped around her goddamned finger.

I want Cat to be mine.

“Good,” she says. “I’d like that too.”

Those words make me so much happier than I thought they would. I was content to take my time with Cat, exploring our bodies and our feelings over time without labels. But hearing her agree to be mine makes me way more excited than it should.

Brandon and all the other guys will have to steer clear of her from now on, because Cat is mine, and there is no room for doubt there.

Even I will admit I get lonely sometimes. I’m human after all. And maybe my career isn’t the only aspect of my life that I’ve been going through on autopilot.

Perhaps Cat came back into my life at just the right time to shake things up. Maybe we were supposed to have our falling out so that she could explore her own sexuality without me. And maybe I was meant to feel her absence so that when she came back, I’d appreciate her all the more.

“What about you?” I ask. “You’ve been in relationships, right?”

“Yeah, but nothing that lasted longer than six months.”

There’s a distant, faraway look in her eyes, but the expression on her face tells a story.

“I take it they didn’t end well?”

“You could say that.” She lets out a long exhale, her shoulders slumping. “I’m not the type of girl guys want to be with. They just want to fuck me and move on.”

My fingers begin to clench, and there’s a desire in me to find every single guy that ever hurt her. I want to make them pay for making her feel anything less than worthy.

Although, I suppose if I’m going to do that, I should probably start with me.

“I’m not like that, Cat. I won’t do that to you.”

She gives me a wistful smile, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Look,” I say, “I know I screwed up before when I turned you down. But I’m not going to make that mistake again, and I’m going to keep trying to regain your trust. No matter how long it takes.”

She takes a shuddering breath in through her lips, and when she exhales, it’s on a sigh.

“Okay, Evan.”

The snow has stopped falling outside, but everything is still coated in white, which means I can’t leave the house right now to go get her flowers and chocolates—or whatever boyfriends give their girlfriends. Cat needs romance, and I wish there was a way I could give it to her.

My eyes fall on a scented candle sitting on the counter in a glass jar, and an idea pops into my head.

“I think I’m going to hop in the shower,” I say. “Why don’t you take a long, hot bath when I’m done?”

Cat shrugs. “Sure. That sounds nice.”

After we clean up the dishes, I snatch the candle off the counter and pull a lighter from the drawer. Keeping the items out of sight from Cat, I head up the stairs toward the loft and make my way into the attached bathroom. Next to the shower sits a spacious garden tub beneath the window, which has a view of the lake through the pine trees.

Once I finish my shower, I draw the bath for her, and I find some scented bubbles under the sink that I dump in. I light the candle and set it on the counter, giving the bathroom a dim, romantic glow.

It might not be as luxurious as the spa at the hotel, but my hope is that she’ll be able to relax. The room fills with the delicate scent of rose water as the bubbles come close to the top of the tub. I wrap a towel around my waist and shut the water off.

When I come out of the bathroom, Cat is crouched over her suitcase lying open on the floor. She jumps when she hears the door, turning to me with flushed cheeks.

“The bath is ready for you. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m great.”

She fumbles around in her suitcase with haste, pulling out a bag of toiletries before throwing some clothes back on top. I get the feeling that she’s hiding something personal in there, so I decide not to pry.

“Come here.”

I hold out my hand and help her to her feet, leading her behind me into the bathroom. We both pause, and I watch her face for any sign of a reaction as she takes in the sight.

“I know it’s not much, but I wanted to at least attempt some romance.”

“It’s perfect, Evan.”

She sets her bag on the counter and heads over to the bath to take in the aroma. With a gentle poke, she pops one of the bubbles.

I come up behind her, wrapping my hands around her waist to pull her against me. My nose nuzzles into her neck, and my lips leave a slow, sensual trail of kisses down to her shoulder.

As she pushes her ass into me, it takes every ounce of willpower not to bend her over and fuck her right here.

But I’m trying to prove I can be a patient and thoughtful boyfriend.

“Take a bath,” I whisper in her ear. “And take your time. I have a few things I want to prepare for tonight.”

She sucks in a sharp gasp at my words. I release her from my grip, satisfied that I’ve given her something to think about while she’s in here.

“See you in an hour.”

I head out to the bedroom, closing the door behind me to give her some privacy. But my cock is already straining against the towel as I start running through a mental checklist of the tools I have on hand.

*Tie. Handcuffs. Spreader bar.*

I can work with that.

As I cross the loft, my eyes catch a glimpse of something sticking out from beneath the pile of clothes in Cat's suitcase. It's bright pink and hard to miss, and when I get closer, a wide grin stretches across my face.

Turns out I'm not the only one keeping dirty little secrets.

*Tie. Handcuffs. Spreader bar. Vibrator.*

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## CHAPTER TWENTY - ONE

### - CAT -

I slide my body further into the hot water, letting the bubbles envelop me up to my neck. As I lean my head against the back of the tub, my gaze drifts out through the window over the peaceful winter landscape outside. It looks like something out of a dreamy Christmas card, which I suppose is appropriate.

This weekend feels like a dream, one that I don't want to wake up from, and I keep running Evan's words through my mind.

*I know I screwed up before when I turned you down.*

*I'm not going to make that mistake again.*

*I'm going to keep trying to regain your trust. No matter how long it takes.*

I want to believe them. I want to cling to them with desperation and never let go, and yet...

I wasn't good enough for him before when I was a virgin, but now that he sees me as someone with more experience in the bedroom, I've suddenly become the perfect girlfriend. And I'm having a difficult time reconciling that paradox in my mind.

When he's finished with his conquest of me and sated his curiosity, will he grow bored like all the others?

Shaking my head, I pull my phone off the ledge of the tub and check the time. He told me he'd see me in an hour when he

closed the door, so I guess I need to entertain myself until then. Rather than wallow in my insecurity, I open one of my streaming apps and pick out a sitcom.

Something light and funny to distract me from spiraling.

When the show is over, the steam of the bath has long cooled, and only a few bubbles remain as the water temperature drops.

Stepping out of the tub, I reach for a towel and wrap it around my body to dry off. My hair is still dry save for a few flyaways at the base of my neck that got caught in the water.

A part of me is curious as to what Evan has waiting for me on the other side of that door, but I take my time to comb my hair and brush my teeth. Evan made me wait for five years, so he can wait five more minutes.

My stomach clenches with nervous excitement. I know I've stalled long enough, so I wrap my fingers around the doorknob and push it open.

The only light illuminating the loft is coming in from the window, reflected off the snow outside. I notice the handcuffs—and another object I don't recognize—lying on the bed in a tidy row. It looks like a long, metal rod with leather belt loops on either end.

When I feel warm arms wrap around me from behind, I close my eyes and lean against him.

“Are you relaxed?” Evan whispers in my ear.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Working in slow, deliberate movements, he unwraps the towel from my body, letting it fall to the floor around our feet.

And that's when I realize he's naked too, his skin pressing into me as he pushes his hips forward. One of his hands finds its way to my breast, kneading and massaging it in his firm grasp. The other descends toward my stomach, past my belly button as his fingers trace a teasing trail further south.

I'm frozen in place, trembling with anticipation as I wait for him to provide relief for the bundle of nerves between my legs. My head lolls back against his shoulder as my body quivers.

Unable to wait for a second longer, I bring my hand down on top of his, guiding him further toward my wet, throbbing center.

“Ah, ah, not so fast.”

He grabs my wrists, and I let out a huff of frustration as I struggle to free myself. But he's much stronger than I am, and there's no way he's letting me gain control.

He pushes me toward the bed, shoving me down with a firm hand on my back. Before I'm able to roll over, I feel him on top of me, trapping me facedown against the sheets.

Two can play this game.

Arching my spine, I press my ass further into his growing erection, which gives me just enough room to shimmy my hand beneath me. Finding my pussy, I slip my fingers inside and begin to touch myself, desperate to relieve this ache. A soft, breathy moan escapes my lips as I start to work against myself.

“Oh, I don't think so,” he growls. “I'm the only one that's going to make you come tonight.”

He pulls my hand out from beneath me, pinning my wrists above my head with a forceful yank. My neck cranes upward to see him looping the handcuffs through the wrought iron headboard with deft speed, and soon they're slapped securely around my wrists.

Once he's satisfied that I'm not going anywhere, he hoists himself off me. Without him pinning me down, I'm able to tuck my legs beneath me—if I can just sit up on my knees, I might be able to figure out how to get myself out of these handcuffs.

But Evan catches on to my plan, and I let out a loud shriek when he tugs one of my legs back. I feel the touch of smooth leather against my ankle, where he tightens it in a secure loop.



He does the same with my other leg, and I realize that my wrists and ankles are bound.

“And last but not least...” he murmurs.

I glance over my shoulder to see what he’s doing, but I only catch a glimpse of him holding his tie in his hand. He brings it over my eyes, tying a knot behind my hair to blindfold me.

“There,” he says. “You’re not going anywhere.”

His dark promise sends a shudder rolling through my body, ending between my thighs like an explosive match. My pussy clenches with anticipation as my body adjusts to these new sensations.

Without my sight, I notice the other senses grow more attuned to my surroundings. The cool air of the loft tickles my skin, which erupts into goosebumps. My damp flyaway hairs graze the back of my neck, and I hear his footsteps against the wooden floorboards.

He’s forcing me to wait, exerting his dominance as he takes his time to tease me, and I’m left naked and exposed on the bed for him.

It makes me crave his touch even more, and I’m trying to anticipate what comes next.

I hear him come to a standstill at the foot of the bed between my ankles.

“What a delicious view,” he says. “Let’s take a closer look, shall we?”

He jerks my legs further apart, wrenching a gasp of surprise from my throat. I try to fight against him, but there’s a bar keeping my legs spread wide, which leaves me feeling even more exposed than before.

“That’s more like it.”

Even though I can’t see him, I can hear him grinning in his voice. Cocky and triumphant.

I feel the mattress dip as he climbs onto the bed behind me. His hands find my hips and hoist them upward, taking me

once again by surprise.

“Ass in the air, Cat.”

My knees dip to catch me as he lowers my hips down, leaving my face pressed against the sheets as my butt sticks up, cheeks spread wide.

“Perfect.”

His palms grab my buttocks before landing a loud spank across my flesh. The tension in my core is growing to unbearable heights, begging for release.

When I hear a familiar, electric hum in my ear, my stomach forms a heavy knot as my body tenses up.

“W-Where did you find that?” I ask in a shaky voice.

“You did a terrible job of hiding it. Do you touch yourself with this at night?”

I feel the round, silicone head of the vibrator touch my back, sending tremors down my spine.

“I asked you a question.”

He brings it down my back, tracing a teasing trail of flourishes along my skin as he grows closer to my exposed openings.

“What do you think?” My cheeks are burning hot as I let out a scoff.

“Why did you bring it with you this weekend?”

I’m sure every girl I know has one of these in their dresser drawer, but it doesn’t lessen the humiliation. I can feel Evan reveling in this.

But now that he knows, he’s using it against me in the most sinful way possible.

“If you answer my questions, you’ll be rewarded,” he says in a low voice. “But if you don’t, you’ll be punished. Now, I won’t repeat myself again—why did you bring your vibrator with you this weekend? What did you plan to do with it?”

The vibrator dances around the mouth of my dripping arousal, teasing me with the hope of release.

I let out a frustrated sigh.

“I thought I was going to have some alone time this weekend. There. Satisfied?”

“Be specific. What part of your body were you going to use it on?”

“Where do you think?”

“Tell me.”

“On...my pussy.”

“To make yourself come?”

“Yes.”

“And what do you think about when you stick this inside of you?”

“I pretend it’s a cock.”

“Whose?”

I gulp. After all this time, even when I thought I’d moved on from Evan, his face still managed to slip into my fantasies when I’d pleasure myself.

“Whose cock, Cat?”

“Yours.”

When the head of the vibrator nestles inside my slit, I let out a low moan, my back arching into the pulse. Chasing my own release of pent-up sexual need, I begin to grind my hips against it, growing closer and closer to the edge.

“Are you close already?”

“Yes...”

Suddenly, the vibrator shuts off, leaving the room in an aching silence. I let out an exasperated cry, and as I pound my wrists against the pillow in frustration, the metal of the handcuffs rattles against the headboard with a heavy clank.

I grit my teeth, seething. “Why did you stop?”

“Because I have so much more planned for you.”

I feel Evan shift on the bed behind me, and my pussy clenches when I sense him between my legs. When his breath fans my slit, I realize that he's lying on his back beneath my spread legs, and the weight of his body on the spreader bar anchors my lower half to the bed.

My body quivers as he hooks his arms around my thighs.

“Sit on my face.”

He yanks my hips down on top of him, and my body erupts like a volcano against his mouth. His tongue pushes past my folds, licking my arousal as he sucks on me.

*Holy. Fucking. Shit.*

My incoherent moaning crescendos fast, reaching a fever pitch as I barrel closer toward the apex of my pleasure.

I need an outlet for this singular, overwhelming sensation. My instinct is to reach for his hair, grind my hips against his face, open my eyes and watch him eat me out. *Something.* Any movement at all.

But being bound like this makes all those options impossible. Instead, I'm left without an ounce of control as a searing, blinding orgasm grips my body, and I swear to God, I feel my soul leave my body.

The groan that escapes my mouth is a guttural noise, so primal and raw that it doesn't even sound human.

Evan is relentless, continuing to work against my sex with his expert tongue, extending my climax as it surges through my body wave after wave.

I didn't know it was possible to have too much of a good thing, but I feel as though my body will explode if I endure any more of this.

“Okay, okay!” I gasp. “That's enough!”

He doesn't stop as he milks every last ounce of euphoria from me. It's so intense that my body can't withstand it anymore, and I search through the mixture of pain and pleasure in my addled mind for the word that I need.

“Red.”

The relief is instantaneous, and as Evan slides out from beneath me, my hips collapse onto the bed. My muscles are shaking with weakness as my heavy panting fills the room, and I struggle to catch my breath.

The tie is slipped off from around my eyes, and through my hooded gaze, I see Evan checking on me with concern.

The atmosphere has shifted between us in an instant.

“What do you need, Cat?”

His voice is urgent. Worried.

“Just...give me a minute.”

As I regain my bearings, I want to curse myself for using the safe word. It feels like a cop out, like I’m not able to withstand Evan’s depraved sexual appetites.

His fingers set to work releasing my wrists from the handcuffs, and then he makes his way down to my ankles.

I feel hot tears prick my vision, and I burrow my face into the sheets to hide from Evan.

*Please don't let him see me cry. Get a grip!*

When the last of the ankle cuffs are released, I curl into myself, my muscles weak and my body spent.

“Talk to me,” he says. “Are you okay?”

I nod my head, but I’m afraid if I speak, my voice will give me away. Why am I acting like this?

“Here, have some water.”

His hand is on my back, encouraging me to roll over to take the glass, but I shake my head no.

The mattress creaks as Evan sits down beside me, and I hear him set the water on the nightstand. Lifting me into his arms, he takes my chin in his fingers and lifts my gaze to meet his.

“I feel so stupid right now!”

The floodgates are open, and there's no holding back as the tears rush down my cheeks. Evan cradles me against his chest as I burrow my wet face into his neck, craving his tender touch.

"You're not stupid," he assures me. "You're having a pretty sharp drop, but that can happen. It's totally normal."

"Crying after sex is normal?" I sob.

He lets out a low chuckle as he rubs my back in slow circles.

"When the scene gets pretty intense, sometimes the submissive partner will have a hard time coming down. Hormones can be all over the place after a strong orgasm. They call it a sub-drop."

That makes me feel marginally better, I guess.

"You didn't get a chance to come," I say. "Do you need—?"

"Don't worry about me right now. I'm fine. What do *you* need?"

"Just... hold me."

"I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

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## CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

### - EVAN -

Cat and I sit like this for a long while, and I make sure to hold her close and massage her wrists while she comes down. I've seen it happen plenty of times before, although it seems to be more common when there are feelings involved.

And I'm sure it has to do with the fact that Cat doesn't have complete trust in my willingness to stay.

"Why don't you stay in bed and get some rest?" I say. "I'll go scrounge up something for an early dinner."

She gives me a small nod, and I take that as her permission to leave. Before I head downstairs, I make sure to adjust her pillow and pull up the bed covers, tucking her in with a gentle touch.

Once I'm downstairs, I open the fridge and find nothing but disappointment. Unless we want to have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches again, I need to get creative.

If some of the roads are cleared by now, I might be able to order a hot meal for delivery.

I call around to a few places in town until someone picks up. There's a pizza restaurant nearby that's offering delivery at a premium rate, but I agree to pay it. Cat needs real food right now—not bottom-of-the-barrel scraps.

Cat and I have ordered pizza countless times, so I know our exact order: half cheese, half pepperoni. I even let them upsell

me on a liter of soda and a Caesar salad.

I imagine the delivery driver doesn't need to see me naked, so I head into the downstairs bedroom and grab a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt from my bag. But I keep an ear on the loft for Cat in case she needs me.

I think it was foolish of me to think that we could just pick up where we left off, that I could declare my feelings and my fetishes to her, and all would be well. There's still a lot of pain and insecurity from our past that will take time to work through, and I'm not sure how we're going to do that.

But I'm going to try my damndest to make sure she knows I'm here to stay.

Once the food arrives, I give a generous tip to the delivery driver before taking the food and heading back upstairs.

I'm surprised to find Cat up and moving about. She's got leggings and a sweatshirt on, and her hair is tied up into a ponytail.

"Delivery!" I announce, keeping my voice light and cheerful. I hold up the bags of food.

"Good," she says with a weary smile. "I'm hungry."

"I figured we could eat up here on the bed. Just bum around for the rest of the night."

I set the pizza box and the bags of food on the bed, unpacking the paper plates and the salad. Cat opens up the liter of soda and starts drinking straight from the bottle, which makes me chuckle and shake my head.

"Always such a lady."

"You know it," she says, passing the soda over to me.

Once we load our plates with food, I hesitate to speak. I want to keep things easy and comfortable, just like this, but I know that we need to address what happened between us.

"Hey, Cat?"

"Mmm hmm?"



“You know, there’s nothing wrong with using safe words. I’m glad you did, actually. I want to explore what your boundaries are, and that takes time.”

She stops chewing her food, staring down at her pizza with a strange look on her face.

“What is it about bondage that you like, exactly?” she asks, her voice quiet. She still refuses to look at me.

“Honestly? I’d say it’s about control, but really, you’re the one with all the power. Like you saw earlier, you have the ability to stop the scene at any time.”

“Then what is it?”

It takes me a moment to consider her question. Telling her I like it because it makes me hard isn’t the answer she’s looking for, and I know it goes much deeper than that.

“I think I like the trust that my partner puts in me to make them feel good,” I answer. “Even though you hold the power to stop our play at any point, I know that you have to surrender a lot of control to be tied up like that, and that takes a lot of trust. I don’t take that responsibility lightly.”

My words surprise even me, but they’re honest, and I want her to know that she can trust me. I *need* her to know that.

She exhales a long sigh, her shoulders slumped forward as she bites her lip.

“I need to know how deep this goes,” she says. “I’m always going to be questioning if I can give you what you need to be happy.”

“Are you kidding me? Cat, this weekend with you has been incredible. You’ve learned who I really am, but you haven’t judged me for it, and that has made me so happy. More than you could possibly know. I want to be with you. Why don’t you believe that?”

“Then give me a chance to fulfill your deepest, darkest fantasy. Tell me what it is.”

At last, she lifts her gaze to meet mine, full of determination and resolve.

“I told you—we have plenty of time to work up to that.”

“You didn’t accept my feelings before because you thought I was too innocent to handle it. But now you’re making the same assumption about me. How is that fair?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just not in any rush to act out that particular scene. I’ve never done it with anyone because it’s really fucked up, Cat. Believe me.”

“I don’t want to start our relationship with any more secrets,” she says. “I lived with hiding my feelings from you for years, just like you hid your kink from me. And I don’t want to live like that anymore...it’s like you don’t trust me to handle them.”

I run my hands through my hair as my chest tightens. She makes a valid point, but I wasn’t prepared to share this level of depravity with her just yet.

“It feels too soon.”

“But we won’t be able to move forward unless you trust me,” she says. “You ask me to put my trust in you when you tie me up, but you won’t tell me how far it can go.”

Shit.

A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead as I swallow, and the room starts to feel like it’s closing in. She’s not going to let me off the hook this time.

“I don’t want you to think less of me,” I say.

“I won’t.”

“What happens in the bedroom doesn’t reflect my values as a person.”

“I get that.”

I suck in a sharp breath. No one has ever asked me about my darkest fantasy, so I’ve never had to explain it out loud—at least until now.

And when I finally say the words, it feels slow and painful, like eating glass.

“I’ve always wanted to sneak into a woman’s room at night while she’s sleeping. Tie her up with rope, gag her, and have my way with her.”

A heavy silence falls between us as my words sink in, and I give her a minute to digest them. She wants to know how fucked up I really am? Well, there it is.

“For the record, I’ve never actually done that, and I would never do that without getting permission in advance.”

My qualifier feels hollow after the admission I’ve made.

Waiting for Cat to respond feels like an eternity of torture, although, to be fair, how does anyone respond to that?

I’m disgusted with myself.

“Please say something,” I say. “Actually, no, can we just forget I said that?”

I dare to glance over at her, and she looks pale as a sheet while her food lies untouched in front of her. Her gaze doesn’t meet mine, and I can almost feel her slipping away as the seconds tick by.

She lets out a long exhale.

“So, like a rape fantasy?”

I recoil. The word *rape* is vulgar, and the idea that I could be associated with such a heinous act is unthinkable.

Even though that’s exactly what it is. *A rape fantasy.*

“I wouldn’t expect you to agree to something like that. Let’s just pretend I never said anything.”

But how can I ask her to erase what she just learned about me?

We finish our dinner without another word, and I feel like I might get crushed under the weight of her silence. I wish I could know what she was thinking, to know for certain if I’ve just ruined any chance I had at happiness by confessing my darkest desire to her.

I’d rather her just end things now instead of making me wait for the final blow.

Fuck.

I don't have much of an appetite, so I set to work clearing the bed of our takeout boxes and crumbs. Pausing at the top of the stairs, I refuse to turn around and meet her gaze.

I don't deserve to look her in the eye right now.

"I'll sleep downstairs tonight."

"Evan, wait."

My heart clenches in my chest, and I don't know if it's about to soar with hope or plunge straight down into my stomach. I glance over my shoulder.

"I just need a little time to think, okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "Totally understandable."

She gives me a nod, and I take that as my cue that I'm dismissed.

It's not an outright rejection, but she didn't confirm that we were staying together, either. Is she thinking about what I just admitted to, or is she rethinking our entire relationship?

And if she decides she doesn't want to be with me, will she at least be comfortable being my friend?

This is the truth I'd been protecting her from for years, and now that it's out, there's nothing I can do but wait.

That night, as I lie in bed, I'm analyzing every word she said, every expression she made, and I can't seem to find any clear answer about which way she's leaning. I want to run up the stairs, take her in my arms, and apologize over and over while begging her not to leave me.

I am terrified I'm going to lose Cat after I've only just found her again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY - THREE

### - CAT -

The first hint of sunrise begins to appear in the sky, and as I lie awake in bed, I stare out the window. I'm not sure if it's the lack of sleep or the bombshell that Evan dropped last night, but none of this feels real.

Up until yesterday, I was desperate to hang on to Evan, and I was willing to do anything to make him fall for me. I wanted to fashion myself into Evan's perfect woman so he would never let me go again.

But then I found out what it would take to make that happen.

I reach for my phone and open the search engine. My fingers hover over the keys, unsure of what to type.

*My boyfriend wants to rape me?*

Where does one even go to get advice about this?

With a resigned sigh, I throw my phone on the bed and curl up against my pillow, staring out the window to watch the slow sunrise above the treetops.

I stand in the doorway with my suitcase as Evan checks the house one last time. While I wait, I catch a glimpse of my pale face in the entryway mirror, looking gaunt with dark circles under my eyes. I didn't even bother with makeup today.

Pulling the brim of my baseball cap down, I shove my hands into the pockets of my sweatshirt for warmth.

“Alright, I think that’s everything,” Evan says.

He slings his duffel bag over his shoulder before following me out the front door. The snow seems to have melted a little overnight, which creates a slippery sludge as we begin our slow walk to Evan’s car.

“Here, let me help you with that.”

Evan reaches for the handle of my suitcase, but my hand grazes against his by accident.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “Thanks.”

He gives me a pained smile before he sets to work loading our bags into the trunk.

The ride over to the hotel feels like an eternity, which we pass in an uneasy silence. When the car turns into the entrance of the resort, it takes a lot of restraint not to exhale a sigh of relief.

“Do you want to go in and get some breakfast before we hit the road?” Evan asks.

The mixture of hope and caution in his voice is unmistakable, and I know he’s testing the waters with me.

“I’ll just grab something from a drive-through on the way out of town,” I answer.

My voice sounds flat and devoid of emotion.

“Okay, then. I guess I’ll talk to you later?”

“Yeah. I’ll text you.”

Again, silence.

“Cat, about last night—”

“It’s okay. Like I said, I just need some time to think about all this.”

I had all night to think about this, and I still don’t have a clue how I’m supposed to feel.

“I understand.”

This feels like the part where I’m supposed to lean over and kiss him goodbye. That’s what girlfriends do when they say goodbye to their boyfriends, right? But do those labels still apply to us?

I suppose Evan is waiting for me to give him my answer on that.

“Bye, Evan.”

“Bye.”

I open the car door, and even though the icy wind whips through my hair, I feel numb to it all. Evan pops the trunk for me to grab my suitcase, and that’s when I hear a familiar voice calling out.

“Cat! What are you doing here?”

Surprised, I turn my head to find Jackie barreling out from the lobby, waving at me as she jogs down the porte-cochère.

I close the trunk, and Jackie waves to Evan as he pulls forward into the parking lot.

“I came to pick up my car,” I say.

“Oh, that’s right. So, how did it go with Evan? I want all the details.”

She waggles her eyebrows at me.

“Shouldn’t you be having honeymoon sex with your husband right now?”

“He’s sleeping in. I was heading down to the lobby for breakfast when I saw you through the window. Wanna join me?”

“I really should hit the road.”

“Please? I didn’t get to see you at the sendoff brunch yesterday, so have breakfast before you go. You’ll still have plenty of time to get to Phoenix by this afternoon.”

“Okay, fine.”

A wide grin lights up her face, and before I can say another word, she's grabbing my bag and wheeling it into the lobby. I follow behind with my hands in my pockets.

We grab a table in the bustling restaurant, claiming our seats before we scout the breakfast buffet. Jackie piles the food high on her plate while I opt for a simple bowl of yogurt.

"Now that I don't have to diet for the wedding, I just want to eat everything in sight," Jackie says with a laugh. "Is that all you're going to eat?"

"I'm not very hungry."

Jackie frowns at me.

"I take it things didn't go according to plan?"

"Yes. And no."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Shifting on the edge of her seat, Jackie hangs on my every word like I'm dishing the juiciest, most exclusive celebrity gossip.

"Evan and I slept together. A few times, actually."

When Jackie claps her hands together and squeals, people sitting at the nearby tables turn to look at her.

"Shh, keep it down!" I hiss.

"How can I contain myself? You and Evan finally got together after all of these years. And at my wedding, too! This is going to be a story we'll tell our kids years from now."

I roll my eyes. She's getting way too ahead of herself.

"So, why don't you look more excited?" she asks.

"Because I'm not sure Evan's who I thought he was."

Jackie's demeanor grows a bit more serious, but she nods at me with compassion and sympathy.

"I heard about the handcuffs."

"Yeah."



It's not my place to air out Evan's dirty laundry, although it sounds like word got around at brunch yesterday. I'd be willing to bet money that it was Vanessa who told her.

Jackie leans in across the table.

"You know, lots of people use handcuffs in the bedroom," she whispers. "Drew and I use them all the time."

"Ugh, I didn't need to know that!"

"I'm serious!" says Jackie, giving my arm a playful smack. "Anyway, is that why you're upset with him? Because of the handcuffs?"

"Not because of the handcuffs, no. Not exactly."

If only she knew how deep this goes.

"Then what? You know you can talk to me, right?"

"I know," I reassure her. "I'm not sure how I feel, honestly."

"I might not know the details, but do you want to know what I think?"

I shrug.

"Evan's a mysterious guy," Jackie says. "He keeps people at arm's length, and I think that's what makes him attractive to girls. But you created this idealized version of him in your head and built him up as the perfect man, even more so after he rejected you. He was a guy you couldn't have, so you put him on a pedestal as someone who was too good for you."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Evan is just a person with flaws, like you and me. I'm not sure what happened between you two, but you're my best friend, and I've seen you dealing with this for a long time now. I think that you saw a different side to Evan this weekend that you weren't expecting, and you weren't prepared to deal with that."

I lean back in my chair, folding my arms across my chest as I consider her words.

“He has dark secrets, Jackie. And I’m not sure I’m ready to share that burden with him.”

“That part is up to you,” she says. “But after watching the two of you this weekend, I got the impression that he’s not going anywhere. Ball’s in your court, Cat. Are you going to accept him as he is with his flaws and secrets and all? Or are you going to reject him the way he rejected you?”

My heart squeezes in my chest at the mention of his rejection. I don’t ever want to feel that pain and humiliation again, and I certainly don’t want to inflict those emotions on someone I care about.

It took him a lot of courage to come forward about himself, and when I pushed him to show me the truth behind his dark desires, I pulled away.

I’m beginning to understand why he kept this lifestyle a secret from me—from everyone—for so long.

I know Evan would never hurt me, which is why it’s difficult to reconcile in my mind the things he wants to do to me.

Look how far I got last night before I had to use the safe word. If I can’t handle that, how can I handle more?

“I need more time to think about it,” I tell her.

“Of course you do. There’s a lot of history between you and Evan. You can’t unpack all that in a single weekend.”

“When did you get to be so wise?” I ask, giving her a small smile. “You get married and all of a sudden you’re a relationship guru.”

She takes a large bite of her waffle, giving me a smug look.

“I’ve had a front-row seat to you and Evan’s relationship for years. Obviously, I’m a Cavan expert.”

“Cavan?”

“Yeah, it’s what Drew and I call you two. Cat plus Evan equals Cavan.”

I nearly snort into my yogurt.

“I didn’t realize we had a fan club.”

“We’re rooting for you,” Jackie says. “But you have to do what’s right for you. Go back to Phoenix and take a few days to get back into your routine. You’ll figure things out soon.”

“Thanks, Jackie. I didn’t want to unburden all of my drama on you during your honeymoon.”

“What are friends for? Besides, I’m going to be your matron of honor at your wedding, so I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t nudge you along.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

I reach across the table and pick up a strawberry from Jackie’s plate. But instead of popping it in my mouth, I chuck it at her.

“I’m going to miss you, Jackie.”

She opens her mouth to reply but stops when she glances over my shoulder. Her expression darkens as two familiar figures approach our table.

“Well, well,” says Vanessa, “look who decided to show up.”

Vanessa and Brandon are standing side-by-side, looking down at me over their noses like snobby twins.

“What are you two doing together?” I ask. “Did you settle for each other as your wedding hookups?”

Vanessa scoffs, but she doesn’t deny it.

“No Evan?” Brandon asks. “Did you two break up, or is he just too ashamed to show his face?”

Before I have a chance to say anything, Jackie jumps to my defense.

“I already told you to stop with this,” she snaps. “Your gossiping ruined the mood of brunch yesterday.”

“Jackie,” Vanessa says, “don’t be like this—”

“And you,” Jackie interrupts, turning her narrowed gaze onto her. “I heard about the tough spot you put Cat in. You were going to let her sleep out in the cold because you’re a petty bitch.”

My jaw drops as I stare at Jackie across the table.

“You don’t mean that,” Vanessa says.

“I do. And Layla says you skipped out on cleaning the bridal suite, leaving everything to her and Cat.”

“I-I...”

I think this is the first time I’ve seen Vanessa at a loss for words, and I’m enjoying the hell out of watching her squirm.

“If you can’t be friends with my friends,” Jackie says, “then you and I can’t be friends, either.”

Vanessa looks stunned for a moment, blinking her eyes as she struggles to find a response.

“Oh, and Brandon?” Jackie says. “Drew is done with you, too. Your behavior this weekend was cringey all around. Don’t think we were too busy to notice.”

Jackie turns back to face me, and I see the corner of her lips tug into a satisfied smirk.

“I think that means you two should go,” I add, waving them away.

When they turn their backs, Jackie and I burst into laughter.

“Bravo,” I say.

“I should have stuck up for you sooner, and I’m sorry about that. You come first, which is why you were my maid-of-honor instead of her, and why Evan was Drew’s best man. You’re our ride-or-dies.”

“I love you,” I say. “Thank you.”

I reach across the table and squeeze her hand.

When we finish our breakfast, she walks me to my car and gives me a tight, comforting hug.

“Call me when you make it home safe, okay?”

“I will,” I promise. “Enjoy your honeymoon.”

“I love you, Cat. You and Evan will do right by each other. I know it.”

Her wise words stay in my head even after I leave the hotel. As my car navigates the winding roads of Lake Arrowhead, I glance up in the rearview mirror to watch the snow-capped trees and mountains disappear behind me.

I have no idea what the future has in store for Evan and me, but one thing is certain. This weekend has changed my life, for better or worse, and now it's up to me to figure out where we go from here.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### - EVAN -

I glance down at the time on my computer screen, and only five minutes have passed since I checked it last.

Fuck me.

It's Friday afternoon, and I'm waiting for five o'clock so I can go home and have a stiff drink. Not only did I put in overtime this week to catch up from my day off, but my boss has been on my case for being so distracted.

It's not like I can tell him why I'm distracted, though.

*Well, you see, I confessed my rape fantasy to my girlfriend after we were together for less than twenty-four hours, and I haven't heard a word from her since. Do you think that's why she ghosted me?*

Yeah, I don't think that would go over well.

I pick up my phone and draft yet another text to Cat that I know I won't send.

*Please text me back.*

No.

*I miss you.*

Too desperate.

*I'm sorry.*

All these words feel inadequate, and with a heavy sigh, I set my phone back down on my desk. All week I've waited to hear from Cat, but it's radio silence on her end.

This feels like history repeating itself. When she confessed her feelings to me five years ago, neither of us reached out to the other afterward. Now I understand how awful she felt waiting for me to extend the olive branch first.

Oh, how the roles have reversed.

Perhaps this is a cruel twist of fate, giving Cat her revenge for how I rejected her back then. Or maybe this is karma's way of punishing me for being a sick fucker that wants to tie up women and do bad things to them with my cock.

Well, not just any woman anymore. Only Cat.

When five o'clock rolls around, I'm the first one out the door, although it's not like I have any big plans this weekend. It will be just me and my computer at home, working on the app that I've taken much too long to start.

After talking about my career with Cat, it lit a fire under my ass to wake up and take action on a long-forgotten goal of mine.

Once I'm home, the first thing I do is pour a glass of whiskey and plop down at my desk. Even though I've been on the computer all day, I find that there's a spark inside of me that makes me want to keep working on my passion project.

I haven't felt this alive in a long time, even if my inspiration is mixed with spiraling anxiety over Cat. At least I feel *something*.

It took Cat walking back into my life to make me realize how numb I truly was.

When I hear my phone chime, my stomach does a little flip.

But when I see Cat's name appear on the screen, my excitement immediately melts into dread. I've been waiting to hear from her all week, but now that I have, I can't help but wonder if she's only reaching out to break things off.

Do I even dare to open it? If I don't, I can hold on to my final shred of hope.

But if I do, I'll know where I stand with her once and for all.

With a deep breath, I open the message, steeling myself for the inevitable rejection.

*Cat: Hey, are you free tonight?*

Did I read that right?

My chest swells as I read and reread her message over and over, making sure that I'm understanding it correctly.

She wants to meet up with me! That's great news, right? Unless she wants to break things off in person.

Shit.

I begin to draft my reply to her, reminding myself not to come off too desperate or clingy.

*Me: Sure, I can meet now!*

The exclamation point is too much. I replace it with a period and hit send, staring at my screen for her response as the seconds tick by.

Should I add an emoji? No, I never use emojis. What am I thinking?

But before I can decide, my phone chimes again.

*Cat: Meet me at my place? I'll drop a pin with my address.*

She's inviting me over to her place? That's a good sign. Or maybe it isn't. Maybe she wants to avoid a public scene when she delivers the final blow.



*Me: Sure, I'll head over soon.*

I decide to take a quick shower and change my clothes before facing Cat. After all, this could be the last time I see her. At the very least, I should look like I haven't spent the entire week agonizing over her when she breaks my heart.

When I pull up to Cat's house, it's a small single-story in an older neighborhood. But it's been kept up well with fresh, blue paint and a yellow door, along with a porch swing and flower bed in front.

As I step out of my car, I can't help but chuckle at how much of her personality she's put into the place.

When I come up the driveway to the front door, I take a deep breath and adjust my shirt before knocking.

I feel my breath hitch when the door opens, and that's when I come face-to-face with Cat. Her long, brunette hair hangs in waves around her shoulders, and she's wearing a tight t-shirt and jeans that hug her curves just right.

"Come in," she says.

The small living room is decorated in shades of beige and green with bohemian accents on the walls. She invites me to sit on the sofa, where a fringed pillow tickles the hair on my arm, and when I glance over at the kitchen, I notice she's laid out a charcuterie board on the counter.

She's bearing food, which means she expects me to be here awhile. Right?

"Would you like something to drink?" she offers.

"I'm okay."

I don't think I could keep anything down right now.

An awkward silence falls between us, and I can tell she wants to say something.

“I’m glad you called,” I say.

“I’m sorry it took so long.”

“It’s okay. Really.”

It was torture.

“I think it was good for us,” she says. “You know, take a step back and reevaluate things for a few days. I think we said a lot of things last weekend in the heat of the moment.”

She pauses as if waiting for me to agree with her, but I feel my body tense up. I need to know where she’s going with this, because it sounds like she’s about to end things.

“I just want to know that I’m enough for you,” she adds. “Not as the woman you want me to be.”

“Of course I want you, Cat,” I say.

“No, I mean that you find me attractive enough to have sex with me—even without tying me up.”

“The you-know-what fantasy is a lot, and I don’t expect you to do that for me. Please forget I mentioned that. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

She shakes her head.

“You’re not getting it,” she says. “I mean, in general. I want to know that I can turn you on as myself, not because I’m handcuffed to your bed. That I’m enough as I am without ropes and chains attached.”

Oh.

The night we kissed, I explained to her how bondage was a prerequisite for moving forward with a relationship. But I figured this might come up again.

“I don’t want my kink to get in the way of our relationship,” I say. “But I also can’t change who I am. I really wish I could. I’d love to be the guy that could enjoy vanilla sex just as much as bondage, but I’ve never been successful with that.”

“You haven’t tried it with me.”

I open my mouth to respond, but something about her hooded expression tells me to shut the hell up.

She rises to her feet and approaches me slowly, and my eyes dip down to her hips as they sway with each step. But when she comes to a stop between my legs, I suck in a sharp breath.

As she drops to her knees, she places her hands on my thighs.

“Cat? What are you doing?”

My voice is hoarse as her hands slide up toward the button of my jeans.

I see where this is going. If she were any other girl, this would be the point that I tell her to stop because it’s a waste of time. A blowjob on its own doesn’t really do much for me unless she’s tied up—and I shove it in her mouth on my terms.

But Cat isn’t just any girl, and I don’t tell her to stop. I feel my dick react with interest as she unzips my pants, and I even lift my hips to help her.

Her fingers are hooked into the waistband of my jeans and my underwear, so when she pulls them down together, my shaft is free and only inches away from her face.

My voice catches when she leans forward, taking my length into her firm grip. Her tongue sticks out to make contact with the tip, swirling around it as she watches me from between my legs.

I feel the blood rush to my cock when her lips wrap around me, sucking and licking all at once in a heady mixture of sensation. My eyes cannot look away as she takes my entire length into her mouth, which makes me harder than a rock.

Her tongue runs up the vein as she withdraws, sending electricity surging through my body.

“Fuck, Cat.”

My fingers thread through her hair to guide her pace. But as soon as I do that, her hands reach up to grab my wrists, pinning them down against the sofa.

The little vixen won’t let me touch her.

I never much cared for the idea of being restrained myself, but this playful action sends me reeling, making my breath quicken and my cock throbbing with need.

Cat hastens her pace with her head bobbing up and down my length, taking me into the back of her throat. My head nearly rolls back against the sofa, but I don't want to tear my gaze away from Cat's incredible performance.

Before I even realize it, Cat sends my pleasure careening over the edge, and I don't have a chance to warn her. I explode into the back of her mouth, letting out a groan of satisfaction at my release.

It takes me a moment to come down, but when my vision comes into focus, I see my seed dripping from the corners of her mouth. Cat sits back on her knees as she wipes off the excess with her thumb.

Her throat bobs when she swallows, and the look of smug satisfaction on her face is unmistakable.

I'm stunned. I open my mouth to speak, but no words come out.

"I guess that answers my question," she says, climbing onto the couch beside me.

I don't know how she managed to suck me off to completion like that, but everything I thought I knew about my kink is being called into question. And all it took was a simple, vanilla blowjob.

But there was nothing average about it. Cat's performance was extraordinary, and that certainly wasn't her first time doing *that* with her mouth.

"Holy shit, that was good," is all I manage to say. The words don't do her justice.

Cat doesn't mask her pride as she settles back against the cushions, and I can't stop staring at her. After all, she just performed a miracle.

My flaccid, satisfied cock is still hanging out when I say, "So, what now?"

“Well,” she starts, “I’ve been thinking a lot about what you said. And I want to be the one to fulfill your fantasy.”

“You really don’t have to—”

“I’m the one that forced you to tell me what it was. But when you did, I made you feel bad about it, and for that, I’m sorry, Evan. I don’t ever want to make you feel ashamed about what you want in the bedroom, and I want to be the girl that makes your dreams come true.”

I pull up my pants but leave the zipper undone.

“Are you agreeing to what I think you are?” I ask.

“Yes, I want to go to the deepest, darkest depths of your desires with you,” she answers, her lips curling into a small, mischievous smile. “But before we do, I have a lot of questions.”

“I would expect you to.”

My eyebrows raise at her, and I’m still in disbelief that we’re even having this conversation right now.

“I mean, how would it work?” she asks. “Do we plan it in advance?”

“Well, I know where you live now, so that’s the first step. But yes, we would plan it out beforehand, and you’d give me a window of time for me to come and, uh, break in. Like an intruder.”

It sounds so fucked up to say it out loud, but Cat nods in understanding.

“You won’t actually break my windows, though. Right?”

“No, I won’t be damaging any property,” I say with a hollow laugh. “You’d leave a spare key for me to find. Perhaps under a rock or in the flower bed.”

“And, uh, how would I use the safe words if I’m...?”

“Gagged? Great question. You can hum a simple tune like *Jingle Bells*.”

“Noted.”

“I should also mention, there’s a bit of role-play involved in a scene like this. I hope that’s okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” she says. “I trust you.”

I reach for her hand, running my thumb over her soft, delicate skin. As I lace my fingers through hers, I feel my heart thumping hard in my chest, and I want to convey how much I appreciate her willingness to stay with me.

“None of this is done without your consent,” I tell her. “If at any time it gets to be too much, you use the safe word, or you hum the tune if you’re gagged. I’ll stop immediately. I would never hurt you, Cat. You have to know that.”

“I do, and that’s why I’m agreeing to do this with you.”

“What changed your mind?” I ask.

“You showed me a side of yourself that I didn’t understand at first, and I got scared. But through it all, you’re still my best friend, and I want you, Evan. Kinks and all. Which is why I needed to know that you could accept me and my needs too. It’s not about being compatible but about compromise—the give and take. And I think you and I can do that. Together.”

Her words make me swell with an unfamiliar joy. I’ve carried a lot of shame around my lifestyle, but for the first time in my life, I’m beginning to feel unburdened by it. Cat’s presence in my life is like a soothing balm, stealing away some of that pain and guilt with her gentle touch.

“Thank you, Cat.”

She accepts me as I am, even though I don’t always accept myself. To hear her say these words means more to me than she’ll ever know.

I lean over to kiss her, full of ardent passion and gratitude. My lips linger on hers, savoring her taste on my tongue as I take a mental snapshot of this moment for my memory. I don’t ever want to forget the way she makes me feel right now.

I no longer feel alone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### - CAT -

#### **Two Weeks Later**

“Wake up.”

I hear a familiar voice at the foot of my bed, but I choose to ignore it and pull up the sheets around my neck.

“Don’t make me repeat myself again. Wake up.”

I squint through the darkness to see Evan’s figure looming over me, but since he’s dressed in black from head to toe, I can only see his face.

“What time is it?” I ask in a groggy voice.

I roll over to grab my phone, but before I can turn it to face me, I feel his tight grip on my wrist.

“No phones.”

He takes it from my hand and shoves it under the bed out of reach, all the while keeping a firm hold on my arm.

“What the hell?” I scoff. “And why are you dressed like a robber...?”

My voice trails off at the end as realization dawns on me. I stare up into his blue eyes, which peek out from the black hoodie he’s wearing, as he brings my hand to his crotch.

“Do you feel how hard I am for you?” he asks, his low voice in the darkness.

Fuck yeah, I do. He’s hard as a rock.

“I’ve been watching you for a long time, Cat Gallagher. Imagining all the things I’d do to you when I finally got you alone.”

He flips me over onto my stomach, and I let out a loud yelp of surprise as he does. His hand flies to my mouth as he crawls on top of me, pressing his bulge against my ass.

“Don’t scream. You’re going to be a good girl and take my cock. Understood?”

This is it. This is the dark fantasy we’ve planned for weeks now, but I didn’t expect it to happen tonight.

Am I ready for this?

As he begins to grind his hips against me, the desire that’s starting to pool in my lower belly tells me that I am.

I nod my head against his palm.

While he keeps one hand clasped over my mouth, I can feel the other reaching for something at the foot of the bed. A few moments pass before he presses a rubber ball against my lips.

“Open wide.”

I shake my head. If Evan is going to commit to his role as an intruder, then I shouldn’t make it easy for him.

“Is that how it’s going to be, Cat?”

One of his hands slips down to the hem of my oversized nightshirt, pulling it up over my ass to expose my lower half.

“You’re not wearing any underwear,” he says. “See? You’re practically begging to be fucked.”

His fingers descend to caress my mound, where he brushes against my sweet spot. My lips part as a sharp gasp escapes my throat, and that’s when he slips the ball between my teeth.

His other hand releases my sex, leaving me with an empty, unsatisfied feeling.



My teeth clamp down on the gag, which is attached to a leather strap that he tightens around the back of my head like a belt. When he's finished, he sits up to straddle me as my face presses into the pillow.

"Put your arms above your head."

"Nnh nnh."

Once again, I shake my head.

"Each time you defy me, you'll get punished."

Keeping me trapped between his legs, he grabs both my wrists and pins them above my head. With his broad palm, he's able to keep them there with one hand while the other yanks my nightshirt up even further.

I'm like putty in his hands as he peels my clothes off, leaving me naked on the bed beneath him.

*Smack!*

I let out a muffled gasp as Evan's hand comes down hard across my backside.

"That's what will happen when you don't cooperate."

Am I not supposed to like that? Because I wouldn't be mad if he spanked me again.

Instead, Evan brings my arms down and pins them against my back. After a few moments, I feel him dragging a rough, braided fabric against my skin, trailing it down my spine in languid movements.

"I'm going to tie you up with this rope and fuck you raw."

My breath hitches with excitement as he begins to tie my wrists together, taking his time as he loops the rope in and out of itself. When he's finished, it isn't so tight that it's uncomfortable, but I couldn't slip out if I tried.

Evan knows a thing or two about knots. If I wasn't gagged, I'd tease him about what a good little boy scout he is.

With my hands tied securely behind my back, Evan shifts off of me to kneel on the mattress. Grabbing my ankles in his

hands, he jerks them upward, folding my legs at the knee.

When the rope starts to wrap around my feet, I realize I'm being hogtied.

I try to wriggle my body to fight him off, but it's too late. My ankles are already secured by rope to the knot at my wrists, and the only thing I can do is open and close my knees, which splays my pussy open for the taking.

Evan climbs off the mattress and walks around the perimeter of the bed, examining his handiwork as I writhe in place.

“God, you look fucking gorgeous all tied up like this.”

His voice holds a hint of awe as he steps into my limited view. I turn my face against the pillow to glance at him, and the way he's staring at me takes me by surprise.

It's like he's admiring a work of art on the level of Michelangelo or Monet. His eyes scan my body with amazement, lingering on the ropes like they're the brushstrokes of a masterpiece.

It gives me a brief glimpse into his mind, and I'm beginning to understand that bondage isn't just a kinky sex act. To him, this is his idea of art, and I'm the canvas upon which to work.

The canvas *and* the muse.

Brushing the hair off my face, he leans down to give me a gentle kiss on my forehead. His tenderness takes me aback given the sordid nature of this fantasy we're acting out, but it reminds me that I can trust him.

When he stands back up, he yanks his sweatshirt over his head to reveal his lean, defined abs. His dark hair is rustled from the hoodie, giving him a sexy, rough appearance.

He slips off his sweatpants and underwear, exposing his hard, erect length just inches from my face.

If I wasn't gagged, I'd take it in my mouth and suck on it.

Evan leans down and opens my dresser drawer, and my eyes widen when he begins to rummage around inside. There's

nothing I can do to stop him, and when he finds what he's looking for, his lips curl up into a smirk.

“You filthy girl. Do you imagine it's my cock when you touch yourself with this?”

He waves my vibrator in front of my face before pressing the button, and it hums to life with a fierce, electric buzz. My body reacts to it on instinct, clenching and unclenching with anticipation. When he disappears from view, I listen for the murmur of the vibrator mixed with his footsteps as he moves toward the end of the bed.

My knees snap together to shield my most private areas from view, which are vulnerable and exposed in this precarious position.

“Spread ‘em.”

I shake my head.

“You know what happens if you don't cooperate.”

*Smack!*

My back arches from the spanking, and he uses my moment of distraction to yank my legs apart. I let out a muted gasp when the vibrator touches my center, making my entire body shudder with anticipation.

Using my knees as leverage, I begin to grind my hips into the sensation, deepening the mounting pleasure in my core. I'm moaning like a wanton whore against the gag, desperate to feel some sort of release.

When he first told me about this fantasy of his, I didn't realize that I would enjoy it this much, but there's something about being tied up and used as Evan's personal fuck toy that turns me on.

But when he brings me to the brink of climax, he stops. I let out a frustrated grunt as he turns the vibrator off, tossing it on the bed without a second thought.

“My cock is the only thing that's going to make you come tonight.”

Evan moves to the side of the bed and flips me over, laying me on my back as my legs butterfly out beneath me. In this position, with my limbs tied underneath me, I'm rendered completely immobile.

The mattress dips when he climbs in between my legs, guiding the head of his cock to my wet, throbbing center. When he penetrates deep inside of me, we both let out a simultaneous groan.

His hips press down against mine as he begins to move, so I'm unable to rock myself up to meet him. I want more of him, so when his thrusts grow more aggressive, my body quivers with delight.

This is how I want it—rough, hard, and fast.

“Oh, fuck, Cat. You feel so good.”

The position I'm in makes everything more intense. Evan slides in and out against my clitoris, creating a delicious friction that sends me hurtling toward the apex of my pleasure. But just before I reach it, he withdraws himself, leaving me empty and unsatisfied once again.

“Mrggh!”

I bang my head on the pillow a couple of times, seeking an outlet for this unmet need and sexual frustration.

Evan's lips curl upward at my struggle, and if I wasn't restrained, I'd pull him back down here and make him fuck me to completion.

“If you promise not to scream, I'll let you suck your juices off my dick.”

I nod my head, eager for a taste of him on my tongue, and Evan climbs off the bed to stand beside me. Turning me onto my side, he begins to unclasp the leather strap around my head, and when the rubber ball slips from my mouth, I let out a sigh of relief.

Evan grabs his cock at the base and slaps me across the face with it, staring down at me with his hooded gaze. The act makes my belly explode with desire.

Who knew I relished being degraded like this?

I think Evan is the only person I would let do this to me. He and I may challenge each other and go toe-to-toe outside the bedroom, but in here, I want him to make me his little whore.

When he slides his length inside my mouth, I take in a sharp breath through my nose. I feel myself gagging on it when it hits the back of my throat, making tears spring to my eyes. Evan grabs the back of my head and threads his fingers through my hair to hold me in place, fucking my mouth with quick, unrelenting thrusts.

“Do you taste your pussy on my cock?” he asks.

I hum in response, which sends a visible shiver up through Evan’s shoulders.

“Don’t make me come just yet. I’m not finished with you.”

He pulls out from between my lips, releasing his grip on my hair. I’m still on my side, teetering precariously on the edge of the bed, and if it wasn’t for Evan’s legs, I’d fall flat on my face onto the floor.

His fingers snake around to the hogtie at my wrists and ankles, and with one swift tug, the entire knot comes undone.

“Ahh...”

After being tied up for so long, my arms and legs welcome the chance to unfurl, and Evan rolls me onto my back. Crawling on top of me, he positions the tip of his erection once more at my entrance, and I gaze up at him in confusion.

“Why did you untie me?”

“I want you to hold on tight to me when you come.”

He smiles at me as I wrap my arms around his neck, and when my legs come around his waist, he sinks inside of me. The two of us fall into rhythm as he ravishes me with increasing speed, and I meet his hungry mouth with my lips, letting him devour me as we fall over the edge together.

Wave after wave of heavenly bliss crashes over me, making my body writhe and spasm beneath him as I scream his name.

I cling to him, afraid that I'm so far gone from the earth because this euphoria is so perfect, so exhilarating, that I might not even want to come back.

An unfamiliar, yet pleasant warmth spreads within my core as he releases himself inside of me, and that's when I hear Evan's voice cutting through the euphoria with a sharp gasp.

"I love you!"

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## CHAPTER TWENTY - SIX

### - CAT -

Evan collapses beside me, and it takes a moment for both of us to catch our breaths as we relax into the sheets.

“Fuck, Cat, I’m sorry.”

He lets out a long, ragged sigh as he runs his hands through his sweaty hair. His cheeks are red as he closes his eyes.

“Why are you sorry?” I ask.

“I shouldn’t have dropped that bombshell on you when we came. Ugh, that wasn’t how I was planning to tell you. You deserve a candlelight dinner and roses when someone tells you they love you.”

“Isn’t that normal? Telling a girl you love her after slapping her in the face with your dick?”

“I know, I’m so fucking sorry.”

He covers his face with his hands, shaking his head. I can’t help but laugh, and I curl up against his side to lay my head on his chest.

“I love you too, Evan.”

Dropping his hands, he stares down at me in disbelief.

“You do?”

“Of course, I do. How could I not be in love with my best friend?”

He encircles his arms around me, holding me tight as he presses his forehead against mine.

“Say it again.”

“I love you,” I say with a wide grin.

He closes his eyes, savoring the words as a serene smile graces his lips.

“One more time.”

“I love you, Evan Simmons.”

“I love you too, Cat Gallagher.”

The two of us settle into a comfortable silence, and Evan begins to massage my wrists with slow, languid movements. I can feel sleep calling out to us, our bodies rendered exhausted and spent, but the moment feels right to ask him the question that’s been on my mind the past few days.

“Hey, Evan?”

“Hmm?”

“When is the lease up on your apartment?”

“At the end of February. Why?”

I swallow.

“What if you moved in with me instead of renewing your lease?”

Evan shifts so that he can get a better glimpse of my face, staring down at me in surprise.

“Are you being serious?”

“You don’t have to answer me now,” I say. “You can take your time to think about it—”

“I don’t have to think about it, Cat. I want to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” he says. His face lights up with a boyish grin that melts my heart. “Let’s move in together.”



“Other people might think we’re insane,” I point out. “We’ve only been dating for a couple weeks.”

“Who cares? It feels right.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

He smiles at me, leaning down to press his lips against mine with the sweetest tenderness I’ve ever known.

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