

BJ HARVEY
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Chicago First
Responders

SERIES SET

CHICAGO FIRST RESPONDERS

Boxed Set

BJ HARVEY

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Show Stopper

A KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR ROM
COM

Renee

One thing that doesn't work in your favor when you're a real estate agent is a propensity for always running late.

Unfortunately for me, it's a Friday when I have back-to-back property showings and my alarms—all three of them—were all miraculously snoozed, and I now have only forty minutes to shower, dress, do my makeup, pour coffee down my throat and get out my front door. Because no house sales means no commission, which means no roof over my head, sexy heels on my feet or Starbucks in my hand, and I need all those things.

Walking into the kitchen, having done the shower, makeup, and half of the dressing side of my to-do list, I spot my bleary-eyed sister Hayley staring off out the window, cradling a mug of steaming caffeine nectar in her hands. Hayley moved to Chicago from Wisconsin four months ago after a nasty breakup with her ex-boss, which led to her being let go from her job at the same time.

"You're late," she says without looking at me.

"No shit, Sherlock." I walk over to the coffee machine, quickly making myself a caramel macchiato with far more caramel than my hips need. But the maintenance of my curves is a serious business, and if caramel is the key, then I'm a devoted follower to testing and proving this theory to be true.

"Guess I better add caramel syrup to the grocery list," my sister mumbles from behind me.

I snicker and face her, mimicking her pose with my coffee cup as I lean back against the kitchen counter. “You? Do the shopping?”

“I am capable of running errands, you know.” I arch a brow, making her gasp. “I take offence to that. I can adult... occasionally.”

“And apparently pigs can fly and the moon landing was a big, giant hoax.”

Her lips twitch as she takes a slug of coffee from her mug.

“Not going in today?” I ask, before taking my much-needed over-sugared caffeine hit.

Hayley is a free-spirited wild child and has been since the day she was born. She lives life on her terms, on her schedule, and can sometimes have issues with authority. That has included calling off work because she doesn’t feel like it.

“Late start.” Hayley works in the front office for the Chicago Fire soccer team. “It’s the team’s travel day so my boss said to take the morning off. There’s not much to do anyway.”

“Nice.” I take a quick look at my watch and a big gulp of my drink. “Shit. I really have to go. I’ve got a showing just after lunch, and I need to go into the office first to get the marketing materials John made up for me. I also wanted to call in and see Grams quickly.”

“And how is John?”

I grimace. “Still asking me out once a week, but it’s more a case of, ‘when are you going to put me out of my misery’,’ nothing else.”

My sister screws her face up. “Yeah. There’s sugar daddy, and then there’s John. Far too old.”

I nod. “And I’m not into stirring the company pot.”

“That too,” she says, her lips curving up. “I definitely learned *that* lesson. Hey, maybe you’ll have some hot bachelor come to your showing and sweep you off your feet.”

“One can only hope,” I say with a snort. “But it’s very unlikely. Besides, dating a potential buyer probably isn’t overly professional.”

Hayley rolls her eyes. “Look at you being all responsible.”

“Someone’s got to be,” I say, poking my tongue out. “I’ve really got to go. I’ll see you later?”

“Well, duh. It’s Real Housewives of Everywhere night. I’ll grab the takeout on the way home, since the maid hasn’t done the grocery shopping,” she adds with a wink.

“Maybe the maid is waiting to see if her counterpart will do it for her.”

“That can be arranged ... for a fee ...”

I quirk a brow. “And that would be?”

“A blind date. We’ve got a new player who’s just been traded to the team, and he’s single and ready to mingle in the big city.”

“Hayley,” I groan. “You know I’m not interested in being set up with anyone.” She gives me a guilty grin and I narrow my eyes. “Why do I feel like you’ve already arranged this?”

“Not exactly ...” she says, averting her gaze. “He’s cute, if that helps, and his arms? Damn. Those babies could do a lot of heavy lifting.”

“And on that note, I’m out of here.” I cross the kitchen and kiss her cheek before grabbing my purse off the hallway table and moving to the front door.

“You didn’t say no,” she calls as I’m halfway out.

“I didn’t say yes, either,” I retort, giving her a quick wave before leaving. Having a sister with the best of intentions may actually be the death of me.

THREE HOURS LATER, I’m waiting in the kitchen for the clock to tick past one p.m. so I can open the front door and

hopefully welcome in a hoard of potential buyers for this listing—a three-bedroom duplex near Palmer Square.

It has enormous potential, but when I took the deceased estate listing, I knew it could go either way in terms of being an easy sell or one of those tricky properties that sit on the market for a while. I'm always up for a challenge, though, so I jumped at the chance.

It's been a slow start, but with effective but inexpensive staging that the daughter of the former owner was more than happy to front up for, a few well-placed vases of fresh fragrant flowers, and the gentle scent of a French vanilla candle wafting through the air, I'm confident that today's showing—albeit, the third for this house—will be a well-received one.

A car door closing on the street outside grabs my attention, and after a quick look in my compact mirror, I take a deep breath, stow away my purse in a kitchen cabinet, and walk through to the front entryway, swinging the door open, signaling that the house is open for viewing.

The first couple of parties are the real estate equivalent of tire kickers—people who aren't in the market to buy, but like to have a good look. I can usually pick them a mile away, but a telltale sign is when they're hesitant to leave their details on the call sheet. I still treat them as potential buyers though because you never know when they might decide they're ready to commit to a new property, and you might cross paths with them at another time in another house. If that happens, you already have that name-recognition/first-impression in the bag. That's my theory, anyway.

With ten minutes to go and no more parties coming through, I begin to think the showing is a bust when the roar of a car outside grabs my attention. Deciding I'm not ready to write this day off just yet, I go to the front porch, ready to greet what could be another potential buyer.

Which is fine if you're not wearing four-inch Jimmy Choo heels and a knee-length pencil skirt, and you trip on the first step with a huge smile plastered on your face. I scream as I go flying off the front stairs, my arms flailing and my eyes

clenched shut as I brace myself for impact, expecting the worst.

Except I don't hit the ground. Instead, there's a loud muttered "damn" just before I hit a wall of someone, the two of us crashing backwards as we both fall down in a tangle of limbs onto the front lawn. The stranger lands first, a loud groan escaping him followed by a low grunt when I land on top of him at my most unladylike best.

We lie there unmoving for a few moments until my eyes snap open. Mortification hits. I lift my head and look down at him, my lips parting to say thank you when I'm rendered speechless by the concerned—and absolutely mesmerizing—deep chocolate gaze shining back at me.

"Are you okay?" he asks roughly, and I swear, I have a mini-orgasm from the sound of his voice alone. I stare down at him, rendered mute for what seems like hours before the man looks around us then returns his amused gaze to mine.

"Well, that didn't go quite how I planned," he says with a cheeky grin. "Now I'm all for public displays of affection, but I'm not sure if this was the kind of showing you had in mind. Not that I'm complaining at having a beautiful woman lying on top of me."

That snaps me out of it.

"Shit," I say, rolling off and away from him and scrambling to my knees. He jumps to his feet as quick as a flash and leans down, placing his hands on my hips. He lifts me back to my feet as if I weigh nothing.

As soon as I'm back upright, blood flow must return to my brain because I finally regain my ability to think straight. "I'm so sorry. It's lucky you were here to cushion my fall though," I say with a laugh.

He smiles and dips his chin, looking down between us and slowly pulling his arms away from where he was holding me steady. I didn't realize he was still touching me, and now all I can feel is the searing palm-print of where his hands have been. God, maybe I should go on that blind date.

Mystery man's lips curve into a sexy half grin. "You're welcome. It's not every day I get the chance to help a damsel in distress."

I snicker and cock my head to the side. "It's not every day a knight in shining armor saves me from making an absolute dick of myself in front of a potential buyer."

His smile widens. "I wouldn't say an absolute dick. Maybe I have a thing for women falling at my feet."

I arch a brow at him. "Hey, if it helps sell the house, I'll walk back up there and fall down all over again."

He chuckles, and I feel myself falling into a daze. Dammit, Ren. Stop swooning over the hot man.

"You don't need to go that far, although I'm not complaining. Any man would do the same if you were the one doing the falling."

I barely stop myself from fanning my face before I remember what I'm doing and what the man is here for. Sell the house, Ren. Don't flirt with the buyer.

I quickly switch back into professional realtor mode and flash him a dazzling you-know-you-want-to-buy-this-home smile.

"So, after that eventful introduction, I'm guessing you're here to see the house?"

"Should I walk behind you just in case I have to catch you again?" he says, making my knees wobble a little.

I laugh and shake my head. "I've been walking in heels since I was a kid stealing my mom's shoes to walk down the hallway. I think I'm good."

He stares at me, his eyes still warm, but there's something else in his gaze I can't pinpoint. I kind of hope it was lust, attraction, a desire to throw me against the nearest surface and ravish me until I'm a panting, breathless mess.

He lazily runs his eyes down to my silver pumps and back again, forcing me to fight off a full-on body shiver. "Still, I

definitely won't complain if I have to follow you around. You know ... just to be safe."

There's absolutely no mistaking the intent of his words now, and it's taking everything in me not to melt into a puddle at his feet. Since that would ruin my very expensive shoes, I lock my knees and decide I really need to move this along to avoid the risk of doing myself an injury by clenching my thighs too tightly.

"Right. So are you waiting for anyone else, or ...?"

He opens his mouth to reply, but we're interrupted by a stunning blonde running up to us in an EMT uniform.

"Sorry, I'm late. I got caught in traffic. But I'm here now," she says, leaning in and giving the man an enormous bear hug, which he reciprocates. He smiles down at her lovingly and pulls her into his side. Damn, okay. That answers that question. Definitely taken. That is exactly the cold bucket of water I needed to cool my jets. Kind of douchey to flirt with me while waiting for his significant other.

"Right. Okay. Hi, I'm Renee. I'm the realtor for this house, and we were just about to go inside if you'd like to join us."

"Awesome. I'm Skye," she says, shaking my hand. She turns to the man I was just lying on top of. "I wanted to have a look at this one first before talking to you know who." The still nameless man chuckles, and I plaster an overstated smile to hide my reaction to his simple action. What is it about a deep, low laugh that turns strong, kick-ass women to mush?

"Let's go inside, and you two can have a look around," I say, carefully walking up the stairs, feeling Mr. Possibly Married, Still Doesn't Have A Name, Was Flirting With Me And Clearly Has A Girlfriend, following behind me.

"Watch your step," he says, sounding amused.

"What did I miss?" Skye asks curiously from the back of the line.

"Oh, nothing, brat. Renee here is a bit shaky on her feet despite years of walking in heels, apparently."

“Damn, girl. Be careful. You don’t want to break an ankle. But I will say, those Jimmy Choos are hot,” Skye says, and I can’t help but smile. It’s hard to be envious of a woman with a sexy, smart-mouthed boyfriend when she’s nice.

I look over my shoulder with a genuine smile on my face. “Thank you. They were my reward for reaching my sales targets last year. I only pull them out for special occasions. Like selling a house?” I say jokingly, wagging my brows.

“She’s good, Marco. You better watch yourself. She’ll try to get us to buy another house too,” Skye says, walking past me and into the house.

Confused by her statement, I stumble—again—and Marco’s hands come to my hips ... again. Why is he touching me? Does he have no shame? Maybe they have an open relationship? I’ve been in an open relationship before and it wasn’t fun. Granted, it was one-sided, mainly because I had no idea my fiancée was banging multiple women behind my back for years. Good riddance.

“I’m thinking you might need more practice in those shoes,” he murmurs in my ear as I right myself.

“Or you could stop using my clumsiness as an excuse to touch me,” I murmur quietly.

“Now, why would I want to do that? I’m just doing my job. I live to serve.”

“Serving doesn’t mean copping a feel every chance you get,” I mutter, horrified at the fact I actually like the fact he’s teasing me. Ugh. This is why I swore off men after my last disaster of a relationship.

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, put on my most professional, cheerful smile and turn around, stepping away from the man who has me not thinking straight.

“So, I’ll let you guys have a look around at your own leisure, and I’ll just be in the kitchen if you have any questions. Sound okay?”

Marco’s eyes lock with mine. It’s as if he’s studying me—or reading my mind—which would be a terrible thing right

now. Especially with his maybe sister, maybe girlfriend or wife standing right next to him. “C’mon, macho man,” Skye says, grabbing his arm and pulling him into the front living room. “I need you to be the voice of reason. I don’t want to take this back to the guys and have them think I’m bringing them a lemon.”

“Just come find me if you need me,” I call out, carefully walking backwards down the hallway towards the other end of the house.

“I will,” Marco says, his eyes not leaving mine until he disappears from sight.

I’m left feeling off-kilter at the strange effect he’s having on me. I don’t flirt with potential clients, and I definitely don’t flirt with possibly attached ones.

So maybe I’ll just write this whole experience off as a friendly exchange and be done with it.

“Thank you, Renee,” Skye says shaking my hand on their way out. “It’s not quite what I was looking for—a bit too finished for our purposes—but I’ll definitely keep your card in case we find ourselves in need of a realtor.”

I grin. “Definitely do that. It was nice to meet you, though.”

Marco doesn’t say anything else to me, he simply smiles and follows Skye out the door.

Which probably explains why I’m still feeling out of sorts and yet weirdly amused while reviewing the call sheets from the day’s showings later that night. I’m fixated on the last two names written down.

Skye Cook and Marco Rossi—two different addresses, two different phone numbers.

I might not even see them again. Regardless, I’ll get my assistant to do a courtesy follow-up call to Skye, and since she’s already said the property didn’t fit the bill, that will probably be as far as it goes.

But what takes the cake is he had the balls to write “call me next time you want to be caught” next to his phone number. Right next to Skye’s name. That screams player, and if my past has taught me anything, it’s that I’m not interested in philanderers or players, no matter how sexy, charming, and funny the man may be.

No way. Not at all.

Marco

“You’ve got to come out with us tomorrow night, Marco Polo,” my colleague—and the biggest pain in my ass—Scotty says.

I turn my head and arch a brow. “Why?” I ask, my mouth full of an Italian beef sandwich. We got back to the firehouse twenty minutes ago and after a hectic afternoon, I’m taking the chance to eat while I can.

My brother Luca plops down on the bench seat beside me and snorts. “Because you pull in the chicks that wouldn’t give him a chance otherwise.”

Scotty flips Luca the bird. “Sit on that and rotate, Rossi.”

I snicker and shake my head. “You know that could be offensive to me since I’m a Rossi too, right?”

Scotty rolls his eyes. “I wouldn’t do that to my lieutenant. That would be disrespectful.”

“But you’d do it to me?” Luca asks, brow quirked.

Scotty shrugs. “If the shoe fits.”

My sister Skye and her husband, Cohen, walk into the big open-plan living area of the firehouse. They’re partners in our station’s ambulance, which makes Firehouse 101 a bit Rossi heavy considering that’s three out of us five siblings working together. Lucky we all get along.

Skye comes up and wraps her arms around my shoulders, hugging me from behind. “Aww, come on, big brother. You’re

not too old to hit the clubs... not *yet* anyway.”

The rest of the guys snicker and my lips twitch. “Thanks for that, brat.”

She straightens, and I catch a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “I saw for myself the other day how much you’ve still got it.”

“Now *this* I want to hear,” Scotty says, leaning forward in his seat.

“Marco came with me to view a house for sale and he already had the realtor on the ground and on top of him by the time I turned up.”

I groan. “It wasn’t like that.”

“It was *totally* like that,” she says. “Then he kept catching her when she stumbled.”

“He probably just wanted to cop a feel,” Scotty jokes.

Skye scrunches up her face. “Not all men are that desperate,” she replies, poking her tongue out at him.

Scotty eyes me curiously. “What was she like?”

“She was ...” No. I don’t want to go back to thinking about that brunette firecracker. She occupied my brain for far too long this week, considering it was only a twenty-minute exchange and despite having my number, and the cheeky little invitation I’d written beside it, she has not called. I thought for sure she’d at least do a personal follow-up. Instead, her assistant called on her behalf. A little disappointing, but I’m a firm believer in things happening and people crossing paths for a reason. If something is meant to happen, I’ll see her again sometime. *Hopefully.*

The bells ring out, saving me from answering but also signaling a frustratingly early end to our ‘grab whatever you can and shove it in your mouth’ meal break.

I take one final big bite of my roll before wrapping it and pushing up out of my seat, shooting Scotty a narrow glare. “Just remember, Scotty Jones, I can make life very difficult for you—in the firehouse and out of it.”

“You wouldn’t ...” he says cockily, but there’s an edge of concern to his voice now. “I was just messing around, Lieutenant. I didn’t—”

I shrug and can’t help but smirk. “Yeah. But you forget one thing, Scotty ...” He’s behind me now, following as we rush to the garage and step into our turnout gear. “I own your ass for twenty-four hours every three days. It pays not to piss me off. Especially if you want to use me to try and get yourself laid.”

The rest of the crew chuckle.

“Yeah, yeah. Okay,” he mutters, jerking his turnout pants up and hooking the suspenders over his shoulders. “So, you’ll come then?”

“Who else is going? And where?” I ask.

“The whole crew and Throb.”

I groan, shaking my head as I jump into the passenger seat of the truck. “That place is a meat market.”

“Your point?” Luca asks, hopping in and shutting the driver’s door when he’s positioned behind the wheel.

My best friend, Rhodes, looks at me, his eyes dancing with amusement. “I’ll go if you go.”

I let out a resigned sigh. “Some of us are too old to go clubbing.”

“Going out might improve your disposition a bit,” Luca mutters loudly enough for the rest of the crew in the back to hear.

I fight back a laugh. “Heard that, asshole.”

“Didn’t whisper it, jerk-off,” Luca retorts with a grin, turning the key and bringing the truck to life.

The garage doors jerk to a stop as they reach the top, and I grab hold of the oh-shit bar as my brother puts his foot down and we roll out, following the rescue truck in front of us.

Rhodes leans forward and puts a hand on my shoulder. “C’mon, Marky Mark, we haven’t been out in a while, and I

need someone to sit with me and watch these fools crash and burn as they try to score.”

“Even Gio’s coming. He never comes out anymore,” Luca says, changing tack. Gio is our youngest brother, bookmarked between our middle sister, Valentina, and Skye.

I shake my head. “That’s ‘cause he’s smart.”

“It’s also because he’s a workaholic who doesn’t care if he never gets laid again,” Luca says with a chuckle. “Like someone else I know.”

I smirk and turn my head Luca’s way. “Oh, he gets laid.” I always love when I know something he doesn’t.

Luca’s head jerks my way. “What?”

“Nothing,” I say, quickly changing the subject because the guys in back don’t need to know about Gio’s private life. “So, back to tomorrow night. Is there a special occasion? Or are we just going out because we have two days off and Scotty is a horn dog?”

“It’s ladies’ night,” Scotty yells from behind me.

“Ah. Now I get it. More ladies than men, Scotty included.”

“Trying hard not to curse you again, boss,” the man in question grumbles. He knows it’s in good fun though. We’ve been working together for nine years now. After that long, we all give each other shit. It helps break up the long twenty-four-hour shifts together.

“Right. Good luck with that. I now might make it my mission to piss you off so you do something dumb, then I can take pleasure in the threat of writing you up.”

“You wouldn’t ...” he gasps. I shrug.

“Who knows?” I try to keep a straight face but lose the fight, and a snicker escapes my lips.

“Such a dick,” Scotty mutters.

“Heard that,” I say. I look over my shoulder and smirk back at him. “Meant you to.”

Rhodes points his arm straight ahead toward the windshield. “Ah, good chat, guys, but see that big plume of smoke right ahead? We kind of need to get there. They’ve called in five engines for this one.”

I look out in front of us, the night sky a muted orange up ahead. Flashing red lights brighten the dark and lead our way.

“Get ready, boys,” I say, turning to look back at the crew. “Looks like we’ve got a big one on our hands.”

Luca slows and brings the engine to a stop at the cordon surrounding the old warehouse building now raging with flames three-stories high. “Let’s go. I’ll check in with Cap and give orders after that. We’re not first here,” I say, looking around to see our ‘rivals’ Firehouse 22 on scene. Their engine lieutenant Nick Pierce is a grade-A asshole, and he doesn’t seem to hide that fact. I really hate deferring to that jerk at a call-out. “It’s not our scene to control but just get ready to go in if needed. Yeah?”

“Yes, boss,” fills the cab, then we all jump into action.

Hours later, I get back to my soggy Portillo’s sandwich.

That’s not to say I don’t inhale it like it was my last meal on earth.

It’s a little bright spot on an otherwise heartbreaking night. Sometimes you’ve just gotta focus on the good to outweigh the bad.

I BLAME PEER PRESSURE.

Not really. After that terrible fire last night, where the bodies of two squatters were found inside, the entire crew needs a big blow-out. And since most of them were already conned into tagging along by Scotty, I won’t pass up the opportunity to let off a bit of steam. Scotty is good at a lot of things even though he might not seem it, but charming his way into a woman’s heart—or pants—is not his strong suit.

I've been to many bars and clubs over the years, but this is the first time I've been to ladies' night at Throb. I can see why Scotty wanted to come here. In fact, I would hazard a guess that this isn't the first time he's been here for this monthly event.

Earlier in the night, the entire crew was here. After a few hours, my friend Zach left to get back home to his wife and kids, along with a few of the others with families. Now, it's just Rhodes, Luca, Gio, Skye, Cohen and myself, all standing around two tall tables lining the wall of the dance floor. In front of us, Scotty is moving from one potential victim to the next, introducing himself and trying to get some action. It's comical.

"I can't watch anymore," Rhodes mutters, snorting and shaking his head. "It's just too sad." He lifts his chin my way. "Some wingman you are. Aren't you supposed to be helping the dude get laid?"

My lips tip up into a smile. "*You, I* could help. Him?" I ask, looking back just in time to see Scotty getting a martini thrown in his face. "Nope. There's absolutely no chance."

Skye leans into my side and puts her hand on my arm. "Don't look now, but your little realtor is in Scotty's crosshairs."

My head snaps up and I scan the room for the errant horn dog and his prey. Then I catch sight of her and her blonde friend being accosted by Scotty at a table on the edge of the dancefloor.

I put my beer down on the table and push off the wall. "I'll be back. It seems wingmen need to stage rescue missions too."

"For him or for her?" Gio calls out with a laugh.

I grin. "Him, definitely him. He's gonna get eaten alive."

"Maybe they'll eat you instead," Skye says.

"Or castrate the two of you. They kind of look like bad asses," Luca muses.

“It might do the women of Chicago a favor if they put Scotty out to pasture,” Rhodes mutters.

“Play nice, Rhodes,” I say, but there’s absolutely no malice in it.

He holds one hand up in the air. “Hey. I’m just saying what we’re all thinking.”

“Hold that thought until I get back.” I slowly maneuver my way through writhing bodies on the dance floor to the other side of the bar where Renee and her friend are glaring daggers at a seemingly clueless Scotty, who has his hands on his hips and a drunken sway going on.

“Ladies. There’s more than enough of the Scottmeister to go around,” he slurs.

“God, no. Scotty,” I say, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, putting him out of his misery because when a guy is so drunk he talks about himself in the third person, that’s when a man who is any friend at all needs to step in. “There’s no one right now who wants a piece of the Scottmeister. You’re drunk, and your beer goggles are definitely leading you down a path you don’t want to travel.”

I lock eyes with Renee, the spark of heat I see there making me stand a little straighter and smile a little brighter. *Good to know I wasn’t imagining things the other day.*

“Beautiful laaaaadddiieeeeeessss, have you met my boss man? He’s my lieutennnnant. The big cheese,” he says, puffing his chest up, making me laugh.

Renee’s long, inky hair is swept to one side over her shoulder. Her gleaming white teeth bite into her perfectly shaped ruby-painted lips as her gaze roams down my body and back up again. Tonight, she’s wearing a sexy-as-hell dark lace top and skin-tight pants that cling to her curves in a way to entice and tease—something she’s achieving with ease.

“Lieutenant?” her blond friend asks with a giggle, turning her head to the brunette goddess I can’t look away from. “It’s our lucky night, Renee. Two for the price of one.”

Renee rolls her eyes. “Hayley. It might pay to lay off the cocktails.”

Hayley throws her head back and laughs. “God, Ren. Live a little,” she says, throwing her arm around Renee’s shoulders, drawing my attention to the enticing smooth skin of Renee’s exposed chest. “The least you can do is *try* to enjoy yourself. Look here,” she says, nodding my way. “This big, buff *boss* looks right up your alley.”

My lips twitch at Hayley because a) she is definitely well on her way to being drunk and should probably switch to water soon, and b) what I wouldn’t give to see Renee relax and give me an in. I’m just as mesmerized by her as I was the first time I saw her, after we crashed to the ground with her on top of me.

Renee shakes her head and turns her attention back to me. Her expression goes from “yes, I’m open for business” to “cautious and suspicious” in the blink of an eye. What caused the sudden change? “So ... Mr. Rossi. Caught any *other* realtors this week?”

“Haven’t had much time. I’ve been too busy working and wondering if my damsel in distress might call,” I say with a half smirk, hoping a little charm might get us back on track. It doesn’t.

“Working as a lieutenant?” she asks.

“Yes ...” I say cautiously, sensing a sharp edge in her tone.

“Where?”

Scotty inserts himself back into the conversation, breaking our confusing face-off. “Marco here is my boss. We’re firefighters at Firehouse 101.”

“Is that so?” Renee says, crossing her arms over her ample chest, instinctively drawing my eyes there. Her body language tells me we’ve now moved on from cautious and shot straight to dead and buried.

“My sister doesn’t like firefighters,” Blondie announces, sounding a little disappointed at that fact. “Bad past with—”

“Hayley ...” Renee warns, but Hayley is too far gone. Her lips tip up into a lopsided grin as she steps forward and loops arms with Scotty. “But that just means more for me.” She looks between the two of us and waggles her brows suggestively. “I’m always up for some fun.”

“And then I lost her ...” Renee murmurs with a resigned sigh, and I have to agree with her.

Scotty has never been one to shy away from fire bunnies, and when he straightens and steps out of my hold to move close to Hayley, I know *he* knows he’s snagged himself a live one.

“So,” Scotty says, slinging his arm around Hayley’s shoulders and grinning down at her. “Does my fire bunny wanna dance?”

I groan, my head dropping back and my eyes going to the roof. His line seems to work though, ‘cause Hayley nods and buries a giggle into Scotty’s chest.

Renee reaches for her sister’s arm, brows knitted together, but Hayley just grins at her while Scotty nuzzles her neck. “I’m just gonna go ... over there, Ren” she announces, melting into my drunk friend. Hayley looks between Renee and I, and flails her arm in the air, gesturing between us. “You two should get acquainted. You know ...” She leans in, not being subtle. “See what pops up.”

Renee grimaces and shakes her head with absolutely no amusement there at all. *Wow. I wonder who shat in her Wheaties.* I’m rethinking my first read on the woman.

“Hayls, remember the rule. Text me if you’re going to leave.”

Blondie turns and grins at her sister. ”Yes, *Mom.*”

We turn and watch Hayley and Scotty stagger onto the dance floor, both of them laughing and hanging off each other. There’s absolutely no doubt in my mind that those two are a sure thing for the night. There was a time years ago when that would have been my main goal when going out to a club too.

Nowadays, not so much. I'm definitely a quality-over-quantity kind of guy. That comes with age and experience, I guess.

"Should we be worried about those two?" I ask, trying to break the icy aura now surrounding this brunette goddess.

"She's fine. Your *friend* seems harmless. Hayley is big enough to make her own choices, however misguided they might be." Her tone is flatter than the Indiana plains, and there's no doubt in my mind that any interest she felt for me has waned. But my mama didn't raise a quitter, and I've always been a fan of mysteries. I never give up until that last piece is in place and the riddle is solved.

"So ..." I look down to the ground and spot the same silver heels she was wearing a week ago when we first met. "Fallen into any buyer's arms lately?"

I'm aiming for a lip twitch but get a clenched jaw instead.

I've never seen such disdain shown for my profession before. Not an obvious one, anyway.

I study her while her attention is on her dancing sister, looking for any sign at all that there's a way to get the night back on course. I'm not quite ready to give up on her yet.

"Have you been to ladies' night before?" I ask, trying to scale the wall she's surrounded herself with.

"Hmm?" she asks, absentmindedly, not even flicking a glance my way.

"Do you come here often?" I say without thinking. *Oh shit, talk about cliché.* I open my mouth to take it back, but she beats me to it.

Her narrowed eyes snap to mine. "Seriously?"

I try to muster up some charm in the beautiful face of animosity. "What I mean is, I haven't seen you here before." *That* earns a new quirked brow. *She's totally not going to make this easy for me. She's a challenge, and I'm hooked on figuring her out.*

"Do *you* come to ladies' night and try to use your big muscles and suave moves often? Or maybe you just say 'I'm a

firefighter; I've got a big hose and I know how to use it' and wait for women to swoon and fall at your feet?"

My lips curve into an amused smirk. "Would it work on you? Because my next move is to take them to the firehouse and show them my big truck. Then, if they're really good, I'll let them slide down my *long* fireman's pole."

Her eyes widen, and I don't miss the slight quirk of her lips. The fact I'm going toe-to-toe with her seems to have surprised her. It also makes me want to do it again and again.

"Just so you know, I came tonight with my crew because we had a hard night last night. It just *coincided* with ladies' night and some of them were coming anyway. I know the owner, so yes, I've been here a few times before, but I've never seen the ice queen in the corner shooting daggers at me all because she thinks I'm a player without any good reason," I reply.

"I'm sorry, but your friend is currently pawing all over my sister. I'm not sure the good-guy, knight-in-shining-armor routine you've got going on is gonna fly if *that*"—she points over to where Scotty is indeed acting like an octopus with Hayley—"is the kind of guy representing your crew."

"Scotty is one of a kind. He's genuinely harmless, but he is good people."

"And what about you?" she asks curiously, her hazel eyes pinning me in place. God, that look on her face is doing bad, bad, *good* things to me. Something about her sass and attitude is hitting all the right buttons.

"What about me?"

"Are you a player?"

"I don't have time for games."

"Pity," she says dismissively.

I frown, completely confused. "Why?"

"Because then I'd have a reason to throw a drink in someone's face."

I scoff and shake my head. “So you’re judging me before getting to know me?”

She turns and faces me dead-on. “Look. I might’ve been open to the idea, but Hayley is right, I’m not exactly gung-ho when it comes to guys in uniform. It’s probably better just to end our night here and now. I’m sure you’re a nice guy, Marco, but you might as well quit now and save yourself the trouble.” She returns to her perch, leaning into the table and watching the people dancing in front of us. *Why is this woman so damn intriguing to me? I’m like a dog with a bone now.*

“You were interested though. I’m no expert, but you definitely liked what you saw when we met and tonight when I walked over.” I sound cocky, but I call things as I see them. That way, there’s never any confusion or miscommunication, whatever the situation.

She shrugs, her mouth curving into a half smirk. “There was. You’re easy on the eyes, Marco Rossi. I won’t deny that. Any red-blooded breathing woman can see that you’re hot. But if your ‘crew’ are all like Scotty, all swagger and ‘men about town looking for fresh meat.’” She turns toward me and this time she unabashedly runs her eyes over my chest, down to my legs and slowly back up again. “It doesn’t matter how good you look, or how well you fill those slacks, or how well you can use your *hose*, I’m not interested in being a notch on any firefighter’s belt. Been there, done that, lived to tell the tale. Now, if you’re going to stay here, can you at least stop trying to charm your way into my pants? That ship has sailed, *Lieutenant*, so save your well-practiced moves for your next target because your aim is well off with me.”

I watch the words come out of her mouth, but the shaky resolve I detect underneath them catches my attention. This woman is a fighter, and god dammit, I’m always up for a challenge. Something tells me Renee will make a man fight for his right to stand by her side, but for a woman like her, you know the battle will always be worth it.

There’s a spark there. She wouldn’t still be trying to justify all the reasons she shouldn’t even be interested in me—in the possibility of *us*—if there wasn’t. It’s almost as if she’s trying

to convince herself. There's definitely a story there, and I'm more determined than ever to find out what it is.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm just going to the bathroom—I'm telling you this in case Hayley stops sucking face with the *delightful* Scottmeister and wonders where I've gone. If you're still here when I get back, then *maybe* I'll let you explain why you're chatting me up when your wife/girlfriend/whoever she is stands over the other side of the room, grinning at us."

"She's my sister. Did you really think I would flirt with you in front of another woman like that?"

"As I said, I have my issues with men in uniform."

Then I see my in. "Yet when you met me, I was out of uniform and saving you from face-planting into the front lawn. And ..." I step a little closer, not wanting to press my luck, but I do love keeping this woman on her toes. Her breath catches, her chest rising and falling a little faster now. I keep going, dropping my voice to a low whisper for her ears only. "And did you think I'd leave you my phone number, offering to catch you, if I was viewing a house with a significant other?"

She shakes her head and worries her bottom lip between her teeth.

"And would I be here, standing in front of you, asking you out on a date if Skye was anyone but my sister?"

"No ..." she breathes.

I decide to make a move. It might earn me a slap in the face, or it might just give me one piece of heaven to end this exchange on a high. I close the remaining distance between us, sliding my hand onto her hip and resting it there. When she doesn't push me away, I press on. "So, sweetheart, how about you give me your number and let me call you tomorrow?"

"Hmm," she hums, sounding more than a little dazed. *Fucking beautiful.*

"Renee, will you go out with me?"

She seems to come back into herself. She takes a few steps between us and tilts her head, as if to study me.

“Maybe,” she says with a shrug, like I’ve asked her something bland like, ‘How’s the weather today?’ or ‘Do you like pineapple on your pizza?’

“Maybe not,” she says, winking at me before she straightens and heads towards the bathroom, leaving me standing there, suddenly alone and absolutely dumbfounded.

That’s not to say my eyes aren’t glued to her fantastic ass as she struts away.

Damn. That really did just happen. I was in, then she shot me down before I ended up with a maybe. I’m not sure whether to call that a win, loss, or draw.

Renee looks back over her shoulder, her eyes locking with mine. I don’t miss her slight smirk And I definitely don’t miss the extra swing in her hips as she disappears from sight.

I can’t wipe the grin off my face. The irony. She’s accused *me* of being a player when she was the one doing the playing all along.

One thing is for sure. That woman just got a lot more interesting. I was already intrigued to begin with, and now more than ever, I can’t wait to find out more about the brunette goddess.

I always said I wanted a show stopper.

Something tells me, I may have just found one.

Renee

Today is a big day. Word-of-mouth has me standing in the middle of a high-rise apartment in the Gold Coast neighborhood, being shown around by a woman named Gilly.

“Your place is beautiful, Mrs. Baker.”

She waves me off. “Mrs. Baker is my mother-in-law and as much as I love her, it makes me feel a lot older than I already do.”

I snort at that, because Gilly doesn’t look a day over thirty-five and has a body with curves for days that you can just tell her husband enjoys—especially if her slightly mussed hair is anything to go by.

Her husband, Ezra, shook my hand and introduced himself, then weirdly said Skye had highly recommended me.

It took me a few moments to remember where I’d heard that name before. Skye, sister of Marco. The woman he’d made sure I knew wasn’t his wife or girlfriend.

Then Ezra had kissed his wife in a far-from-appropriate fashion, and told me Gilly was the boss and it was her decision.

That was forty minutes ago.

“Sorry. *Gilly*, what do you think about my plan for staging and marketing the property? If you were to proceed, of course.” *Please say yes. Mama needs some new Jimmy Choos.*

She studies me for a few seconds. “I’m thinking it’s two o’clock, and we definitely need wine,” she announces, and my heart stutters for a moment. Then I can’t help the half smile that appears. “Will you join me?”

“If it’s to celebrate signing with me, then absolutely,” I say, jokingly.

She walks into the kitchen and pulls out a chilled bottle of white from the refrigerator, then pulls down two glasses from the overhead cabinet. “Of course it’s to celebrate.” I do a little jump for joy in my head. “But it’s also because my darling mother-in-law has both our two kids tonight, and I’m pre-gaming for a date with my husband.”

“Nice,” I say approvingly. “A woman after my own heart.”

She pours two *very* healthy doses of wine and walks around the kitchen island. She hands one glass to me and nods over to the balcony where there are two big outdoor couches facing the lake. Places like these make me love my job. Hayls would flip if she saw this apartment.

“We love this place. Ezra has had it ever since his second divorce.”

Internally, my eyes are bugging out of my head and rolling off the twentieth-floor balcony, but since I’m a professional, I don’t outwardly react.

Gilly’s eyes dance with amusement. “Oh, you’re good,” she says with a smirk. “Yes. My darling husband—bless his heart—chose the wrong woman *twice* before getting it right the third time with me. And since I’m the one who gets to keep him now, I’d probably shake the exes’ hands if I ever met them.” A giggle escapes me. “But now we’ve got two kids and they need space, and we’re pretty well covered with rentals, so this is the first property on the chopping block—so to speak.”

“It’s beautiful, and I’m not just saying that because I scored the listing,” I say with a wry smile. Gilly takes a sip of her wine, her eyes coming my way. “We’re actually planning on selling our two-story place in Wicker Park too, if you’re interested.”

I have to bite my lip to stop my mouth from dropping open. Two listings in one day, and all because I tripped into a sexy man's arms two weeks ago? *What kind of sorcery is this?*

Gilly sits first, and I follow her lead. "So, what do you say about taking on both listings?"

"I'd love to."

"Awesome." She curls her legs up and seems to get comfortable on the couch, as if she's settling in for a while. It's lucky I have nothing else booked for today. "Now, Renee. Since we're in business together. Why don't you tell me all about yourself?" *I guess it's not the strangest thing I've been asked by a client...*

"Okay. I'm thirty-four, and I've lived in Chicago for the past ten years."

Gilly nods for me to continue. *Why is this weird?*

"Um ... I live with my sister, Hayley, in a two-bed duplex I own near West Garfield Park."

"That's a nice area. Friends of ours have flipped a few houses near there."

Wait. Surely not. "Do you mean Cook Construction?"

Her eyes widen, her expression becoming animated as she bounces in the chair. "Yes. How do you know them?"

"I've sold a few of their houses, actually. They do amazing work."

"That they do," she replies. "My sister married Jax Cook, and Ezra is an honorary Cook brother too."

A surprised laugh escapes my lips. "Wow. Small world then, huh?"

"Definitely." She nods. "Enough of the standard things. Give me something juicy about you."

I scrunch up my face. "Like what?"

"I know," she says, taking a sip of her wine. "If you had three words to describe yourself on a dating profile, what

would they be?”

Why are my Spidey senses tingling?

“Does this have anything to do with me signing your listing?”

She smiles. “Oh God, no. And it’s *listings*, remember?” She finishes her glass and stands up. “Hold that thought—I’ll just go grab the bottle and bring it out here. Ez will come by to get me so I’m not driving. We can always send you home in a car too.”

I don’t know why, but her reassurance relaxes me. And Gilly seems lovely. Like someone I could be friends with if I didn’t work dumb hours all the time. Although, I will say this is the first time I’ve been subjected to a Spanish Inquisition at a listing appointment before.

Then again, it’s a Friday, and I’m on the twentieth-floor balcony of a million-dollar apartment, so can I really complain?

She walks back and does a sneaky top-up of my glass as she walks past. *I definitely like her now.*

“Sorry if it seems like I’m interrogating you. I have two toddlers, so I’m used to drilling them for info for the fastest, most mess-saving response.”

I snort. I can totally see that method has merit.

“But I also spend a lot of time with those toddlers, so given the chance for stimulating adult conversation, I go for it.”

I wave my hand in the air. “I get that. Go right ahead. Ask me anything. Another glass of wine and I’ll be looser than a town bike on payday.”

Gilly splutters and cracks up laughing. “You would get along with my sister, Ronnie. She’s full of crazy sayings like that too.”

I tilt my head and shrug. “Hayley and I have made it a game to try and come up with the most outrageous similes we can. The more shocking and offensive, the better.”

“I definitely like you more now,” she says. “So, c’mon, tell me. Where were you before Chicago?”

“Milwaukee, born and raised.”

“So old Chicago then?” she teases, her lips twitching.

“Ah, spoken like a true Chicago sports fan. Let me guess: Cubs, Bears and Blackhawks till you die?”

“Cubs—yes, ‘cause my husband would make me ex-wife number three if I didn’t. Bears—nope. I’m actually a Chiefs fan because *hello*, Patrick Mahomes is a god. And hockey?” She scrunches her nose up. “I can take it or leave it but Ezra is a diehard Hawks supporter and will probably wanna be buried in a jersey.”

My lips curve up. “So sports is not that big in your house, then?”

“Noooo, not at *all*,” she replies, both of us snickering.

“Okay. To turn the tables, Packers, Bucks, and the Hawks. And Hayley works for the Chicago Fire soccer team, so I get dragged along to those games too.”

Gilly’s brows lift up. “Interesting. So, what else is there to know about you? Do you have a husband, boyfriend, secret baby daddy somewhere?”

“Nope, nope, and I’d know if I did.”

“How? You’re hot, you’re funny, and you can obviously take care of yourself. Men love a strong, independent woman,” she says, looking me up and down.

“You tell me and we’ll both know,” I say with a grin. “Honestly, I came out of a bad relationship a few years ago, and since then, I’ve been focused on building up my client list and networking. My mom was a typical stay-at-home housewife who was totally reliant on the man she was with, and I never wanted to find myself in that position. I’m all about equality and trust in a relationship. Without that, what have you got?”

“See? And *this* is another reason I like you. You’re strong-minded and won’t let a man walk all over you. Take it from

someone who rules the roost in her marriage—guys dig it.” She leans in. “They *really* dig it.”

“Yes, yes we do,” Ezra says, appearing out of thin air and wrapping his arms around his wife’s shoulders from behind. He looks my way. “Hey, Renee. Looks like my wife has inducted you into her little wine club.”

Gilly looks up at her husband and kisses under his jaw. “I’m preparing for date night,” she says softly.

Ezra turns and gives her a hard, fast but rather passionate kiss on the lips before straightening. “And Lord knows I approve of *that*.”

I down my glass and stand, smoothing down my skirt as I go. “I better get going.”

“Hey, don’t leave on my account. I need to do some work anyway.”

Gilly looks up at me. “You don’t have to go. Ezra is used to hanging around girls. He has two sisters who used to talk his ear off growing up. And besides, we were just getting to the juicy stuff.”

Ezra’s amused eyes drift down to his wife. The two of them share some unspoken conversation which awakens my Spidey senses again, but I have no idea why. Call it self-protective suspicion. “Sweetheart ...” he grumbles affectionately.

She holds her hands up in surrender. “What? Just a little recon, that’s all.”

His lips twitch. “And we said we would stay out of it.”

“Stay out of what?”

“A few weeks ago, you met Skye and her brother at a house showing ...”

The penny drops. Is this Marco’s doing? He gave me two listings with *big* potential commissions, all to get me to go out with him?

“Marco?” I ask. Granted, the man does intrigue me, and he has occupied my thoughts a lot since the club—more than I thought he would, anyway. But I’m not sure I’m comfortable with this play.

Gilly’s head jerks back. “Oh, God no. Skye—his sister. She’s determined to play matchmaker with you two.”

“Oh,” I say. Didn’t see that one coming.

“Her heart’s in the right place, and we’re not signing with you because of that. Business is separate from our personal lives.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you for saying that. Now I’m just glad I didn’t tell you my deepest, darkest secrets.”

“Believe me, even if you had, Gilly wouldn’t have shared. She’s of the firm belief you have to make a guy work for it,” Ezra says with a smirk.

Gilly winks at me. “And look what happens when you do, baby daddy.”

The soft smile Ezra shoots his wife is nothing short of dazzling. “Totally worth it.”

“I do need to get going. But I’ll get my assistant to send you through the draft listing contracts and then we can schedule a coffee next week to sign them?”

Gilly stands, putting her glass down as she does. She holds her hand out to me to shake. Ezra does the same, then she leads me back into the apartment and toward the front door.

“I hope you didn’t mind the twenty questions,” she says cautiously.

“Not at all. It makes sense now. Besides, it was more like five, not twenty.”

“I was gearing up for some juicy ones, I swear.”

I laugh at that. “Maybe next time. But maybe you can even the score by telling me something about Marco. A girl’s gotta have some ammunition under her belt.” Especially if I’m going to keep crossing paths with the man.

She opens the door and taps her chin. “Hmm. He’s the oldest of five, Skye being the baby. She’s a paramedic. The others are a firefighter, a cop, and an aesthetician. They’re Chicago born and bred, and his mama makes amazing gnocchi.”

“Damn.”

“What?”

“I’m a sucker for a good gnocchi,” I say.

“You’re perfect for a Rossi man. Those boys have been tearing up the female population of Chicago for years, by all accounts.”

My face falls and Gilly doesn’t miss it.

“No, no. Not terribly. I mean ... shit. You’d think, being a lawyer, I’d learn not to put my foot in my mouth.”

“Hey. All the lawyers I’ve ever known have a tendency to do that occasionally,” I reply, trying to break the weird change in atmosphere.

“I just know that men like that, with high-stress jobs and lots of testosterone around them, like to blow off steam. Skye holds her brothers in very high regard, though. She even held off hooking up with her now husband because they all work together, and those brothers are super-protective.”

Now *that* I’d believe. “Okay, tell me this and I’ll let you report back to Skye anything and everything I said.”

Gilly nods, fighting a grin. There’s no missing the fact she’s all in on this matchmaking malarkey. “Hit me with it and if I know, I’ll share.”

“Is he single now?”

Her head jerks back. “There’s no way we’d set any woman up for a fall, and there’s also no way any of the men in our lives—husbands, brothers, or otherwise—would ever cheat on a woman. They’re honest to a fault, protective as hell, and, the most fun part ... they’re dedicated to the chase when they find the one they want.”

“Hmm. Good to know. Then report back to Skye and tell her whatever you want. But if Marco wants me, then I’m all about being the chasee. If he wants the water, he’s going to have to come to the well and dip the bucket in.”

We leave it at that, but my entire way home I totally overthink my decision. Then I decide, fuck it; Gilly has nothing to gain by playing up what a good guy Marco might be. Maybe it’s time I find out for myself.

Once he makes the first move though. What kind of chasee would I be otherwise?

Marco

Sunday afternoon and I'm walking into my parents' house, feeling tired from my last twenty-four-hour shift.

"Mama?" I call out.

"In here, Marco," my mother replies from halfway down the hall.

In the kitchen, I find Mama, Skye, Cohen, and Valentina seated at stools around the center island.

After greeting the girls with a kiss on the cheek and Co with a handshake, I move around to my mother and pull her in for a big hug.

"It's good to see you, son." She shifts back and looks in my eyes. "You look tired though. You work too hard."

I smile down at her and shake my head. "You say that to all of us."

"A mother never stops worrying about her children. You know that, Marco Rossi."

"Except me. I *never* look tired," Val says, glowing like she's slept for twenty hours.

"That's the beauty of cosmetics," Skye muses, earning a gasp.

Val leans over and points her finger at her. "Take that back, brat!"

That just makes Skye smirk. "If the concealer fits."

“Bit—”

“Valentina Maria,” Mama growls in a scary ‘don’t mess with me’ tone, just as Luca and Gio walk in together, followed by Papa.

“Who’s in trouble?” Luca says with a singsong voice.

“Val,” Skye, Co, and I say in unison, making everyone except Mama and Val chuckle.

“It’s always Val,” Gio says, walking over to said sister and ruffling her hair in the way we know she hates.

“Be nice to my girl,” my father says, moving to Mama and kissing her temple.

“Val or Mama?” I ask with a half grin.

“Mama, of course. Always your mother, till the day I take my last breath.” He’s whispering by the end, earning a soft look from his wife.

This is why I’ve held out for a show stopper. A woman worth anything life throws at you and then some. *That’s* why I’m almost thirty-nine and single, working up to three twenty-four-hour shifts a week, and living in a house with Gio. Luca *used* to live with us, but working and living together was a bit too much for both of us to cope with.

Speaking of brothers ... “Hey, where did you guys get to this morning?” I ask, switching between Gio and Luca.

“We went for a run along the Lakefront Trail.”

“You went for a run after your shift?” I ask Luca.

“Yep. Like it’s hard,” he says.

Skye snorts. “You guys are crazy.”

Luca lifts his shirt and twists his shoulders from side to side, flexing his abs. “Gotta keep in shape for the ladies.”

“Oh God,” Val groans. I just drop my head and chuckle, as does Dad.

“And on *that* note, why don’t you all help me carry these plates through to the dining table so we can eat,” Mama says.

A chorus of, “Yes, Mama” follows. I pick up a plate and my siblings follow, obeying Mama as we always do. With five out of the six of us doing shift work—and not always following the same schedule—we make sure to all get together for these meals so we can connect as a family.

We’re all very close, so it’s something we never miss.

Once we’re seated, Papa stands and says grace before we dig in and dish up our plates.

“I heard you guys caught a big one last night?” Gio says, looking over at Luca and myself.

I nod. “Yeah. House fire in a three-flat. Took most of the night to get under control.”

Papa arches a brow. “Arson?”

“Seems that way. We found evidence of an incendiary device, but the investigators will know more once they can get in there.”

“Did everyone get out?” Gio asks.

“Everyone that we knew about, yep.”

Mama does the sign of the cross, making me smile. “Thank heavens.”

“Are we all set for Marco’s birthday dinner next weekend? I’ve made the booking for seven p.m. and it’s the first day Luca and Marco are off-shift, which gives you two time to sleep,” Mama says, her soft blue eyes drifting around the table.

“Sounds good, Mama,” I say with a smile. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“And you chose Japanese this year. That’s exciting,” she says, almost looking excited at the prospect of a teppanyaki dinner.

“And will you be bringing a date?” Mama asks, waggling her eyebrows at me, and I almost laugh.

I shoot her my best adoring son expression. “You know you’re the only woman in my life, Mama,” I say, earning

groans from everyone except Mama, who sighs, and my father, who chuckles.

“So, Val. How’s online dating going?” Skye asks. There’s no missing the twinkle in her eye and I know she’s trying to stitch our sister up.

“It’s fine ...” Val answers, drawing out the words.

“And your date on Friday night?” *The little brat is in fine form today.*

“Oh, Valentina. You didn’t tell me you were seeing someone,” Mama says, jumping all over this conversation—just like Skye intended.

If looks could kill, Skye would be seriously injured by now as Val’s eyes cut through her.

Her expression is all business when she looks down the table at our mother. “We’ve only been out a few times. We’re still getting to know each other,” she replies, rather diplomatically.

“But he must be a good man to catch the eye of our daughter. You wouldn’t give someone the time of day unless he was worth your time,” Mama says.

Val’s cheeks turn pink and she studies the green salad on her plate. “He’s okay.”

I glance across to Gio, Skye and Cohen, sitting opposite me, and note they’re all either smiling or quietly laughing.

Unfortunately, that’s when Skye moves on to her next target—me.

“Marco, I forgot to tell you. We saw Gilly and Ezra yesterday, and they’ve signed both the apartment and their house with your favorite realtor.”

My head snaps up before I can catch my reaction. “What?”

Val leans forward in her chair and turns my way. She’s probably just happy the spotlight has shifted onto me. *Just my luck.* “Now, *this* sounds far more interesting. Who’s Marco’s realtor?”

I go to say something but Skye beats me to it. “So two weeks ago, I asked Marco to come with me to look at a house I’d seen for sale that I thought Co and his brothers could flip.”

“Okay ... but that’s doesn’t explain why she’s *Marco’s* realtor. Are you planning on selling?” Val asks, adorably clueless as always.

Luca snorts beside me, earning a quick elbow jab in return. “Ouch. Motherfu—”

I turn and glare at him and he wisely shuts up.

“Renee’s *his* realtor because Marco here has taken a bit of a liking to her in the two times we’ve seen her,” Skye says, leaning back in her chair and grinning like the Cheshire cat.

“Twice?” Mama asks, her gaze firmly locked on me.

“We ran into her when we went out for drinks last weekend,” I reply. Skye—still in the mood to drop me in it—keeps going.

“We went to Throb for crew drinks. You know, the nightclub that’s also a—”

“It was ladies’ night, Mama. We went to relax after a tough week and also support Scotty,” Luca says.

That earns snickers from us kids since that’s a very diplomatic way of putting it.

“Hang on,” I say with a frown. “How did Gilly and Ez know about Renee?”

“Renee’s a nice name,” Mama murmurs, and I try not to throw a potato at Skye’s head.

Skye doesn’t answer and by the apologetic look Cohen’s sending me, I know I’m not gonna like this.

“Skye ...” I grumble, low and menacing.

Her guilty eyes meet mine. “I just thought I’d recommend her. She was really nice, and you guys seemed to get along well so I ... put in a good word for her with Gilly and Ez, and then Gilly might have—”

“Matchmaker Skye strikes again,” Luca muses under his breath. She looks away but I’m not in the mood to let this go.

“What did you do, Skye?”

“We just wanted to make sure she was good enough for you,” she blurts out.

“You don’t think it’s up to *me* to determine that?”

Skye’s eyes flash and I know it’s on like Donkey Kong now. “And what were you doing about it, Marco? Huh? Have you got her phone number? Have you asked her out? Maybe made your interest known? Because we could all see you were both into each other at the club, and you still ended up coming back to our table ... *alone*.”

“Brat, my love life is exactly that. *Mine*.”

“Aha. See? You *do* like her,” Skye shouts, jumping to her feet. “I *knew* it.”

I can’t help but smile at that. Everyone else around the table laughs.

“So, little sister. What *did* Gilly find out about Marco’s realtor?” Val asks, leaning forward.

“She’s from Milwaukee, and—”

“Stop. I don’t wanna hear this from you,” I say, softening my voice. “If I wanna find out things about her, I’ll ask her myself.”

“I was just trying to help,” Skye says, batting her lashes and looking at me with her big blue eyes that she knows have done a number on me since she was born.

“I know,” I say, my lips twitching. “But does she *know* that you recommended her and probably put Gilly up to interrogating her?”

Skye grimaces. “She guessed.”

Of course she did. She’s not an idiot.

“And when was this?”

“Friday.”

I groan. “Shit, Skye.”

“Language, son,” Papa says.

“Sorry, Mama,” I say, looking down the table at her before returning my eyes to my baby sister. “I guess now I *will* have to message her to apologize.”

“Or you could just ask her out,” Cohen says. “She’s not hard on the eye, Mar.”

Skye shrugs. She’s not one of those women who scolds her husband for stating the obvious—and Cohen knows it.

“Send her flowers,” Mama suggests. “Women love surprise flowers.”

Valentina shakes her head. “Mama, I love you, but flowers from a man you’ve met twice and haven’t gone on a date with, let alone given your address and/or phone number to? Nope. That’s just a little stalkerish.”

Luca frowns. “Then how is he supposed to apologize?”

“He doesn’t,” Val says with a shrug, looking my way. “You don’t apologize for your baby sister wanting the best for you. Just tell her the truth and roll with it.”

“Well, huh,” Gio says, sounding just as surprised as I am, because that’s exactly what I was going to do when I got home.

Skye nods in agreement. “Gilly answered her question about you too.”

My head snaps to Skye. “She asked about me?”

Mama giggles. “Ah. Good call, Skye. My Marco *is* interested in her.” A low hum of amusement goes around the table.

“She asked whether you were single. Gilly made sure Renee knew you were a good guy,” Skye replies, answering my unasked question.

“Well, of course he is. He’s a Rossi,” my dad says, leaning over and patting my shoulder. “Any woman would be lucky to get a Rossi man.”

That earns a proud smile from Mama, giggles from the girls, and amused headshakes from the boys.

Whereas me, I just groan. *Lord help me.*

My only hope now is that Renee is the understanding, give-me-another-chance type of woman.

Then again, I've never been one to shy away from a challenge.

Which is probably why later Sunday night, I'm sitting in my leather recliner, the Cubs playing a game on the West Coast on the TV in front of me, and my phone is in my hand. Renee's number is on the screen after I looked it up online.

Since Gio is working, I can't ask him whether to send a text message or call her, so I decide Rhodes is the best person to give advice.

He was married for fifteen years to his high school sweetheart. Lily tragically passed away from ovarian cancer five years ago. That left Rhodes as a single dad to a now fifteen-year-old son. He's one of the smartest, most loyal, and selfless men I know, and one of my closest friends.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey. You free to talk?"

"Is the Pope a Catholic?"

"And is Scotty the idiot who actually had to stop and think about that one?"

"You know it." He laughs. "But yeah, you're all good. Jake and I are just chilling on the couch watching *Days of Thunder*."

"Kicking back old school, then?"

"Every guy needs to see Tom Cruise in his heyday."

"Truer words have never been spoken."

When comfortable silence falls between us, it's not long till Rhodes gets straight to it. "C'mon. Spill."

“So this is gonna sound totally lame but should I text Renee or call her?”

“Wait. Renee? The realtor? I thought you didn’t get her number,” he says.

“Ah, yeah ... well, the brat decided to play matchmaker and do some undercover reconnaissance and got Gilly to secretly interrogate her but wasn’t very good at it. Now Renee knows Skye was meddling, and I know Skye meddled. So I looked up her number.”

“You were going to call her anyway.”

“I was. This week. I was going to turn up at one of her listings and ask her out again, and this time make sure I get a yes.”

“Text her, Uncle Marco!” Jake yells out in the background. “It won’t freak her out as much. It won’t be as awkward as an unsolicited phone call either. Just don’t send a dick pic as a conversation starter; you might not get the answer you’re hoping for.”

Then both father and son crack up laughing, as do I.

“So now I have a fifteen-year-old schooling me on dating,” I say with a grin.

Rhodes chuckles. “Hey. If I ever decide to date, I’ll probably be asking Jake for advice too.”

“Ha ha, Dad. You, date!” Then Jake’s uncontrollable laughter filters down the line again.

“Smart kid,” I muse.

“Yeah. Sometimes he’s *too* smart.”

I smile at that. Rhodes has done an amazing job with that kid. It’s been those two against the world, with help from Rhodes’ parents so he could still work and support Jake. Everyone from the firehouse chipped in whenever and wherever they could, but any less of a man might’ve let their world crumble around them. Rhodes has stayed strong—in public anyway.

“I better go so you guys can finish your movie.”

“And you go google the lovely Renee and somehow explain why your baby sister felt the need to play matchmaker.”

Yeah, there's that too.

“Got her number. Now I just need to send the message.”

“Go for casual. Might give you half a chance before she blocks your number,” Rhodes says, snickering.

“Thanks, *friend*.”

“Anytime, Marky Mark. Come around tomorrow for dinner. Jake's cooking some fancy thing he learned on YouTube.”

“Is that code for ‘come save me from being poisoned’ or what?”

“It's code for ‘come over and have your taste buds dazzled!’”

“Tell Jake it's a date,” I say.

“Bye, and good luck. If a woman has you this interested after only a chance encounter or two, you're screwed.”

“Probably, but isn't that half the fun?”

Rhodes chuckles. “You're not wrong there.”

“You two have a good night,” I say before ending the call.

Then I bring up Renee's number, take a deep breath, and type out my message.

Marco – It appears I have a sister who likes to interrogate women I'd like to date, and she didn't even report back with any useful intel.

Not a minute later, my phone vibrates with a reply.

Renee – It took you long enough, Lieutenant.

Marco – Does this mean you'll go out with me?

Renee – Never picked you for a quick draw, Mr. Rossi. Don't disappoint me before we've even begun.

Marco – That's not a no ...

Renee – It's not a yes yet either ...

Renee

Monday

Marco – *Hey. How's your day going? Fallen into the arms of any men lately?*

Renee – *Good afternoon, Lieutenant. I've had no showings today. I'm in the office proofing marketing materials and doing boring admin stuff. Unless I trip over my own feet and my fifty-five-year-old broker John catches me, I don't think I'll be needing your rescue services today.*

Marco – *I wouldn't rule it out. So, what heels are you wearing?*

Renee – *Should I take that question as you admitting to a foot fetish?*

Marco – *Isn't it a little early in our relationship to be asking about sexual preferences?*

Renee – *Isn't it a little presumptuous to be using labels?*

Marco – *Touché.*

Renee – *Don't think I didn't notice you didn't answer my question, Lieutenant.*

Wednesday

Marco – *My sister just told me you're a closet Brewers fan. Please tell me she's screwing with me, otherwise it might be the first thing in your con column.*

Renee – *Brewers ... they're a football team, right?*

Marco – *On my way to a call-out now, but don't think I'm going to let this one go.*

Renee – *No, definitely not a Brewers fan. Cubs for life, through and through. I fly the W proudly. Be safe, Lieutenant.*

Marco – *Always, princess.*

Renee – *Princess... I like it.*

Marco – *Just say the word and I'll bow down at your feet willingly.*

Thursday

Renee – *Lieutenant Rossi, I've heard you are a good guy. Do you have further testimonials to support this claim?*

Marco – *You sure know how to make a long shift go faster. And no, I don't have a collection of references to hand out to future dates.*

Renee – *That is a shame. Word-of-mouth is key in my line of work.*

Marco – *Surely my meddling sister's confirmation that I'm not a douchebag is proof enough?*

Renee – *LOL. Skye might just see you as a charity case that needs a woman's touch.*

Marco – *I'm trying so hard not to go near that one. I will say that I'm not afraid to put in the work to get a woman's touch on my own.*

Renee – *I'll put that in your pro column then.*

Marco – *I hope you've got a lot of room on that side of the list. You're going to need it.*

Friday

Marco – *Roses are red, Violets are blue, all I want for my birthday tomorrow, is the promise of a date with you.*

Renee – *LMAO are you serious?*

Marco – *I may be a little buzzed, but I'm an honest drunk.*

Renee – *And you thought texting me while intoxicated would convince me to accept the date you haven't asked me out on yet?*

Marco – *What would your answer be if I did?*

Renee – *It's still a maybe ... is it really your birthday tomorrow?*

Marco – *Yup. Thirty-nine and never been kissed.*

Renee – *Now THAT I find hard to believe. I thought you were an honest drunk?*

Marco – *I'd be honest if you were here with me now.*

Renee – *And where is here?*

Marco – *My house. Us guys are just having a couple of quiet drinks. What are you up to?*

Renee – *Saying my prayers and reading the bible.*

Marco – *What are you praying for? I'm already yours for the taking.*

Renee – *You're also a funny drunk. Is your delightful friend Scotty there?*

Marco – *The Scottmeister is in fine form tonight.*

Renee – *So should I warn my sister she might be getting a booty call again?*

Marco – *Wait ... AGAIN? They actually hooked up?*

Renee – *Yep. I woke up the morning after the club to find a half-naked Scotty sitting in my kitchen.*

Marco – *I'm so sorry. No one wants to see that first thing in the morning.*

Renee – *That's what Hayley said after he left.*

Marco – *In his defense, he is a good guy. He's just a little*

...

Renee – *Clueless when it comes to women?*

Marco – *BINGO. Anyway, I'll leave you to your conversations with God.*

Marco – Any other plans for the weekend?

Renee – I'm doing my sister a favor and having dinner with a new soccer player who's just been signed to the team.

Renee – Marco? You still with me?

Marco – Dinner? Or a blind date?

Renee – Is it blind if I've seen a photo?

Marco – Is it cheating if you're already planning on going out on a date with a handsome and charming firefighter you met?

Renee – Is it planning if the handsome and charming firefighter hasn't asked me out on a date again yet?

Marco – You forgot to say sexy firefighter ...

Renee – Goodnight, Marco. Happy birthday for tomorrow. Make a wish when you blow out your candles.

Marco – There's only one thing I want, princess.

Renee – Then all you have to do is ask when you're sober.

Marco – Watch this space.

The next night, I'm led into the restaurant by Antoine Laurent. I chant to myself. It's just a friendly dinner. It's *just* a friendly dinner. If Hayley hadn't begged me to go through with it, promising to make it up to me and telling me it'll help her cred at work, I wouldn't still be here.

That's because my soccer-playing dinner companion has been trying to touch me every chance he's gotten since he picked me up from home in his Italian sports car, one hour late.

I've never been a fan of showy guys, or men who feel the need to overcompensate for what women can tell are their obvious shortcomings. In Antoine's case, it's a personality, the ability to talk about anything or anyone other than himself, and, judging by the overwhelming volume of cologne he's wearing, his half-undone shirt, the ostentatious gold watch on his wrist and the slimy smile he sent the hostess when we arrived, there's a reason he has to be set up for 'dinners' like

this one. To put it bluntly, he has absolutely no chance without a little help.

I already knew I wasn't a fan of men in uniform—I can thank my philandering ex and his addiction to fire bunnies for that—but so far, my time with Antoine has me scratching sportsmen off the list too.

We sit in awkward silence, me looking around the semi-full restaurant and admiring the very zen decor, while Antoine leans back in his chair, man-spreading his legs under the table so far I can barely escape, yet he seems far more engrossed with the phone in his hand than initiating friendly conversation. I take the chance to quickly send Hayley a text.

Renee – You owe me BIG TIME for this.

Hayley – Aww. Is he really that bad?

Renee – You should be here instead of me.

Hayley – Well first, there's a fraternization policy and second, you don't put up with bullshit. And Antoine can be a little ...difficult

Renee – NOW you tell me. I'm not sure even I can suffer this fool.

I slip my phone back into my purse and decide to at least make an effort at making conversation. I didn't get my hair done, shave my legs, buy new shoes, and get dressed up just to talk to myself all night—okay, maybe the shoes *are* for me.

“So, how are you finding Chicago so far?” I ask.

He looks up, his half-lidded gaze roaming down to my chest then slowly back to my eyes. I have to fight my body's instinctive shudder.

“I'm enjoying the sights, that's for sure,” he croons. *Um, eww!*

Thankfully, the waitress appears to take our order.

“Hi. I'm Holly and I'm your waitress for this evening. Unfortunately, because it's getting late, our chef's specials have sold out, but everything else on our menu is available.”

“Thank you. Can I please have—”

“We’ll have a bottle of your most expensive red wine, and we’ll have two of the best of everything,” Antoine says, speaking over me and looking at the waitress like she’s no better than the dirt on the bottom of his Salvatore Ferragamo loafers. Holly’s mouth drops open slightly but she catches it and plasters a professional expression on her face.

She turns my way, and I shoot her a sympathetic ‘I feel you’ smile. “And would you like to—”

“I’ve ordered for her. That will be all,” my *date* says, making it clear he’s dismissing her.

“Yes, Mr. Laurent,” she says. I mouth a quick, “*I’m sorry*,” which earns me a sympathetic nod before she moves away.

If he keeps this up, allegiance to my sister or not, he’ll be eating alone and I’ll gladly Uber home and order in. Life’s too short for egotistical assholes who think they’re God’s gift to the women of Chicago. I don’t care how many zeros there are in his bank account. An asshole is an asshole, no matter what.

“That was rude, Antoine,” I say.

“What was rude?” he replies flippantly, placing his phone face down on the table between us.

I quirk a brow. “Do you want a list?”

He dares to grin at me. “Okay, Renee. What’s on the list?”

“You ordered for me without asking. You—”

“Chicks love that shit.”

I jerk back, my eyes jumping out as if they’re making a run for it. “I can confirm that *chicks* do not love that ‘shit,’ as you so eloquently put it.”

He tilts his head, his eyes narrowing as if to study me. “Ah, you’re one of those feminist types.”

One of those—

“You know, the women who like to stand their ground and exert their independence when really, they still get wet when a man pays for them, showers them with expensive gifts and ...” He waves his hand in the air and looks around the room. “... takes them to expensive restaurants.”

With every word out of his slimy, douche-faced lips, my mouth drops wider open. *Did he just ... did I hear him correctly?*

Holly returns with the bottle of red wine that I am determined to drink in its entirety—purely to survive this damn date.

“Thank you,” I murmur, shooting her a grateful smile. I lift the glass to my lips and take a slow, measured sip when he makes his move, his palm sliding over my knee, his fingers resting on the inside of my leg.

I quickly jerk it away, not missing the amused twitch of his lips. He’s testing the waters and weirdly, it’s almost as if he gets off on pushing the limits. *No surprise there. He’s probably not used to women with a backbone.*

My purse vibrates next to my foot. Since this is more like a blind favor my sister is going to owe me for—for a *long*, long time—I don’t think twice before muttering, “Excuse me,” and leaning down to grab my phone from my bag.

When I straighten and side-glance at my date, I catch his eyes firmly glued to my ass. When I arch my brow at him, he has the balls to smirk. I think Antoine needs a new name—*Douche Canoe* seems to be a good fit.

As far as I’m concerned, the sooner we can finish our meal and get out of here, the better. You can bet I’m going to eat the food he ordered for me. I mean, I *shaved* for this. I deserve to at least get fed for my pain and suffering.

Before I can read the first message, another one comes through. I can’t help my lips curving up at seeing Marco’s name on the screen.

Marco – Of all the restaurants in Chicago.

My entire body goes as frozen as the lake in winter. My head snaps up and I look around the room, but I can't see him anywhere.

Then I read the next message.

Marco – And I can tell you'd much rather be on a date with me. Your body language is so frigid right now, I might start calling you Alaska.

I don't even think about Antoine before typing out my reply. All I want to know is where Marco Rossi is, and how he can see me when I can't see him.

Renee – Ah, it's the birthday boy. BTW, I'm starting to wonder if you ARE stalking me. Where are you?

Marco – Is it stalking if the stalkee is willing?

Renee – Surely it can't be a coincidence when you keep crossing paths with the same person over and over again?

Marco – I call it fortunate serendipity.

Renee – Or stalking ... where are you?

Marco – Look to the right of the front door at the entry to the teppanyaki bar.

I lift my chin and slowly follow his directions, then lock eyes with his warm melted chocolate ones. My gaze dips to his perfectly curved mouth tipping up on one side. *God, a mouth like that should be outlawed.*

Marco – Uh-oh. Don't look now. Seems your date has realized he's not the sun in your solar system and he doesn't look happy about it.

I snort, not giving two hoots whether he's happy or not. I'm waiting for the ostentatious food he ordered for me, eating it, then I'm out.

Renee – Honestly, there's no room in his galaxy for anything but his ego.

Marco – Need an escape plan? You know I have a thing about saving damsels in distress.

That one makes my lips tip up in a smile.

Renee – I haven't even gotten anything good out of this dinner. The appetizers HE ordered for me are due any minute.

Marco – What if I promise to feed you?

I glance up to find his attention squarely focused on me. It's as if the other patrons mulling around us fade away, leaving just the two of us.

My mouth waters and I'm not sure whether it's from the promise of food or the man who's staring across a crowded restaurant at me.

Renee – I should probably see this through.

Marco – Well, the offer is there if you need it.

I grin as a warm feeling fills me up.

Renee – Thank you, Lieutenant. You truly do live to serve.

Marco – Oh you have no idea, princess.

It's probably best to put my phone down and at least try to return my attention back to my dinner companion.

Except the look he's giving me tells me Marco was right in his deduction that my date is far from impressed with my lack of attention.

He nods at my phone. "You're smiling more at your phone than you have the entire time you've been with me."

I bite my tongue to stop the retort begging to pass my lips. "Sorry." I slip the offending electronic device back into my purse. I lift a brow. "You were saying?"

He moves his knee and his hand at the same time in a sneak attack. *Man, the balls on this guy!* I reach down, grab hold of his thumb, and jerk it back in a little move I learned from self-defense classes at college. He squeals like a pig and snatches his arm back at the same time as the waitress appears at our table with our appetizers. Not a second later, Marco looms over me, his angry eyes stabbing into my asshole date.

“You touched her,” he growls and for a woman who doesn’t pander to peacocking alpha-males, the gravelly tone of Marco’s voice touches me in a way I haven’t experienced in a long, *long* time.

I catch the waitress’s telling smirk as she slides the plates onto the table and quickly steps away. I dart to my feet and put my palm on Marco’s chest. Now that he’s here, maybe we should have a little fun with this. It’s not like I want to make a good impression for my date. That was a lost cause from the moment Antoine picked me up.

“Baby, it doesn’t mean anything, I swear.” Then I make a snap decision to go big or go home. I press my body into Marco’s side, reaching up and cupping his jaw, earning his fiery gaze. “I thought I’d spice things up a bit. I thought you’d like this game ...” I purr, loud enough for Antoine to hear.

“What the fuck?” Antoine mutters but I don’t miss the flash of heat in Marco’s eyes. *Now he’s getting with the program.*

“Princess,” he rumbles. “You gotta let me know when you want to spice things up a notch.” He wraps an arm around my waist, his large hand claiming my ass. We may be pretending but there’s nothing fake about the shudder that travels throughout my body. The flash of heat I catch in his eyes tells me he didn’t miss it, and better still—he likes it.

“Oh I’m so not into this shit,” Antoine says, getting to his feet. “Tell Hayley thanks for nothing.”

Marco and I both watch him pull out his wallet, slam some bills down on the table, and stalk across the restaurant and out the front door.

“Oh my lord, that was awesome,” the waitress exclaims, giving us a small clap. Suddenly, I feel all the eyes in the room firmly fixed on us and the scene we just made. Marco looks down at me, lips twitching. “You’re one of a kind, princess.”

I tilt my head. “And right now, you’re my favorite knight in shining armor.”

My body stills when I realize I'm still pressed tightly against him, and he's still holding me close, and neither one of us seems to be in a rush to change that situation. But unfortunately, we can't stand like this forever so I gently shift back and mourn the loss of his body heat against mine as I put some distance between us.

"So ..." I say.

"So ..." he replies, his lips turning up into a grin. "We can either stay here and eat whatever on earth he ordered for you?"

I dip my chin and look at what could just be the most pretentious, beautiful—but *not* something I would have ordered—appetizer I've ever seen—and it's not my cup of tea. I look back to Marco. "Or?"

"*Or* you can come back with me to meet my family, then I'll take you out and feed you."

"Oh my God," I gasp. "I ruined your family dinner! I'm so sorry!"

His eyes crinkle. "Two things," he says, closing the distance between us. "One, I'm the birthday boy and my family knows I was coming over to save you." My lips part. "And two, Mama wants to meet 'my realtor,' who seems to have stolen part of my brain."

My brows jump at that. "I've stolen your brain?"

"Part of it."

"Which part?" I ask coyly, unable to wipe the grin from my face.

He dips his head, bringing his face close to mine. "That's yet to be determined. But let's not keep Mama waiting."

He bends down, grabs my purse, and straightens. Then he laces his fingers in mine. "By the way, princess. Anytime you wanna play games like that, count me in."

I gasp. "I don't ... I wasn't ..."

He turns and grabs the bottle of red wine off the table, then winks at me. On anyone else, it would be jerky, but on Marco

... *damn*.

A minute later, Marco and I are standing in front of a table full of Rossis all smiling up at us.

Marco might have saved me, but with all the expectant eyes now looking at me, I think I've just jumped out of the frypan and into the fire.

Luckily, I have a fireman by my side to save me.

Marco

“Everyone, this is Renee. She seems to have lost her dinner date, so I’ve invited her to join us.”

My brothers all stand and hold out their arms to shake Renee’s hand, as does my father, except the sly dog looks at me and kisses her knuckles, winking when I don’t stop the soft growl rumbling in my chest. Mama doesn’t miss it, though; neither do Skye and Val. All three women grin at me.

I look down at Renee, who, gratifyingly, doesn’t look fazed by the gauntlet I’ve innocuously laid down. It was purposeful. I just couldn’t help myself once I saw the asshole next to her make a move. I was halfway across the restaurant when she put the asshole in his place.

Then she shocked the shit out of me. Not that I’m complaining about her pressing up against me the way she did. The ass-grab was as much for the game as it was for me, but her blown pupils and wry smile told me she wasn’t complaining either. “You can let her go, Marco. I don’t think she’s going to run away *just yet*,” Gio says with a smirk

I look back to Gio. “Maybe I don’t want to let her escape?”

“The fact you’re throwing her to the wolves before even taking her on a date? Big mistake, Marco. *Huge*,” Skye says as the rest of my family chuckle.

“You’re welcome to join us,” Mama says. “Son, get your friend a chair.”

I reluctantly release my grip on Renee's hand and grab a chair from an empty table beside us, dragging it next to mine. We finished dinner awhile ago, our personal chef having long finished throwing hot grilled food at us.

Once Renee is seated, I sit next to her, draping my arm behind her back

"I'm sorry for intruding. Marco just unwittingly saved me from a disastrous dinner," she says.

Papa chortles. "Renee, my dear. The way my son moved over to you? There was nothing unwitting about it."

I shake my head, glancing at the beautiful woman beside me and noting the half smirk curving her lips. Her amused gaze meets my curious one before she turns back to Papa. "Your son has made it a habit of saving me."

I dip my head as if tipping a hat. "All in a good day's work."

"I'm sorry for disturbing your meal. The birthday boy here was very insistent," she says.

Mama waves her hand dismissively. "You're more than welcome. Any friend of my children is a friend of mine." She lifts the espresso in her hand, then leans forward in her seat. The rest of my family shift back in their chairs as if they're getting ready for the show. "We're almost finished anyway. But enough about that; tell us about yourself, Renee. My son has talked about you."

I have—but I haven't said anything about how I've spent all week imagining those long tanned legs and those fuck-me heels I'd really love to have in my bed.

The princess quirks a brow my way. Her eyes are bright and sparkling with mischief. "He has, has he?"

I shrug. I'm not going to deny it. Even if Mama *is* playing it up.

"Well, my Skye here tried to meddle, which means he kind of got ambushed at dinner last weekend."

“I really should apologize for my sneak attack with Gilly,” Skye says,

Renee laughs quietly. “It’s okay. Gilly was able to give me some good intel on your brother so it was quid pro quo in that respect.”

“Oh, I like her,” Val says, nodding approvingly. “She’s not going to be a pushover.”

“My Marco needs a strong woman.”

While Mama, Skye, and Val talk amongst themselves about my dating life, I lean down and bring my mouth to Renee’s ear. “I’m starting to regret not walking you straight out the door.”

“And miss the free entertainment that is the Rossi family dynamic?” she whispers, pulling back to meet my eyes. “My night is looking up already.”

“You know, if you’d accepted my date invitation, I would have at least fed you before trying to feel you up.”

She sighs melodramatically. “If only you’d asked.”

“What if I asked now?”

Her gaze drifts down to my mouth then slowly back to meet my eyes. “I’d say feed me and you can have anything,” she whispers with a wink. *Fuck, this woman is going to kill me.*

“*Anything?*” I ask. Her eyes flash.

Her stomach growls and she covers it with her hand, her cheeks blushing pink as she drops her head and giggles before looking back. “Yes, apparently, anything.”

“I’ll feed you if you agree to go on a date with me.”

“Deal.”

“Now?”

She frowns in confusion. “Now?”

God, she’s cute. “Yeah, now.”

“But your family ...” she replies.

“They’ll understand. We’ve finished anyway. And birthday rules apply.”

“Birthday rules?”

“Birthday rules—whatever I want, whenever I want it, and a new one—whoever I want it with,” I say with a grin

She narrows her eyes suspiciously. “That’s not a thing.”

“It’s *my* thing.”

Renee rolls her eyes and bites her lip, and now all I can think about is kissing her, tasting her, and doing *other* things too. *And yep, that’s got me hard as a rock.* I can see her mind working. and I decide to choose for her.

Standing, I reach out my hand for hers. “C’mon, princess. You can get grilled by my family next time. But now, I need to feed you.” When she gets up from her chair, tangling her fingers with mine, I turn to face the table, meeting a hoard of amused grins and curious gazes.

“Thank you for dinner. Renee and I have plans, and since she hasn’t eaten, I’m going to see to getting her fed.” I meet Mama’s eyes. “I’ll call by tomorrow.” My mother doesn’t miss what I’m not saying. *Give me this and I’ll tell you what you wanna know next time.*

“Yes, son. You two go do your own thing.” Mama stands and moves around the table toward us, pulling me in for a big hug, then—not surprisingly—does the same to Renee.

“It’s lovely to meet you, *bella*. I hope to see you again.” Then she whispers something in Renee’s ear, making my date giggle then nod at Mama. *What’s that about?*

I look between Gio and Luca. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Run, nine a.m.,” says Gio, his way of asking if I’m coming home.

“Yep. Wake me up at eight.”

He nods, his lips twitching. *Right, enough of this.*

“Bye, everyone.” I wave again and start moving away, bringing Renee with me.

“Bye! Nice to meet you all,” she says as she follows my lead.

We walk outside and I don't stop till we're around the corner and I know we're out of view. I turn to face her, finding a wry smile twisting her lips.

“So ...” I say, my eyes roaming her face. She's even more beautiful than I remember, and she was already stunning.

“So ...”

“Where to?”

Her head jerks. “Oh no, Lieutenant. This is all on you. My only demand is that you feed me. Beyond that ...”

“Beyond that, I'd feed you then work you over until you've worked up another appetite,” is what I'd say if I wasn't trying to be a gentleman. That's how I know there's something different about Renee.

Do I want her in my bed? I've known that since the minute I laid eyes on her hair, her legs, those fuck-me heels I want digging into my hips, and that spark she has that's begging for me to ignite it.

But I want to get to know her. She's funny and cute and gives back as good as she gets. She's strong and independent. The way she took control of her asshole date proves that.

It's been a long time since a woman has occupied my mind like this, and even longer since a woman has met my family.

“Let's go get the princess fed then,” I say, squeezing her hand. “Do you like burgers?”

“Am I Renee Hamilton? Of course I like burgers.”

“Good. Then I know just the place.” I take my time to slowly look down her body, pausing to take in the sexy as hell heels adorning her feet before returning to her beautiful face. “Can you walk in those shoes?”

“You've got a foot fetish.”

No, I have a you fetish.

“I’m contemplating a fireman’s hold,” I say with a loaded grin.

I don’t miss the hitch in her breath and make a note to go all caveman on her when we get to the point of her being naked and willing in my bed. She’s not the only one who likes playing games.

“I can walk,” she says huskily.

My mouth tips up in a smile. “You just let me know if you can’t. I’m born to serve.”

“I bet you are.

We move down the street, turn at the corner, and head down toward my favorite little diner I always come to when I’m in this part of town.

“So, why were you on that date? That guy was definitely not worthy,” I ask, moving closer to her as a group of twenty-something girls walk past us.

She sighs. “You’re not the only one who likes to help people.”

I turn and quirk a brow.

“Hayley works for the Chicago Fire soccer team, and he’s a new import that she wanted to make a good impression with.”

“And your sister recruited you to do it?”

“Yeah. It was a favor—that’s all.”

I look her up and down. “You did *him* a favor. You made him look like he was almost worthy of having you on his arm.”

She tilts her head. “Is that your way of telling me I look good?”

We stop at the lights, waiting for the pedestrian signal. I turn to face her and bring her in close, my gaze locked on hers.

“Good is nothing. You look fucking fantastic.”

Her eyes soften and she blushes beautifully. "Thank you. I do try."

I lift my hand to cup her jaw and tilt her chin up. "You don't have to even try. But when you do, you'd make any man want to stalk across the room to claim you."

Her teeth dig into her bottom lip, drawing my eyes there. *Fuck, I want to kiss her.*

But I won't. Not yet. That first kiss is going to be memorable. It's going to be burnt into my brain and hers. When it happens there will be absolutely no doubt in her mind where my head is at when it comes to Renee.

"Fuck, you're cute. You're strong and tough and you take no shit, but when you're soft and pliant and biting your lip?" My voice is rough and thick. "You make me want things."

"Things?" she breathes.

"Yeah. *Things.*"

"What kind of things?" she asks curiously.

"I'll tell you when I know you won't bolt."

She opens her mouth but the lights change and we're moving again.

After that, she falls quiet and I just enjoy the feel of her hand in mine and the fact I have time with her, just the two of us. It feels right—like, *really* right. But I'm still conscious of the fact she has baggage when it comes to men in uniform—especially firefighters. I want to get us to a point where we can unpack that. Only when I know the reasons why—once we've gotten to know each other more—will I know the fight I'm up against to get her to let me in.

Which means we have to take this slow.

It's a good thing I'm a patient man when it comes to getting the things I want, and right now, I want Renee.

An hour and a half later, I'm pulling my car into her driveway and cutting the engine. I turn toward her and find her

head leaning against the headrest and her soft, tired eyes looking my way.

“Food coma?”

“Close to it. You weren’t kidding about those burgers. And those deep-fried pickles and ranch were to *die* for.”

I chuckle. “Yeah. I go there as much as I can.”

“You can take me back whenever you want.”

I shoot her a warm grin. “You asking me out for another date?”

Her eyes sparkle with amusement. “If it’s *those* burgers and *those* pickles, then yes. Yes, I am.” A yawn escapes her, and I decide it’s time to get my princess to bed. Not *my* bed, but there’s no doubt in my mind that she’ll be there soon enough. I’ll bust my ass to make sure she does.

“Wait there,” I say, hopping out and rounding the hood. I open her door and hold out my hand for hers. I’m addicted to touching her. It settles me. The warm slide of her palm against mine, the trust she gives me when she looks at me—they both point to good things on the horizon. When you face flames daily, you need something or someone to keep your mind focused on getting out. Someone to come home to and help you through the good times and the bad.

After just a few weeks and one burger date, I know Renee could be that person for me. A full heart, a good soul, a strong, resilient constitution.

And to think, we only crossed paths because Skye dragged me along to a house showing.

I lead her up the stairs to her front door. She turns to face me, the soft, gentle smile on her lips enchanting me. “Thank you for turning the night around.”

“You know ... if this was our first date, I’d be angling for a goodnight kiss.”

She graces me with a slow-growing smile. “Is that what you want this to be?”

My eyes burn into hers as they roam her face and fixate on her full, glossy lips. "I know I've never had such a relaxed, easy time with a woman before tonight—date or otherwise."

She tilts her head to the side in a way I've noticed she does a lot. I get the feeling she's looking for any tell that I'm full of shit and just telling her what I think she wants to hear. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

I move in slowly, closing the distance, my gaze locked with hers. I leave barely an inch between us, the heat from her body radiating onto mine, making me ache with the need to do *something*.

"I'm saying that to the woman who's been stuck in my head for the last two weeks." I lean in, bracing my arm on the wall beside her head. My heart thuds against my chest as I breathe her in. "The woman whose path continues to cross mine. I think it means she's meant to be in my life ... or she's a stalker."

She giggles, shaking her head and biting her lip again. I can't tear my eyes away from her.

Whatever this is between us, it's palpable. The air around us is so electric, it's like it has its own force field. It's something no one in their right mind could—or should—ignore.

I reach out and gently tuck a loose tendril of hair behind her ear, lightly brushing my fingertip over the side of her face and down the satin-smooth skin of her throat, leaving goose bumps following in my wake.

I dip my head, bringing our lips closer until they're almost touching. My eyes stare deep into her soft, glazed ones and fuck, it's a good look on her. "The same woman who was on a date tonight with a man so far beneath her, he's lucky he even got past drinks," I finish.

She lifts a brow. "And do you think you're worthy of a date with me?"

Oh, yes. There's that sass I like so much.

“Fuck no. But that doesn’t mean I won’t work my ass off to make sure I’m the lucky bastard who gets a shot with a show stopper like you.”

She stills, her breath catching, her lips parting. “A show stopper?” she whispers, her fingertips flexing against my chest.

I press her deeper into the wall. “Yeah. The one who makes me want to buy a ticket because I know deep in my bones that if I play my cards right, she might just be the headline act for the rest of my life.”

Her entire body jerks before she grabs my jaw in her hands and crushes our mouths together, her tongue delving between my lips and seeking mine. I snake my hand around her waist and down to her ass, holding her to me as I take over, kissing her deep and long and wet, not leaving a single inch of her mouth undiscovered.

She moans into my mouth and I groan back into hers, her hands roaming over my chest and waist and sliding down to my—

I end the kiss before we pass the point of no return and my aching hard-on takes this where I really wanna take it, especially after having had a taste of her.

Meeting her lust-filled eyes, I watch her lick her lips, which makes me want to take them again. I cup her jaw and trace her mouth with the pad of my thumb. “Fuck, you can kiss.”

Her lips quirk up. “You’re not too bad yourself, Lieutenant.”

“Thanks for making my birthday wish come true.”

“Thanks for letting me.”

“I’m busy until Thursday, but I’d like to cook you dinner.”

She melts into me. “That would be nice,” she says softly. *And there’s that soft spot I knew she was protecting.*

“Good,” I murmur, my eyes fixated on her wet, swollen lips and I lean down to brush my mouth against hers. “You

better get inside before I try and make another wish come true.” My voice is so low and rough, there’s no mistaking my meaning.

“What might that be?” she asks teasingly.

“That’s definitely an IOU conversation.”

“I might hold you to that.”

I kiss her again, this time soft and slow, pulling back after touching my tongue to hers. I flatten my hands and slide them down her sides to her hips before I straighten and gently pull her off the wall.

There’s no stopping my smirk at the promise of that. ”I hope you do.”

Renee

Marco – *Hey princess. What are you up to?*

Renee – *Hey. We're just at our grandmother's house for dinner. It's a Hamilton family tradition to watch trashy TV and eat comfort food on Sunday nights.*

Marco – *I like that. Let me know when I'm invited.*

Renee – *Whoa, buddy. Slow down. I've still gotta see whether you can bring the goods on this epic first date.*

Marco – *That kiss should've told you everything you needed to know*

Renee – *It was definitely enlightening ...*

Marco – *It was something. I just wanted to see whether the DC contacted you after last night.*

Renee – *DC?*

Marco – *Douche canoe*

Renee – *That's a perfect name for him! But no. He hasn't texted Hayls either.*

Marco – *Damn. So I don't get to hunt him down and teach him a lesson in manners?"*

Renee – *Ha ha. I appreciate the thought but that's one battle I can probably fight on my own.*

Marco – *I'm sorry. I'm a little protective sometimes.*

Renee – I hadn't noticed ... but thank you for offering to give the douchebag a much-needed and overdue reality check. Somehow I think he's past being helped now.

Marco – Then let's not waste any time talking about old news, and focus on Thursday.

Renee – Let me check my diary ... I've got an enema booked; that's the highlight of my Thursday.

Marco – WHAT?

Renee – Kidding. That's not something you'd tell the guy you wanna kiss again and who you want to kiss you again.

Marco – Oh ... well, this is awkward then.

I gape at my phone, going back through the messages and wondering if I misread something or—

Marco – Jesus, no response. You thought I'd wanna cook you dinner on Thursday if I didn't want to see you again? Princess, I didn't think we'd need to work on your confidence. You KNOW you've got it going on.

Renee – I have some baggage. What can I say?

Marco – My mission is now to help you process that baggage and take it out with the trash.

Renee – And how do you plan on tackling that?

Marco – By reminding you every time I see you just how into you I am.

Renee – Wanna enlighten me?

Marco – Really fucking into you, princess.

Renee – Now it's awkward ...

Marco – I'll just wear you down with my persistence and sensational cooking skills, and if those fail, I'll have to pull out the big guns.

Renee – I've always said to start with your best weapon.

Marco – I'm saving myself for marriage.

Renee – City Hall is open.

Marco – *Wow. That was easy.*

Renee – *Ha ha. Maybe my sister's approach to her love life is rubbing off on me.*

Marco – *Wanna rub it off on me too?*

I burst out laughing at that, earning a curious glance from Hayley who's sitting on the other couch across from me.

Marco – *Shit. I didn't mean literally. I meant figuratively. As in ha ha, I'm not easy either and sometimes I swear it would be easier if I was.*

Renee – *Life would be easier if you were easier? You should put that on a bumper sticker.*

Marco – *My godson, Jake, just told me I'm an idiot who doesn't deserve a decent woman since I can't even text properly.*

Renee – *Well, I haven't blocked you yet, so your skills must be passable. And how old is your godson? 'Cause he sounds like a genius.*

Marco – *Fifteen going on forty. His father and I swear he's smarter than both of us put together.*

Renee – *You let fifteen-year-old boys read your texts? I'll make sure I don't send anything X-rated.*

Marco – *I don't usually show him my phone, so you're safe to send whatever you like...*

Renee – *LOL. I think I love him. Tell him to look me up in ten years if he's single.*

Marco – *Good to know I might have a ten-year life cycle with you.*

Renee – *Depends on whether you live up to expectations. You might not get past Thursday yet.*

Marco – *Expect the worst, princess, then I'm guaranteed to knock your socks off.*

Renee – *I'll hold you to that.*

Marco – *If you're the reward at the end, you're worth the effort.*

I blink quickly to stop the threat of tears from taking hold. What the hell is this man doing to me? I'm a strong, backbone-of-steel badass who takes no shit, yet sweet words make me melt? I don't even know who I am anymore.

Renee – *So Thursday?*

Marco – *Two options. Your place or mine, but both include me cooking you dinner. Then, if I haven't given you food poisoning, I thought we could go see the lunar eclipse at the planetarium.*

Renee – *Damn, Lieutenant. You're already blowing my last date out of the water.*

Marco – *In all fairness, that's not exactly hard.*

Renee – *True, but I'm looking forward to it regardless. I like the idea of you in my kitchen. Do you do dishes too? Is it a full-service dining experience?*

Marco – *Define full service? And of course I do the dishes. I want a date, not a maid.*

Renee – *If I was a swooner, I'd so be swooning right now.*

Marco – *I'll have to work harder then. I like the idea of you being weak at the knees and melting into me.*

Renee – *I was half expecting an "on your knees" joke then, but I remembered that would be a Scotty thing to do.*

I snort at my joke, mainly 'cause it's true.

Marco – *And now Jake and Rhodes are looking at me like I've lost my mind 'cause I'm chuckling at my phone.*

My phone chimes again.

Marco – *Hey, it's Jake. I just read Uncle Marco's last text and I have two words, Renee. YOU'RE WELCOME. P.S. He's never asked me for advice about women because he's rarely met any that have left an impression. He can be trained though. He has potential, I promise. So hopefully soon it'll be ME thanking YOU for making him happy.*

Marco – By the way, this message will self-destruct in the ten seconds it takes for him to come from the kitchen with a beer. If he asks, I said nothing.

I leave it at that; there's no way I'm going to reply and do Jake in it. He might be a worthwhile ally in the future, depending on whether Marco proves to be just as honest and genuine and trustworthy as he seems to be.

I'm hopeful but not fully sold yet. I've never thought a woman with half a brain should go all in from day one—or week two, whatever. As I said to Marco, that comes from my own baggage. Although the weight of it may be heavy, I'm determined not to let the hang-ups from my past dictate my future. That's why I'm giving this thing with Marco a chance, because I believe in fate, I believe in serendipity, and I believe in chemistry.

And since I was gearing up to jump on and ride that Italian stallion home last night. Chemistry is definitely not a problem for us. Not. At. All.

“Who has you grinning like a schoolgirl texting her boy crush?” Gram asks, snapping me out of my Marco daze.

“She's probably texting her new *boyfriend*,” Hayley says, smirking over at me. Gram's eyes widen before sparkling with mischief, and I know I'm in for a grilling, ‘Gram style.’

She turns my way in her recliner, the comedy we were watching on her TV all but forgotten now.

“So, tell me about him,” she says, her lips curving up.

“A real man will never break your heart. He should break your headboard, your bed . . .” She leans forward, her sprightly eyes darting between Hayley and me. “Maybe sometimes your special place, but never your heart.” She narrows her gaze my way and points a finger at me. “Is this Marco a good man? One worth your time and womanly charms?”

If anybody else said those two words, I'd bust a gut laughing, but this is Gram's way. Ever since she took us both in at ten and twelve, she has never been anything but straight to the point and honest. Then, when I moved to Chicago ten

years ago, Gram came with me. Together with Hayls, we're peas in a pod—except Gram has always wanted her own space in case she ever found a man to measure up to our grandpa who passed away just before we moved.

“He's ... he's different,” I say thoughtfully.

Gram lifts a brow. “Explain, sweet child, because different could mean a lot of things, good and bad.”

“The pull between us is intense, and he keeps saving me.”

“You're not a woman who needs to be saved.”

“No. But he's always around when I need him to be.”

Her lips form an o, whereas Hayley just grins and nods. “I knew there was something strong there at the club. I could feel it.”

I snort. “Surprised you could feel anything with the number of champagnes you had under your belt.”

My sister's eyes narrow. “Hey. Ladies' night means fun night. Am I right, Grams?”

Gram just shakes her head, a little smile playing on her lips. “I do remember having a lot of fun when champagne was involved. Once, Hattie, Kendra, Bette, and I had a girls' night in and we shared a few bottles, and by the time my sweet George came home, he found us having half-naked piggyback races in the backyard.”

I cover my mouth, but Hayley and I dissolve into a fit of giggles.

“What did Grandpa say?” I ask.

Gram shrugs. “My George knew what he was getting into when he married me. I'm not sure anything we did ever shocked him. He'd just smirk and shake his head, and then make sure I made it up to him later,” she says with a wink.

I groan and Hayley just laughs harder. Gram has always been unashamedly honest with us girls. Her version of the birds and the bees talk was one for the ages and went into graphic detail that left us half-traumatized yet strangely

grateful later in life. When it came to our bodies, boys, and sex, there were never any surprises.

“Is he better than the last one?” Grams asks.

“*Sooo* much better,” Hayley says with an enthusiastic nod. “And hotter.”

I groan and drop my head back against the sofa.

“Renee?” Gram asks. “What’s wrong?”

I turn to meet her eyes. “He’s a firefighter,” I say softly. “And we know how that turned out last time.”

Gram covers my hand with hers. “Is he anything like that ass wipe?”

My lips tip up in a smile. If anyone was to hate my ex more than I do, it’d be Gram.

“So far, so good,” I say with a shrug. “He’s coming over to cook me dinner on Thursday.”

Gram’s head jerks. “He’s cooking for you? Damn, child, lock that man up and hide the key. My George was good at a lot of things—making food was not one of them. And you know what they say about men who can cook ...”

“What?” I ask curiously.

Her eyes light with mischief. “They’re good with their hands.” When she waggles her eyebrows, I lose it completely, and all three of us laugh.

On the drive home, Marco sends me one last text for the night.

Marco – Sweet dreams, princess. Looking forward to Thursday.

And try as I might, I can’t wipe the smile off my face or pop the small bubble of excitement inside me. Maybe Marco is everything he seems to be: strong, kind, funny, reliable, honest ... Maybe it’s time for me to stop overthinking things, because if that first kiss was anything to go by, I’d be a fool not to give the man a chance, his profession be damned.

Marco

I dish up the chicken parmigiana with steamed broccoli and green beans and, after folding the kitchen towel over my shoulder, I carry them out into Renee's dining room.

Her eyes come to me as soon as I walk through the door, her gaze warming as I slide the plate in front of her.

"Buon appetito," I say, nodding to the food.

"Damn. He cooks, he speaks Italian... your talent knows no bounds."

I grin at that. "Don't get your hopes up. I know maybe ten words and I'm a so-so cook."

She narrows her gaze and I try to keep a straight face, but my twitching lips mean I fail miserably. She knocks my leg with hers. "You're so full of shit. This smells amazing."

"Have to pull out the big guns if I want another date."

Renee lifts her glass of white wine to her lips, her brow arching. "Already planning another date?"

I reach out and gently lift her free hand to brush my lips against her skin, my eyes locked with hers. "Gotta lock you in early before I lose my shot."

"You haven't done anything to minimize your chances so far."

My grin widens. "Good to know."

“Except maybe delay me eating this amazing-smelling food.”

I reluctantly release her hand and hold my drink up between us. “To *official* first dates and gorgeous company.” A blush colors her cheeks as she gently clinks her glass against mine.

“To men who cook and swoop in to save damsels in distress,” she replies.

I chuckle and shake my head. “Something tells me you’re not a person who needs saving often. You’re one of the most headstrong, determined women I’ve met, and I’m related to three half-Italian women who would kick my ass without any hesitation if I ever put a step wrong.”

Her beautiful eyes soften, a wry smile playing on her lips as she lowers her glass and picks up her cutlery.

Instead of doing the same, I watch as she cuts off a small piece of chicken and takes her first bite. Her eyes close and she hums a satisfied moan that has me needing to adjust myself. Everything about this woman intrigues me. In some ways, she wears her emotions on her sleeve; in others, she’s a locked treasure chest I’m aching to crack open.

“How did you learn to cook? Your mother, or for self-preservation as a single man?” she asks.

“A lot of column A, a bit of column B. But I’ve only ever wanted to be a firefighter so that doesn’t work if I don’t look after myself. Can’t pass the annual physical and do the Tough Mudder if I’m eating takeout all the time.”

Her head jerks back. “The Tough Mudder? That’s the dirty obstacle course, right?”

“Dirty obstacle course sounds so filthy coming from your lips,” I say, my eyes drifting down to her mouth.

Renee’s eyes dance with mischief as she quirks a brow. “Everything I want to say is probably not appropriate for a first date.”

I lean forward in my seat. “Say it, just once. Just for me,” I whisper, looking from side to side conspiratorially.

She laughs, her whole face lighting up. “So are you part of a team or ...?”

“Our whole crew is doing it against another firehouse in six months, and all the money we raise goes to the winner’s chosen charity.”

Her whole face softens. ”Who’s your charity?”

“Big Brothers Big Sisters.”

Renee’s eyes light up and she smiles over at me. “I go to their charity ball every year. I used to volunteer when I was at college.”

I look at her in wonder. “How are you single?”

Her lips tug up on the side. “I could ask you the same question.”

“I’ve already told you.”

“You did?”

My smile broadens. “Yep. I was waiting for my show stopper.”

“Ah yes,” she says, watching me over her glass. “I do remember that.”

“So, you?”

“Waiting for a knight in turnout pants?”

I throw my head back and laugh. ”I know you’re no fire bunny. Your sister said you don’t like firefighters.”

She shrugs but I don’t miss the blink-and-you’d-miss-it fall in her expression before she quickly catches it. I decide to backtrack and get back to safer territory. She’ll tell me in her own time. It’s up to me to show her I’m not the same as her ex—whatever he is and whatever he did. Do I have my suspicions about the kind of man he might’ve been? Sure. But I also know what people say about making assumptions.

“Okay. Tell me about your family. Is your grandmother your only other family in Chicago?” I ask, after a few moments of comfortable silence as we start eating.

“How did you remember that?”

“Remember your grandmother? You said you were at her house the other night when I was with Rhodes and Jake.”

Her lips twitch.

“And I know he texted you when I left the room,” I say with a chuckle. “That boy is the best almost-man I know.”

“I’m thinking he’s got good male role models in his life then.”

“He and Rhodes lost Lily five years ago. I went through the academy with Rhodes so I’ve been around for all of Jake’s life, but when Lils died, the entire firehouse rallied around them. The two of them might as well have the last name Rossi—they *would* if Mama had her way.”

“That’s amazing. Jake’s already proved to me he’s an impressive young man. And smart. I figured he deleted all evidence of his messages to me.”

“He did. He just made sure to screw with me after doing it so I had no idea what he said but he told me he’d appreciate gratitude when he’s in his twenties.”

She smiles. I want to make her look like that over and over again. *Huh. How about that?*

Renee rests her hand around the stem of her glass. “So, my gram ...” She tilts her head and looks at me. “She’s the best, most nimble eighty-year-old woman I’ve ever known, and she was there for us when nobody else was.” She pauses and stares into my eyes. “Did we want heavy on a first date?”

“If it was an *official*, official first date, then maybe we’d stay on the surface, but I want to get to know more about you—*all* about you—which means we can go as fast or slow as you feel ready to go. The rest can be like an onion.”

“Layer by layer?” she says softly.

“Absolutely. Because I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of delving deeper and discovering all that makes up you.”

She shakes her head. “You’re one of a kind, Lieutenant.”

“And we haven’t even slept together yet,” I say jokingly.

“Things you say aren’t what I’m used to hearing from the men I date.”

“*Or* you’ve been dating the wrong men, because any man who just wants a quick lay shouldn’t be wasting a woman’s time with false promises of more. Or, worse still, leading her on thinking it’s going somewhere when he’s not in the mindset to entertain anything past convenient sex on tap.”

She stares at me, her breath catching, her fork stopped in mid-air. Quickly recovering, she takes the mouthful then studious eyes watch me, so much going on behind them as she takes another sip of wine.

“Usually, hearing a man say these things—things a woman like me wants to hear—would make me roll my eyes and scoff and write them off as just some guy trying to get into my pants.”

I put my hand up, my devilish smirk unrelenting. “I’m gonna put it out there that I’m absolutely, one hundred percent not opposed to any part of me getting into your pants. Hell, it doesn’t even have to be in. I’d be happy with *on*.”

When Renee responds with an arched brow and I can see she’s trying hard to keep a straight face, I wink and she cracks up, her infectious giggle making me laugh with her.

“Okay. So let’s stay away from heavy for tonight. I promise I’m not hiding anything. I just like talking with you and eating this delicious food,” she says. “If you were aiming to impress, you’ve succeeded.”

“I wanted to dazzle.”

“You’ve dazzled me.”

“Wait until we see the eclipse. That’ll *wow* you.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” she says, her grin as gratifying as it is satisfying.

I nod to her half-eaten plate as I reach over for the bottle and top up her glass. “Then eat up so we can get this date on the road. Unfortunately, a lunar eclipse waits for no one.”

She gasps dramatically. “Not even the great Sir Marco Rossi?”

I chuckle. “Not even for me. Now, eat.”

She gives me a mock salute. “Yes, Lieutenant.”

I shake my head as I return my attention to my own plate “Smartass,” I mutter.

If I wanted a meek woman, I wouldn’t have been drawn to someone like Renee. And judging by how this date is going right now, I’m so fucking glad I was.

I STAND beside Renee amongst the large crowd gathered on the big grass clearing next to the Adler Planetarium.

In front of us, there’s a giant projector screen that’s been set up for those who want a magnified look at the full moon lunar eclipse, which is almost due to start.

Even standing here now, I still haven’t let go of her hand, loving the physical connection. I’ve always been a demonstrative guy in relationships—not that there have been any long-term or even serious ‘I could spend my life with this woman’ ones. Many haven’t been happy with my hours or the danger aspect of my job, or supportive enough to accept my dedication to furthering my career. So when I started getting a little older and looking to make headway in my personal life, I became a lot more selective on my dating choices. This meant fewer options because my focus was on quality over quantity, and two of the most important parts of that are honesty and equality.

“It’s starting,” Renee says, squeezing my hand. I don’t miss the shiver in her voice. It may be late summer but it’s also a crystal-clear night, and there’s a chilly breeze coming off the lake which has brought the temperature down to the high fifties.

I shrug off my jacket and hold it out for her, helping her slip it on and zip it closed.

She turns and puts her hands on my shoulders. I look down and wrap my arms around her back, lowering my head and brushing my lips against hers. Her fingers glide up into my hair and hold me there, her tongue sneaking out and teasing mine before retreating. Accepting her invitation, I tighten my hold and press her harder against me as I deepen the kiss, loving the way she meets me stroke for languid stroke.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my lips when we pull apart, our eyes locked together, and I love the sexy-as-hell lust I see shining back at me. I know she can see the same reflecting back at her because I’m not hiding a single feeling when it comes to this woman—or the incessant hard-on I seem to have whenever she touches me. It would be a problem if I didn’t want her to feel exactly what she does to me.

“You’re kicking ass at this first official date gig,” she says, smiling up at me. She turns her head slightly, burying her nose in the collar of the jacket and inhaling deeply. “It also helps that your cologne smells really good.”

The announcer’s voice fills the air. “The lunar eclipse is due to begin in the next few minutes. It will be visible to the naked eye—thanks to the weather gods for tonight’s clear sky—or you can watch the magnified view from our telescope on-screen.” With the show about to start, I frame Renee’s hips with my hands and spin her slowly toward the screen again, wrapping my arms around her and pressing a barely there kiss to the back of her neck. When she covers my hands with hers and leans against me, I know I’ve read her right.

That’s how we stay as we tip our heads up to the sky and watch the amazing sight of the sun’s shadow being cast onto the moon.

Once we get back to Renee's house, again, I find myself standing on her doorstep, looking into the same eyes I was on my birthday five nights earlier.

This time, I didn't save her from a date; I was busy showing her what a date *should* be like.

And, judging by the look she's giving me right now as she leans back against her front door, I think I got a passing grade.

"Do you want to come inside?" she asks, her eyes hooded.

Fuck. Do I ever.

I move in, my eyes not leaving hers for a second—not until our hips meet and I let my gaze drift slowly down as her tongue darts out to slowly wet her parted lips. *Fuck me.*

I touch my forehead to hers. Our bodies are pressed tight from chest to thigh and everywhere in between. I huff out a breath and a frustrated growl escapes me. "You have no idea how much I want to say yes."

Her lips quirk up as she runs her hand around to my back and slowly glides it lower until she reaches the top of my ass. "Can you be persuaded?" she asks roughly.

I roll my hips against her. "What do you think?"

She laughs quietly, her fingers giving my butt a gentle squeeze. "So why can't you stay?"

"Because I have work at seven, and I don't stay out on school nights."

I lift my head back as she tips her chin and shoots me an adorable playful pout as Renee moves her hands around to smooth her palms up my chest.

"That is a real shame, Lieutenant," she says, shaking her head slowly, her eyes warm and understanding yet still full of heat.

I quirk a brow. "Rain check?"

"Oh," she says. Her smirk proves the amusement I hear in her tone. "Is this a little case of payback?"

“Believe me when I say I have far more creative and satisfying ways of dishing out payback that would make the both of us sleep well tonight—if there was sleep to be had.” Her body trembles against me, and it’s gratifying as hell.

“But,” I say, before leaning in and brushing my lips achingly slowly against hers. “I want you to keep my jacket until next time.”

She pulls back and scrunches her nose up. “Next time?”

“How about next Saturday? Wear it to my house when you come to cook dinner for me.”

Her eyes flash before they grow hooded and amused. “*Oh, really?*”

“Yeah? Are you asking or telling?”

“Telling,” I reply without missing a beat.

She hooks her hands around the back of my neck, bringing my face close to hers. “And why’s that?”

“Because,” I rasp, my voice thick with lust. I touch our lips together. “If you cook, I’ll take you to bed after and have *you* for dessert.”

“Damn, you’re good at this,” she breathes.

“Princess, you give me this rain check and I’ll prove just how true that is at the first opportunity we get on Saturday night.”

Renee flexes her fingers and traces the tip of her tongue along my bottom lip before I growl into her mouth and put all of my sexual frustration into a deep, wet, hard and *long* kiss, which ends with our tongues tangling together and Renee’s calf hooked behind my thigh. My hips grind against hers as I press her into the door and make out with her like the horny teenager she’s turned me into.

“Saturday,” I whisper.

“You’re on, Lieutenant,” she replies, smiling against my lips. “But you bet my ass I’m doing the dishes this time.”

Renee

Fridays have always been my favorite day of the week. Aside from the obvious introduction to the weekend, it is also the conclusion of another week of working hard towards a better future.

Today is especially good because after a private showing of my still-not-sold deceased estate property—the very one that brought Marco into my life—an offer was presented, and following some pretty minor negotiation, I’m now in the office boardroom with my real estate broker/boss, John, and a very happy young family of four, ready to sign on the dotted line.

As with all of my other sales, I haven’t told anyone about this one because I’m superstitious when it comes to counting my chickens. It’s probably why I took my time warming to a certain lieutenant too.

With all the formalities taken care of, I stand and shake their hands, laughing when the wife pulls me in for a hug and whispers, “Thank you,” in my ear.

I walk them out, handing them the bottle of champagne I bought to commemorate their new home with, and wave them off as they disappear down the road.

Returning to the boardroom, I find John sitting back in a chair, hands on his head, manspreading like he was born that way. His eyes and smile are pinned my way. “Another one in the books, Ren. What does that make it now?” John asks.

I grin at him as I gather together all the sales paperwork from the table. “That was lucky number one hundred and fifty in Chicago.”

“Congrats. We should all go out to celebrate,” he says, looking up at me.

John is a nice, respectable, decent man—he’s just never done it for me. I’m a woman who knows pretty early on whether there’s potential for anything past friendship. John is a good friend, an awesome broker to have at my back, and reliable to a fault. What he’s not is a ten years younger Italian American who makes my heart race at the mere thought of him, who turns me into a klutz whenever I’m near, and who has me sleeping next to his jacket just because it *smells* like him.

He’s also not the first person I’d want to call about good news, like a milestone house sale. A certain Chicago firefighter, however ...

With the signed contract papers in hand, I straighten and focus my eyes gently on John. “I’m actually having a quiet night in because I’ve got big plans tomorrow night.” *Big plans. Huge, if what I’ve felt of Marco so far is accurate.*

“Oh. Well, good for you,” he says, standing and walking around the table. “Then I won’t keep you any longer. Make sure you get some downtime this weekend. You’ve earned that much at least.”

“Thanks, John. I’m planning on it.” *Sometimes down, sometimes top, and then maybe standing up if Marco has enough stamina.*

God, what is with me? Ever since Marco’s dirty promise of dinner and sex, the latter part of that sentence has been the only thing I can think about. I’m not a virgin—far from it—and I’m not a prude, but it’s not healthy to spend an entire week thinking about the sex more than the dinner before it, or seeing Marco’s house for the first time, or even just the man himself again. I almost feel guilty about it but then I realize it’s Marco’s fault for kissing me breathless, pushing me up against

my house—something which he seems to like doing—and putting all these dirty thoughts into my head.

“Good. You deserve it. I forgot to ask—has there been much interest in the Gold Coast apartment and the duplex the owners are selling as well?” John asks, referring to Gilly and Ezra’s two listings as he leans against the table

“I’ve given a list of some of my existing clients to Elaine to call; we’ve had some bites on the marketing ads. Now it’s just a case of doing the showings we’ve got planned and then hoping we get offers.”

John nods. “That’s what I like to hear.” He glances down at my black patent leather pumps. “You’ll have ten more pairs of those in no time.”

My love of heels is not a secret around here. My female coworkers make it a point to ask me about my shoe-buying exploits whenever they see me.

“And to help you in that, I might have a few very interested buyers for you. I’ll email you their details and you can follow up if you want to.”

“Absolutely. That sounds great. Thanks so much, John.”

“It’s my pleasure. Now, hand me that contract and get out of here. Go start your quiet night in early and I’ll see you Monday.” He claps me on the shoulder and walks out of the room.

I check the time and see it’s just after three o’clock. Marco is working but he’s also said to message him whenever I want. The other night he had some downtime while on-shift and we were texting back and forth for a good twenty minutes before they got a call-out and he had to go. With this in mind, I pull out my phone.

Renee – Hey, Lieutenant. I have good news and the first person I thought to tell was a certain brown-haired, coffee-eyed firefighter I know. Is he around?

A few minutes pass before the three little dots appear on the screen.

Marco – *He just left. Will I be an adequate stand-in?*

My lips curve up.

Renee – *Maybe. Do you have any jackets I can borrow? I seem to have a new habit of acquiring that particular item of men's clothing.*

Marco – *Sorry, I'm all out. I left mine with a sexy realtor to guarantee she'd see me again.*

Renee – *That's very sneaky.*

Marco – *It is, but I made my intentions for our next date very clear so I'm hoping she'll return the jacket tomorrow.*

Renee – *And if she turns up without said jacket because it's now got a new home in her room where she can smell it whenever she wants?*

I can see he's typing his reply but he keeps starting then stopping again. I'm moving toward the boardroom door when my phone starts vibrating in my hand.

“Hey, Lieutenant. This is unexpected.”

The sound of him chuckling in my ear sends a wave of warmth through me. “I couldn't work out what to say without it sounding dirty so I figured I'd go to my office and call you instead.”

“It's nice to hear your voice.”

“You too, princess. How's your day going?”

“I could be cheesy and say it's so much better now that I'm talking to you, but that would be one of your lines.”

“Still nice to hear it though. It means I was on your mind.”

“When are you not these days?” I murmur, half to myself and—obviously—to him

“If it helps, that affection is entirely mutual and not at all unwelcome on my part. I'm looking forward to tomorrow night,” he says, his voice dropping to that low and melts-warm-chocolate tone I like. *He so knows the effect it has on me too.*

“So ...” I say, trying to redirect the conversation before it gets too deep. I’ll do deep, just not when the man in question is on-duty until seven a.m. tomorrow morning.

When the phone goes quiet for a little too long, Marco’s soft chuckle breaks the silence. “Princess, are we running out of conversation topics already? You said you had good news ...”

That makes me smile. “No. I mean, yes.”

“Which is it, beautiful?” I can hear his amusement.

I frown. “You distracted me with your sweet-talking.”

“You’re the one giving me thoughts I can’t entertain at work, *Ms. Hamilton*.”

“I’ll *try* to behave. Especially if you don’t like it ...”

“You can give me all the dirty thoughts in the world. Wherever. Whenever. I’ll deal. Especially if you’re the one responsible.”

“And why’s that?” I ask coyly.

“Because then it means I’ll have a stockpile of ideas to play out in person when you’re laid out naked in my bed.”

“Damn. Now you’re giving *me* inappropriate ideas while *I’m* at work.”

“Seems like we’re torturing each other then.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because we both have to wait twenty-four hours until we can act on any of these thoughts.”

“Well ...” I say, leaving him hanging.

“Well what, princess?”

“I can act on some of mine. It’s just, you’ll only be there watching in my imagination.”

“*Fuuuuuuck*,” he curses, making me smile. “You don’t play fair.”

“What if I promised not to act out anything until we’re within touching distance?”

“That would only make it *slightly* better.”

“I’ll take it into consideration.”

His low chuckle in my ear sends a shot of heat straight through me. “You do that. Or else I’ll make you tell me in graphic detail *while* giving me a blow-by-blow re-enactment.”

“Blow-by-blow?”

“If I play my cards right, fuck yeah.”

I huff out a breath, fanning myself as I do it. “It’s lucky I’m good at multitasking then, Lieutenant.”

“If you weren’t, I’m a really good instructor.”

“Oh, you *are*, are you?”

“Mm-hmm.”

The phone falls quiet except for the sound of his breathing.

“You said you had good news?” he asks, confusingly.

“I did? Oh wait, I *did*. You distracted me with all your non-dirty, dirty talk.”

“Non-dirty, dirty talk? You sure know how to wound a man’s ego.”

“I didn’t mean ... What I meant was—”

“Princess?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m just messing with you.”

I sigh, resigned to the fact that for all Marco’s pros—and so far, there are a lot—his only con is his love of winding me up. “I’m getting used to that.”

“Aww, baby, if I promise to kiss it better will that make it up to you?”

My lips quirk up. “Depends what you’re kissing.”

His responding groan is music to my ears, and I'm the one snickering this time.

"So, yes. Good news. I sold the house we first met each other at."

"That's great. Congratulations." His voice is full of warmth and pride. "We should celebrate."

My breath catches. "What?" I whisper, my throat getting tight.

"You had a win; we should celebrate. Renee, what's wrong?"

"Nothing it's just ... I didn't even tell you that it's my one hundred and fiftieth sale in Chicago."

"Even more reason to celebrate, but now, we need to go big. I was going to let you off cooking tomorrow and whip something up myself, but instead, let's go to Wrigley for the Cubs' night game."

"What?"

"That is, if you want to, I mean. I'm not exactly going to let you cook your celebration meal. My mama would never let me live that down if she found out."

I open my mouth to say something but I'm still in shock.

"Do you not want to go to the game? We don't have to." The sound of fingers hitting computer keys fills the line.

"There are seats on the second level near the visitors' dugout, but I promise I'll buy you a Cubs shirt so no one mistakes you for a Brewers fan."

That snaps me out of it and my forgotten sass returns. "I am *not* a Brewers fan."

"Oh I know, princess. You seem a little shell-shocked so I had to pull out the big guns to snap you out of it."

I narrow my eyes even though he can't see me. "I'm seriously starting to think you get off on annoying me."

“No. But I do like riling you up, because then you give me that smart mouth and *that* gives me a reason to shut you up.”

“You don’t need a reason. Feel free to shut me up whenever you like,” I retort.

He chuckles. “Good to know. I’ll remember that.”

“Are you seriously booking tickets right now for tomorrow night’s game?”

“Nope.”

“No?”

“Already booked. Just paid for them. You can still bring my jacket though—that deal *definitely* hasn’t changed. And pack an overnight bag. You’re staying the night.”

“Sleeping in your bed?”

“In my bed? Yes. Sleeping? Probably not.”

And with that, Marco has proven that yes, it *is* possible to have a spontaneous mini-orgasm from words alone.

“Marco ...?”

“Yeah, princess?”

“You’re really good at this.”

“That’s funny. I was just thinking the same about you.”

“I’m going to go now because otherwise, I’ll start telling you about my inappropriate ideas again,” I say, my voice soft and husky.

“You can thank me by showing me all the best ones tomorrow after the game.”

“Now *that* I can do.”

“I think I’m looking forward to that more than the game now,” he says, just as the bells start ringing in the background. He groans in my ear. “Sorry, baby. I’ve gotta go.”

“I know, Marco. I know what that sound means.”

“And that’s something else we’ll be talking about tomorrow, along with why you’re so surprised whenever

anyone wants to do something nice for you. Until then, drive safe and have a good night, princess.”

“Look after yourself, too.”

“Always, but especially when I have a night of no sleeping planned with a certain pretty lady coming up. I’ll text you tomorrow. Bye,” he says, before ending the call, leaving me sitting in the empty boardroom with a goofy grin on my face, my stomach full of butterflies for the first time in a long time.

Baseball and a sleepover with a man I can’t stop thinking about. I don’t even care that he wants to talk about my past. I can’t expect Marco to be completely open and honest with me if I’m not willing to be the same with him.

So far, everything Marco has done has me wanting to see where this might go. He’s the first man since my ex who’s had me feeling that way.

In other words, it’s about *damn* time.

Marco

“For it’s one, two, three strikes, you’re out ...” we shout, singing loudly with the rest of the crowd in the seventh-inning stretch.

Our seats are amazing. I lucked out with the location—one level up and directly behind the Brewers’ dugout. Of course, the Cubs are up, but this rivalry is one for the ages.

Renee is as into the game as I am. She cheers when there’s a hit, and groans when there’s a strikeout.

We’ve eaten ballpark hotdogs and refillable pop. We’ve had a beer or two as well, and so far, it’s the best date I’ve ever had. Papa always used to joke that if you find a woman who understands baseball, you lock her down. Watching Renee with her new blue Cubs jersey, her favorite first baseman’s name on the back, I can imagine more games, more dates, more *everything* with her.

“Wanna make a bet?” I ask, nudging her with my elbow.

She turns suspicious eyes to me, her lips tipped up in a smile. “What kind of bet?”

I lean in so she’s all I can see—even though that’s been the case all night so far anyway. “A dirty bet,” I whisper.

Her gaze drifts down to my mouth then slowly back up again, making my jeans tighten. “Bring it on.”

“If your beloved first baseman strikes out, *I* get to decide what we do the second I get you alone and behind closed

doors.”

Her eyes flash with heat as she arches her brow. “And if he gets a hit?”

“If he gets a hit ...” I murmur, moving my mouth to her ear. “You get free rein in my bed.” She bites her lip and there’s no mistaking the flash of heat in her gaze.

“Anything?”

I grin, loving the way she’s leaning into me. “*Everything...* then again I don’t really care if he gets a hit, cause even losing means I still win anyway.”

I straighten and rake my eyes over her, loving how expressive she is and how she’s not hiding a single reaction from me.

Her lips curl up into a salacious smile. “Okay then, Mr. Rossi. No bet, but my man will hit on the first ball. Guarantee it!”

Her expression goes from smug to hot as hell, her pupils blown, her cheeks flushed and her front teeth biting into her bottom lip. *Fuck the game. I want her now.*

She tilts her head and smooths her hand slowly over my jean-clad thigh. “Let’s just see who comes out on top then.”

My cock pulses at the promise in her eyes. Two and a half innings and a thirty-minute train ride until we’re alone. I’m sure I can make it ... well, I fucking hope I do.

I may want to rush home but when I get Renee all to myself, we’ll be taking things slow. I’m going to take my time. Because when you’ve got a show stopper in your bed, you damn well make sure she wants to stay there.

“HEY,” Renee says as I open her door and hold out my hand. We caught the train to downtown from Wrigley Field and then I drove us the rest of the way back in my truck.

But the entire trip home I've been tense with anticipation. This isn't just a random once-and-done hook up. *She* isn't someone I've just met and who I don't have plans to see again. This is the start of something. And I can't screw this up.

She hops down and I shut the door behind her, then turn to her and all but pull her toward my front porch.

Renee tugs on my arm to stop me. "Marco?" Her gentle giggle snaps my focus, and I spin back to face her.

"Yeah, princess?" Closing the distance between us, she presses her body against me and lifts up on her toes, cupping my face in her hands. With her eyes locked on mine, she places a barely-there kiss on my lips. I grab hold of her hips to keep her in place and tilt my head, an invitation she does not miss. This time the kiss is slow, starting soft then turning harder, stronger, deeper. My flimsy hold on restraint snaps as my hand slips around to her gorgeous ass, my other sliding up between her shoulder blades, holding her body hostage as my tongue plunders her mouth. Groans and moans from both of us fill the air.

We pull apart, leaning our foreheads together. My chest heaves as I suck in a much-needed breath, trying to cool my jets just a little so that this night isn't over before the real fun starts.

She glides one of her hands behind my neck, her grip gentle but firm. "You're a total stress magnet, and as cute as it is to see you a little ruffled, I was worried you were having second thoughts. We don't have to do anything you don't want ___"

I slam my mouth down on hers again, not wanting her to misconstrue my nerves as second thoughts. This time, though, I'm not standing by and just kissing her.

Without breaking our lips apart, I lift her up by the ass. Her legs wrap around me straight away as I kiss and walk, carrying her up to the porch. I gently lean her back against the side of my house while I find the house key, turn it in the lock, and make quick work of opening the door.

I walk us both through it and shut it again with a swift backwards kick of my foot. Renee buries her face in my neck as I carry her up the flight of stairs and down the small hallway to my bedroom. All the while her nails bite into my back through my shirt, the slight sting making me hard as a rock and even more desperate to get this woman naked.

I close my door, kissing Renee with renewed hunger. My heart threatens to beat right out of my chest as her grip on my shoulders tightens and I slowly lower her down to the ground so she stands right in front of me again.

Her half-open eyes are full of heat, her lips swollen and puffy, and I can't help the satisfied growl rumbling in my throat knowing I'm the one turning her on like that.

Then it's like something snaps and we're all over each other like animals. We're hands and fingers and lips and mouths, only pulling apart to tear my T-shirt over my head and for me to utter promises to buy her another Cubs jersey as buttons scatter across the room when I grab hers and jerk it off her. Then we're kicking off our socks and sneakers and her hands are at my belt, snapping it out of my pants, slapping the buckle against my skin and making me grunt. That still doesn't stop us. I kiss away Renee's giggles and turn them into moans as I flick open her jeans and jerk them down her legs, not stopping until she's gloriously naked before me.

Then I slowly step back and drag my hungry eyes down her body and back up again, my fist wrapping around my straining shaft out of instinct. I pull my hand back and forth at the very sight of her.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," I murmur, my voice rough and deep and laced with need.

She tips her chin, studying me the same way as I did. Her eyes unapologetically rake over my body, stopping at particular parts of interest and showing absolutely no shame in doing so. Her lips tip up in a half smirk as she moves closer, lifting one hand to cup my cheek and dropping the other to cover mine on my cock. Then she pulls my head down,

touching her mouth to mine at the same time she takes over the long slow strokes along my cock from base to tip.

She traces the seam of my lips with her tongue, making me growl and driving me right to the limit of my self-control. Then I snap, attacking her mouth with renewed hunger, swallowing her whimpers, and relishing in her moans. Her body trembles against mine and her hand speeds up. My breaths come hard and fast when her grip tightens around my shaft.

I cradle her close and put a knee in the bed, gently lowering her down onto the mattress. Lying on my side next to her, I tangle my fingers in her hair and hold her in place before plundering her mouth.

I glide my hand down her body, watching her closely when I rub the heel of my palm against her clit. Her eyelids flutter closed and her head presses into the pillow as my fingers toy between her legs, a rough moan escaping her lips. My hips rock against her, my cock desperate for friction of any kind. I watch her face as I slowly inch a finger inside her slick heat, her body sucking me in, wanting to keep me there. *There's no other place I want to be.*

Renee grabs my face and crushes her lips to mine, my head spinning at the intoxicating lust I'm feeling and how crazy she's making me feel.

Tearing my mouth from hers, I pepper her neck with open-mouthed kisses, nipping gently, then soothing the sting away with a swirl of my tongue as I taste every inch of her sweet, smooth skin. I drag my lips down between her breasts, cupping them in my hands, loving the weight of them against my palm before taking one pert nipple into my mouth.

I alternate between sucking soft then harder, studying her body as her moans get louder, her grip on my hair tightening when I draw out one finger from inside her and push in two.

Her back arches. Her husky whimper fills my ears, her hips thrusting into my hand as if begging for more. My mouth waters as I lick and nip my way down her stomach until my shoulders are between her thighs, keeping her open to me. I

glance up her body and lock eyes with hers as I take a long, languid lick along the full length of her wet seam before burying my face and pumping my fingers in and out of her pussy, my tongue circling and sucking and twitching against her clit. My hand grips her waist and fights her bucking hips as she rolls up against my mouth, unintelligible words spilling from her mouth in between her cries and whimpers and low, breathy moans.

Her legs hook over my shoulders and her feet digging into my back, holding me hostage—if a willing servant could ever be held—and her entire body tenses tight like a coiled spring. I slowly push a third finger inside of her just as I wrap my lips around her clit and lightly scrape my teeth over the swollen bud and she screams. “Marco. Shit. Fuck. Oh, *God*.”

She clings to me, continuing to cry out my name as her body convulses with her climax. I ease back and slow it down, my tongue languidly swirling and rolling around to draw out her orgasm. I’m more desperate than ever to bury myself deep inside this woman.

Rising up and over her, I cover her body with mine, her thighs staying wide as I nestle my throbbing hard-on against her.

I kiss her hard and fast again, my tongue exploring her mouth with a hunger born from weeks of wanting her to be exactly where she is now—fed by days of anticipation and fantasies of exactly how she’ll feel when I sink my cock inside of her for that first time.

I slowly pull my head back and look straight in her lust-filled gaze. “I’ve gotta get a condom, baby, then I’m going to give us both what we want.”

She arches her hips against mine, making my cock glide along her wet seam.

She arches her neck, running her tongue against my lips from corner to corner. “Hurry, Marco.”

The fact she’s using my name instead of her typical ‘lieutenant’ isn’t lost on me. It spurs me on to hurry up. So I

do, leaning over and jerking open my nightstand drawer and blindly rummaging around until I find purchase and pull out a gold foil packet.

Sitting back on my heels, I make quick work of the condom, rolling it from tip to base, my eyes catching Renee spreading wide for me, her hand slipping between her legs right where I'm about to be.

Renee bends at the waist and reaches out for me, pulling me back down over her. Her eyes search mine, roaming my face with a soft sincerity. The enormity of the moment cuts through my fervent lust-fueled haze. I pause to look at the woman beneath me who takes my breath away without even trying.

She holds her palm to my cheek and stares deep into my eyes. "I need you to make me a promise, Marco Rossi," she whispers.

"Anything, princess."

"This means something. I know that. But I also need you to not let me lose myself in you."

My heart is pounding in my chest, all I see is absolute honesty in Renee's eyes. She needs this. Whatever has happened in her past had her scared to give herself to someone again, but now she's here, showing me that soft, vulnerable side of her that makes me want to build a wall around the two of us and slay dragons and monsters for her.

I'll protect this woman with everything I am and everything I have, and now, she's asking me to protect her from herself. *That* is a whole new level of trust I've never been given the privilege of having before and it strikes right to the core of me.

Touching my forehead to hers, I lock eyes with hers so she gets just how much I mean the words as I press my lips to her mouth. "I'll never let you because I'm falling for the woman you are now and I don't ever want that to change," I say. I draw my hips back, crushing my mouth down on hers and

burying myself deep inside my woman. And that's where I plan on staying for a good long while.

Renee

I slowly open my eyes, reaching my arms up above my head and groaning as I stretch my spent and well-used muscles. I'm in Marco's bed after a night of very little sleep and a lot of orgasms—his and mine. I should be exhausted after managing only a few hours rest but my entire body, mind, and soul feel alive.

Speaking of that man ... I roll over to find his big bed surprisingly empty. I pat my hand on top of the sheet, finding it lukewarm, which means he can't be far.

Closing my eyes again, I hug my pillow and decide to doze until Marco returns.

I wake again when the mattress shifts beside me. Looking up, I meet his warm chocolate gaze, watching as he reaches out to brush away the hair from my face.

“God, you look good in my bed in the morning.”

I tilt my head with a sassy smile. “I think I could look good in your bed at any time of the day.”

“I like your way of thinking, princess. Are you hungry?”

Pushing myself up to lean against the headboard, I catch sight of a brightly-colored serving tray placed on the nightstand beside the bed, a carafe of orange juice, and two plates with toasted bagels and cream cheese next to them.

“Wow. You give good sex *and* breakfast in bed the next morning. I approve,” I say, not missing his amused grin.

He shakes his head before hooking his hand around the back of my neck and softly tugging me forward so our lips meet halfway. It's a gentle, probing, lazy kiss that I feel right down to my toes and everywhere in between. When he pulls back to end it, I'm already so addicted to his touch that I try to chase his mouth for another one. His cheeky grin is so cute—well, as cute as a big buff Italian stallion firefighter can be.

“You're far too good at that, Lieutenant,” I say. “Breakfast and turning me on before I've even had coffee. You're just kicking goals everywhere today, aren't you?”

“As long as I score with you, I'll be happy.”

I snicker and shake my head, unable to stop myself from grinning too.

“Hang on,” I look over at the tray, my smile falling. “Hang on. There's no coffee. I'm sorry,” I say, making moves to get out of bed. “That's a deal-breaker for m—”

Quick as a flash, I'm spun around and am flat on my back, an amused Marco looming over me, his body holding me in place from hips to feet. *Damn, he's good.*

I look up at him with an arched brow and shake my head. “You think you've found the man you want to date, and then he falls down at the last hurdle. And so close to the finish line too.”

“You already came first last night,” he says, his interest in repeating that feat making its case rather incessantly known through his pajama pants right against my core.

“I think ... I might have forgotten all about that. Maybe I need a reminder. You know ... just to ensure I'm making an *informed* decision ...”

Marco shoots me a devilish grin before he plants a hard and fast kiss on my lips and moving off me, laughing when I groan in disappointment.

“First I feed you, then we talk, *then* we shower.”

Now, I'm liking this plan. Except ... “Talk?”

“Yeah, princess. Talk. You say things. I say more things. We clear the air and make sure we’re on the same page of this story we’re writing.”

“Okay ...” I say, narrowing my eyes at him.

“Hey, it’s nothing to be suspicious about. I’m just the kind of guy that says it like it is, and I made it clear last night that this connection between us meant something. And since I didn’t want to interrupt our post-date activities then, I figure now, before we recommence those activities, we can just chat.”

“And eat?”

“Yep,” he says, elongating the *P* and grinning at me as he takes a big bite of a bagel.

I gasp and reach over him, nabbing my own pastry and sitting straight. “Hey. Didn’t your mama teach you about ladies first?”

He chuckles. “My mother taught me everything I ever needed to know about how to treat a woman. My papa showed me how to do it.”

My heart melts. This man has so much love for his family, and I can see just how profound their impact on him has been. He’s a good man. A trustworthy man. Someone who wore me down and charmed me, who’s always right where I need him

How did I ever think I could resist him?

I sit to his side, crossing my legs and facing him, grateful that I stole a tee and boxers from Marco before we went to sleep. “Okay, let’s talk. What would you like to know?”

Marco’s head jerks. “Really?”

“Of course. I can’t expect honesty if I can’t be open and honest too.” I point my finger at him. “And I’ll tell you now, lying is a deal-breaker. I’m not a woman with many rules but that, cheating, and disrespect are my limits.”

He nods, looking impressed. “Are you real? Because I swear you’re fucking perfect.” He leans in for a kiss, but I stop him with a hand on his chest.

I snort at the confused look on his face. “Nuh-uh, buddy. No touching the goods until the terms surrounding the touching of the goods are agreed upon,” I say. “Unless you just want to just get down and dirty and talk to me *while* you’re doing it?”

“I’ll agree to whatever you want if I get a kiss. You’re being all sassy and demanding, and it’s doing crazy things to me,” he says, his voice dripping with sex. *When did I turn into this crazy wanton woman who can barely think straight around this man?*

I narrow my eyes. “Marco ...”

He straightens and holds his hands up in surrender. I take another bite of my bagel while I wait for his reply.

“So this is where *I’m* at with this thing we’ve started.”

“You mean sex?”

“God no,” he spits out, his dark eyes pinned to mine. “I would not have brought you to my bed without knowing I want this to be more. I want to see where this relationship can go.” He laces his fingers with mine on the mattress between us. “I want to *be* with you, Renee. I know you’ve got your misgivings about firefighters, and I hope that one day you’ll tell me about it. But being a firefighter is the only thing I’ve ever wanted to do, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon. I love my job. I’ve spent eighteen years dedicating most of my time to climbing up the ranks. Now that I’ve finally met you, I want to spend some time working on that too.”

I’m speechless. Like, I have absolutely nothing sitting on the tip of my tongue. I also wanna pinch myself and make sure this is actually happening because Marco is too good to be true.

His lips curve into a smirk. “Don’t tell me I’ve rendered my princess speechless?”

“You are so much more than I ever gave you credit for.” Yep—he says this amazingly honest and raw thing and *that* is what I blurt out.

“Baby,” he says softly, and that one word washes over me like a soft, fluffy blanket, surrounding me in warmth as I prepare to unload the heavy weight in my gut. It’s what has been holding me back with Marco, and it’s time to let it go.

“My ex-fiancé was a firefighter.” I sneak a glance up at Marco, his encouraging nod all I need to continue. “We were together for four years before he proposed. I thought that was my life sorted. I figured he was financially stable, I was happy and in love, and I was starting to do well in my own career. I had my place, he had his, and it worked. He worked twenty-four on, forty-eight off, and often between doing that, the catching-up-on-sleep-and-life after his shifts, and the side jobs to make extra money, he was busy and I understood that.”

“The life as a firefighter’s partner is not always easy.”

I give his hand a gentle squeeze and send him a wry smile. “No, but for the right man, you know the work they do for the greater good, and you cherish the time you *do* spend together.”

“Fuck,” he curses.

“What?”

“Just when I think I’ve got you figured out, you say something like that and it makes me wanna lay you down and show my appreciation.”

“But we’re still talking,” I say, unable to wipe the grin off my face.

“Yeah, we are. And I want you to know that whatever you say next, it won’t change a thing except maybe make me wanna hunt a fellow fireman down and earn myself a suspension.”

My mouth drops open, my eyes staring in disbelief. “You don’t even know what he did.”

“I can hazard a guess.”

“Yeah, well, there was a reason he was always busy, and it had nothing to do with work and everything to do with him and fire bunnies wanting to slide down his inadequate pole.”

Marco's lips twitch. Soon his shoulders start shaking, and I know he's not laughing at me, but more at how ridiculous it sounds.

He lifts my hand to his mouth and smiles as he kisses my knuckles. "Baby, it's a crying shame you were willing to marry a man with an inadequate pole, but I damn well hope I'm more than enough."

I snicker, then it turns into a giggle, and by the end of it, I'm leaning against Marco's shoulder and we're both laughing.

"Would I know him? Your ex?"

"I don't know. I try not to waste my time thinking about him," I say with a shrug

"I'm sorry that happened to you because he obviously didn't deserve everything you were giving him, and he definitely didn't appreciate it." He reaches up and cradles my jaw, tilting my chin so he's staring deep into my eyes. "I swear, princess. I would never disrespect you like that. I'd never intentionally hurt you."

"Honestly, I wouldn't be right where I am now if I ever thought you would."

"Fucking show stopper. Should've known you'd be fucking fantastic when I finally found you."

"Stop being swoony," I whisper.

"I'll stop when you stop me," he challenges, knowing exactly what he's doing.

I pounce. The bagels go flying. Soon, we're making out on his bed and I somehow end up with cream cheese in my hair. Luckily for both of us, Marco has a big double shower and he knows how to be creative in it.

Marco Rossi is now my boyfriend. Hayley is going to have a field day with this one.

Now there's just one more thing we have to do ... get Gram's approval.

But if Marco can warm my cold heart, there's absolutely no doubt in my mind he can charm my grandmother. Or maybe it'll be the other way around. I guess we'll see.

Marco

Sunday afternoon and our entire crew and Gio are sitting around Rhodes' backyard, having our monthly potluck get together. Rhodes, Zach and I started it a few years ago as a way of keeping our fingers on the pulse of the group as a whole. We may spend a lot of time working together during the week, but when you trust your life in each other's hands on almost a daily basis, the friendships and camaraderie we have as a group is just as important as the trust we need to have on the job. Besides, it's also good to just let loose among friends now and then. So we rotate these BBQs at each other's houses, and all bring food and drinks, talk shit, unwind, and often, decompress.

I'm still on a high after an incredible night and half the day with Renee. I'd love to rip her ex a new one, but had he not been an asshole and screwed her over, I wouldn't have my shot now—and that's something I'm eternally grateful for. Except for the fact that someone—namely, Gio—has obviously opened his big mouth and spread the news of my new relationship around the group.

“Scotty, I'm telling you. We're *not* going to be related.”

“But if you seal the deal with Renee, and Hayley returns my calls, then I could be your brother from another mother,” he says sounding far too into the idea.

I lean in, my lips quirking up. “Scotty, if a woman isn't returning your calls, she's just not that into you.”

He scoffs. “Yeah, right. Women love the Scottmeister.”

I meet Gio's amused eyes across the table from me as he joins in on this ridiculous conversation. "Here's a tip, *Scottmeister*. Women aren't into guys who call themselves *anything-meister*."

I snort, as do Rhodes and Jake beside me.

Scotty pulls his phone out of his pocket and scrolls through his contacts. "How about I call any one of these hot chicks in here? They'll all vouch for just how much they liked it."

Jake screws his face up and holds his hand in the air. "This conversation just went above my classifications rating."

"Says the kid discussing the pros and cons of free and paid porn with me just last night," Rhodes scoffs, earning a chorus of chuckles around the backyard.

"Smartass," Scotty grumbles, making us laugh harder.

"How about we change the subject and get back to talking about the lieutenant and his realtor. How are things going with the lovely Renee?" Skye asks, sitting in Cohen's lap and looking my way.

"Or not," I mumble, lifting my beer bottle to my mouth.

"Well, she *did* stay last night," Gio adds, *not* helping.

My sister lights up. "So, things are getting serious then?"

Rolling my eyes, I send pleading eyes to Rhodes to save me. He looks at me with a "What do you expect me to do?" expression. He's as private as I am about my life, the difference being Rhodes' life is all about work, Jake, and that's about it.

"Marco? You didn't answer my question," Skye says in a singsong voice that tells me she's enjoying this far too much.

"Yes, brat?"

"Is it serious?"

"It's something, and that's all you're gonna get."

She pouts. "You're no fun."

"And you're far too much fun."

“That’s what he says.” She leans her back against Cohen’s chest, his arms wrapping around her waist.

“Hold up,” Luca calls out, peering around Zach and narrowing his eyes on our sister. “*Why* are you touching her stomach?”

All eyes turn to Cohen and Skye, and his hands cradling her abdomen. He goes to move them to her hips but Skye stops him, a slow-growing grin curving her mouth.

“Brat?” Gio asks.

My gaze softens as my baby sister looks my way.

“We’re having a baby!” she announces.

A round of cheers and applause fill the air. Gio gets up first, gently pulling Skye off Cohen’s legs and wrapping her up in a huge hug. Luca follows, doing the same thing, and I’m stuck staring at the little brat who—try as I might—I still see as a little girl with blond pigtails and a pink ballerina dress who would always follow me around and look at me like I’d hung the moon and arranged the stars.

I’m the last to offer my congratulations, needing the time to swallow the lump in my throat. I’d never live it down if Scotty saw me choked up, even if it was for a damn good reason. I stand and make my way around to the now emotional Skye, who even with tears in her eyes and wet cheeks, still manages to pop a hip and narrow her gaze. “If you make me cry, Marco, I’ll make your life a living hell,” she says, absolutely no malice behind the words.

I pull her in for a big bear hug and bring my mouth to her ear. “Brat, I’m so happy for you,” I murmur. “You’re going to be an amazing mom.” I move back but she stops me before I can step away.

“Uncle Marco has a nice ring to it,” she says with a smile.

“My *favorite* Uncle Marco sounds more like it.”

“That too.”

“I love you, brat.”

“Love you too, big brother.”

“But now, we need to go deal with your husband because I don’t care if you’re married, we now have proof he’s touched you and—”

Her eyes bug out of her head and her mouth drops open before she quickly recovers. Then she grins. “Oh, okay,” she sighs, melodramatically. She’s used to us three Rossi brothers riling Cohen up. Besides, he brought a lifetime of it when he broke the rule and hooked up with our sister. He’s just lucky that I already knew he was a good man before he threw himself on his sword in front of us to tell Skye he loved her. “Just don’t hurt the important parts. I may be pregnant, but I’m not *dead*.”

“Hey, *wife*! I heard that,” Cohen says, appearing at her side and wrapping his arm over her shoulders.

Skye gazes up at him, looking happier than I’ve ever seen her. “You were meant to.”

Cohen scowls back but with those two, it’s probably just foreplay. *Eww*.

“Does this mean we *don’t* get to rough Cohen up this time?” Luca calls out from where he’s now manning the grill with Rhodes.

“Marco always spoils our fun,” Gio moans. “Just let us get a few licks in. It’ll do the boy some good.”

“I’ll show you, old man,” Cohen says, him and Gio circling each other with their fists up like they’re sparring, both with huge grins on their faces.

“You’re all a bunch of teenage boys,” Skye says, laughing as she sits down and leans back, watching our brother and her husband.

“Leave him alone, G,” Zach says, chuckling as he brings out the BBQ meat from inside. “As someone who *did* get punched in the face by my wife’s brother, I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.”

“What about that time when you were too busy getting it on and you set your apartment on fire? Would you wish *that* on anyone?” Rhodes says, smirking at his new grill partner.

“Fuck,” Zach replies, shaking his head. “Will I *ever* live that down?”

“No,” every single one of us says in unison.

“Damn.”

I move back to my chair, finding Jake with his head down, his attention on his phone.

“Hey. You good?” I ask, sitting next to him.

He looks my way and gives me a chin lift. *God, it's scary how much he's like Rhodes.* “Yeah, Uncle Marco.”

I nod to the phone. “Who's that?”

“Dee Duncan. She's this big YouTube chef who's going viral at the moment. Dad watches her with me. I even catch him cheating and watching her new videos before I do.”

My brows go up. “Really?”

“Yep. She likes doing traditional dishes in new and healthy ways and making it all from scratch, not out of a box.”

“So no Kraft mac 'n' cheese then?” I ask, nudging his arm.

Jake's lips twitch. “I haven't had that since I was ten when you let me try and make it by myself.”

“It was just lucky you had your fireman uncle nearby to limit the damage, huh?”

He rolls his eyes but I don't miss his half grin. “Whatever.”

“Rhodes, Jake whatever'd me,” I say, sounding like a petulant teenager.

“Jake,” Rhodes calls out. “I've told you not to tease Marco with your superior intellect. You know he just can't keep up with us.”

Jake sighs melodramatically. “But he makes it hard sometimes.”

“I know, son,” Rhodes says, nodding sympathetically. “But he seems to keep coming around so we *must* entertain him. Call it a humanitarian effort.”

I chuckle, shaking my head and flipping them both off.

Jake stops the video and looks over at me with a contemplative gaze. “So, you and Renee?”

Smartass Jake has left the building—now I’ve got the good-man-in-training that Rhodes and I have worked hard on molding. Although, if I’m honest, he’s probably the one who’s had an effect on the two of us more than anything.

“Yeah,” I say. “There’s a me and Renee.”

He smiles. “Good to hear you haven’t screwed it up yet.”

I bump his shoulder with mine. “Not yet. But give it time. It’s still early days. We’re just dating.”

“You never ‘just date.’ You’re not in or *all* in. There’s no middle ground. So you’re all in with her, aren’t you?”

I swear, the kid is smarter than Rhodes and I combined. “Yeah. As of last night. Absolutely.”

Jake must see something in my face because he screws his up. “Okay, TMI. I don’t want to know anything because I may have been raised right, but that doesn’t mean I want to blush when I meet Renee—which I will, by the way. I won’t be able to hide the fact I know you’re sleeping with her and then I’ll ruin the cool points you’ve got going with her, and probably the ones I’ve got going with her too.”

“She’d never embarrass you. I might, but Renee won’t,” I reply with a laugh.

“Just to be safe, let’s just end it with ‘you’re dating.’ You’ve got a girlfriend now. And we’re waiting for the first screw-up so that I can counsel you on how to grovel appropriately and adequately so that she *stays* your girlfriend. Right?”

My eyes are near on bugging out of my head but even still, I find myself nodding.

“Good,” he says, a satisfied grin on his face. He glances up towards Rhodes then back to me, leaning in and lowering his voice. “Now, let’s talk about how we’re going to get *Dad* a date because you’re not such a lost cause anymore, but he’s not even *trying*.”

My eyes soften. “Jake. He’s got to be ready for it.”

“And he is. I *know* he is. But I’ve only got a few more years at home if I go out of state for college, and I need to know he’s going to be okay and *have* someone other than the two of us before I go. So we have three years in which to—”

I snort. “Marry him off?”

“Or at least get him dating. I want to hear about him getting laid as much as I want to hear about you doing it—which is not at all—but I’d like to at least know he’s *trying*. Know what I mean?”

Fuck, this kid is more fucking onto it than most people I know. He makes Scotty look like a toddler, and there’s a twenty-year age gap between them.

“Yeah, Jake. You need me to help you with that goal, I’ll be your wingman.”

He snorts. “You probably need to be *his* wingman, not mine. I have absolutely no issues getting the ladies.”

“TMI, Jake.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Whatever.”

Then I decide a little payback is in order. “Rhodes, Jake’s working his way through the female population of his school.”

Rhodes looks our way, his eyes crinkling as he switches his gaze between us.

“Dad, Marco even said he’d be my wingman,” Jake retorts, making my mouth drop open. Rhodes snickers and turns back to the grill.

I meet Jake’s amused eyes and shake my head. “You’re *such* a little shit.”

“Yep. But you’re proud as hell of me.”

“Abso-fucking-lutely.”

THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, we’ve just finished up at a multi-vehicle accident where we were the first engine on scene and therefore, as the highest-ranking officer on-site, I automatically took control of the management. Just my luck, the second engine to respond was from Firehouse 22, which meant Lieutenant Nick Pierce had to cede his authority to me and follow my instructions.

Thankfully, he has a good crew; they just have an attitude problem when it comes to Firehouse 101. At least they never fail to put that aside when we’re all at the same incident, and tonight was no different. But the big cloud of animosity floating above Pierce’s head could not—and was not—missed by myself or any of my crew. We’re just professional enough to ignore it and get on with our jobs, which tonight involved using both the K12 and the jaws of life to extract two patients trapped in two of the cars involved in the pile-up.

We’ve just finished clearing the scene when Nick walks up to me. I hold out my hand to him. “Lieutenant Pierce, thank you for your assistance. Engine 22 can stand down and return to base.”

He looks down at my outstretched arm and then back to my face, nodding at my instruction but also twisting his lips up in disgust at me. “You can stop puffing your chest out now, Rossi. Do you know how to do that? Or do you need a demonstration on how a *real* lieutenant should conduct himself?” And there he goes, pushing my buttons needlessly.

I’m too tired and sick of his over-the-top macho bullshit to turn around and walk away like I *should*, like my Captain has *told* me to do countless times before. Instead, I just shake my head at him. “There’s never going to be a time when I need a demonstration on *anything* from you, Pierce. Maybe it’s *you* who needs to stand back and watch how *I* conduct myself. That’s okay, though; we’ll just wait until we kick your

ass at the Tough Mudder.” I hate that I let this guy get under my skin. I try to be the bigger, better man, but he makes it so fucking hard. Assholes see as assholes do, and this guy *really* brings out my inner asshole.

“And by all means, *Lieutenant*, if you want to flop your dick out too just to convince yourself that your *shortcomings* aren’t all in your head, let’s go,” Luca says, taking my back.

Nick’s eyes move from over my shoulder back to mine. “Oh, look. Need your brother to fight your battles for you now, Marco? My, how the mighty have fallen. The department’s golden boy needs his baby bro to defend him.”

“I don’t need shit, Pierce, especially from you. You’re the one with the problem—not me, not my brother, and not my crew. I have my entire *Firehouse* at my back but I see you don’t have any behind you. Maybe it’s because they find it hard to respect a man whose big head makes it hard to walk into the damn firehouse.”

“You’re a real piece of work. I can’t wait to be there when you fall from grace. It’s way past time you were brought back down to earth. You’ve had higher-ups kissing your ass and sucking your dick for far too long now.”

“If I’ve had anybody kissing my ass, it’s because I fucking earned it, *Lieutenant*,” I grind out. “And to suggest otherwise is just downright insulting. Some of us don’t need our dicks sucked to feel good about ourselves.”

Nick’s smirk widens. “Good to know you can’t even get some, Rossi. I’ve never had issues there.”

I feel Luca’s anger without needing to look at him. I can also feel my squad watching from the truck, and I know they’re already more than willing to wade in if I need them to.

“What you’ve got, *Lieutenant Pierce*, are issues—a lot of them. Maybe counseling could help. Maybe an ass-kicking could, too,” my brother says. He’s walking a fine line because he shouldn’t be addressing a superior like that.

“Luca ...” I warn, wanting to stop him before he goes too far. My brother doesn’t have many faults but if he had one, it would be his temper. *Especially* when it comes to defending those he cares about.

Pierce steps forward and drops his voice for my ears only. “You’ve been a thorn in my ass since the academy, Rossi. I can’t wait to bring you down at the Tough Mudder.”

I shake my head because I honestly don’t know what’s crawled up his ass. Whatever it is, it’s been there for fucking years. I’ve never seen a firefighter—a lieutenant, no less—with a god complex like Nick Pierce. It’s not even that warranted. “Nick, I don’t have a problem with you. My issue is with your attitude toward me as your commanding officer on-scene. I don’t give a single flying *fuck* about you as a person. I didn’t at the academy, when you were always coming third behind me and Rhodes, and I still don’t. Now, if you’re finished with this little pissing contest of yours, my crew and I are leaving, because it’s been a long fucking night and I’d rather be anywhere but here.”

I turn around and leave, not missing the shit-eating grins on all of the guys’ faces except for Rhodes and Zach, who look concerned. Rhodes knows how much of a pain in the ass Pierce is and always has been, and the entire crew at Firehouse 22 has rubbed our firehouse the wrong way since Pierce has been there. It seems their sole goal is to beat us to each scene—and for all the wrong reasons. I’m worried that one day this unofficial ‘rivalry’ he has with me is going to cause a major problem. But right now, coffee and some food sound really fucking good.

What would be even better would be crawling into bed with Renee as soon as my shift ends in a few hours, but given her nine-to-five day job and my seven a.m. finish, that dream is going to have to wait until the weekend.

“Take us to the station, Luca,” I say, grunting as I drop my body into the seat and close the front passenger door to the truck behind me.

“I’m sorry, Mar. I couldn’t just stand by and watch him talk shit.”

“I know. But he has every right to report you. You’ve got to watch yourself.”

“Wouldn’t ever trust that guy as far as I could throw him.”

“Makes two of us, but he’s a good firefighter. He’s just got a me-sized chip on his shoulder.”

“Then maybe it’s *you* that should watch yourself.”

“Always do, brother. Always do. Now, who’s up for some food? ‘Cause after that job, I’ve worked up an appetite.”

“Hear, hear,” the guys in the back answer.

I shoot Luca a smile as he starts the truck and we leave the scene in our rearview mirror. “You heard them, Firefighter Rossi. Your choice of takeout but I suggest you choose wisely because you’re paying.”

“What?”

With a smirk, I turn and lift a brow. “Are you questioning your lieutenant?”

“Are you acting as my lieutenant right now?”

“You bet your ass I am, especially if it means free food. What do you guys think?” I look over my shoulder and meet Rhodes’s amused gaze.

“Aye, aye, Lieutenant,” Luca grumbles, making me laugh. And just like that, Nick Pierce and his asshole complex are left behind and forgotten.

Renee

Sunday afternoon and Marco and I are lying down on his thankfully wide sofa, watching the Cubs play the White Sox. Last night, I finally got around to cooking dinner for Marco. He still wouldn't let me do dishes, but that's okay because I made sure I rewarded him well after *he* cleaned up anyway. Then he repaid the favor, which led to us *both* needing to clean up. It was *fabulous*.

I had to pop out for a quick private showing at Ezra and Gilly's Gold Coast apartment earlier but the minute I came back, Marco claimed me, and we've been on the sofa ever since.

Typically, Hayley and I would've gone to this cross-town derby to experience it firsthand, but today is a little different, because in a few hours, I'm taking Marco to meet Grams.

And if we had gone to the game, Marco couldn't have used every ad break and mid-innings interval to cop a feel and turn me on. The only good thing is knowing he's suffering the torture of delayed gratification right along with me since his hips are wedged between the couch at his back and my ass at the front.

What's been an added challenge is staying quiet, since Gio worked a night shift and is sleeping just one room away.

Seeing that the sports channel has cut to a quick news bulletin, I turn around to face my erotic torturer, meeting his glazed, hooded eyes and pressing my front into his.

“You’re distracting, you know?” I ask, my voice rough.

He quirks a brow, his lips twitching as he does. “I don’t hear you complaining. In fact,” he says, dipping his chin and rubbing his rough, stubbled cheek against mine, “the way you’ve been squirming and moaning under your breath, I think you like the fact I’m drawing this out.”

“You think?” I breathe as he gently sucks my earlobe between his lips.

“If it helps,” he rasps, moving his body down the couch and dragging his mouth over my neck, nipping and sucking and kissing as he goes. I bite my lip, my whimpers muffled in my throat when his hands join the party and start roaming, one drifting down my back, one cupping a breast, his thumb and forefinger rolling over my pert nipple through my thin top.

He stops and looks over my shoulder, his hands shifting from my boobs to my waist.

“Hey, G,” Marco rumbles, making my entire body tense.

“Hey. Afternoon, Renee. Nice to see you again.”

I bury my face in the crook of Marco’s neck, a snort escaping my lips before I give up and start giggling, my entire body shaking with it.

“Hi, Gio,” I murmur.

“Good shift?” Marco asks, still holding me in place, probably more for his benefit than mine since his body is *far* more obvious about its current state than mine is.

Then again. Maybe I should have some fun with this.

Since my hand is now wedged between us, I wiggle my fingertips, brushing them against his hard-on.

“Yeah. Typical Friday night. Attended a scene with Firehouse 22. He’s on one hell of an ego trip at the moment, isn’t he?” Gio says, walking past the couch and through to the kitchen, leaving us out of view.

“Yep. He’ll learn.”

“If he doesn’t, I know a fair few cops that are more than willing to teach him anyway,” Gio says.

While Gio is talking, I wrap my hand around Marco’s cock and give it a firm squeeze. He grunts and taps my ass in warning. “Be good,” he growls low and quiet in my ear.

I tilt my face so it’s buried in his neck. “I always am,” I whisper before running my tongue up the column of his throat.

“Got much planned today?” Gio calls out.

“Going to Renee’s grandmother’s house for afternoon tea,” Marco replies.

“Wow. Meeting the nonna. That’s a big deal.” Amusement is obvious in Gio’s voice.

“Grams is a sweetheart. Fierce but sweet, and one of the scariest, craziest, most overprotective women I’ve ever met,” I say proudly, then I return to the task at *hand*, giving one last, teasing squeeze of Marco’s hard length.

“Fuck ...” he whispers roughly.

I kiss the hinge of his jaw. “Shh, Lieutenant. We have an audience remember,” I whisper, then roll back over to face the TV and watch the game.

“You’ll keep,” he rasps roughly in my ear.

“Anyway,” Gio says, walking past us and stopping at the hallway door, a steaming mug of what smells like coffee in his hand, “I’m heading out to run some errands, then catch up with Val to fix something at the spa.”

“God, she needs to find herself a man,” Marco mutters.

“Why does she need one when she’s got three brothers to help her out? Anyway, I’m jumping in the shower so I’ll leave you guys to it.” His amused eyes go from me to Marco. He waggles his brows. “Just don’t mess up the couch,” he says, making me giggle and Marco chuckle. Gio winks before turning and disappearing down the hallway.

Now that we’re alone again, Marco’s hands resume their languid roaming, and he peppers the back of my neck and

collarbone with soft, wet, openmouthed kisses.

“You’re a menace,” he rasps. “Teasing me when I can’t do anything about it.”

I turn my head, my amused gaze locking with his. “If the Cubs win, you can do whatever you want to me before we go to Grams’,” I murmur against his mouth.

His eyes drift to the screen then back to mine, his lips curving up into what can only be described as a devilish ‘I’m gonna get me some’ grin. “You’re on, princess.”

That’s when my own smile widens. “I damn well hope so. But a word of warning. Grams will know. And so will Hayley.”

His head jerks back. “What?” he asks with a disbelieving laugh.

“Yep. Grams has a sixth sense about these things.”

“A sixth sense about sex?”

I giggle, pressing my ass back against his still *very* interested groin. “A way of knowing when her granddaughters are happy.”

Marco nuzzles the back of my neck and tightens his arms around me, holding me close. “Glad I’m making you happy, baby.”

“Not as much as I am.”

“Not as much as you will be in an inning’s time either.”

“Fly the W,” I cheer with a giggle:

Marco’s chest shakes behind me. “Never mind that. You’ll be flying the O a few times before I’m finished with you.”

“Then Grams will definitely know.”

“Bring it on. If I can charm one Hamilton woman, I can charm them all.”

“OH WOW, aren’t you a big, strapping man,” Grams says as soon as we walk into her den, her eyes looking Marco up and down. Hayley snickers and I bite my lip to hold back my own laugh. “Just imagine all the money I’d save with the handyman jobs you could do for me around the house.” She turns to me. “Renee, I approve.”

Chuckling, Marco holds out his hand and Grams covers it with hers. “It’s lovely to meet you, Mrs. Hamilton,” he says low and soft. *Damn, he’s good.*

“Oh, son, please call me Grams like my girls do.”

His lips twitch. “Okay.”

I shake my head with a grin. “Hey, Grams. Remember me?” I ask wryly, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

“Could never forget you, my sweet child. By the way,” she whispers, her eyes drifting past me to Marco’s butt, “ten out of ten so far.”

I snicker. “Behave, Grams.”

“*Never,*” she mouths back. “Now, take a seat and Hayley can get you refreshments.”

Refreshments? I quirk a brow at my sister, who’s struggling not to laugh herself.

I take Marco’s hand and we sit on the sofa across from my grandmother. “Thanks, Hayls.”

Hayley rolls her eyes. “I can do one better than that. I’ll serve up food and drinks.”

My head jerks back. “You cooked?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to make Grams cook for all of us. Her doctor said she needs to take it easy.”

“Hush now, child,” Gram says, waving her off. “Young Marco doesn’t need to hear about an aging woman’s woes.” She looks over at the young man in question and smiles sweetly. “I’m not an invalid just yet, but my sweet girls think I’m ready to be shipped off to the good lord upstairs. I happen to think I’ve got at least another twenty years left on this earth.

There's still so much more mischief to get up to, don't you think?"

"You don't look a day over seventy, Grams," Marco replies smoothly. I cover my mouth to smother my giggles, my shoulders shaking with them. Grams narrows her eyes at me but I don't miss the flash of amusement on her face either.

She nods. "Such nice manners. A gentleman should always compliment a lady. Your parents raised you well. My George had a way with words too."

"Mama always said manners will get you far."

"She's right," Grams replies, smiling up at Hayley as she returns with a tray of sandwiches and pastries, and disappears again. Not long after, she comes back with another tray, which Marco stands and helps her with, this one with a teapot of what will undoubtedly be Gram's favorite English Breakfast tea, along with a jug of iced tea with matching tumblers.

Like the trained hostess Grams taught her to be, Hayley serves everyone, before joining Grams opposite us.

"You have a lovely home. My parents live not far from here," Marco says, looking around the living room. Grams has always prided herself on keeping a clean and tidy house. She has a cleaner come by twice a week but she still would've made sure the place was perfect before we arrived today, purely for Marco's benefit.

"Thank you. My George always loved coming home to a nice tidy house with a good home-cooked meal after his long, hard day at work. I'm sure my granddaughters will be just as thoughtful when they *finally* settle down too."

Hayley snorts but covers it quickly with a cough, her dancing eyes widening as she looks over at me, my expression mirroring hers.

To his credit, Marco doesn't miss a beat, but he does reach out and rest his arm over the back of the sofa behind me. "I can already tell you've done a fine job with both of them, too."

I blink in shock as Gram's cheeks turn pink. Oh, my. Marco Rossi has just charmed my hard-to-please grandmother

in the space of twenty minutes. My ex tried—and failed miserably—to make a good impression on her. Grams has always supported the decisions Hayley and I have made in our lives, but when it came to my engagement, I knew she was worried.

Listening to Marco, Hayley, and Grams talk, I'm amazed—but not all that surprised—that Marco has just slotted into our close-knit family of three.

“Now, Marco. You may or may not know, but we haven't had much luck with firefighters in this family,” Grams says, snapping me out of my revelry. My mouth gapes open.

“Grams!” Hayley and I gasp in unison.

She arches a brow. “What, sweet child? Am I lying?”

“No, but I—”

“But nothing, Renee. Any man worthy of my granddaughter's time and body must be able to rise above the woman's past dalliances.” To his credit, Marco doesn't even flinch.

“I agree with that sentiment, Grams,” he replies, locking eyes with her intense gaze. He laces his fingers with mine and squeezes me affectionately. “And I can unequivocally promise you that I am absolutely nothing like that particular poor excuse for a man.”

She tilts her head as if studying him, looking for any sign of uncertainty. When she seemingly finds none, she smiles at him. “I'm glad to hear that. Let me warn you—my Renee here is hell on wheels when cornered and she's as stubborn as I am when it comes to standing her ground, regardless of whether she's right or wrong.”

Marco chuckles. “Good to know.”

“And she loves thoughtful gestures. Not expensive ones. She's determined and feisty and bull-headed, but she's ambitious, and when she sets her mind on getting something or going somewhere, she never gives up till she makes it happen. She loves fiercely. She's also the most loyal, thoughtful and supportive wom—”

Hayley giggles. “Grams, you sound like you’re selling him on a prized cow, not your granddaughter.”

“Oh pfft,” she says, waving my sister off. “One look at those two and I already know Marco appreciates what he’s got in his arms and his bed.”

Marco’s amused grunt almost sets me off. I did warn him Grams would know, and there’s a dazzling twinkle in her wise old eyes confirming she’s not blind and is definitely still as sharp as a tack.

“I know all about you macho firefighters.” A sly smile plays on Gram’s lips as she leans toward Marco, her eyes bright. “When I was a young sprightly thing, my girls and I were known to get up to a little mischief.”

“Something tells me you and your friends got into more than your fair share of trouble, Grams,” Marco says, making even me swoon, and I’m the one who just two hours ago was panting and whimpering under his touch as a result of a lost bet. But I clearly came out on top thanks to his talented mouth, fingers, body ...

Grams holds up her fingers. “Maybe,” she says, a sly smile playing on her lips. “But what’s the point in living life to the full if you don’t have fun while doing it?”

“There’s fun, then there’s getting stuck up a tree in a miniskirt at three a.m. on your fiftieth birthday, Grams,” I say with a giggle.

Grams laughs. “Hey. A woman only turns fifty once, and in the end, I was saved by five very hunky firemen with a big ladder.”

“And Grandpa blew his stack when you conned the firemen into dropping you home and turning their lights on, giving him one hell of a fright.”

“Your grandfather was a good man who hooked his star to a wild woman. He knew what he was getting into, believe you me,” she says.

“I think your husband and I would have had a lot in common then,” Marco says before turning my way. His

intense gaze and quirked lips make my stomach flip, my heart sigh, and my lady parts clench. “At least the part about having a soft spot for a wild woman.”

Holy spontaneous orgasm, Batman.

“Oh, my sweet child,” Grams says. “I approve. I wholeheartedly approve.”

And all I see in her expression is relief, something I’ve never seen before. She’s not just saying it, she means it, and it’s not until now that I realize I really needed Grams’ okay. I needed to know I wasn’t just seeing everything I wanted to see in Marco. He’s the real deal. He’s everything he says he is, and if Grams can see it, and Hayley can too—well, she liked him before she even met him—then I can trust my gut when it comes to my growing feelings for this man.

It was never anything about Marco; it was me and my own baggage that were the problems. But not anymore. When it comes to Marco Rossi, I’m all in. With my moment of self-realization passed, I lean into his side. His hand comes down to rest around my shoulders, pulling me in closer as I melt against him. And when I sneak a look at Grams and Hayley, both of them are grinning over at us and I don’t even mind.

That’s until Grams opens her mouth again. “So Marco. Now that Renee’s taken care of, have you got any handsome single friends for my Hayley, here?”

Marco

I'm sitting at my desk, working through a pile of paperwork while the guys run through drills in the garage, when my phone vibrates against the desk.

Renee – Hey. How's your day going? I'm just sitting down to dinner with Hayley and thought I'd see how you are. Can I call you tonight? I've got something to ask you?

"Who's that?" Luca asks, walking into my office and slumping down on the small couch opposite my desk.

"Hello to you too."

"Hey, brother. How have you been in the fifteen minutes since I saw you last?" he asks.

I turn to face him, shaking my head at his shit-eating grin. "Smartass."

"One of us has to be. You'd rather moon over your *girlfriend* than do paperwork. Jeez, you get the approval of the nonna and you're all lovey-dovey and shit. I should probably check it when you're done just in case you've written 'Marco hearts Renee' or something."

I snicker, shaking my head at the idiot. "Like you've finished yours."

"Well, no. But I'm taking a well-earned break before getting back into it."

"You say that like you've even started."

“Hey, I was hungry and you can’t stay looking this good without sustenance.”

I chuckle because I’ve never met anyone else who can eat his weight in food and *not* have to slog his guts out to work it off. Luca seems to eat without regret and have it all turn into muscle, and that includes a few of Mama’s home-cooked meals each week. He doesn’t live there, but I swear, he’d eat there every night if he could.

“How is Renee?” he asks, nodding to the phone.

“Did I say I was messaging her?”

“You didn’t have to,” he replies without missing a beat.

“She’s good.”

“So things are going well?”

“What do you think?” I reply in a ‘duh’ tone.

“You’re an Italian Captain America. Everyone loves you, so of course you’ve got the Hamilton women eating out of your hand.”

“Who does that make you then?” I lift a brow his way.

“The Hulk.”

I throw my head back and burst out laughing.

Rhodes appears in my doorway, looking between us with a smirk. “Is Luca telling you about how he had a woman’s roommate ask to join in last night?”

My eyes bug out at my brother. “What?”

He winces and scowls at Rhodes. “Thanks, big mouth. Last time I tell *you* anything in confidence.”

The grin on Rhodes face gets bigger. “Gio thinks it’s funny too. The Captain and Zach just chuckled and walked away, muttering about how you’ll never learn, and I think Scotty wants to ask you for tips since *Hayley* broke his heart.”

“Hayley didn’t even get close to his heart. All she wanted was a good time,” Luca says. “That’s more than half obvious.”

I hold my hands up when both of them turn to me as if I know the answer. “I have not and *will* not ask Renee’s sister why she hasn’t returned Scotty’s fifty calls and text messages.”

“Fifty? Shit,” Rhodes says in disbelief. “We need to teach him how to be cool.”

My eyes widen. “Do you think he’s going to change? He’s been the same way as long as we’ve known him.”

Rhodes sighs. “This is true.”

Back to my brother, the manwhore. “How on earth did the proposed three-way come about?”

Luca blushes a little. “She told me she had a roommate and that they might be keen to join us. I was the idiot who assumed she was another girl.”

I bite my lip, trying so hard not to laugh, but I make the mistake of glancing at Rhodes and we both crack up at the same time, howling this time, not having any hope of being quiet.

“God, I hate you two sometimes,” Luca grumbles.

“I’m just living vicariously through you. Learning what *not* to do when I start dating again.”

That grabs my attention, my head turning in slow motion to my best friend. “Did I hear that right?” I ask quietly.

Rhodes shrugs. “Jake has a point. He’s gonna go to college in a few years, and I can’t put my life on hold forever. Lily wouldn’t want that and Jake’s got a good head on his shoulders. Maybe it’s time I open myself up to the possibility of *dating* again.”

“Yeah. But there’s no pressure.” I tilt my head Luca’s way. “You don’t have to be like my ‘easy-breezy, all access to everyone’ brother over here.”

“Thanks,” Luca retorts dryly.

I eye him questioningly. “Am I wrong?”

“You don’t have to be so obvious about it,” he mutters.

“Neither do you,” Rhodes says, backing me up.

“Yeah, yeah. Maybe I’ll be like my big brother here and meet the one woman who knocks him on his ass and fall head over heels.”

“Actually, she *did* knock me on my ass—*literally*.”

“That’ll be a good story to tell the grandkids one day,” Rhodes replies with a knowing glint in his eye.

God, that’s jumping a bit far ahead, isn’t it?

I roll my eyes and turn back to face my desk. “On that note, I need to get back to my paperwork before we get another job.”

Luca stands and looks over at Rhodes, both of them with knowing glints in their eyes. “That’s code for ‘get out so I can call my *girlfriend*,’” Rhodes says with a smirk.

My brother snorts. “Doesn’t want us to hear him getting all lovey-dovey ‘cause then we’ll give him shit.”

Rhodes scoffs. “Says the man who only sweet talks to get in a woman’s pants.”

“Or skirt. Not that fussed,” he says with a wink. Rhodes grabs him in a headlock and drags him from my office.

“Thanks,” I call out, still chuckling to myself as I bring up Renee’s number, already looking forward to hearing the sound of her voice.

“Hey,” she says softly when the call connects.

“Hey yourself. You know you don’t have to text me to ask if you can call? If I can answer, I always will.”

“I’m not one of those needy girlfriends who expects you to reply straight away. I just like to let you know I’m thinking of you and that you can call me when you’re not busy.”

“Baby, if you call and I’m not on a job, I’ll always answer because there’s nothing better for my mood than hearing your voice if I can’t see you.”

She sighs, and fuck, that's a good sound. It's a happy one that tells me I'm not laying it on too thick. My doubts that we're on the same page are pretty much non-existent, but when a man has a woman in his bed he wants to stay there, he'll always be a little wary until he locks it down. "Good to know."

"What can I say? I kinda like you."

"Oooh. Like really, really like me?" she asks, putting on a teenage girl's drawl.

I chuckle. "Yeah. Like, a *lot*." I try to sound like a surfer dude but it comes out more like Beavis from *Beavis and Butthead*, making her giggle down the phone.

"That's good. It would be terribly sad to have to break Grams' heart. She's a firm fan of yours now. She's even told her friends about my 'handsome new man-friend.'"

"I promise not to break any Hamilton woman's heart."

"I'll hold you to that."

"You can hold me to anything as long as it's against your body, especially naked."

"*Behave*, Marco. Don't be sweet and sexy when I can't show you my appreciation," she says, her voice as smooth as the melted chocolate I drizzled over her skin a few nights ago when we last had a sleepover.

"Being told to behave. *That's* a first," I say with a laugh, resting my ass against my desk, my groin definitely interested in the memory and promise of more. "You said you wanted to ask me something."

"Yeah. So John asked me today if I was planning on going to the Big Brothers Big Sisters Fall Ball next month."

"You said you usually do."

"Yeah. I do. I just hadn't really thought about it."

"I can be the candy on your arm," I reply without her asking. "I think I look quite good in a suit if I do say so myself ..."

I hear her small gasp in my ear. “I didn’t, I mean ... you don’t have to—”

My lips twitch and I shake my head, even though I know she can’t see me. “Renee, were you going to ask me to be your date?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want me there?”

“Yeah,” she says softly and so damn sweetly that it makes me wish I was there right now to throw her over my shoulder, take her to bed and show her what she does to me.

“Then I’ll be there. When is it?”

“Four weeks away. Can you make it?” she asks, and I don’t miss the hope in her voice.

“Princess, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Especially since it means I get to see you in a ball gown.”

She gasps. “I didn’t even think about that fact. I’ll get to see you in a suit.”

“I’ll swap shifts around if I have to, and—”

Her breath catches. “I don’t want to be any hassle though ...”

“Baby, I may not be able to give you everything in the world, but I’ll never give up trying. This is important to you and because of that, it’s important to me.” Comfortable silence fills the line. “But also, the fire department gets tickets every year because some of us volunteer now and then. The difference this year is I’ll be going for *you*, not as a firefighter. I’ll get the guys to come too.” The line goes quiet.

“Renee?”

“He never ...” she says shakily but trails off. She doesn’t often talk about her ex, which is good, because then I’d press to try find out who he is and likely hunt him down to thank him for being a fuck-up and giving me a chance with her. “I know you’re not him, you’re nothing like him, but sometimes you’re so different it takes my breath away,” she says in her

honest way that I like a hell of a lot. There's no pretense with Renee. It's all black and white, and clear as day.

"Nothing about you will ever be a hassle. I swear to God, Renee, don't doubt how important you are to me."

"Maybe you need to come show me," she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

"I need to sleep tomorrow, but do you want to come over tomorrow night?"

"Or you could crawl into my bed when you finish in the morning and sleep here."

"Will you be there with me?" I ask, my voice thick.

"For a few hours, then I'll have to leave, but I like the idea of you coming home to me in the morning."

"You have no fucking idea how much I've been wanting to do that."

"Good, because I may have snuck my spare key into the front pocket of your work bag."

My lips curve up as I look out the window of my office. "For a special occasion?"

"For when you called me and I asked you to come here in the morning."

"You were rather sure I would say yes."

"I seem to know you well," she replies with a laugh.

"Fuck, princess. I swear you were made for me."

"If that's true then that means you're meant for me too."

"I'll prove it in the morning."

"I'm counting on it."

"Good night, baby."

"Good night, Lieutenant. Stay safe."

"Always do. But let me ask you something. Did you call to tell him to be safe, or is that just for me?"

“Considering I wasn’t *allowed* to call him, or if I did, he’d never call back? It has only been and only will be yours. It would also be a damn shame for you to do something to yourself now after spending so much time and effort getting me to like you.”

“You did put up a good fight,” I say, and you could not wipe the satisfied grin off my face if you tried.

“It was a battle I had no hope of winning.”

Fuck that feels good to hear. “I’m glad you didn’t win. Not when we know how good it is now.”

“Absolutely. Now stay *safe*, Lieutenant. I have plans for you in the morning.”

“Not if I wake you first.”

I smile at her soft moan. “Goodnight, princess. Don’t do anything I’ll have to spank you for.”

“What if I send you photos?” she asks with a sexy laugh that gets my cock’s attention again.

“Stop making me hard when I’m at work and can’t bend you over my desk to deal with it *and* you.”

“At least now I know you won’t be short of ideas in the morning. Bye.” She giggles before hanging up.

The bells ring five minutes later, giving me enough time to recover. Yet I still walk out to the garage with a stupid grin on my face, earning an amused chuckle from Rhodes and a shake of Luca’s head. I glare at both of them. “Not a word. But we are going to the Fall Ball together, so make sure you guys are there too. We’ll make a night of it as a crew.”

“Sounds good to me. I’ll bring Jake; he’s been bugging me to go,” Rhodes replies.

Luca nods. “I’m sure I can find a date. If not, Renee has a sister, right?” he asks as he sits behind the steering wheel and turns the key.

“Hey. You leave Hayley alone,” Scotty calls out from the back seat. “She’s mine.”

I scoff and look over my shoulder. “Does *she* know that or is there a trespass order at play here?”

Scotty flips me the bird. “Maybe she lost my number,” he mutters. By the time we pull out of the garage, lights and sirens blazing, the entire crew is laughing.

Renee

I'm surprised to find Marco's truck still in my driveway when I get home after work. He'd crawled into my bed and woke me up in spectacular fashion before he promptly fell asleep curled behind me, while I dozed until my phone alarm vibrated on my nightstand.

He slept like the dead while I got ready. I let Hayley know he was there, had a key and would lock up when he left. I didn't expect him to be here now.

Before he crashed out, he'd told me we were going out on a date tonight, which is why I'm home an hour earlier than usual so that I'll have enough time to beautify myself to knock his socks off when he comes to pick me up. Since it seems he's already here—or rather, still is here—he'll likely distract me. I won't have the same element of surprise when he sees my outfit, but I know he'll be far from disappointed.

I put my key in the lock and walk in my front door, finding the man in question laid out on my couch, and a basketball replay on the television. He mutes the sound as I walk toward him.

“Princess, come ‘ere,” he rumbles, his voice rough.

“You should've just watched TV in bed. Then I could've crawled in with you, and had a repeat performance of this morning.”

“Why do you think I came back before you got home?” he asks, raking his eyes up and down my body. “Now get your

ass here so I can kiss you and show my appreciation for your workwear.”

“What?”

“That’s okay. I’ll get up and come to you.” He shifts as if to stand up. But I rather like the idea of lying all over him as he is.

“No,” I say, “stay exactly like that.”

His adorable confused look makes me laugh as I kick off my heels, drop my purse on the side table, and move his way.

“And if you like this look, just wait until you see my date outfit.”

“Looking forward to it,” he says with an appreciative grin just before I launch myself over the back of the couch and land flat-out on top of him with a heavy thud and a loud groan from the man himself.

I prop myself up on my hands so I’m looking down at him. “Hi again.”

“Hey.”

“Sleep well?”

“Yeah. I like your bed. Just like it better when you’re in it with me.”

“Oh yeah?” I say, my lips curving up as his gaze darkens.

“I think you should show me how much more fun it is when we’re both naked and horizontal.”

In the blink of an eye, I’m flipped over and we’ve switched places, Marco’s hard muscular form pressing down against me as his lips crash down on mine.

He moves his mouth lower to pepper kisses along the sensitive skin of my neck. “You said my bed ...” I moan although I hold him tight against me, not wanting to go anywhere.

He chuckles. “Soon.”

“Okay,” I breathe, and it’s my last coherent word for the next thirty minutes.

WE’VE JUST FINISHED our three-course meal at the same Japanese restaurant where he saved me from my horrible blind date last time we were both here. On the plus side, at least I got to *taste* the food this time and choose dishes myself, too. This was after we were a teensy bit late by way of Marco having a roger rabbit moment—tongue rolling out of his mouth and all—when I walked out of my bedroom ready to leave for dinner wearing a deep cowl-necked black dress, bronzed bare legs, and my newest pair of black Fendi pointed-toe ankle boots.

“I can’t believe you brought me back here,” I say, lifting my glass of wine to meet Marco’s raised one opposite.

His dazzling smile is almost blinding. A relaxed and happy Marco is a sight to behold. I never stood a chance at resisting this man. *God knows why I thought I ever could—or ever wanted to.*

“I wanted to give you a date re-do.”

I tilt my head and frown. “But you already gave me a real first date?”

“Yeah, but when I saw you having dinner here with the douche canoe, I knew I wanted to bring you back here one day.”

“You were *that* sure I’d give in to your relentless pursuit?”

He grins and shakes his head. “Was it relentless though? Or were you just ignoring all the signs the universe gave us?”

I shrug. “A bit of column A, a lot of column B.”

“And now?” he asks, quirking a brow, his legs brushing against mine under the table.

“The longer we’re together, the more I wonder why I was so hell-bent on resisting you.”

“Because I’m too handsome and sexy for my own good?” he asks, flipping his hair back like a preening peacock and posing with his arms up, showing his bulging biceps.

“Sure, let’s go with that,” I murmur wryly, taking a sip of my wine. His gaze narrows, and I struggle not to giggle. Then he chuckles and I have to put my glass back on the table before I lose the fight and start snort-laughing in a dramatic fashion.

When I catch the strange amused looks from our table neighbors, I cover my mouth, my mirth turning into a soft snicker.

Marco’s eyes sparkle, his attention stuck on my upturned lips. “Fuck, I wanna kiss you. I remember sitting across the restaurant from you and aching to see you smile but not wanting you to have *too* much fun with that guy, because it pissed me off.”

I lean into my hand, intrigued by the insight he’s giving me. “What did?”

“That you were out with him when I knew I wanted you on my arm, at my side ...” He leans in. “And in my bed.”

I lick my lips. Knowing how much he wanted me, even before I gave up fighting my attraction to him, is hot. He’s certain of who he is and what he wants. He’s never given up looking for his “show stopper”—and he thinks that woman is me.

That gives a woman with baggage like I have, the confidence to be herself. It’s probably because when you’re not looking, and a man like Marco Rossi is unapologetic in his pursuit of you, and is *sure* that you’re the one he wants, there’s no need for anything but the truth. I’ve not held back any of my faults or flaws, my likes or dislikes, or any of my personality traits—the good, the bad, and the annoying. He’s been through two bouts of PMS with me and hasn’t batted an eyelid or gone running for the hills. I’ve managed to not once doubt where he is or what he’s doing when he’s not working because he’s done absolutely nothing to show me he’s nothing but the man he’s proven himself to be. I haven’t been needy or

demanding or anything but myself. It's been as easy as breathing since the day we first met. It's been exactly how I thought it always would be when I found the right man. *I'd just stopped looking.*

The waiter stops by and slips the check onto the table. Both Marco and I going for it at the same time, but when he pins me in place with a heated stare full of determination and the promise that he'll show his appreciation in ways I'll like later, I let him win.

His victorious grin widens, and I narrow my gaze.

"You know you're not always going to win?" I ask.

"There's no doubt, princess. You'll fight for your right to fight for as long as you live." Marco waves his arm in the air, handing the black folder with the check and his credit card to the waiter as he walks past.

"Too right," I say with a laugh.

"But here's the thing," he says, leaning forward in his seat and placing his hand over mine on the table. "I like everything about you, Renee. What I've seen, and what I haven't yet. So if you think I don't appreciate the fact you don't just sit back and *expect* me to pay the bill, then you're so fucking wrong, but you'll get there."

"Get where?"

"To the place where you stop thinking something you do could put me off or make me think anything except how fucking lucky I am to have found you."

I pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. *Nope, this man is as real as it gets.*

I tangle our fingers together, giving his a gentle squeeze. "How on earth were you still single?" I blurt out.

"What?" he splutters with a laugh.

"You're hot. You're charming. You have a good job, a successful career, you treat women well, you come from a good family, and you love hard and fiercely and you do it unapologetically. You're phenomenal in bed, you give before

you take—but not before giving *again*—and most importantly, you’re not an asshole.”

Marco’s lips curve into a cocky smirk, but it just serves to make him downright irresistible. *Where the hell is the waiter? Some of us need to get out of here—like now.*

“Anyone would think you like me, princess.”

My eyes widen, my hand covering my heart as I feign innocence. “Whatever would make you think that, Lieutenant?”

He barks out a laugh. “Call it an educated guess.”

I hold two fingers in the air and scrunch my nose up. “Okay, I might like you a *little* bit.”

Marco’s eyes dance with amusement, and he’s still shaking his head at me when the waiter returns with his credit card and two individually packaged mints on the small ceramic dish.

“Oooh, I’ll take one of those.”

Marco’s eyes warm as he hands me a mint. “Planning on getting lucky tonight?”

I waggle my brows. “Play your cards right, Lieutenant, and you might find out.”

He shoots me his signature ‘I’m gonna get me some’ grin as he pockets his wallet again and stands, holding an arm out my way.

“C’mon, beautiful. Let’s get out of here.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He stops and holds the restaurant’s front door open for me, pressing his palm to the exposed skin of my back, sending a delicious shiver through me.

Once we’re outside, he leads us away from the main thoroughfare. Turning to face me, he slips his jacket off and drapes it over my shoulders before tilting my chin up with his knuckles and brushing his lips against mine.

“If you’re up for it, I thought we could go for a walk through to Buckingham Fountain. I haven’t seen the light show for a while, and we’ve got more than enough time tonight to do everything I’ve got planned for you—*twice*—and still fit this in.”

“Okay,” I whisper, totally breathy and obvious. “Lead the way.”

Ten minutes later, we’re walking hand in hand into Grant Park. “When I first moved here, I used to love coming downtown and spending the day just exploring,” I say.

“Yeah? Papa used to bring us boys out to give Mama a break from all the noise.”

“Probably the girls too,” I muse.

“Or give us a break from them. *God*, Skye was easy compared to Val.” He chuckles then turns to look at me. “She still is, too. Val takes high-maintenance to a *whole* new level.”

“She seems lovely.”

“She’s as sweet as pie. Honestly, she’d fight to the death for anyone she cares about and would give up the shirt off her back. She’s just ...”

“Needy?”

His eyes flash. “Yep. You know something about that?” he asks, quirking a brow. I look around, trying to get my bearings in the dark, spotting the small circular fountain with the original Turtle Boy fountain figure in the center.

“Hayley is a lot of things. Not needy, per se. More ... reliant, maybe. But she was young when we went to live with Grams so it has always just been the three of us girls—and Grandpa, of course—but just us three since he passed. And I guess she’s always known we’d be there to help her out when she needs it.”

“And you?” he asks, his voice soft and low.

The fountain sparks to life in front of us, the bright lights glowing against the darkness behind it. “Wow. I’ve never seen it at night. It’s gorgeous. I used to love watching it during the

opening credits to *Married With Children* and made sure it was one of the first things I came to see during my first visit Downtown.”

I let go of his hand and turn to face him. Looping my arms over his shoulders, I tip my head and smile up at him, feeling so content, so comfortable and so sure of the person I am and the man in front of me. When he wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me in close, I melt even more. *Nothing and no one has ever felt this right.*

“You didn’t answer my question, baby,” he says, running a hand along my back.

I run my fingers through his hair, tugging his head down closer to mine. “I’m right where I want to be with exactly who I want to be with.”

His intense stare bores into mine, and I hold my breath because the air changes between us and I don’t yet know what it is. I just know it’s something epic, monumental ...

“Fuck, I love you.”

I gasp but don’t dare move, not wanting to do anything to ruin this perfect moment.

His gorgeous eyes soften, full of absolute certainty and sincerity. “And I know I will for a really long time, probably forever.”

Tears sting my eyes because of all the things I expected him to say, that wasn’t one of them. I stare at him, surprised beyond belief, but my heart feels so full it’s fit to burst. I run my hands around his shoulders to cup his jaw, my thumb sweeping over his cheek as my gaze roams his beautiful face. When I lock eyes with his, I know I have his full attention.

“I love you, too,” I reply. His entire body jerks then goes deathly still, my breath catching at the intensity shining back at me.

Then it’s as if he snaps, his hand hooking around the back of my neck and tugging me closer. Marco kisses me hard and with so much feeling, I gasp. His tongue delves past my parted lips, circling my own as he deepens the connection, both of us

giving as good as we get, cementing this monumental occasion in the only way we can in public. But I'm looking forward to continuing the celebration behind closed doors as soon as we get home.

When we finally pull apart, he buries his face in my neck.

"Fuck, princess. Just when I thought you couldn't surprise me."

I'm grinning when he straightens and looks down at me, his expression so soft and gentle it makes my heart skip a beat.

I shrug. "I was just taking a page out of your book."

He tilts his head, his brow furrowed. "And what's that?"

"When you know, you know."

"Okay then. So where do we go from here then, oh wise one?"

My lips curve as I melt into him and touch my mouth to his. "Well, I want to go home to bed so I can *show* you how I ___"

That's all I get out because Marco is kissing me again, swallowing the rest of my words. Then he grabs my hand and near-on drags me back toward the parking lot.

It appears Marco isn't a fan of delayed celebrations. Which is good, because right now, neither am I.

Marco

One Month Later

I use my key and let myself in, finding Hayley sitting on the couch, some reality singing competition playing on the TV. She looks over her shoulder and checks me up and down grinning when she meets my eyes.

“Hope you’re ready, Rossi. My sister is gonna knock your socks off in a minute.”

I look down at my watch and smirk. “Not sure we’ve got time for that, but I’m game if she is.”

“Oh, eww. I mean she looks hot, you perv!” she says with a laugh, throwing a handful of popcorn at me and thankfully missing.

“Hey, you better clean that up,” Renee says, walking into the kitchen and grabbing her purse from the counter. I don’t move though—I can’t. I’m frozen in place, taking her in from her bare neck down to the blue velvet dress that clings to her curves the same way my hands are aching to right now. Maybe Hayley was right when she said her sister would knock my socks off, because she’s turned me mute and dumb with lust as well.

She turns and stares at me, stopping mid-step as her eyes rake over me with just as much hunger as I’m feeling right now.

“Hey,” she says, her voice rough and sultry and *not* helping my self-control at all.

“You’re killing me in that dress, princess.”

Her perfectly painted red lips curve up seductively. “I really hope not, Lieutenant, because I have dirty plans for you in that suit later.”

Hayley makes puking noises from the other side of the room but I’m on a mission. Regaining the ability to move, I close the distance between myself and the woman I love, lifting my hands to cradle her jaw as soon as I’m within reach.

“You look beautiful,” I whisper, lowering my head.

“Wait,” she says, pressing her palms to my chest. “If you kiss me how I know you’re going to kiss me, I’ll have to redo my lipstick and—”

I crush my lips to hers anyway, loving the way she whimpers into my mouth as I take my time. I wait till she’s soft and pliant and sagging into me before pulling back and gazing down at her now swollen, smeared lips, feeling triumphant and way too fucking turned on. Especially since we won’t be able to do *anything* about it until much later tonight when we’re back home.

“Damn, now *I’m* gonna need a cold shower. You know it’s cruel to make out in front of a single woman with no eligible men on the horizon, right?” Hayley asks. I stand beside Renee and wrap my arm around her waist, deciding not to let the chance go by to screw with Hayley just a little bit.

“You know, there’s a certain single man there tonight who I know for a *fact* is going stag ...”

Hayley narrows her eyes at me. “No. Don’t you dare. That was a one-time thing. He’s just not my ty—”

“Type? Really?” I ask.

Renee giggles, resting her head on my chest. “Hayls has a dream man she’s striving to one day meet, and no one else will do.”

I frown. “Is this an actual person?”

“No. Just an ideal. A girl has to have goals, you know,” Hayley says with a shrug and a smile. “Look, I know Scotty is

probably a nice guy, and maybe even a good guy—he’s just not *the* guy I want to end up with, and I don’t want to get involved with someone and not be available when I meet *the* guy.”

“Right,” I say, not understanding the logic but each to their own. I look down at Renee just as she shifts back and tips her chin to meet my eyes. “Thank fuck I’m *your* ideal guy, princess.”

“You were my knight in shining armor. I had no choice.”

“Too fucking right,” I say, smiling against her lips as I give her one last kiss and lift my head. “Now you better go fix your lipstick because I may like the look of you messed up and knowing I did it, but I’m not sure *you* will.”

She snickers and wipes my mouth with her thumb, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “That goes both ways. I’m not sure Fire Engine Red is quite your color, Lieutenant. Ironic, isn’t it?”

Hayley starts up with the puking noises again, making Renee roll her eyes. “I’ll be back.”

“And I’ll watch you go, just so I get the *full* experience of that dress.”

“You’re such a perv!” she calls out as she walks down the hallway.

“You’re not the first Hamilton woman to call me that tonight.”

“It’s ‘cause we’re always right.”

“I’ll remember that,” I say, turning back to a smiling Hayley.

She nods. “It’s probably best.”

“You know what’s also for the best?” I ask.

“Go on,” she says with a resigned sigh.

“Texting Scotty to tell him you’re not interested. Then maybe he’ll stop telling me we could be family one day.”

She winces. “Yeah. *That* I can do.”

“Much appreciated.”

WALKING into the hotel where the ball is being held, I don't think I've stood taller or ever felt more invincible, and it's all because of the woman on my arm.

It's not because she looks fucking amazing—she's breathtaking, permanent hard-on inducing, the envy of all men, all of the above—and it's not because the way she carries herself exudes such confidence and an aura of success that it makes everyone want to get close, talk to her, or *be* her. It's the whole package. It's just *her*. And seeing her in her professional element tonight as she works the room, shaking hands with existing clients, potential new ones, and business contacts, I'm in awe of the woman—and I'm the lucky S.O.B. who gets to call her mine. What makes it even better is that I'm equally and completely hers too.

“Dinner will be served in ten minutes. Please make your way to your allocated tables,” the event's MC announces from the middle of the stage. Renee laces her fingers with mine, and we walk over to join the rest of the guys at our table. There we find Rhodes and Jake, Scotty, Luca, Gio and Val—who all came together—and Cohen and Skye. Rounding out the group is our Captain and his daughter, London.

I introduce Renee to everyone, chuckling when she pulls Jake up into a big hug. I'm not sure I've ever seen my godson speechless before now ... or that I've seen him blush.

“Behave yourself, midget. I'm watching you,” I warn.

He quickly gets his bearings back, clutching his hand over his chest and feigning innocence. “Who, me? What on earth would I have to offer as magnificent a woman as Renee?”

Rhodes hooks an arm around his son's shoulders, shaking his head. “I'm sorry, Renee. My son here seems to think he's a bit of a ladies man.”

“Says my father who has been binge-watching a certain *YouTube* chef and hiding it from me.”

My best friend’s mouth drops open, his eyes wide as Jake winks at Renee then turns to his dad and quirks a brow, as if challenging him to argue.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rhodes mutters, lifting his glass to his mouth and without another word, walking around the table to join Luca and the rest of our group.

I hold my hand in the air. Jake gives me a high five and laughs, his eyes tracking his dad as he walks away.

“He so likes her,” he says.

“A YouTube chef? I suppose it’s a pretty safe option, since it’s unlikely he’s ever going to meet her,” Renee replies.

Jake’s eyes look between us. “That’s the thing. She’s from Chicago.”

Renee gasps. “Oh, wow.”

“How about this, bud. Let your dad do his own thing when it comes to dating and whatnot.”

Jake groans and rolls his eyes. “Then he’ll never do anything and he’ll still be single when I move out, or I’ll never leave because I don’t want to leave him alone.”

“You’re adorable,” Renee says, sidling up to the boy and wrapping her arm around his waist. “Can we keep him, Lieutenant?”

I chuckle. “How about we let Rhodes have him, and I’ll let you visit whenever you’d like?”

“Oh alright then,” she says, leaning in and kissing Jake’s cheek, making him blush again.

I narrow my eyes but this time, nothing can wipe the shit-eating grin from Jake’s face. Not even when I tell him he’s got lipstick on his cheek.

“I don’t care. I’m going to wear it like a badge of honor. Chicks will think I’m a catch.”

“*Chicks* don’t like being called *chicks*. Have I taught you nothing?” I ask, shaking my head in mock disappointment. “I’d say go to your room, but you’re in public, so maybe go save your dad from Skye’s pregnancy stories.”

His eyes widen. “Good idea. Bye, Renee. Feel free to claim me anytime, especially when you get sick of *this guy*.” Jake nudges my arm then jumps out of reach, laughing as he moves away.

Renee smiles up at me. “He is teenager goals.”

“He is pretty awesome.”

She pats my chest, placating me. “Don’t worry, baby. I promise not to share my lipstick with any other man tonight, okay?”

“You’ll keep, princess. You’ll keep.” I expect a smartass reply but instead her head jerks from something over my shoulder back to me. “I just need to go to the ladies’ room before we start dinner.”

“I can take you if you want.”

She shakes her head and brushes her lips against my cheek. “I’m a big girl, Marco. But save me a seat, okay?”

“Always.”

She shoots me a smile, then turns and walks out the nearest door. I do as instructed, taking a seat next to Luca and waiting for Renee to return.

AFTER DINNER, the CEO of the charity finishes giving his thank-you speech, and shakes hands and takes photos with some big names holding oversized checks. I take advantage of the lull in proceedings, running my hand up Renee’s thigh under the table. Ever since she returned from the restroom, she’s been strangely quiet.

She covers my hand with hers and stops my advance, meeting my eyes.

“You’re very distracting,” Renee whispers in my ear. I turn my head and press my cheek to hers.

“Says the woman who’s commando under that dress.”

Her head jerks back. “I’m wearing a thong.” Her gaze narrows as my lips curve into a knowing smirk.

“I look forward to discovering it later,” I say, leaning close and brushing my mouth against hers. She reaches up and rubs her thumb over my lips, holding it up to show the lipstick smear she’s tidied.

“Red looks so much better on you.” Her eyes crinkle as she shoots me a devilish smile. “I dunno, I’m up for testing my red lipstick on other parts of your body when we get home if you are.”

And now, all I can think about is *that* mental picture, and how long I have to wait to make it a reality. *Damn. My princess can play dirty.*

The MC for the event announces the dance floor is open for business. After waiting a few songs to people watch—and laugh at Luca, Scotty, Skye, and Cohen mucking around—I decide it’s time.

There’s no way I’m missing the chance to dance with my girlfriend for the first time and show her off as mine in front of everyone. With this in mind, I stand and hold out my arm, wagging my brows. Renee grins and places her hand in mine, standing and following as I lead her out onto the edge of the floor to a place near the crew but not too close.

As we sway from side to side to the beat, she nestles her head against my shoulder, her arms wrapping right around my back. “Thank you for being my arm candy.”

I touch my lips to the top of her head. “You’re welcome, princess. It’s been a good night.”

“Yeah ...” The lack of enthusiasm in her voice grabs my attention.

“That sounds convincing,” I reply

“It’s not that.”

I stop moving and she shifts back, her wary eyes staring straight into mine. I cup her cheek. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I don’t want to let anything or anyone ruin our night. Just forget about it.”

“I *would* have if you didn’t just say that.” Then a light bulb goes off. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it sooner. “He’s here, isn’t he? You saw him before dinner.”

She looks down, her silence saying it all.

“Hey, it’s okay,” I say with a gentle smile. “He’s just a guy. He doesn’t get to dictate what you do, where you go, or who you see now, right?”

“Yeah. I just ... he represents the me I’m embarrassed I ever was.”

“Whoever you used to be, the woman who worked the room tonight and owned it was always in there. Whoever it is, he’s an asshole who didn’t realize the beauty he had when he had it. He used the uniform and his job to fuel his ego. It says nothing about you and *everything* about him. Okay?”

“I love you,” she whispers, her eyes shimmering with happy tears. This time, our lips meet halfway in a soft, gentle, full-of-feeling kiss that’s more of a promise to each other than anything else.

“You good now?”

She tilts her head flirtatiously and beams up at me. “I’m with you. Of course I’m good.”

“Aww, aren’t you two cute,” a familiar voice slurs behind me.

Renee’s expression falls and she tenses.

“Pierce, lay off. Leave Marco and Renee to it,” Rhodes says, moving closer. “We’re not on duty. You can be an asshole another day. Just leave it.”

I stare dumbfounded at Renee. “The asshole is Nick Pierce?” I ask incredulously.

Her fingers cling to my arms. “Just leave it, Marco. *Please*. He’s not worth it.” I’m angry but not at her. I didn’t once suspect Nick Pierce was her ex because she never told me his name and I never asked. But the absolute last person I ever thought Renee would be *engaged* to is the thorn in my side. Mainly because I didn’t think the guy had it in him to score someone as hot or as amazing as she is.

As her man *now*, and the man who plans to be by her side forever, it’s my job to show Lieutenant Nick Pierce just what he lost.

I hook my hand behind her neck and pull her close, crushing my lips to hers, kissing her long, hard, and deep. It’s not how I’d normally kiss in public, but needs must. Nick fucking Pierce deserves to know what he stupidly threw away. He needs to know she’s mine.

I pull away and plaster a smile on my face, ignoring Renee’s wide eyes and shaking head. I wrap my arm over her shoulder. Then I turn us around to come face to face with a glassy-eyed, sneering Pierce, who’s looking between Renee and myself with disgust.

“I never thought you’d slum it after me, Nay, but if you’re desperate enough to go for Rossi here, then you must’ve hit rock bottom.”

My entire body stills, my muscles tensing impossibly tight and my head ready to explode right here in the middle of the dancefloor. I fist my hands at my sides, my gaze filtered red as I wait for Nick to give me a reason to justifying laying him out cold.

Renee gasps, obviously reading my body language. “Marco, he’s not worth it. C’mon. Let’s go home and—”

“Yeah, *Marco*. Why don’t you let Renee take you home? She used to try and lead me around by my dick as well, and look how well *that* turned out.”

“You did *not* just say that to me,” I growl. I sense that we might’ve grabbed the attention of those around us now, and

not just my crew either. But I'm not about to stand by and let the woman I love be spoken about so crudely, *especially* not by this lowlife.

"Was it a pity fuck?" I ask, turning to Renee.

"What?" she whispers, the word barely audible.

"This guy. Was he that desperate that he wouldn't leave you alone so you just gave in and then couldn't get rid of him? Because I've had you; you're fucking magnificent, baby, and I've also known him for years, and there's no way in hell he'd ever be worthy of you. He's not even worth the shit on the bottom of your shoe."

"Marco, *please*," she pleads, her eyes darting to the crowd. "Please don't make a scene. You're right; he's not worth it. Let's leave now. Just turn and walk away."

"Yeah, *Marco the Great*. Listen to the ball and chain. I never knew you'd be happy with my sloppy seconds. I could've introduced you two a long time ag—"

I'm stepping forward and cocking my arm before I even know it's happening. My fist flies into Pierce's jaw as Renee screams, "*No!*"

It reverberates in my ears. I don't get a chance to throw a second shot because Rhodes comes in front of me and Luca stands between him and Pierce, and it hits me like a ton of bricks what I've just done.

I spin to find Renee, but all I see is her back running out of the room and my pregnant, very angry-looking sister scowling up at me.

"Skye," I growl. I need to go after Renee. Skye stops me though, grabbing my arm and dragging me back to the table. She turns her head toward the small crowd watching us.

"Nothing to see here, people. DJ, you're up." To his credit, the man in the booth on stage does what the angry woman tells him to and turns the music up.

"Skye, I need to talk to her," I say when we reach our table. My stubborn sister just pushes me into a chair and glares

at me, her finger pointed ominously in my face.

“No. You need to calm the fuck down and get some ice for your hand.”

“On it,” Jake says, making a beeline for the bar at the side of the room.

“And big brother, you need to give Renee some time to get home and come up with a plan to rip you a new one.”

“Look. I know I shouldn’t have punched him, but—”

“Oh, no. It’s not even that. You’re not here as a firefighter today—which is lucky for you—but it’s not lucky for *her*.”

Fuck. *Fuuuuuuuck*. Skye nods, a slow, sardonic smile appearing on her face. “And *now* he gets it.”

“I was defending her.”

“And any other time, that would be hot to a woman. *Not* tonight. And *not* when it’s clear you’ve got personal history with the asshole ex that represents the biggest failure of her life.”

“Shit,” I spit out, just as Jake reappears holding a napkin full of ice. “Here, Uncle Marco.”

“Thanks, Jake,” I mutter, taking it from him and pressing it to my swelling knuckles.

“Now, Cohen and I will take Renee home, and I suggest you give her tonight and start some much-needed groveling tomorrow.” She’s right. She’s Skye, of course she’s right. I was here as Renee’s date and I let Nick get under my skin and draw a reaction out of me, which is exactly what he wanted. That makes me no better than he is.

I nod, leaning in to kiss her goodbye.

“Look after her, brat.” If I know Renee, she’s equally parts angry and hurt right now and the knowledge that I made her feel like that is tearing me apart. If I can’t make it right tonight, then at least I trust Skye and Cohen to be there in my place.

“I will, big brother,” she says. “That’s something I will do.”

Renee

I toss and turn all night and when I finally give up on sleep and get out of bed, my head is complaining about the tequila shots Hayley poured down me after I got home.

I'm still nursing my justifiable snit when Marco knocks on my door the next morning. His mouth slams shut the moment he lays eyes on me.

He walks in and takes a seat at the kitchen counter, not saying a thing while I walk past him and pour us both a coffee, but because I'm a little Petty Betty, I turn and take a slow, measured sip in front of him, not offering him his cup just yet.

"Do you want one?" I finally ask.

He nods and I move past him, leaving his on the bench for him to pull closer himself. Then I walk over to the couch and sit down in the corner, curling my legs under me.

He doesn't sit opposite me, though. He proves he's a man who likes to take his life in his hands and puts his cup on the table before sitting right beside me, leaning his shoulder into the back cushions and watching me. "I'm so fucking sorry, princess."

"Go on ..." I say, not wanting to make it seem too easy for him. It's a given that I'll accept his apology, but he did ignore my repeated attempts to deescalate the situation, so it's only fair I let him say his piece first, right? Besides, I'd rather get all of this sorted out between us so there's absolutely nothing left to fester and grow and ruin what we have. *This is what a*

true adult relationship is all about—and it just goes to prove I'd never really had one until I met Marco.

“I was an idiot, and the way I defended you? It made a bad situation worse.”

“You might as well have pissed on my leg.”

Marco frowns. “Nothing I did was about claiming you for his benefit.”

I tilt my head and lift my brow. “Really? Because it seems to me you were peacocking like an alpha caveman just as much as he was with his dumbass drunken comments. If you'd started banging your chest and grunting ‘my woman,’ I probably wouldn't have been surprised.”

“I wasn't staking a claim.”

“Then what were you doing?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and pinning him with a glare. “Because if you two had flopped your dicks out to see whose was bigger, I wouldn't have been surprised.”

“It's mine, right?” he asks, his lips curving into a half smirk.

“Of course it's fucking yours,” I say, rolling my eyes. “But you've just proven my point.”

“No,” he says, his expression turning intense and commanding my attention. “Kissing you like that in front of everyone was about *me* showing *him* you're worth so much more than how he treated.”

“That's not who I am now.”

He squeezes my hand. “You think I don't know that? I came over this morning knowing you'd bust my balls and call me out on my behavior last night, but what we have is worth so much more than either of us ever imagined, and there's nothing I won't do to fight for that.”

“Marco ...”

“And one of the things that drew me to you is your independence and strength, just as much as your spark and

your gorgeous ass in that dress you were wearing ...”

“Hey,” I say with a laugh, giving his arm a gentle shove.

“Honestly though, the woman you became *because* of that asshole is who I’m in love with. It’s what makes your eyes light up and gave you the courage to fight our chemistry at every turn until I wore you down.” A smirk pulls at his lips, widening when I glare at him.

“Baby, it wasn’t the right time and place. I know that now, but more than anything, I wanted him to see how happy and in love you are. You’re with a man who knows your worth and who will support you in everything you set your mind to. I’ll always have your back, even if it means changing shifts to be your arm candy and making sure my crew makes a night of it, too—for them, for me, but mainly to support *you*. I’ll always have your back the same way I know you have mine.”

“Fuck, you’re too good at this apology thing.”

“I can’t say it won’t happen again, but me acting like an idiot isn’t a common thing. I’ll make sure those events are few and far between and when I do screw up, I’ll always make it right.”

I swallow down the growing lump in my throat, blinking back the happy tears threatening to escape.

“Call it pride, call it cockiness, but I wanted him to know that you’re it for me like I already know you are.” He leans forward and cups my jaw, rubbing his thumb over my bottom lip and looking straight at me. “There’s never going to be anyone else, princess, and I know how so fucking lucky I am to be loved by you.”

How the hell can I hold a grudge now? Do I have a lifetime of this to look forward to? If so, sign me up. “How can I argue with you after *that*?”

He sends me an indulgent, butter-wouldn’t-melt half smile. “We could move on to the making up portion of this apology.”

Seeing his hopeful expression, I shake my head and giggle. *God loves a trier.*

“You seem pretty confident there, Lieutenant. But let me say my piece first.”

He nods and shifts back, but he’s still close, and still touching me. It’s a good thing, though; it anchors me.

“The thing is, that wasn’t just a charity event for me. That was also about networking. There were a lot of past clients there and potential new ones. My biggest fear is that any ground I made earlier in the night could’ve been lost because we let Nick *fucking* Pierce get under our skin.”

Marco grimaces. “If it helps, I know for a fact he’ll get the same ass reaming from his captain as I got from mine this morning.”

“Wow. That was quick.”

“Cap called and made it crystal clear that Pierce and I will cross paths and will have to work together, and if we can’t, then something will need to be done.”

“You can’t let him have that much control over you. He’s not worth it. Take it from someone who learned that lesson long ago,” I say, uncurling my legs and draping them over Marco’s lap.

He straightens and wraps his hands around my knees. “I don’t usually let him get to me. But when it comes to you, it appears all bets are off and my restraint goes flying out the window.”

“Maybe find some next time ... or, you know, listen to your girlfriend when she says it’s time to leave.”

“She’s pretty awesome, that girlfriend of mine.”

I shrug, shooting him a small, cocky grin. “I think she knows that, but it’s still good to hear it anyway.”

“I’ll remember to make sure you always know it, princess. Look, I know I did a dumb thing, and I was too far gone to stop and listen to you. I can’t say I won’t screw up again in the future—’cause I *am* a man, and we are known for acting first, thinking later—but I am sorry. I was a macho dick, and I’m sorry I couldn’t walk away and be the better man.”

I shake my head. “You still don’t get it, Marco. You *are* the better man. You don’t have to even try.”

“*Fuck ...*” he breathes, his eyes searching mine for any uncertainty. “Jesus. You really mean that, don’t you?”

“How can you not know that I absolutely adore you?” I say, shifting my legs to straddle his thighs. “I love you. You’re the man I always hoped to find and one I least expected to fall for. But every time I’d normally start to doubt what I was feeling and how *much* I was feeling, you’d reassure me without knowing you were doing it.”

“Baby ...”

“And I get it. I didn’t tell you his name so when he goaded you, you were blindsided, and you just reacted. I really didn’t think I’d cross paths with him, especially not at *that* ball.”

“I said the department gets given tickets every year.”

“Yeah, but I’ve been going for ten years, and he never showed any interest when we were together.”

“Ah, yes. He wasn’t a lieutenant then though, was he?”

I shake my head.

“Pierce passed the exam and ever since, he’s had a god complex bigger than the John Hancock building. He’s determined to work his way up the ranks, whatever it takes, whatever the cost, and whoever he has to shit on to get there.”

“Lovely,” I muse, scrunching up my nose.

“That’s *not* the word I’d use to describe him.”

“Cohen mentioned something about bad blood between you and Nick but wouldn’t elaborate.”

“Rivalry, mutual hatred. I’ve just never been able to stand the asshole.”

“Makes two of us then,” I say, my lips quirking.

“There must’ve been a time you liked him enough to marry him.”

“Or I was too stupid and too loyal to see the forest for the trees. I was a shadow of the woman you see today.”

He reaches out and rubs his hand over my knee but doesn't say anything.

“So what made you snap last night?” I ask.

“You're joking, right? He had no right to say what he did about you. But he was looking to push my buttons and cause trouble, and that's exactly what he wanted. He just got it care of a fist to the face.”

I shake my head. “So you were defending my honor?”

“Fuck yeah. He's an asshole, but *what* he said about you? That was just inappropriate, rude, and completely uncalled for.”

“Yeah, I get that, and I don't mean to piss you off any more, but it's not the worst I've heard from him.”

“What do you mean?” he rumbles angrily.

“He wasn't a fan of me calling off the engagement,” I say matter-of-factly.

“So maybe he had *some* idea of who he had and what he'd lost.”

“I'm not saying he ever appreciated it; he just liked the idea of having what he thought was a perfect little wife waiting at home for him, regardless of what—or *who*—he was doing outside of the house.”

“You're so much better off now.”

“Without a doubt. But it's my turn to apologize because it's his baggage that made me so hesitant to give you a chance.”

Marco's eyes are soft as he rubs his palms up and down my legs. “I'll let you in on a little secret.”

I scrunch my nose up. “What's that?”

“Nothing is worth its weight in gold unless you have to work to get it. And you are the best thing I've ever had to fight

to win.”

My nose starts to tingle and my eyes sting but it’s a good thing. I cannot think of a time I’ve been this happy.

“Now,” he says, giving my hips a gentle squeeze, “before we stop talking about this, let’s agree on one thing.”

My lips slowly curve. “You resuming this apology in my bed?”

He smirks. “That’s guaranteed. But first, nothing and no one will ever come between us. It’s you and me against the world, princess, and that’s how I want it to stay.”

“Deal,” I say without hesitation, leaning in and touching my lips to his. “Now, back to this apology of yours.”

“It’s a hard job, but someone’s got to do it,” he says with a sigh.

I wriggle my ass in his lap, earning a low, throaty growl. “Well, *something* is hard. It would be a shame not to put it to good use.”

And for the rest of the morning, we both make sure it’s not wasted.

Marco

Monday afternoon and we're gearing up on the run as we hurry to a house-fire call, one of multiple engines responding.

Not knowing how big the fire is or how long it could take to get under control, I shoot Renee a quick text before we get too close to our destined address.

Marco – Hope you're having a good day, princess. Knowing you, you're kicking ass and taking names. Love you, always.

"Still in the dog box?" Luca asks, glancing sideways at me as I put my phone away.

"Nope. We're all good. I'm heading there in the morning."

He nods. "You guys have got a good thing. And even if you did screw up, you're one hell of an upgrade from the ex."

I don't say anything because he's not wrong.

Ten blocks away from our destination, I can already see smoke billowing up into the sky.

"It's a doozy," Scotty calls out, leaning in the gap between the front seats to get a better look.

"He's right. Game faces on, boys. It's go time as soon as we arrive," I say, just as I hear it called over the radio that Firehouse 22 is first on-scene, which means Lieutenant Pierce will be in charge until a superior officer arrives. I groan. Luca and I share a knowing look. After Saturday night, this is going to go one of two ways, and past experience with Pierce has

taught me not to let my guard down—especially after what happened at the ball two nights ago. But he’s in charge of running the fire, so in the end, I’ll still have to follow orders.

We pull to a stop and all hop out, Rhodes and I heading over to where Nick and his second-in-command, Alex, are standing in full gear as if they’re ready to head inside at a moment’s notice if needed.

“Lieutenant,” I say when we reach them.

Nick looks over at me and I catch a flash of annoyance crossing his features before he schools his expression and switches into professional mode. The guy may have a god complex, but he’s still a good firefighter.

“Rossi. My guys are around the back getting ready to vent. I need you and your guys going in the front to check there’s no one inside. Reports indicate it’s abandoned, but there could be squatters like there was in that last warehouse fire, and you’d hate to have that on your conscience, right? You know, since you’re such an upstanding guy and all.”

There it is. Asshole Pierce is back in business.

Rhodes growls under this breath next to me, taking my back the same way I’d take his in the same situation. I put my arm out to stop Rhodes’ advance. Pierce and his minion just look between us and smirk.

“Yeah, Rossi. Call your dog back and get your heads in the game. Time’s a-wasting,” Nick says. I can tell he’s itching for a fight, but he’s shit out of luck if he thinks he’s getting another one from me.

“Right. We’ll clear the first floor,” I reply.”

“Alex and I will join you as soon as a captain arrives. Ours is caught up so it’ll likely be yours that takes over command.”

Good. At least then I can trust standard operating procedure, or SOP, will be followed to the letter.

Without giving the asshole another word, I turn and together, Rhodes and I move quickly to the guys, relaying our orders. We all jump into action,

“Scotty, Max, you’re out here watching our backs and reporting in to command until Cap gets here to take over. Rhodes and Zach, you’re together, as are Luca and myself. We’re all heading in to clear the first and second floor.”

I don’t wait for them to agree because I’ve always had the respect of my crew. It’s why we’ve stuck together for so long.

As instructed, we climb the stairs and move inside, masks, helmets, SCBA and PASS devices all on, my brother next to me, Rhodes and Zach behind us. We take a side each, working our way from room to room, calling out for anyone who might be there and looking for any sign someone could be hurt, injured, or trapped inside.

We meet halfway down the hallway. “Clear at our end,” I shout to the guys.

“Same here so far. Just need to check the back,” Rhodes yells over the roar of the fire.

I jerk my head. “We’ll start upstairs. Call out over the radio when the bottom is clear.”

Rhodes and Zach nod and disappear. Luca and I move back toward the front of the house and the staircase.

A muffled message comes over the radio. The smoke is thicker now, my visibility limited to my hand in front of me and nothing more. The radio sounds again.

“Lieutenant Rossi, it’s Cap here. Do you copy?”

“Yeah, Cap,” I reply, tilting my head to bring my mouth to the radio clipped to my jacket.

“Luca’s out. Pierce has said he’ll take your back until Luca can return. Lieutenant Pierce reports the vent is done so clear the second floor then get out so we can fight this thing with all we’ve got.”

“Roger that,” I say, locking eyes with my brother. He moves closer, his expression telling me he’s not pleased, but we have to follow orders—especially from the Captain. We’ve got no choice. Pierce may be the biggest asshole I know, but he’s still a firefighter. He’s bound by the same principles and

oath we all are. When we're putting our lives on the line, we have to be able to trust each other.

A moment later, Pierce appears at my side, a nod between us serving as our silent and muted greeting.

I follow him up the stairs, stopping by his side when we reach the top.

"Split up and we can clear it quickly between the two of us. If anyone was here, we'd know about it by now anyway. The vent is done. As long as we don't cause a backdraft, we'll be fine. Okay?" he yells, leaning in close as the house creaks and groans.

"Together, Pierce. Never leave another man alone, *remember?*" I say.

He nods and I can tell it's a conciliatory gesture, but I take it as an affirmative nonetheless. I don't miss him grinding his jaw though.

Pierce sweeps his arm ahead. "Behind you, Lieutenant."

We clear the first room together, finding no one. I focus on the job at hand, keeping my wits about me in the face of danger.

Pushing on, we move to the next room near the front of the house, but as soon as I step inside, something is wrong. There's a change in the air, and Pierce is nowhere to be seen.

That's a second before my entire world implodes as the window in front of me shatters. Something is thrown from behind me.

I'm stuck relying on my training to save myself. The door behind me slams shut but it's too late. It blasts back open, and all I can do is drop to the ground and hope for the best. Halfway down, I'm thrown against the wall with a deafening thud before falling down face-first, the lip of my helmet hitting catching before it's knocked free. My mask digs into my skin as I hit the deck, my forehead colliding with the floor.

Then everything goes black.

AN ALARM BLARES in the distance. It's muted, almost dull, but it's continuous and doesn't stop. My head wants me to ignore it, throbbing pain taking up most of my brainpower. My PASS device keeps sounding, droning on and on, just like the shouting voices coming from the radio which is wedged between the floor and my chest. *Probably why it hurts like a bitch too.*

I open my eyes, trying to get my bearings and work out what the hell happened and where I am.

My ears are ringing and my head kills. My SCBA feels like a dead weight on my back, and my mask is suffocating me. My helmet is gone, obviously knocked away when I fell.

There's a constant drone coming from my PASS device since I'm not moving, the long drone getting louder then softer, over and over again. "Marco? Motherfucking answer me, Lieutenant?"

I hear shouting coming from the radio but my head is still fuzzy and it's muffled beneath my chest. It takes everything I've got to shrug off the straps on one shoulder. I grunt and use all the energy I have to roll onto my side so I can reach the belt at my waist and jerk that off too, then it's back to my front, one more shoulder strap off, and my tank is gone, my mask soon following.

The yelling continues, but now that I can lie flat on my back, I can focus a little better. Losing the mask was against SOP, but without air in the tank, the mask was useless anyway.

I focus on the radio, recognizing the voice. It's familiar, like mine. Maybe my brother?

"Lieutenant Rossi, *copy?*" I'd recognize that voice anywhere. Rhodes.

"Rhodes." *Cough.* "Rossi copy?"

"Marco? Thank fuck," he replies. "You alright?"

“Head hurts. Air gone too. Was that ...” *Cough.* “... a backdraft? Came right at me before I could do anything. Need ...” I cough, my chest getting tighter and tighter. *Fuck, it’s hard to breathe.* The air is so thick. Smoke fills the room, making it too dark to see much of anything. “Need ... help,” I croak.

“Where are you?”

“Second floor. End room.”

“Yeah. Pierce called it in just before it happened. Is he with you?”

“Not ... here,” I say between hacking my lungs out.

“Stairs are out. Stay put, Lieutenant. Cap?” Rhodes says into the radio.

“Copy. What do you need, Rhodes?” our Captain replies.

“Ladder to the window. Send Scotty and Luc up quickly. The vent wasn’t done right the first time.”

“On it,” Luca replies, not waiting for the Captain to confirm the orders. “Coming for you, brother. Stay put and don’t do anything stupid. Mama will kill us otherwise.”

I chuckle but it just makes me cough again.

“I’ll just ... stay here ... and ... wait,” I grind out, trying not to breathe in like my body desperately wants me to do.

“Where’s Pierce?” Rhodes asks. “Is he out?”

I frown as it all comes back to me. “He’s ... the one ... who shut the door on me ...” I rasp. “He ... screwed me ... didn’t he?” *God. I forgot how much breathing smoke fucking sucks.*

“Motherfucker. I’m gonna kill the son of a—” Rhodes shouts down the radio before being cut off—probably by the Captain. He’s not a stickler for proper radio use all the time, but if there’s likely disciplinary action on the horizon, he’ll do what he has to do to make sure our asses are covered.

“Lieutenant, it’s Cap. Standard protocol. Sit tight. Cover your mouth if possible. If not, face down on the ground. Can

you move?”

“Yeah, I can ... a bit ...” I try to survey my injuries. Working my way through my body, I brace myself up on my elbows and try to lift up into a sitting position, succeeding on the second try.

I pat around the ground. My fingers finding purchase on my discarded mask. I summon everything I’ve got left in me to push myself up so I’m slumped back against a wall. I think it’s near the window, ‘cause there’s a thin sliver of light coming through the dark, smoky haze. I try to use my legs to stand, maybe get air from the window, but my body won’t cooperate. There’s just nothing left in me and my head is so fucking foggy, I’m struggling to think straight.

“Where are you?” Cap asks.

“By the window, I think. I’m not ... sure,” I croak.

“Sit tight, Rossi. Ladder’s up and we’re almost there,” he replies.

I wrack my brain trying to work out what the hell happened. “Where’s ... Pierce?”

“He’s just been pulled out by his crew. He got thrown when the stairs went but he’s walking.”

“He’s okay then?”

“He’s masked up. Looks like a gash on his cheek but nothing bad.”

“Call it in, Cap.” Anger and pain course through me in equal measure.

“You saying something happened?” he growls.

“Standard ops not followed ...” I wheeze. Talking is making it worse, but the more clarity I get as my foggy brain clears, the more obvious the situation is. “Expected him to have my back. Should’ve known.”

“They vented just as the window blew out at your side of the house.”

“He screwed me. Something broke the window, then the door was closed but it blew back open ...”

“Definitely a backdraft,” Cap says. His tone is so low and menacing it scares me. That says a lot, considering I’m stuck in a room filled with smoke and can’t even pull myself up to my feet.

My throat burns. Every time I swallow it feels like acid is being poured down it. “He wouldn’t ... listen to fucking reason and wait for the all-clear to go,” I wheeze, the weight on my chest so fucking heavy, talking is impossible.

Then suddenly, the sliver of light turns into a billowing curtain of fresh air as my brother pushes through the window. His head turns my way. I reach up and grunt. His hand grabs my forearm, his eyes locking with mine.

“Got you, brother. Now if Scotty can find his balls and pull us back, we can get you out of here.”

“Hey, I heard that, Luc,” Scotty yells from outside.

Luca smirks at me. “Meant you to.”

I use the last of my energy to roll my eyes. “Can we give him shit ... *after* he’s helped saved me?”

Luca grins. “*Fine.*”

“Then Mama won’t have to kick your ass,” Rhodes says down the radio.

“Cut the crap and get the hell out of there you two,” Cap bellows, silencing the chatter.

I chuckle and start hacking my lungs out again, making Luca’s grin turn into a frown. “Yeah, Cap ...”

“See you down here, Lieutenant,” Cap replies, signing off.

“Yeah ... he’ll get right on that, Cap. When he stops trying to win an Oscar,” Luca says, leaning down and hooking his arms under my shoulders. Then I’m being jerked up, Luca taking my weight.

“Fuck...you” I whisper roughly.

“You act like you’re dying or something,” Luca says. “Since I know Mama *and* Renee would ride my ass if that happened, quit trying to get me in trouble like you always fucking do.”

I force out a laugh but it just makes me cough again. “Sure thing, little brother.”

“Good. Let’s go.” Then he’s all business and within moments, I’m out of the window and sucking in mouthfuls of glorious fresh air like my life depends on it.

And there’s only one thing—one person—on my mind. *Renee*.

Minutes later, Skye and Co hover over me. Skye’s eyes are wet and she’s muttering under her breath about stupid brothers and stupid fires. Cohen is all focus, taking my vitals and hooking up monitors before shoving an oxygen mask over my face.

“Luc?” I say, lifting myself on an elbow and jerking the mask away, locking eyes with my brother. Luca throws his hand out to stop Cohen shutting the bus’s back door.

“Yeah?”

“Call Renee,” I whisper.

He lifts his chin. “Already on it. Gio’s gone to pick her up. We’ll meet you at the hospital.”

My eyes drift from Luca to a frowning Rhodes and a concerned Zach, finishing with an angry Captain whose responding nod gives me more reassurance than anyone else.

My body slumps back onto the gurney, any leftover tension leaches out of my body.

I wave my hand in the air half-heartedly and turn my head, giving my baby sister a gentle grin as she jerks the mask back over my face. Skye’s narrowed eyes would make me laugh if it was any other time.

She points a finger at me. “Behave, Lieutenant. Otherwise, I’ll sic Mama on you.”

I close my eyes, the events of the last thirty minutes and what might've been finally weighing on me. "Not sure who's scarier—you, Mama, or Renee."

"My pick is your woman."

I snort but groan when pain shoots through my chest. "I think that's a pretty safe bet."

Renee

My heart is racing, my mind going a million miles an hour as Gio leads me out of the elevator with a gentle hand at the small of my back.

When he knocked on my door an hour ago, I had to lock my knees to stop from falling over.

We walk through the doors and into the waiting area, the room full of Marco's crew and family. Mrs. Rossi jumps up out of her chair and envelopes me in a huge hug, and I lose the loose control I have on my emotions, burying my face in her shoulder and letting tears fall for the first time.

She rubs my back soothingly. "It's okay, Renee. He's just a bit banged up but he's going to make a full recovery. I promise you. You're strong enough to handle this. I know you are. My Marco wouldn't love a woman who wasn't."

I nod and she lets me go, leaving her hands on my shoulders and meeting my eyes, her gaze then roaming my face as if to make sure I heard her words.

"I think ..." I say, sniffing and wiping my eyes, trying to pull myself together. "I think I'm just in shock. The last thing I expected was for him to get hurt. He's always so strong, so formidable."

Mama smiles at me, giving me a reassuring squeeze before letting me go. "My Marco is all of those things but he's still just a man, and I'll let you in on a secret," she says, leaning in and bringing her mouth to my ear. "All of the Rossi men are

like that, but they also need a powerhouse of a woman at their back and sometimes their front. These things are sent to test us, but they're also the making of us."

I nod, biting my lip so I don't start crying again.

I square my shoulders and pull myself together, feeling the love and support of everyone in the room surrounding me, but also knowing they're here for Marco; their Lieutenant; their friend; their brother.

"Now, he's been asking for you, and I know he'll feel a lot better for seeing you," Mrs. Rossi says.

I huff out a big breath, desperately needing to see for myself that he's okay. "Don't you want to go in and see him first? I'm not family. I'm just his—"

One look at her determined face and I can see the mama bear within shining through. The woman who always had Marco's back before he met me is just as fierce and determined as the man himself. Then I remember what he told me about his mother being the one to teach the Rossi children how a woman should be treated, and his father being the one to show them. Respect. Honor. Love. The three cornerstones of my relationship with Marco. The three things he's shown me from the start.

I can do this. I can be the strong one until he's back on his feet and ready to take the reins again.

"Are you ready?" Gio asks, coming up beside me, Luca flanking my other side. Mrs. Rossi looks between her boys, reaching out to cup both their cheeks, pride shining in her gaze. She locks eyes with me, and I don't miss the significance of this moment. It's like she's handing the baton over, giving me the job of seeing to the man we both love.

I nod, silently promising her that I'm the only other woman for the job.

Gio and Luca walk with me down the corridor, leading me to Marco's room, nodding to a tall, very handsome doctor standing at the nurses' station outside, jotting notes down in a folder.

“Cade,” Luca says, reaching out and shaking hands with him, Gio following suit. “This is Renee, Marco’s partner.”

“Hey,” Cade says, holding out his arm to shake my hand. “He’s a little banged up but he’s going to make a full recovery. He’s got a mild concussion and a little smoke inhalation from losing his mask. But he was pulled out as soon as they could get to him and will be able to go home tomorrow after some oxygen and monitoring overnight.”

I don’t know what comes over me, but I step forward and wrap my arms around the doctor’s shoulders, hugging him tightly.

“Thank you, Doctor. I’ll make sure he does everything he’s told to do, even if I have to chain him to my bed to make him rest.”

“Call me Cade, Renee. And he’s lucky to have you. He’s been asking for you ever since he was brought in. I hope he might finally be able to relax now that you’re here.”

“Don’t you worry,” I say, letting myself accept the fact he’s going to be okay. “He knows not to argue with me. In fact, I know he hates it.”

“You remind me of my wife. She’s just as scary as you are,” Cade says with a smile which says he doesn’t mind one bit.

“You’re a lucky man then.”

“Believe me, that is something I do know.” He shakes hands with Gio and Luca again. “I’ll leave you guys to it. Just call out if you need anything.”

“Will do, Doc. Thanks again,” Luca says before turning to look down at me as Cade strolls down the hall.

“You ready?” Gio asks. “We’ll leave you guys to it, okay?”

“You can come in. I’m sure he’ll want to see you as well.”

“Not as much as you, princess,” Gio says, tapping my nose. “We’ll see him after.”

Luca nods in agreement. “Now go. Marco is not the best patient, and right now, he’s downright grumpy.”

“Okay, thank you. For coming to get me, and being here.”

“Renee, you’re family. The only one who doesn’t seem to get that yet is you,” Luca says, his eyes crinkling at the sides. “We’ll be in the waiting room if you need us.”

I don’t wait any longer. I open the door to the room with M. Rossi on the side and step inside, closing it behind me and getting my first look at the battered but well and truly alive love of my life.

He smiles when his eyes meet mine.

“Come here, baby,” he rasps, holding his hand out and I’m at his side before he’s finished talking.

“You’re in so much trouble, Lieutenant,” I say, my voice breaking as I gently run my hands over his arms, shoulders, chest, and then up to his face.

“I’m okay. It got a bit hairy but I’m good now, especially ‘cause you’re here.”

He lifts his arm and I don’t even question him, carefully easing myself into the bed beside him, draping my body over his.

“Feeling a lot better now,” he rumbles, before coughing and trying to clear his throat. I shift to get off him and he grips my hip to hold me in place. “You’re not going anywhere. Need you close.”

Pressing my cheek to the pillow beside his head, I meet his eyes, letting my hand rest over his heart to reassure myself he’s okay.

“So, what happened? Gio wouldn’t tell me much except you got trapped and they had to get the ladder up to pull you out.”

“That’s pretty much it. We got told the vent was done except it was called too early. Then something happened, got caught in a backdraft, lost my helmet and mask, and got a good knock to the back of the head. Came to, found my radio,

called out for help, and Luca and Scotty hauled me out the window.”

I lean in and move his mask aside for just long enough to brush my lips against his before putting it back on, loving the soft, lazy look he gives me.

Resting my forehead against his, I take a huge breath, embracing the growing lump in my throat. “I can’t lose you, Marco. We just found each other; we’ve got a lifetime to make up for.”

“Princess,” he says, his voice thick. “I’m not going anywhere, and I’m not letting anyone or anything keep me from you.” He wraps his arms around me and hugs me tight as I do the same.

“Good to hear.” I sniff, as we sit there in peaceful silence, soaking each other in.

Then all hell breaks loose outside, Luca’s angry growl breaking the tranquility.

“You have some fucking nerve, Pierce. You don’t deserve to wear that uniform.”

I push myself up on an arm in the bed, my eyes going to the door before swinging back to Marco, who eyes me warily. That sets off alarm bells in my head and I quickly think over his explanation, my mind catching on things he didn’t say.

My blood boils, my muscles tensing. Marco’s eyes widen. “Baby, no. Do not—”

Grams warned Marco I was hell on wheels when angry, and something tells me I’m about to hit the stratosphere. “Please tell me that Nick Pierce had nothing to do with this.” My voice is low and rough, my anger reaching a fever pitch when Marco clamps his mouth shut and rubs his hand up and down my arm as if to try soothe me.

“No,” I say, my eyes stinging with tears but for an entirely different reason because there’s a haze clouding my vision now and its color is red.

I scramble off the bed. Marco reaches out to stop me but I'm too fast and too determined to catch.

Marco jerks off his oxygen mask. "Princess, no. He's not wor—"

With my hand on the door handle, I whirl around to look back at him over my shoulder. "He's a worthless son of a bitch who almost got you killed. And for what? Because of a bruised ego? Because you punched him when he was an asshole to me? Because he thinks you're playing with his toys?" I screech. "No. I almost lost you, Marco. He doesn't get to do that, and he needs to know that."

"He'll get what's coming to him," he says roughly, his throat still raw.

"Yes. He will," I say, my tone menacing and deceptively calm. I point to the bed. "You, stay."

Marco quirks a brow, his lips twitching. "Really?"

"Yes," I demand. I cross the room and bend down, touching my lips to his. "You defended me. Now it's my turn to repay the favor."

"You don't have to."

I lift my head and shoot him a 'Really?' look.

When he slumps back down into the mattress I know I've won this fight. "Just don't do anything I would do."

"Believe me, I'm going to do *exactly* what you'd do."

He gives a resigned sigh. "I figured."

"Don't worry, Lieutenant. I'll leave the door open so you can watch."

"Just don't make my brother arrest you," he says. I swear I catch the smallest of smiles when I blow him a kiss.

Then I let my anger fly free and stalk out of the room, finding Rhodes, Luca, and Zach in the middle of the corridor, facing off against Nick. Gio is leaning back against the nurses' station, staring daggers while Rhodes and Zach struggle to hold back an angry Luca. Further down the hall is Marco's

Captain, standing with his arms crossed, glaring at the confrontation but not making a move to control his men. That in itself speaks volumes and makes me more determined to tear my own piece of flesh from my ex-fiancé.

Gio's gaze swings to me, watching closely as I close the distance and storm around Luca, Rhodes, and Zach to get in Nick's face.

His eyes widen when he catches sight of me. "Nay, I just wanted to apologize."

"Oh, no. You don't get to call me anything anymore. As far as I'm concerned, you lost the right to talk to me five years ago when I called off the wedding, and you ceased to even exist the day I met Marco Rossi and knew what a real man was. And you," I spit out, poking my finger in his chest, "do not get anywhere near him or me or his family, because they're my family now and I'll defend them until my last breath. Even on his worst day, Marco is so much more of a man than you'll ever be."

Nick's eyes are narrowed slits, and I can feel the anger and hatred rolling off him, which proves what I guessed already—Nick Pierce is here to see his handiwork but also lay the foundation for what will likely be a long, drawn-out investigation, one in which he'll try to throw the man I love under the bus to save his own ass.

I cross my arms, my face screwed up as I shake my head. *What the hell did I ever see in him?* "You're a joke. You saw me with Marco and you couldn't stand it, so you tried to ruin my night at the ball, and when that didn't work and Marco embarrassed you, you decided to lose your ever-loving mind and try to kill him!"

"He's fine, isn't he?" he says. I glare at him, not believing what I'm hearing. There's no remorse at all. Nick is looking out for Nick and Nick only. Then he looks me up and down and sneers. "You two deserve each other. You're both as worthless as—"

I slap the last word out of his damn mouth before I'm jerked backward. Rhodes hooks his arm around my belly,

holding me away from my shell-shocked ex, who's pressing a hand to his face and scowling at me.

"I want to lay charges," he says, glaring at Gio.

"And what's your complaint, Lieutenant Pierce?"

"She assaulted me," Nick splutters.

Gio looks around the group. "I must've missed it. Luca, did you see what happened?"

Luca crosses his arms over his chest, suddenly seeming clueless. "I didn't see a thing. How about you, Rhodes?"

"Nope. Not me."

"Oh for fuck's sake. You're all in on it." He glares at Gio. "I'll have your badge too. There'll be security footage."

"Give it up, Pierce," Marco says. My head snaps toward his hospital room door to find him leaning against the frame, as if watching the show. "You're fighting a losing battle you're never going to win. Resign. Save yourself and the department the embarrassment and time of having to investigate your criminal behavior and just leave," Marco says, his voice rough and quiet, but no less commanding.

Nick snorts and shakes his head. "It was an accident, Rossi. I'm not going to sacrifice my career."

Marco rolls his eyes, looking to me before turning his attention back to Pierce. "Fine. Draw it out. Won't do you any good. There are witnesses. There's a record of past behavior and complaints made against you. I guarantee any investigation will end with termination at best and the filing of attempted murder charges at worst. So the ball is in your court. Just know this is done. I'll never work a scene with you again and I know the department will never stand for that."

Nick still won't give up. He drags his angry eyes from Marco back to me. "You two deserve each other," he snarls.

"Lieutenant Pierce," Marco's Captain announces, stepping into the fray. "You need to leave. But some advice—get in touch with your union rep because an investigation has been

launched, and I have every faith that you'll be found guilty and terminated."

"All because of this bitch," Nick spits out, shooting daggers my way. I smirk and walk over to Marco, wrap my arm around his waist and stand by his side. "Yeah, Nick. It was about Marco but you made this about me. And news flash: I'm his bitch now, and he'll always be more of a firefighter and more of a man than you could ever wish to be. So give up, and if you're smart, you'll fall on your sword and resign."

"Fuck this shit," he says before turning around and stalking back down the corridor, all of us standing there and watching until he disappears from sight.

"Renee," Marco says, his raspy voice laced with humor.

I tilt my head to meet his eyes. "What?"

"A slap? Really?"

I wave my hand in the air, wriggling my fingers. "I wasn't going to risk hurting myself—not for him. He's not worth it," I say. "Besides, I figured a bitch like that deserves a bitch slap from the woman he always underestimated."

"Fuck," he says, dragging his hand up into my hair and crushing his mouth to mine. He chuckles against my lips. "You're one of a kind, princess—you know that?"

I smile and melt into him. "As long as you know that, then that's all that matters."

"Known it since the moment I met you."

I pull back and quirk a brow. "So you're buying a ticket?" I say, remembering back to that night at my front door when he laid all his cards on the table.

"I knew you were the one that first time when you knocked me on my ass," he says, shooting me a cocky grin. "And you reminded me why when you stormed out to slap some sense into Pierce."

"I was defending your honor."

"And I love you even more for that fact."

“Well, good,” I huff.

“Baby?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re moving in together. You know that, right?”

I tilt my head and quirk a brow. “Is that a question or a demand?”

“It’s a forgone conclusion,” he says, matter-of-factly.

“Then yes, I do know. I’d already decided the same thing when I saw you in that hospital bed.”

“Good, because I *really* like your bed.”

I arch a brow. “And me in it with you too, right?”

“Yeah, baby. That too.” Then I can’t say anything else because he’s kissing me again, and I’m definitely not going to argue about *that*.

Epilogue

Marco

It's been two months since I got caught up in that house fire and one month since the investigation concluded. As Cap had warned him, Lieutenant Nick Pierce was fired. I declined to press criminal charges against him and the last anyone heard was that he'd left Chicago, destination unknown. The general consensus was that he wouldn't be missed. One thing is for sure—I definitely felt better attending a call-out with Engine 22 and knowing I could trust Alex, their new lieutenant, to have my back and my guys' backs if needed.

The other thing that happened since then has been a bit of living situation switcheroo. Given the option of staying or going, Gio opted to stay and live in my house by himself. He said he might end up getting a roommate at some stage, but in the meantime, he's happy to have his own space without—in his words—”walking into the living room and cock-blocking my brother.”

The other change was Hayley moving out of Renee's duplex and in with Grams. To her credit, Grams tried to protest and say that she didn't need a babysitter, but she admitted to Renee that she felt a little better knowing that Hayley would be there just in case anything happened. Although, they did both agree to not encroach on each other's social lives, which included Hayley not bringing men home, and Grams promising not to cause any trouble when her 'girls' came to visit from out of state.

And today, after months and months of training, Firehouse 101 is facing Firehouse 22 and other teams in the Tough Mudder, with the winning crew earning bragging rights, and all money raised going to the winner's chosen charity. In this case, we've agreed that if either house wins, Big Brothers Big Sisters will receive the donation regardless.

"You ready for this?" Renee asks as we walk hand in hand toward the start area.

"Hell, yeah. We're determined to come out on top, and we've got a secret weapon up our sleeves that we didn't have last year."

"Oh, really? And who's that? Don't say Scotty, because I won't believe you," she says with a laugh.

I shake my head. "Don't count him out. He's stubborn and for all his faults, he never leaves a man behind. Which is good for a team event like this, he'll make sure we all get through an obstacle before moving on."

"Maybe I misjudged the guy," she says, as we make a beeline to where our crew are all standing around in a circle.

I give her hand a squeeze. "Scotty Jones is a lot of things, but he's one of the most loyal and dependable men I know."

"Maybe Hayley should've given him a chance after all."

"Oh, no. Your sister would spit him out and eat him for breakfast. The best thing she could've done was blow him off after their one-night stand."

"Um ... it might've been *two* one-night stands."

I turn and stare at her. "No wonder he thought he was in with a chance. She led him on a bit."

She winces guiltily. "Yeah. Hayls has a habit of moving past anything and anyone that could be good for her, mainly because she has this image in her head of the perfect man and she's vowed to never give up until she finds him."

"And until then?"

“She’s happy living life on the single-and-always-ready-to-mingle train.”

I chuckle, Renee joining in when her words sink in. She gives me a gentle elbow bump. “I didn’t mean it like *that*.”

“Princess, any time you want to get *off* on my train, just say the word and hop onboard.”

“Oh my *god*. That was terrible.”

I grab hold of her head and touch my lips to her temple. “And yet I guarantee you’re thinking about jumping me, aren’t ya?”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And yet, I’m the lucky S.O.B. who gets you all to myself.”

She beams up at me. “Yep. But only if you win today. If you lose to 22, then I’m thinking you’ll be *far* too tired for *any* post-race celebrations tonight.”

“Just you watch, princess.”

“I will. Speaking of that, I should let you go. I see our little Firehouse 101 cheerleading crew over there, ready and waiting.”

I look over and spot my family, Grams, Hayley, Skye, Cohen’s brothers and their families, and Ezra and Gilly. “I’ll walk you over,” I say, changing direction..

After greeting everyone and giving Mama, Grams, Hayley, and Skye a kiss and a hug, I move to Ezra and Gilly, shaking Ezra’s hand. “This is a surprise. I didn’t expect to see you two here.”

“We met with Renee earlier in the week to sign the sale documents for the apartment and Wicker Park place, and she mentioned you and Cohen were doing this today, so we figured we’d come along too.”

“Awesome. Thanks. I’m surprised Renee didn’t hit you up for a donation too,” I say, stepping away from the main group.

Ezra laughs. “Don’t worry, she did. But it’s all for a good cause, and better yet, tax-deductible.”

Gilly rolls her eyes. “Ignore my husband. He’d donate regardless.”

“Ez here probably wants to see me fall on my ass and get a mouthful of mud.”

“That’s just an added bonus,” he replies with a smirk.

“I was actually meaning to catch up with you for a beer soon,” I say.

He quirks a brow. “You need some plans drawn up?”

“Not at all—it’s more to ask a favor. Your sister, Delilah. How is she doing?”

“Good ...” he answers slowly, obviously wondering why I’m asking. I stand beside him and hook an arm over his shoulders, pointing over toward my crew and where Rhodes and Jake are standing.

“See the tall guy over there with the teenager standing next to him?”

“Yeah?”

I turn back to look him in the eye, Gilly’s lips slowly curve up, and if ever I doubted the existence of women’s intuition, I don’t now. “That’s Rhodes, my best friend, and his son, Jake. He lost his wife five years ago and it’s just been him and Jake since then, and it seems that he’s finally open to the idea of dating again and has been sneakily watching episodes of a certain YouTube cooking channel.”

“Okay. So he watches Dee’s videos. Is he a bit of a fan?” Gilly says, almost sounding giddy. “Because I’m sure we can arrange a meeting or something. We’ve got Skye and Cohen’s BBQ coming up in a few weeks. I can just invite her along. If she’s not working or filming, she’s spending time with my nephew, Harvey.”

“That sounds like a good start,” I say, earning a confused frown from Ezra but Gilly is all smiles, her eyes twinkling with mischief and understanding.

She winks at me. “I see what you’re doing, Marco, and I approve. It seems like matchmaking runs in the Rossi family.”

I hold my hands up. “I don’t know *what* you’re talking about, Mrs. Baker. But if you want to help me the same way you helped Skye get Renee to give me a chance, I’m not going to say no.”

“We’ll talk. Okay?” she replies.

Ezra just laughs and shakes his head, wrapping an arm around his wife. “I don’t wanna know. I’ll let you two play cupid. All I care about is that he treats her right and makes her happy.”

“He’s one of the best men and fathers I know.”

Ezra reaches out and shakes my hand. “That’s what I needed to hear.” He gestures behind me. “I think you better get over there. The race is about to start.”

“Shit. Okay. We’ll catch up afterward,” I say, looking around and finding Renee talking to Grams. I quickly walk to her and lean down to give her a kiss.

“Good luck, Lieutenant,” she says, bringing her mouth to my ear. “If you win, I’ll let you do anything, anywhere, anytime.”

I pull back and grin at her. “You’re on, princess.” Then I jog over to the crew to warm up and make sure we’re all stretched and ready to go.

When we hear the five-minute warning, we move to the start line, shake hands with the members of Firehouse 22, and wait for the starter’s gun.

For the record, it was neck and neck between 22 and 101 right up until the last obstacle—the Texas Hold’em—where team members have to pair up and shuffle along a see-sawing triangle platform that moves and shakes back and forth with even the smallest of jerks. It came down to the last pairing of Jake and myself, with Engine 22 edging ahead halfway through. But with our little cheerleading team yelling and cheering for us on the sidelines, and our crew egging us on and screaming at us to ‘move our asses’ and ‘hurry the hell up,’

Jake and I pushed and pulled, growled and grunted, and with our muscles burning and our legs aching, we rallied right till the end. Our hands gripped together and we lifted them high in the air as we collapsed across the finish line with a five-second margin over our just-as-tired rivals.

I'm barely back on my feet when I see a flash of movement coming at me, and I just have time to brace myself before Renee jumps up into my arms, not giving a single shit that I'm wet and covered in mud from head to toe. Then she grabs my face in her hands and slams her mouth down on mine for a hard, long, deep kiss for the ages.

"You ready to go home, Lieutenant?" she asks breathlessly when we finally pull apart.

"I am now that you've got a promise to follow through with."

"Aww, you sure you're not too tired?" she asks, her lips quirking into a deceptive smile.

I squeeze her ass and hold her to me as we walk our way over to the stage where the prize-giving is going to be held. "As soon as we get our trophy, I'm taking you home. I'll never be too tired to lay back and watch you do all the work, princess. It's time for you to sit on your throne."

Up next – Rhodes and Delilah's story in Life Changer where we'll see the single, divorced mom and our favorite widowed, single dad get another chance at getting their own happy ever after. Keep reading for a sneak peek.

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Life Changer

A SINGLE DAD SECOND CHANCE AT
LOVE ROMANCE

Rhodes

I have a problem. I'm dreaming about a woman I've never even met before. I know who she is. I know where she is. It would just be creepy to meet her—or even initiate contact. But if I don't get this little fixation of mine under control soon, I'm going to end up doing something stupid—more stupid than not paying attention as I turn the corner, about to walk past the object of my obsession's restaurant.

But thank god I am, because one minute I'm frozen mid-step as Dee Duncan stops on the sidewalk outside Delish—she's talking animatedly into her phone before hanging up and sliding it into her purse—the next, a tall, lanky guy in a black hoodie and jeans launches into a run straight at her. At first it looks like she's just going to be knocked over, not that the piece of crap is going to yank her purse off her shoulder and sprint away with it in a middle-of-the-day mugging.

I've closed half the distance between us before I realize I'm moving. When she falls to the ground, grabbing her arm with a cry as she hits the pavement, I'm torn between going to her aid or hunting down the SOB and beating him to a pulp—and I'm not a violent man.

My body decides for me, and I'm bending down beside her, the world grinding to a halt the moment her crystal-green wide eyes meet mine.

“Are you okay?”

“Ye ... yeah. My purse! It's got my keys and everything in it.”

I hand her my phone. My fingers brush hers as I dump the device in her hand, but I don't let myself dwell on how smooth her skin feels—later I will, but right now, I'm on a mission. “Code to unlock it is one, nine, eight, one. Call the cops. I'll be back,” I say before I'm on my feet and running after the mugger.

“Wait. No!” Dee yells from behind me, but I don't stop. I round the corner I saw the mugger take and spot his hooded head already halfway down the block. *He probably thought he was home and free. Have I got news for him?*

I'm almost close enough to ambush him, but he glances over his shoulder, his eyes widening before he darts down an alley and takes off. But being a city firefighter means I'm no slouch in the speed department, and lucky for me, I'm a shit-ton faster than he is. And by the time he's halfway along, I'm close enough to swing my arm out and hook my hand in the strap of Dee's purse, jerking the kid to a stop.

I grab his shirt and pull him around to face me. I'm ready to teach him a lesson.

“What the hell, man?” he spits out, his voice full of hot air and bluster that doesn't match the wariness I see in his eyes. His gaze roams my face and perhaps wisely reading my angry expression, he changes tack. “Look, man, no harm, no foul, right? I'm just ...” He lets out a big sigh, and for the first time, I really take him in. Old worn clothes, a smell not worth mentioning, and a downtrodden demeanor that hints he's more resigned and tired than scared. It occurs to me that he's probably around the same age as my sixteen-year-old son, Jake.

“Right,” I say, letting him go and standing to my full six-foot-three height. “This can go one of two ways. You going to drop the macho bullshit and listen to someone willing to give you a break?”

The boy living in a man's world far too soon tilts his chin, but when his shoulders slump, it's clear he's a product of circumstance.

“You stay around here?”

He grunts and averts his eyes. “All around,” he mumbles. “You going to call the cops?”

I don’t miss the edge to his voice. “Depends if you plan on stealing a hardworking woman’s purse again?”

“I—”

I spear him a scathing look, and he crumbles under it. I actually feel sorry for him.

“Nah. I saw her standing there and figured she wouldn’t miss it.”

“Do you miss having a bed to sleep in?”

“Every fucking day, man.”

“It doesn’t matter what it is—whether it’s a bed, a roof, a hot home-cooked meal, or even a purse, usually, they all mean something to someone.”

“I’m just so damn hungry and desperate, and—”

“Over the hard life?”

“Yes!” he spits out, and his anger clearly isn’t at me.

“Right. So, how about this.” I reach into my pocket and grab my wallet before unfolding a couple of twenties and holding them out for him. He goes to snatch them off me, but my fingers hold firm until his gaze jerks to mine. “You use this to get some food into you, and you let me make a call for you so you have a warm, *safe* bed to sleep in for a few days.”

His eyes jump wide. “Whoa. You’d do that?”

“Wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it, bud.”

Skepticism hardens his expression, and he arches a brow. “Why should I believe you?”

“Honestly, you’re right to question me. But I’m legit. My name is Rhodes, and I work for the CFD. I’ve got nothing to gain from lying, dude. I’ve got a son your age, and you’re far too young to be living on the street—whatever the circumstance. So instead of calling the cops, I’ll cut you some

slack. 'Cause something tells me you haven't had much of that lately. Am I right?"

He nods, the relief shining back at me tugging at my heartstrings. If I hadn't already decided to help him, that look would've secured it.

"Good. So, take this." I let go of the bills, feeling verified when he doesn't move to snatch it this time. Instead, he's looking at the money in his hand like it's a lifeline.

"You sure you don't expect anything for this?" he asks.

I shake my head, hating the fact he even has to ask that question. Kids should have time to be kids, not worrying about people's intentions. "What's your name?"

"Pete."

"Well, Pete. Life may not have been good to you yet, but it will. This is me just offering you a break."

His look of relief is all the thanks I need.

"I will ask you to do one thing though. I want you to think of a way to apologize to the woman who owns this purse, because she didn't deserve what you just did to her at all."

"But ... the cops?"

"Pete, I'll take care of that. I said I would, and I meant it. Now, you know the shelter by Grant Park?"

He bites his lip, and his eyes go up as if he's wracking his brain. "Yep. Three-story brick building. Kinda old, but clean."

I grin. "Yeah. Go in and tell the manager Rhodes sent you. I'll clear it with them, as long as you turn up, Don will look after you."

Pete looks at me with such wide-eyed wonder, I can almost see the carefree teenager he *should* be. *God, Lily would be smiling so big if she could see me right now.*

"You sure?" he asks, his voice turning defensive.

"Yeah. Don's my dad. I'm gonna call him and he'll be expecting you." I lock eyes with the kid once more. "You'll go

there?”

Pete nods. “I will. I’ll go and talk to Don and say you sent me. And the lady, I’ll think of a way to say sorry. Without, like, scaring her. Okay?”

“See that you do,” I say, putting my dad hat back on. Pete waves and walks backward before turning around and hurrying away. “And don’t eat crap. Get a salad or something!” I yell out to him.

When he disappears from sight, I shake my head, hoping my gut feeling was right.

It hits me that I’m standing alone in a dirty alley, in the middle of the Loop, holding a handbag. *Shit, Dee!*

I make quick work of retracing my steps, and I’m soon rounding the corner near Delish.

“There he is!” Dee says, pointing me out to the cop standing next to her—a cop who looks right at me. His eyes widen before he shakes his head and smirks at me while Dee runs toward me.

“Oh my god, you got it back,” she hurries out, taking her purse from my outstretched hand.

“Are you okay? ’Cause that’s more important.”

She freezes and blinks as if I’ve surprised her. It’s cute as hell. *I may be a big man, but that doesn’t make me a Neanderthal.*

“Yeah, thanks. Officer Rossi wanted me to go get checked out at the ER, but I’m fine.”

I arch a brow, and her eyes widen.

She holds her hand in the air as if to give me a scout’s honor salute. “I promise. I’m okay. My arm is a bit tender, but otherwise, I’m more embarrassed than anything. I should’ve been paying attention instead of talking on the phone.”

I rest my hand on her forearm. “You did nothing wrong ...” *Dee*, I just manage to stop myself from saying.

She blushes, and I think *that* may be my favorite look on her. Then I mentally kick myself, because it's way too weird to have a favorite *anything* about this woman I've just met in person but already feel like I know after watching her videos. *Am I a stalker now?*

We stand there staring at each other, her purse now hanging over her shoulder, my fingers still on her arm, and if I'm not mistaken, it's almost as if we're having a moment. *God, I've been out of the game so long I can't even be sure anymore.*

"Miss Duncan?" Gio Rossi calls out, walking toward us. I jerk my hand away like I've been caught breaking the law. He nods my way. "Rhodes," he says, his lips twitching.

"G."

"Wait, you know each other?" Dee says, her head shifting between us. "I know Chicago can be a small world sometimes, but what are the odds?"

"Indeed." Gio muses. "Your vigilante here is our family's best friend—well, my brothers and I, anyway."

I open my mouth to explain further, but Dee beats me to it. "Oh, wow. So, it's serendipity, of sorts."

"Something like that," Gio replies. I give him a death glare that *thankfully* he reads before changing the subject. He looks down at Dee's purse. "I take it you caught up with the offender?"

"I recovered the bag and came straight back to return it to its rightful owner. How about we leave it at that."

Gio arches a brow, his expression full of understanding. It's not the first time I've stepped in to try and change the direction of a delinquent teen's life. "You send him to your dad?"

I nod. "Yeah. Whether he turns up there or not is another question."

"Wait," Dee says, speaking up. "You let the mugger go?" Her tone isn't angry. It's ... curious.

“Yeah. I’m sorry if that’s not what you expected. I kind of threw my phone at you, barked out orders, then took off like a bat out of hell. But when I caught up to him, he was just a desperate kid living on a wish and a prayer. He just needed someone to give him a chance.”

“Oh wow,” she whispers. While in the alley with Pete, I hadn’t really thought about how Dee might react to me letting him go, but I didn’t expect her to be looking at me with wonder.

“I’ll check in with Don and keep my finger on the pulse. Ms. Duncan—”

“Dee, Officer. Call me Dee.”

Gio smiles. “Okay, *Dee*. Are you wanting to press charges?”

“Oh god, no. I’m just grateful Rhodes, here, was able to get it back for me. My keys and phone are in there. It would’ve been a pain in the butt to get the locks changed at the restaurant *and* home.”

“And is everything still in there?” Gio asks.

“Damn, I didn’t even check. I was too busy thanking my Good Samaritan here.” Dee opens her purse and rummages through the contents inside.

“Rhodes is *good* like that,” Gio murmurs, and I narrow my eyes at him, which just makes his smirk deepen.

Dee lets out a sigh of relief. “Phew. It’s all here.”

“Okay, Ms.—*Dee*.” Gio catches himself. “If that’s everything, I’ll leave you both to it.”

I don’t miss his intimation but choose to ignore it. *Because Lord knows the Rossi brothers won’t let me live this situation down anytime soon.*

“Thank you, Officer. Sorry to waste your time,” Dee says, holding out her hand to Gio and shaking his. “And I meant what I said. Make sure you come down for a meal. I know I can’t give it to you on the house, but that doesn’t mean I can’t give a heavy discount,” she adds with a wink.

“I might just do that, Dee.” He turns to me. “Later, hero,” he says. I’m tempted to flip him the bird, but since Dee is standing next to me, I’m thankfully able to refrain.

Gio and his partner get into their patrol car and soon drive away.

“I should let you—” I say, as Dee holds out her hand, “Here’s your phone back.”

Both our eyes widen before she blushes, and a wry grin curves her plush, pink lips. She pulls my cell out from her back pocket.

“Thanks. I’d kind of forgotten about that in all the drama.”

“I am truly grateful, Rhodes. Not many people would jump in to help a stranger like that.”

I’m suddenly struck with a bit of guilt. *Probably not the best time to admit I know who she is, right?* “I’m a firefighter. Helping people is my job.”

Her eyes grow soft and warm. “Oh. Well then, I guess I was lucky that one of the CFD’s finest was walking by in my time of need then.” *Wait. Is she flirting with me now?*

“It’s no trouble, honestly.”

“Handsome, honest, *and* humble. That’s a dangerous combination, Rhodes.”

Yep. Definitely flirting. “Not sure about the humble part.”

Her hazel eyes crinkle at the sides. “Ah, gotta be impressed by a man who *knows* his best attributes.”

My cheeks burn hot. *What the hell, Rhodes? Man up already.* “I’m just glad it turned out for the best.”

“Definitely. Well, I’ll let you go, but you *have* to come back for a meal on the house. I can’t be seen to be bribing police officers, but since you’re not on duty, I can show my gratitude without getting you in trouble.”

“It’s not necessary—”

“Nope,” she says, shooting me a beaming smile. “Bring the family. Make it a big night out.”

“That’d be me and my son, Jake. He’d probably eat you out of house and home.” I tilt my head toward the building. “Or your restaurant, as the case may be.”

“Oh, bring it on. My ten-year-old hasn’t managed to do that, and I swear he was born with hollow legs.”

I chuckle. “Boys. They keep us on our toes.”

“And at the grocery store, it seems,” she says with a laugh.

“That too. I’ll let you go. I’m sure you’re busy.”

A flash of disappointment crosses her gaze. “Yes. I have to get home in time for hockey practice, then back here for the dinner rush. But please, Rhodes. Do come back, try the food. I’m a bit biased, but I promise it’s good. And it’ll fill even the most ravenous growing teenage boy. Make sure to call ahead and I’ll tell my maître d’ to put you at my table.”

“I’ll pay my way though, Dee.”

She opens her mouth to protest but shuts it when I continue.

“But you *can* repay me by joining *me* for a meal.” *I put myself out there. That’s progress.*

Dee bites her lip and studies me, as if weighing up her options. For a moment, my heart lodges itself in my throat. Maybe I misread the signs—or she’s just not that into me.

Then she rolls her eyes. “Oh, I *suppose* I could be persuaded,” she says, a gorgeous, cheeky grin transforming her already beautiful face. “But you better be as charming at dinner as you are now, Mr. Hero. Otherwise, I’ll have gotten my hopes up for nothing.”

I wouldn’t be able to fight my smile even if I wanted to. Flirting with Dee might be my new nighttime dream fodder. “I’ll try my best, Ms. Duncan.”

She smiles and starts walking toward the restaurant. “I look forward to seeing you again, Rhodes. Hopefully, next

time, there'll be no police officers involved." She shoots me a wink then disappears inside the building, leaving me standing on the sidewalk playing back the last thirty minutes to make sure that really just happened.

When my cell starts vibrating with my best friend Marco's name on the screen. I bring the phone to my ear and walk along the sidewalk. Marco is going to have a field day with this since Jake has already told him I watch Dee's cooking videos and going by how soon he's calling me, it looks like Gio is already spreading the word. "Hello. Look, it's not what you—"

"You saved Dee Duncan from a mugging? Damn, Rhodes. You sure know how to make an impression on a girl, don't ya?"

Kill me now.

Dee

I'm about to leave for dinner with my brother, his wife, and my two nephews when Flynn—my ex-husband and still roommate—walks into the kitchen, having just arrived home.

“Hey,” I say, slinging my purse over my shoulder. “How was work?”

“Busy, but good.”

Flynn used to work crazy hours, but after experiencing burnout at thirty-five, we did some traveling with Harvey while he took a much-needed hiatus. The bonus being that we got to experience different cultures, and I was able to learn from a ton of top international chefs, expanding my food knowledge and my palate. The downside was that it made us realize we were better friends and parents than partners and lovers. But to keep a steady ship for Harvey, we decided we'd still live together, and life has kept moving on. In many ways, we're better now without the relationship and sex stuff between us than we were when we were married. That's not to say I don't miss dating, lust, and that butterflies-in-the-tummy feeling. Oh, and sex.

“You're home early ...” I add, turning my ear to the second floor and frowning when I *don't* hear our ten-year-old bounding down the stairs.

“Yeah. My last two appointments canceled, so I decided to come home and see Harvs before you guys left.” It's then that Harvey bursts into the room, stopping midway to me before turning toward Flynn and changing direction.

“Dad!”

“Hey, buddy,” Flynn says, bracing himself before the boy tackles his waist.

“You said I wouldn’t see you tonight.”

Flynn ruffles our son’s hair. “I thought I’d surprise you before you two go to Uncle E’s. How was school?”

“*Sooo* good. We started to plan our science fair projects.”

“Oh yeah? And what are we doing this year?”

Harvey shifts and looks around the room for his backpack before running over to it, rummaging inside, and pulling out his science folder.

“Baby, have you brushed your teeth?” I ask.

“Yeah, Mom,” he replies, totally distracted by the task at hand. “Here it is.” He bounds over to his dad. “See? I’m going to test the friction of shoe soles on different textured surfaces.”

“Ah,” Flynn replies, glancing up at me. “A physicist, then.”

Harvey’s brows bunch together. “What’s that?”

“Well, your mom’s cooking is like chemistry, right? Mixing lots of things together to create something else.”

Harvey nods.

“And I’m more a biologist, except I work with kids who I need to make better.”

“Yep,” our son replies, accentuating the *P*.

“So, you can be the family’s physicist. They look at energy and forces and structures and how they affect the world.”

Harvey tilts his head, making me smile because that’s a mannerism he only has me to thank for. “So, energy is like power?”

“Yep. And speed. Then there’s force. The friction of shoes on different surfaces for example.”

Harvey's eyes go wide before he grins and fist pumps the air. "Awesome. Billy Nelson can kiss my butt, 'cause I'm *totally* gonna beat him now. He's just doing a boring old volcano." Harvey rolls his eyes like that's the most dull project ever.

"Hey. Don't knock a good volcano creation. You seem to love my lava cake. That's like an eruption, isn't it?" I say, leaning a hip into the kitchen counter and narrowing my eyes at him in mock annoyance.

"Nah, Mom. That's a *food* explosion. That could never be lame."

I glance over at Flynn, who's struggling not to laugh at our son's logic.

"Thanks, Harvs. All I'm gonna think about tonight is your mom's lava cake. And since you two are out for dinner, I'll have to make do with ...?" He quirks a hopeful brow my way.

I sigh dramatically, but it's all for show. "I brought some spaghetti Alfredo home for you from the restaurant. I'll even let you steal a glass of the Syrah in the pantry to have with it."

"*Nice.* I knew I lived here for a reason," he muses.

I push off the counter with my arm and huff out a breath when I tweak the bruise coming up on my arm.

"What's wrong?" Flynn asks. I have the attention of both father and son now.

"She was rubbing her arm when she picked me up from school too."

I wave them off. "It's nothing."

"Didn't sound like nothing. Want me to check you out?"

Rolling my eyes, I try distraction. "I just knocked it."

Flynn turns to Harvey. "Hey, champ, I've got a book for Uncle Ezra in my room. Can you go grab it? It's the one about European architecture."

Harvey looks to me and then his dad. His gaze is skeptical before he shrugs and runs to the kitchen doorway. "For the

record, *A*, I know you're about to talk about something I don't need to hear. I'm ten, not an idiot. And *B*, this is totally the *last* time I run up those stairs. Sheesh." Then he spins around, and all that can be heard are his heavy steps up the stairs .

"Right," Flynn says, all business now. *Damn doctor*. "What happened?"

I sigh as I undo a few buttons of my shirt and push it over my shoulder, revealing not only my bra strap—which is nothing Flynn hasn't seen many times—but a purple bruised line across my bicep from where my bag strap caught before I let it go.

Flynn probes the muscle with trained fingers before pinning me with a stern stare. "Wanna tell me what this is about? Or should I just assume it's something to do with your new video posted today: 'Food to Make a Bad Day Go Away?'"

I start straightening my shirt, making sure it looks the same as it was before since Harvey is due back any minute. I try to stare Flynn down, hoping he'll let the issue go. Unfortunately, he's as stubborn as I am. "Kid grabbed my bag on the sidewalk. It got caught on my arm before I let him take it," I say with a sigh.

"Shit, Dee. Are you okay otherwise?"

"Yeah. I was a bit shook up. I mean, I didn't expect to get mugged outside my own restaurant in the middle of the day. But it worked out in the end." *Even better if Rhodes comes back to see me*. "Honestly, Flynn. My bag and phone were recovered, and by then, the cops had arrived."

"So, you've made a report?"

I avert my eyes, my teeth digging into my lip as I look to the door, willing my son to suddenly appear.

"Dee," Flynn growls. "Damn, I forgot how nice you are."

Harvey runs back into the room, a big coffee-table book under his arm, saving me from answering any more questions. "Got it, Dad."

Thank god for my kid.

“Right, you ready to go, Harvs? I know for a *fact* Aunty Gilly has made a big pot of chili for dinner.”

“And ice cream for dessert?”

I smirk at him. “Since when do we *not* have ice cream at Uncle Ezra’s house?”

“Yay!” He turns to his father and hugs his waist. “Bye, Dad. See you when we get home.”

“Bye, champ. Say hi to everyone for me.” Flynn’s gaze shifts to me. “Take some Advil. It’ll help.”

“Yes, Doctor.” I smirk.

Flynn shakes his head. “Always a smartass. If I’m not here later, I’m at Sophie’s.” Sophie is Flynn’s girlfriend of six months. She never stays at the house, but she’s lovely and she dotes on Harvey, so that’s a plus.

“All good. I’m working tomorrow night though. Can you be home for Harvey?”

“Always. Now go. Our son needs his chili and ice cream.”

I step in and kiss his cheek. “Have fun, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Flynn chuckles. “That doesn’t leave much, does it?”

“Shh,” I stage-whisper, catching Harvey’s smirk. “Can’t have our kid getting any ideas.”

“You know I can hear you, Mom, right?” Harvey giggles.

“I think we’ve got our hands full with this tweenager. What do you think, Dad?”

Flynn chuckles. “Have fun, guys. Harvs, look after your mother.”

“Will do.”

And with that, our son takes my hand in his and leads me to the door, like the mini protector-in-training he is.

IT'S after dinner that my brother brings up the elephant in the room. I didn't feel the need to tell anyone about today's incident because it all worked out, and it's just the embarrassment that I was caught unawares that I'm left with. But then again, I also met a charming, intriguing, incredibly sexy man who flirted with me. I flirted back, and now he may—or may not—come to have dinner at the restaurant sometime in the future. *God, I hope he does.*

“So, I may have heard you had a little fun today?” Ezra says when Gilly, Harvey, and my nephew, Hudson, leave the room in search of ice cream. Ezra and Gilly's daughter, Olivia, is already in bed, having fallen asleep in her high chair during dinner.

My brows go up as I rest my hands on the table. “Is that so? Which little birdie in a police uniform told you that?”

My brother's lips twitch, his eyes alight with amusement. “I don't reveal my sources.”

“Bullshit,” I say with a laugh. “Gio has a big mouth.”

Ezra lifts his wine glass to his mouth. “I would have hoped my little sister would have told me.”

“Not so little anymore, big brother.”

His eyes turn soft. “You'll always be little to me.”

My heart swells. “Stop being sweet.”

“I can't help what comes naturally,” he says as his eyes turn concerned. “You're okay though?”

I nod. “Yeah. I kind of had a knight in shining armor come to my rescue.” *And boy, what a good-looking knight he was.* Well-kept light brown hair, the perfect amount of stubble covering a square jaw, kind blue eyes, and a smile that made me forget all about being mugged.

“Oh?”

I can't help the wry smile that curves my lips at the memory of Rhodes apologizing for letting the kid go. That show of compassion hit my soft spot, well and truly. A man who jumps in to help not one, but two strangers like that is definitely a man I want to get to know better. The fact that he's hot as Hades is just a bonus.

"That smile says there's a story there ..." Ezra muses.

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Okay, Dee. I'll let you keep your secrets this time," he says with a wink. "Now what are you doing next weekend?"

I scan my brain. "Nothing much. Flynn is going fishing for the weekend and the restaurant is covered, so it's a mom and son weekend."

"So, movies, baking, and PlayStation then?"

"Pretty much," I say with a laugh. "Why do you ask?"

Ezra is an open book—always has been, always will be. But there's a semi-cautious edge to his expression that piques my curiosity.

"The firehouse is having a barbecue. It's at Skye and Cohen's house this time and we're using it as an excuse to have a final get-together before the baby comes. Everyone you know is going to be there, including Mom and Dad, so it would be cool if you and Harvey could come."

"Aww, that sounds good. Will give us a chance to catch up with Faith and Bry too." Our youngest sister, Faith, and her childhood sweetheart, Bryant, both work full time. And with two kids under five, a house that they are forever renovating, and my unsociable hours at the restaurant on top of that, we don't get to catch up as often as we'd like.

Ezra shifts in his seat and clears his throat. "I might have an ulterior motive as well ..."

"Mmm hmm." I take a sip of my wine and rest my glass on the table.

"We've got a friend who we'd like you to meet. But apparently you already did that today..."

My mouthful gets stuck halfway down my throat, and I start spluttering. “*What?*”

“Yeah ... look, another little birdie—”

“Not the police officer birdie?” Then something occurs to me. “Wait ... the friend isn’t Gio, is it?”

He smirks. “*No*, a different friend this time. Gio is a good guy, but I’m not sure he could keep up with you. He’s more of a stay-at-home-and-chill kind of person.”

That gets my attention. Because Gio is Skye’s brother, and she works with her husband Cohen at a fire station. *Surely the world isn’t that small ...*

“Rhodes Anderson. The man who stepped in to help you today.”

Yep. This world is completely too small. What are the odds? “Okay.”

Ezra’s head jerks back and I know I’ve surprised the hell out of him. “*Really?*”

“Yeah. It’s just a casual meeting amongst friends and family. He seems like a good guy.”

“He’s a fucking great guy, Dee.”

I kind of got that impression, but I’m not going to admit that to you, brother.

“So, tell me about him. I wanna be prepared for this blind date setup.”

“It’s not a—”

I level my brother with a stare, seeing right through him before throwing my head back and barking out a laugh. “You’re so full of shit, Ez. This is totally a setup, and I’m up for it. Does this mean Rhodes knows I’m your sister?”

Ezra’s grin widens. “Nope.”

I quirk a brow. “You don’t think you should tell him?”

“Nope,” he replies, just as sure of himself.

“What about the YouTube account?”

“Apparently he already watches the videos.”

My body jerks at that. “Wait ... if he knows about the vlogging, does that mean he knew who I was *before* today? Was he outside the restaurant to check me out?” *There goes my thoughts of serendipity ...*

“Now that I *can* clear up. He’d just been to see his parents at a homeless shelter downtown and happened to be walking by when you were attacked.”

“Okay. That seems like a bit of a weird coincidence.” I tilt my head and bite my lip. “Are you *sure* he’s on the up and up?” *Surely I haven’t been out of the dating game for that long that I can’t trust my gut instinct about a guy.*

“Stop thinking so hard and looking for a problem where there isn’t one. If it helps, he’s a widower with a sixteen-year-old son. He’s also a career firefighter who works with Marco Rossi—Gio’s brother, by the way, and little birdie number two—which is the same firehouse where Skye and Cohen work.”

It makes sense and seems like a logical explanation. But it’s a little close to home. What if we don’t get along outside of ‘just been mugged and checking I’m okay’ situations? “Do you ever think this entire friendship/family group is *way* too incestuous?”

Ez leans back in his chair and shoots me a shit-eating grin. “Yep. But there’s no pressure here. If you don’t want to be set up with Rhodes, he doesn’t even need to know. No harm, no foul. But if you do, then a BBQ where mutual friends are there to make it a little less awkward than a straight blind date is a safe bet.”

Harvey walks back into the room with Gilly and Hudson, both of the boys carrying bowls of ice cream.

“Did you ask her?” Gilly says before turning to me, not giving Ezra a chance to answer. “Did he ask you?”

I giggle and nod. “Yes, he did, and yes, I will.”

“Yay. He’s *such* a nice guy. And *hot*,” she whispers. “Right, Ez?”

My brother sputters around his mouthful of wine, glaring at his wife. “Hot, baby mama? Really?”

“Hey. I’m married, not *dead*,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“I know he’s hot. He was the one to help me today when I was mu—” I stop, feeling Harvey’s gaze boring into me.

“When you were what, Mom?” he asks.

I look his way. “When I was outside my work.”

“Who helped you?” he presses, his ice cream no longer his main focus.

“A nice man. A very good-looking man. And one who seems to think your mom here is all that and a bag of potato chips.” Gilly winks at me, and I groan at the impending rapid-fire questions my son will no doubt have.

“Really, Gilly?” Ezra says, chuckling under his breath. “Should I leave you two alone for this conversation?”

“You should do it, Mom. You need more friends. I mean ...” Harvey shrugs. “You don’t go out and meet people. You’re always at work or with me. And Dad has a girlfriend, so why can’t you?”

“You want me to get a girlfriend?” I tease.

Harvey rolls his eyes and sighs. “You know what I mean, Mom. But I have to like him before you accept a date. Okay?”

My brows shoot up, totally taken aback by this unexpected turn of events. I didn’t expect Harvey to be so on board with this but also want to *approve* any man I date.

“Is that right, Uncle Ez? Do I get to approve the guy she dates?” Harvey asks my brother, who nods, his eyes shining with pride.

Ezra ruffles my son’s hair. “I think that’s fair. We’re the two most important men in her life. Well, your dad, too, but that might be a bit weird, right?”

I grimace, because Flynn and I are in a good place. He’s moved on and Sophie is awesome. But that’s not to say I’m itching to add someone else to the mix. The joys of not dating

two years after an amicable divorce. I can only imagine how that would go down. ‘Hey, by the way, I live with my ex-husband, and he’s my best friend. Wanna meet him?’

Harvey nods and turns to me, his shoulders pulled back, his little man chest puffed out, and a determined glint in his gaze. “Right. You can meet Uncle Ez’s friend, but I want to as well.”

I hold my arm out, and Harvey comes around the table, stopping right in front of me. “Okay, how about this. I meet the guy, feel him out—” Ezra and Gilly start laughing under their breaths, earning narrowed eyes from me. My son frowns adorably. “I’ll get to know him, but before I agree to go out on a date with him, if it even gets that far, then I’ll ask your permission.”

“You’ve got my permission, Mom. If you’re dating someone, that means he could end up being my other dad, like my friend Jesse has, and any guy that might be my other dad has to treat you right, like my real dad does.”

My heart melts. My boy feels deep and he feels hard, and the look in his eyes and the sincerity of his words tells me this is important to him. *God, I love my kid!* “Come here, kiddo. I love you, you know that?” I ask him, jerking him into my arms for a huge bear hug.

“Mmm hmm,” he mumbles against my chest.

“So, you’ll do it?” Gilly asks, wiping happy tears away from her smiling face.

I nod, looking between my sister-in-law and brother. “Yes. But don’t tell him. Let’s go for the element of surprise.”

Ezra’s lips curve into a wicked grin as he rubs his hands together. “I’m looking forward to this BBQ now. Something tells me this one is going to be interesting.”

Rhodes

“Dad! Marco and Renee are here,” Jake says from my bedroom doorway.

Looking at him in the mirror’s reflection, I frown in confusion when he scans me from head to toe.

“You sure you don’t want to wear a nice shirt or something?”

Turning around to him, I quirk a brow. “Sorry, kid. Didn’t think the firehouse BBQ was a fashion show.”

“It’s not,” he answers quickly. “But considering you’re a lieutenant and all, shouldn’t you put some effort in?”

I then realize he’s also not wearing just any old clothes he’s found on his floor as per usual. “Why are *you* dressed up?”

Jake looks himself over. “I wanted to wear a shirt with my jeans. You should try it sometime,” he adds with a smirk. My spidey senses are pinging, but I’m not exactly going to complain about my teenage son putting in some effort. He’s a good kid, but he’s also a sixteen-year-old boy who’s all about girls, sports, social media, and gaming. Pretty much the same as I was at his age, except I already had the girl, I played varsity baseball, and social media consisted of Myspace, not all the different sites available now.

Almost twenty-three years later, I’m a widowed single dad who’s contemplating taking up Dee Duncan’s offer to one day go into her restaurant for a thank-you dinner. Of course, she

probably doesn't see it as anything more than that, but the woman fascinates me even more after the scene outside her building last week. She flirted, I flirted back, and then I had to go, but the chemistry was there. I'm not *so* out of the game that I don't remember what it's like to feel a spark with a woman. I just haven't wanted to have it ignite with anyone in the five years since my wife, Lily, lost her battle with ovarian cancer.

Jake walks over to my closet and rummages through the hangers before pulling out a black short-sleeved button-up and holding it out my way. It's the exact shirt I had been thinking of wearing to Dee's restaurant when I next had a clear night with no work, obligations, or when I wasn't a walking zombie because of said work and obligations.

"Put this on. And do something with *that*." He points to my hair.

"Jake, wanna clue me in on what's going on? Is this more than just a normal firehouse catch up?"

"No. Nope. Not at all," he replies cautiously. "You just never know who might turn up. You said you were open to dating and putting yourself out there. Why not practice tonight? Then we can work on getting you into speed dating or making an online profile for you or something."

"You really are team dating now, aren't you?" I smirk and take the shirt from him. Moving over to the bed, I reach behind my shoulders and tug off my CFD tee before replacing it with the shirt.

It was only recently that I decided I should put myself out there and consider dating again. That just happened to coincide with my growing fascination with everything Dee Duncan after Jake introduced me to her videos months earlier. At first I thought it was just another foodie with a god complex spouting their unqualified dribble about an amazing hamburger they'd bought, but I couldn't have been more wrong. Dee captivated me from her first smile to the camera and the following tirade about plant-based products that did *not* taste the same as the real thing. Then she'd covered non-

animal product ones that—when done right—*can* taste okay. I’ve been a meat-eater since conception—all Andersons are—but the video had even me considering trying something different next time I was at the grocery store.

“Don’t forget the hair,” Jake says, walking out of the room. “Oh, and that cologne I got you for your birthday.”

That kid is something else. He’s awesome, and I’m proud of the man he’s becoming, but he never fails to give me glimpses of ‘what the fuck’ now and then.

After putting some putty in my hair and styling it, and giving myself a spritz of Bvlgari Man, I slide on my boots and walk into the newly renovated kitchen and living area to find Marco and his girlfriend, Renee, standing in a huddle with Jake, the conversation ending abruptly when they see me.

“Don’t stop on my account,” I murmur, giving them a suspicious side-eye as I grab my keys and wallet from the dining table.

“We’re just talking about school,” Jake says at the same time Marco says, “Thinking of going to a Bears game.”

I look between my son and his godfather with raised brows, while Renee struggles not to burst out laughing, her eyes sparkling with amusement before she hides her face behind Marco’s shoulder.

“So ... school *and* the Bears. That’s the best you can come up with? Really?” I catch sight of Marco’s top and shoot Jake a glare. “Why does Marco get to wear a CFD T-shirt and not me?”

Renee sighs, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at the two. “Jesus, guys. Just tell the poor man.”

“And let him stress about it the whole way over there? Were *you* calm before your first date with Uncle Marco?”

Marco smirks at Renee, who looks a little flustered. “Hmm, princess, when was our first date?”

Renee’s cheeks turn pink, but she still manages to scowl at her boyfriend while she does it.

To his credit, Jake shakes his head at Marco, tut-tutting in disappointment. “Marco, have you learned *nothing* from me? You don’t embarrass your woman in front of company.”

“Or at all,” Renee mutters.

Jake nods. “Or at all. But Renee knows I’m right. If we tell Dad now, he’ll build it up in his head, and just his luck, he’ll get nervous and shit.”

“Jake ...” I warn. “Language around a lady.”

My son rolls his eyes. “It’s Renee. She’s hardly a—” He wisely clamps his mouth shut at the shocked expression on said lady’s face. Marco just chuckles and hooks an arm around Jake’s shoulders. “Hey, bud. Welcome to the doghouse. Get comfortable. It might be a while.”

That makes me laugh under my breath—well out of angry-woman-death-stare range.

“Right. As fun as it is to be the only one in the room without a clue, it’s not my birthday, I haven’t got a new job, and there sure as fuck isn’t anything else in my life exciting enough to be celebrated with a surprise party. So put me out of my misery, and just tell me already.”

Marco’s amused eyes turn to mine. “Rhodes, language around a lady.”

“Oh, fuck off, Marky Mark. Unless you’re going to tell me what the hell scheme you’ve cooked up with my son.”

Renee’s gaze switches between Jake and Marco before she sighs and moves my way. “Okay,” she says, stopping in front of me and reaching out to straighten my collar. “Hmm, nice touch with the cologne.”

“See, Dad? Told you!”

“Rhodes, stop charming my girlfriend,” Marco adds with a sigh.

I roll my eyes, meeting Renee’s amused ones. “Okay. You’re being set up with a woman tonight, and I don’t want you to freak out. Because then Jake and Marco would be right and I’d be wrong, and you *really* don’t want them to gloat the

whole drive to Cohen and Skye's. *Believe* me. Jake beat us at pool last week and he still texts Marco every day to toot his own horn. So just smile and nod, take a deep breath, and act like there's absolutely nothing to freak out about. Can you do that?" Her eyes bore into mine but it takes a while for her words to register.

"Wait ... you think I'll freak out? What, is she someone awful or something? I mean ... did *Scotty* pick her?" Scotty is the equivalent of our station's class clown. He's a good guy, and I trust him with my life every shift. He's just ... *Scotty*.

"*No*. She's lovely. I just need you to be cool about this, because Marco arranged it, and since Jake found out, he's become kinda invested in 'Operation Get Dad Dating,' which is sweet, but—"

"Potentially setting himself up for disappointment?" I say under my breath.

"Yeah. How *do* you feel about it?"

My lips quirk up. "Haven't met her yet, have I?"

"Oh my god, I can totally see why you and Marco are friends," she says with a laugh. I hook an arm around her shoulder and pull her into my side, catching Marco's narrowed eyes and Jake's cautious expression. "I've already got my date right here, boys. So you two can relax. I've got all the woman I need with Renee."

"Hands off my woman, Anderson."

"Aww, sorry, Lieutenant. Rhodes has got that helpless bachelor thing going for him. And then there's Jake. That makes father and son the whole package," Renee says, rubbing my chest while arching a brow at her man.

Jake is looking at the ground, his shoulders shaking with laughter, and Marco, the possessive idiot, is already halfway across the room to reclaim his girlfriend, making the rest of us chuckle.

"Now, we better hit the road so I can meet this woman you're setting me up with. Who knows, Jake, you might've got it right the first try?"

His head jerks back. “Really?”

“No, ya knucklehead. But I appreciate the positivity.”

“Just don’t freak out, Dad. Okay? Be yourself, and she’s bound to like you. At least enough for a proper date, right?”

“Wow. Great pep talk, kid. And what kind of loser am I when my son feels the need to give me dating advice?”

“You’re not a loser, Dad. A little lame, but not a loser.”

“Quit while you’re ahead, Jake. *Especially* if you don’t want me to ‘freak out,’ as you put it.”

Thankfully, I’m not worried. I’m more curious as to who Marco might’ve set me up with, and why he thought the firehouse BBQ would be the best situation for what is for all intents and purposes a blind date.

I guess I’m about to find out.

Dee

Skye and Cohen's backyard is full of people, but in the hour since Harvey and I arrived, I haven't been able to relax. I'm nervous—with actual butterflies in my tummy. Thankfully, Mom and Dad and their best friends and lifelong neighbors, Marcy and Rick, are here too, which means that all of the grandkids from the Baker and Cook families are being spoiled rotten, entertained, and well-fed by the oldies. Everyone else is kicking back, talking shit, and enjoying a few drinks. Everyone except me, that is, because I'm a chef, and I can never sit idle when there's food to prep, snacks to make, and dishes to serve. It's just not in my DNA. Yet doing it all while constantly watching the back door and the side gate in anticipation of seeing the man you've agreed to be set up with does not a cool, laid-back, carefree Dee make.

To make matters worse, the gorgeous white shirt I was wearing when I arrived—one I'd chosen because it perfectly showcases everything my mama gave me—is now covered in what looks like a combination of blue cheese sauce, buffalo wing grease, and potentially a side of guac. None of which can be fixed with a quick dab job in the bathroom.

I'm standing by the kitchen sink, busying myself with the accumulated dishes, when a round-bellied Skye walks in, carrying a tray now devoid of the wings. "You need to come to *every* BBQ, Dee. Seriously, your food is *amazing*. If I had any room in this tummy, I'd be begging you to make some more."

I fold the kitchen towel over the rail of her beautiful freestanding oven range and grin over my shoulder. “With a kitchen like this, you’ll be able to whip up gourmet feasts yourself soon.” I nod at her belly. “After you’ve mastered the whole new-mum thing, of course.”

“Yeah. That’ll be a while I think. I’ve still got a few months to go,” she says with a laugh. She walks around the huge kitchen island and stops in front of me. “So, I’m gonna be blunt, ’cause that’s who I am, but also, you know I want to see my friends happy, right?”

I hold my breath, her expression unreadable as I brace myself for a ‘don’t hurt Rhodes’s speech.

Her eyes drop to my shirt. “You need to come with me so we can raid my pre-pregnancy closet and fix up this mess. ’Cause I have it on good authority that Marco, Renee, Jake, *and* Rhodes are ten minutes away, and as much as that mess you’ve made is adorable, it’s *not* saying ‘Date me. I’m a catch.’ Besides, I know the Lieutenant well and I’m sure we can find something *clean* that will get his firehose pumping—so to speak.”

My mouth drops open at her candor, but I’m thankful, because I may have looked well put together when I arrived, but my passion for cooking means I’m now more of a hot mess than a hot blind date.

A few minutes later, we’re shut behind Skye and Cohen’s guest room door and standing in front of a wide double closet filled to the brim with clothes. Skye waves her arm out. “My closet is your closet. It’s not like I’ll be wearing any of this stuff anytime soon. By the way, your video today was hilarious.”

I jut a hip and paint on my best TV presenter smile. “You mean ‘What Not to Eat Before a Date?’ I was going for funny, entertaining, *and* informative.”

“Well, you definitely succeeded there. Cohen wondered what the hell I was cackling about.”

I give a fake bow. “Pleased to be of service. And holy smokes. This closet is amazing.” I look over my shoulder at Skye. “Do you want to be my sister-wife? Seriously, I’d take a walk on the polyamory side for your wardrobe.”

Skye steps forward and starts flicking through her hangers. “Something tells me your living situation is complicated enough without adding wife-sharing to the mix.”

“Probably true. But I wouldn’t say it’s *complicated* ... Maybe just a little different and unexpected.”

She pulls out a white low-cut shirt in one hand and a bright red sleeveless one in the other, her eyes switching between it and me before she shakes her head and puts it back, replacing it with an almost sheer black shirt and nodding to herself. “Unexpected is right. But I respect you and your ex-husband so much for it. I’ve never met him, but Ezra speaks highly of him.”

“Ezra speaks highly of Rhodes too.” I wasn’t planning to garner information from Skye, but now that she’s opened the door, I’m damn well walking inside.

Skye shoots me a wry grin. “Finally! I was starting to think you’d never ask. We’ve only got five minutes, so we’ll have to go with as many questions as possible, rapid-fire style. If I know it, I’ll answer. And while we’re doing that, I’m going to take my growing cankles and sit down on this bed while you choose between prim and proper and a hint of saucy minx underneath,” she says, handing me a white shirt. “Or hot-blooded single woman who’s confident, sexy, and putting myself out there with this black one.”

I shake my head and look between the two tops, knowing exactly which one is more my style, as Skye crosses the room and gets comfortable on the mattress.

I hang the white one back on the rail and start working the buttons of my ruined shirt. “Okay. Is he a serial killer?”

Skye’s head jerks back, a smirk curving her lips. “Unexpected opener. I like it, but nope. Not to my knowledge.”

“Is he a stalker?”

Skye’s brows bunch together. “He’s rather enamored with a certain YouTube food vlogger, but nope. No stalking in his history. He’s new to this dating thing—as in, a newborn.”

That’s surprising. His flirting the other day was far from rusty.

“But the important thing of note is that you’re the first person to capture his interest in the past few years.”

“Good to know we’re on a level playing field then.” I slip the black shirt over my shoulders and turn to face the mirror as I do it up.

“You really are. He’s a single dad, and you’re a single mom, who just happens to live with her ex-husband and have a weirdly healthy, productive, and *civil* relationship with him.”

“Flynn and I didn’t end our marriage because we didn’t love each other.”

“You just weren’t *in* love, right? I get it.”

“Is that weird? Will Rhodes have a problem with that?”

“Rhodes Anderson can be like a bull in a china shop if he’s pissed off. He can be quiet and withdrawn if we have a bad outcome at a callout. He’s staunchly loyal, will do anything for anyone, has a heart of gold, and a soft spot for those close to him. But I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that he is *not* close-minded. He lost his wife five years ago and has raised possibly the best teenager I’ve ever known. So, no, Dee, you have absolutely nothing to worry about when it comes to whether Rhodes is a good man—a *hot* man.”

I nod at that assessment before I can stop myself.

“And he may be shocked as hell that you’re his blind date, but he will *not* be even one little bit disappointed.”

A knock at the door stops me from asking anything else, but after Skye’s ringing endorsement, I think I know enough. Skye pushes herself to her feet, shooting me a wry smile before looking me up and down and nodding with approval. “Come in...”

“Y’all better be decent,” Ezra says, making me laugh.

“Yes, Dad,” Skye replies sarcastically, just as my brother pops his head in.

“Always a smartass, aren’t you, Skye?” He glances my way and does a double take. “Looking good, Dee. And right on time, because they’re here.”

My chest gets tight and those butterflies aren’t just fluttering—they’re damn near causing a tornado in my stomach. “This is weird. You’re all being weird. A setup. At a firehouse BBQ. Who does that?”

“We do,” Skye and Ezra reply in unison.

“Take a deep breath. Be your charming self and get down there before your son subjects Rhodes to a Spanish Inquisition, the ten-year-old edition.” Ezra’s smirk broadens as my eyes widen and my mouth drops open.

Then my brother is jumping out of the way, and I leave a laughing Skye and chuckling Ezra in my dust as I rush out of the room and make a beeline for the backyard.

Unfortunately, I’m too late. As I burst through the French doors leading outside, Harvey’s mini-alpha-in-training voice reaches my ears as he looks up at an amused-looking Rhodes, a look-alike teenager who could only be his son, and another couple next to them. What’s equally amusing and surprising is that my son seems to have recruited Jamie Cook’s son, Axel, to have his back and join his little welcoming committee. And everyone else in the backyard have all fallen quiet, all attention now on the show that’s playing out in front of them.

I jerk to a halt and brace myself for whatever Harvey is about to say, because Flynn and I don’t filter ourselves around our son, and Harvey is just as protective of his mom as my ex-husband, brother, *and* the Cook brothers. I can never predict what is going to come out of his mouth so this could go either way.

“Hello. I’m Harvey. I’d like to know what your intentions are with my mom.”

I'd be shocked if I wasn't slightly mortified, given that he hasn't addressed the question to Rhodes. He's asking the guy who could only be Marco, and it's probably because he's wearing a CFD T-shirt and Harvey knows Rhodes is a firefighter. The *actual* man I've been looking forward to seeing all week is wearing a nice button-up shirt and jeans that hug his hips—and likely his nice butt I couldn't help but ogle the other day. His hair is messy in a styled way, and there's a light smattering of stubble covering his jaw that makes him look all the more handsome.

Marco chuckles and holds out his hand to my son. "Sorry to say, bud. But the man you're looking for is this guy." He claps Rhodes on the shoulder. "But definitely grill him. A man should always look out for the women in his life, right?"

"Yeah, sir. My dad says it's my job to keep my mom happy and make sure everyone else in her life makes her happy too."

Then my not-so-blind date for the evening steps forward and leans down to hold his hand out to dwarf my son's one. But my little man stands his ground and looks Rhodes straight in the eye.

"Hey, Harvey, I'm Rhodes. I'm not sure I've met your mom yet, but you've certainly made me want to if she raised a fine, protective son like you. This is my son, Jake. The man wearing the CFD T-shirt here is Marco, and that's his girlfriend, Renee."

Holy swoon, Batman. All my nerves evaporate, because without knowing I'm here, Rhodes has just proven he's as genuine as the man who stepped in to help me the first time we met.

"Oh," Harvey murmurs, his little head switching between the four adults standing in front of him. Axel puts his hand on my son's shoulder and says something I can't hear before Harvey looks back at his new best friend and nods. "So, Mr. Rhodes, please make my mom happy. She's the very best mom and my favorite person in the entire world—apart from my dad ... and maybe my uncle ... oh, and my dog—and she cooks yummy food, and she's always looking after me, and I

need to make sure you're not gonna make her sad or cry, because then I'd have to do what my mom and dad say I shouldn't do."

Rhodes's lips twist to one side as he quirks a brow. That sexy, half-puzzled, half-amused look on a man should never be underrated. "And what's that, Harvey?"

"Kick you in the balls," he deadpans. And suddenly the backyard erupts into laughter as my mouth curves up with pride. *God, I love my kid.*

To his credit, Rhodes doesn't dismiss Harvey's words or not take them seriously. Instead, he holds out his hand and shakes my son's hand again, meeting his gaze. "Okay, Harvey. I love my mom too, so I appreciate you looking out for your mom and making sure she is treated well. Is she here? I think I'd like to meet her now to tell her what a fine man she's raising."

Before Harvey can reply, Jake's eyes lift and inadvertently meet mine. He stills, his mouth agape as he closes his eyes and shakes his head before opening them and staring back at me. He flashes me what can only be described as a shit-eating grin, teenager style. Then he's elbowing his father in the side and whispering in his ear.

Rhodes's head jerks my way, his blue eyes boring into mine before they snap to a grinning Marco and his beaming girlfriend and a smirking Jake. I bite my lip, focusing on breathing in and out in the mere moments it takes for Rhodes's shock to morph into a dazzling smile. He shines it my way, and it has my knees knocking and my thighs clenching together.

For my first ever setup—my first *date* since my divorce—I think all the little birdies involved have done well. I can only hope it keeps getting better.

Rhodes

Of all the women I imagined I was being set up with, Dee Duncan would've been at the bottom of the list.

But here she is in the flesh, looking gorgeous and smiling at me, which makes me think she was expecting me.

The idea that this could be a prank flits through my mind, mainly because I'm all too aware that everyone is watching.

Jake is first to move, walking over to her. "Hi. I'm Jake. I'm a huge fan of your channel and food ... and, uh ... My dad and I watch your videos. I got him hooked on them. I've even caught him watching them without me. Okay, now I'll shut up, because I'm being a starstruck idiot."

Dee laughs and shakes her head, holding out her hand for my rambling son. "Nice to meet you, Jake," she says, glancing over his shoulder and mouthing "*hi*" at me.

"Did you know?" I murmur to Marco beside me.

"I'm the one who set it up with Ezra."

I jerk my eyes to my best friend, my brows furrowed. "What's Ezra got to do with it?"

Marco's grin widens. "Dee Duncan is her married name. Dee *Baker* is Ezra's sister."

Color me surprised.

"You'd think you'd know that with all your low-key stalking."

“I haven’t been stalking her.”

He holds his hands in the air. “Oh right, just watching her videos and googling her. Sorry, my bad.”

I turn back and see Jake and Dee talking, wishing I could hear what they’re saying. Dee nods at my son before throwing her head back as she bursts out laughing.

Marco elbows my ribs, jolting me out of my daze. “Are you just going to stand there staring at the woman or are you going to go up and introduce yourself—again?” he muses. “Because if you don’t, Scotty is gonna try his luck a second time, and Ezra already said he’s warned him off once. Not sure I like his chances though.”

My eyes snap to my coworker in question—a man far too cocky for his own good—as he gets up out of his chair as if to head this way.

Ezra stands, blocking Scotty’s path to Dee.

“Shit.” When I turn back to Dee, she’s leaning against the back deck railing, brow raised, her lips twitching as she looks me up and down as if waiting for me to make a move—literally.

I close the distance between us until I’m standing in front of her and loving the way she doesn’t even try to hide that she’s checking me out, “Fancy seeing you here, Ms. Duncan.”

She tilts her head to the side. “We did say we’d share a meal together, didn’t we?”

I chuckle. “Yeah, just not with such a curious audience.”

Dee leans in, and a hint of Jasmine hits my senses. “You also said no police officers would be involved, but here we are.” She glances toward Gio, who meets my eyes and lifts his beer bottle in the air, sending me a smirk.

If I wasn’t standing in front of a beautiful woman I want to get to know, I’d flip him the bird for being a smartass. “In my defense, this was a blind setup. For me, anyway.”

“That’s an interesting way to ask whether I knew it was going to be you, Rhodes.” Her lips curve up as she shoots me a

wink.

“Want to come inside and I can get you a drink?” I ask, feeling the weight of everyone’s eyes on us

“Absolutely,” she says. She must also be aware we’re providing entertainment to our family and friends.

I follow her lead and walk beside her into the kitchen. A relieved sigh escapes my lips once we’re out of sight. “Thank god for that.”

“Not much of an exhibitionist there, Rhodes?”

“Not with that crowd. Do you know how much crap I’ll get from Scotty on our next shift? He’s like a dog with a bone, that guy.”

“He seems harmless. He was asking me all about my restaurant and whether I do private dining.”

I groan and shake my head. “I bet he did. And what did you advise him?”

Her eyes dance with humor. “That I’m here to meet a lieutenant and only *he* would get the pleasure of a private dining experience with me ...”

Wow. Nice. “You don’t play games, do you?”

“Nope. Do you?”

I shake my head. It’s been so damn long since I’ve actually *dated* a woman—or been interested in dating one—that now I’m putting all this pressure on myself to perform. *A whole new kind of performance anxiety right here.* “What are you drinking?” I turn toward the refrigerator to see what our options are.

“Hey, Rhodes?” I stop and meet her gaze. When she gifts me a soft, sweet, fucking gorgeous smile, I’m stunned for a moment. “Jake told me to go easy on you.”

My brows shoot up, not sure whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. “Did he now?” I reply cautiously.

“Hey, my son told you he’d kick you in the nuts. Yours said you might be a bit rusty with the whole flirting and dating

thing, but not to worry because you're a good guy with a huge ..."

I stare at her, mouth agape.

She giggles. "*Heart*, Rhodes. A huge heart ... And to give you a chance, even if you're a bit awkward to start with."

"Not sure whether he helped me or not."

"Oh, he totally scored points." She tilts her head. "But it also means he doesn't know we already met, does he?"

I shake my head, my cheeks burning. "Nah. Marco knew because Gio called him as soon as he could, then Marco was in my ear the minute I left the restaurant the other day."

"I swear you men can be as bad as gossiping women."

"You have *no* idea. Especially those Rossi boys."

"I grew up with Ezra and the Cook brothers next door. They didn't let us girls get away with *anything*," she says, snickering.

"So, my son threw me under the bus in terms of being nervous, possibly awkward, and totally out of practice with this whole dating thing. Good to know."

"Rhodes, if it helps, I'm in the same boat. I just hide it well."

I nod and turn to go to the refrigerator before opening the door and checking inside, hiding the pleased—and relieved—smile on my face.

"I'll have a white wine if there's any in there. I've been kind of wired and a little nervous, so I didn't want to drink too much before you arrived."

Not finding any drinks, I close the door and look her way. "You're refreshingly honest, you know that?"

Dee shrugs. "There's no other way to be. If you're always upfront, then no one can ever question your integrity. I'm honest in life, in business, in relationships—all of it."

“Wow,” I say, impressed at how down-to-earth and open she is. She scrunches her nose and bites her lip, which of course has my eyes dropping to her mouth and my body getting ideas it definitely shouldn’t for a ... Is it even a blind date if we know each other already?

“Is that a good wow or a ‘shit, she’s a space cadet—abort mission immediately’ kind of wow?”

I nod. “Definitely a good wow. It’s an impressed wow.”

She preens a little at that, and that small show of vulnerability warms my chest and eases my nerves. Dee doesn’t seem to be a woman who fades into the background, and it’s that self-confidence and backbone that draws me to her. But any guy will see a glimpse of a soft spot and want to protect it. It calls to the alpha male in me. “The whole way here I’ve been worried about what kind of woman Marco—and probably the crew, too—would set me up with.”

“Then you saw me.”

I make a point of looking down her body from her face to her toes and back again, memorizing every single curve as I go. My grin deepens when her breath hitches. “Yep. They get an A-plus for setups. I can relax now.”

“Good,” she replies. “Because in the interest of full disclosure, Ezra did ask if he could set me up, and it just happened to be the same day that I’d met you.”

My brows jump. “Did he now?” I ponder that for a second before moving across the room to Cohen’s big icebox, popping the lid open, and looking inside. “And did you know *I* was the friend?” I ask, my voice echoing a little. When Dee doesn’t answer, I straighten and look over my shoulder. I’m more than pleased to find Dee’s eyes aimed at my ass, and I laugh to myself when her body jolts as she realizes she’s been sprung. “Should I stand up so you can get a good look?” I say with a chuckle.

Thankfully, Dee doesn’t miss a beat, not even acknowledging the red blush tinging her cheeks. She holds her hands in the air, palms out. “Hey, any red-blooded woman

would be a fool not to check out a handsome man's butt." She shoots me a cheeky smirk. "And to answer your question, Ez said your name, and I agreed straight away."

My head jerks. *Fuck, I like hearing that.* "So, you're a woman who knows what she wants?" I walk over to the island where she stands and pour her a white wine before handing it to her.

As luck would have it, Scotty bellows, "Dinner's ready," from the backyard, calling a much earlier end to our stolen time together than I'd have liked.

"Catch up later?" I ask, knowing I'll track her down regardless. All of my worries about who I was being set up with vanished the moment I realized it was Dee. I just want to take the opportunity to spend more time with her.

She lifts her drink in the air and holds it there until I touch the neck of my beer bottle to her wineglass. "To not-so-blind dates," she toasts. "And Good Samaritans who look *really* good in jeans."

That last comment has me laughing when Jake and Harvey walk into the kitchen looking for us.

"IT'S A SMALL WORLD, isn't it?" Dee takes Jake's empty seat. It's the first chance since dinner and speeches that we've had to chat.

"It is. I had no idea that you were a Baker."

I catch a hint of amusement in her eyes. "To be fair, my professional name is different. And it's not like you *know* me as Dee Baker, is it?"

I scrub my face with a groan. "Need I ask what you've been told about me?"

"Nothing bad. I do know you've watched my videos though. It's good to know you're a fan."

“Blame Jake for that. He showed me a few months ago, and I became a fan.”

She tilts her head. “Fan of my content or ...”

I laugh. “Does it make me a creep to say it’s the videos *and* the host?”

A knowing smile appears. “It tells me you have good taste. But it does raise another question ...”

I arch a brow. “And that is?”

“How *did* you come to be near my restaurant when that kid swiped my bag?”

I lift my beer to my lips before taking a long drink to cover my embarrassment. There’s no way I can tell her I just happened to be there. She’ll run for the hills, and this has been a whole lot less awkward than it could’ve been.

“I mean, as far as stalkers go, you’re more nice than creepy. At least you’re not digging through my garbage for mementos or sending me underwear and asking me to wear them and return them in the mail.”

My mouthful gets stuck in my throat, and I start choking, my eyes bugging out of my head as I gape at her. “You’re kidding, right? That didn’t happen.”

“Only once, thank god.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “So, to answer your question, I was in town to catch up with my parents and without thinking, ended up taking a wrong turn.”

“Couldn’t get me out of your head?”

“No. I mean ... *Shit.*”

“It’s okay. I mean, if you *were* to stalk me, I don’t think I’d complain.” She lifts her wine to her mouth, smirking against the glass.

“And I definitely don’t want your panties.” My words don’t register until her eyes widen and her lips twitch. “Oh, shit. I mean—”

She pushes up to get out of the chair, and for a second, I panic.

“Stop. I—”

Leaning forward, she rests her hand on my arm, sending a jolt of heat through me. “I’m fucking with you, Rhodes. But since we said we’re being honest ...” She moves in closer and drops her voice to a whisper. “I’d at least *consider* the request if it came from you.” Then she snickers and leans back in her seat, leaving me sitting there stunned speechless.

Marco, Renee, and Jake return, my son taking the seat on the other side of me, looking between Dee and myself.

“Sooooo ... how’s it going ...?” His singsong voice has me torn between shoving him off his chair and cracking up laughing. Jake trying to be a love guru when it was Marco and Renee was funny. When it involves me—not so much. To make it worse, he’s going to want a debrief on the way home, and knowing Marco, he’ll love being a bystander this time.

Dee’s shoulders shake with silent laughter, whereas I just roll my eyes at my son. “How are *you* doing, Jake?” I ask.

“Good, Daddio. Really good. Although”—he lifts his chin in Dee’s direction—“not as good as you, I bet.”

“God, you two. You’re doing that weird conversation thing without having an actual conversation,” Renee says.

“Is this what I have to look forward to when Harvey gets older?” Dee asks.

“Probably,” I say with a nod. “Kids. Fun to live with, can’t live without them.”

She giggles. “And they steal a little bit of your sanity as each day passes?”

I point my finger at her. “Yes! Which means you’ve got time to protect your mind while you still can.”

“Hey. I’m sitting right here, you know?” Jake says, pretending to sound offended.

I roll my eyes at him. “Yeah, Jacob Dylan Anderson. I hear you.”

“Damn, Jakey boy. Your Dad is on fire tonight.” Marco messes up Jake’s hair, earning him a teenage-boy grunt. “So, Dee. Renee and I were wondering if you’d like to join us for ax-throwing next week.”

“Put the woman on the spot, why don’t you,” Jake mutters, earning a death stare from me. In return, he shoots me a smirk, telling me he’s having way too much fun with this.

Dee grins. “Said woman *is* sitting right here.”

Our eyes lock and she quirks a single brow.

“What do you say, Rhodes? Want to make it a double date? I mean, Marco *did* bring us together, not knowing I’d already kind of asked you out.”

“What?” Marco says. “You didn’t tell me that?”

“In my defense, I thought Dee was being nice and offering me a meal to say thanks. It was me that made it a condition that she join me.”

Jake stands, looking first at Dee and then me before throwing his hands in the air with a loud, “Ugh. I give up. I tried. I really did. Adults these days!” Then with a muttered, “I’ll be in the car,” he walks away, still shaking his head, leaving the rest of us to laugh at my son’s antics.

“We’re heading off. Do you want to come with us?” Marco asks. “Or do you want us to take Jake and you’ll find your own way home?”

Smooth, Marky Mark. Real smooth.

“Actually, I’d better be heading home anyway. I’ve got a staff meeting and ordering in the morning, and since Mom and Dad took Harvey home with them, I now don’t have a ten-year-old to manage. So I’m thinking I’ll go relax and enjoy the serenity and have an early night.” Dee downs the last mouthful of wine and stands.

“Yeah. We’ve got an early start too,” I say, not wanting the night to end but knowing my twenty-four-hour shift will drag

if I don't get a good sleep.

"We'll meet you in the car." Renee hooks her arm in Marco's elbow. "Nice to meet you, Dee."

The two women grin at each other. "You too. I'll get Rhodes to let you know about next week."

Renee's smile widens before she waves and walks away.

"So ..." I say, turning to face my not-so-blind date.

"So ..."

"You sure you want to come on a double date?"

"Well, it will be a hardship, but Marco and Renee seem nice enough," she says, unable to keep a straight face.

"You're one of a kind, aren't you?"

She sighs dramatically. "It's hard to be this awesome, but I try."

"You do it well."

Her gaze softens, and she smiles. "Nice to know I made a good impression."

"You made that the other day. Tonight just confirmed I wasn't wrong."

She scrunches her nose in what is a quirk of hers that I really fucking like. The only problem is every time she does it, I want to kiss the confusion away. *Slowly does it, Rhodes.*

Dee reaches out and grabs my phone off the table before pressing the home button and holding the screen up to my face to unlock it. She enters her contact details into my phone—even going as far as to take a photo of herself blowing a kiss and adding it to her info—before reaching around and sliding said phone into my back pocket. The blood in my body diverts south, and central, other parts of me threaten to get their hopes up.

Then she puts a hand on my shoulder, lifting on her toes and brushing her lips against my cheek. "Call me, Rhodes, and we can arrange our winning ax-throwing strategy in person."

After shooting me a smile so dazzling it reaches inside and rocks my world, Dee turns and walks into the house, leaving me standing there, eyes on her ass in those tight jeans..

You'd like her, Lily, I think, closing my eyes and imagining her watching with a smirk from heaven.

And in my head, I hear her replying, . *I already do, Ro. I already do.*

Dee

I'm sitting in my office at the restaurant, buried under a mountain of supplier invoices on Wednesday afternoon, when my cell rings. "Hello, this is Dee."

"Hey, it's Rhodes." Just the sound of his deep, raspy voice in my ear provides an instant cure to my mid-week monotony.

"Well, you certainly took your time, mister," I muse, earning an even more arousing chuckle.

"A man can't seem too eager. Apparently there's a specified timeframe in which a man must wait before calling a woman. Well, according to Firehouse 101's self-appointed love guru. Supposedly, I'm his new pet project."

I lean back in my chair and lift my ankles to rest on my desk. "Is that so?"

"So I'm told. In fact, didn't your video today ask the same question of your subscribers?"

I giggle at that. At the end of my vlog about best first-date foods, I asked people to comment on the current dating rules surrounding time to wait before calling. Or if the girl is allowed to call if she doesn't *want* to wait for the guy. I thought for sure I would get trolled for having non-food related content but was pleasantly surprised at the varied and mostly positive responses I received. "And is the person sharing this wisdom with you single or attached?"

"He's *very* single ... No, Scotty, you *can't* talk to her. Yes, I'm dating her. No, you can't talk me up. Goodbye," he says,

and I bite my lip, trying not to laugh. “Sorry. That man is like a dog with a bone.”

“So tell me, how did you decide on the right moment then?”

He huffs out a laugh. “To be honest, I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“Right. Well, you just scraped in there before the deadline.”

The phone falls silent. “Wait ... there’s a deadline?” He sounds genuinely surprised.

I take pity on him. “Nah. Although, Harvey *does* keep asking if the firefighter has called me.”

“Funny that. Jake has been hounding me to call as well.”

“Smart boy, that son of yours.”

“Too much so sometimes.”

“I don’t know. He seems to have a good head on his shoulders.”

“Yeah, he does,” Rhodes’s voice softens with obvious pride. “I can’t take all the credit. His mom was the intelligent one. He got it from her.” Then there’s rustling down the line before there’s a faint “shit” in my ear. “Sorry, I guess it’s not good dating practice to mention my late wife when calling to ask another woman out.”

By god that thoughtfulness makes me swoon. “Hey. I won’t hold it against you as long as you don’t hold Flynn against me.”

“Flynn?”

“Ex-husband, baby daddy, best friend ...”

“Oh right. I’m messing this up, aren’t I?”

“What could you mess up when you haven’t even asked the question yet?” I tease.

“I’m a bit out of practice with this stuff.”

“That makes two of us then.”

Rhodes's relieved sigh makes me smile.

"Let's make a deal. You don't censor yourself around me, and I'll do the same. Then, neither of us has to mull over what is right or wrong to say. We haven't had a date yet, and I'm really looking forward to doing that, so how about we wait to agonize over mentioning important people in our past, or better still, don't agonize over it at all."

"You're a smart woman."

"I like to think so. Now, if you've called to compliment me, I'm not going to stop you, but I'm *hoping* you're calling to organize the much-anticipated double date."

He chuckles, and that's just as endearing as his admission he's rusty at dating. "Anticipated?"

"Of course. You see, there's this hot firefighter I want to get to know better, and I'm up for a bit of ax-throwing in order to achieve that."

"Is that right?" he replies, sounding amused. "What a coincidence. There's this gorgeous chef I've met that I want to get to know too."

"That *is* a coincidence. Maybe we should do something about that?" I cannot wipe the smile off my face. One might almost say I'm a little giddy at the prospect of spending more time with Rhodes. *There's those butterflies again.*

"Marco and Renee were thinking Sunday afternoon since our next twenty-four starts Monday morning."

"Twenty-four? As in, twenty-four-hour shift?"

"That's the one."

"Damn. You need an early night then."

He laughs, and I vow to keep him laughing whenever we're together.

"Hopefully not *too* early."

"Well, I wasn't going to say it, but I was thinking the same thing."

“Aww, are you going to play hard to get for me?”

“A woman has to keep a couple of tricks up her sleeve.”

“I wouldn’t know. That’s not to say I don’t want to see what you’re hiding.”

A surprised laugh escapes me and a few moments later Rhodes joins me.

“Damn, sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“So you *don’t* want to see me naked? That’s disappointing, because I’ve definitely been thinking about *you* that way.”

“What?” he says with a snicker. “You weren’t joking about being honest, were you?”

“Nope,” I say, accentuating the *P*. “Ask and you shall receive.”

“I’ll file that away for future.”

“As long as you use it to your advantage, have at it.”

“You’re a surprise, Dee. A good one.”

“That makes me happy, ’cause when you haven’t dated in over a decade, it’s hard to know whether you’re doing it right.”

“Oh, you’re doing it right.” His voice takes on a rough edge that I *really* freaking like.

“Okay. So, as much as I’d love to keep talking all day—and I mean that—I’m drowning in paperwork, and I have to dash home to see Harvs before I’m due back here at six.”

“Ah, the busy life of a famous chef.”

“And mom. It’s hard, but so damn worth it.”

“I hear you. I’ll let you go. The bells could ring at any moment and then I’d have to jump anyway. Does three on Sunday suit? Can you get a sitter?”

Oh, yeah. I guess we’ll have to cross the whole ‘I live with my ex-husband’ conversation at some point. “Yeah, Flynn and Harvey have a standing Sunday dad/son date, so that’s covered.”

“That’s good. I’m lucky that Jake takes care of himself whether I’m there or not.”

“Joys of having a teenager.”

“Yep. So, would you be okay with me picking you up? I may be rusty, but I’m still a gentleman.”

Swoon! Damn, if this man is not careful, he’ll ruin me before the first date. “I’d like that, Rhodes. I’ll text you my address.”

“Sounds good, Dee..”

“We’ve still got our dinner at the chef’s table to organize too.”

He laughs quietly. “And you’re planning another date before we even have our first.”

“Hey, I’ve been wanting to feed you *before* my brother and your best friend decided to play matchmaker.”

“So, you’re saying we’d be here regardless of the setup?”

“I definitely hoped so.”

“Me too, if I’m being honest.”

“It’s the only way to be.”

“For sure,” he says, as bells sound in the background. “Duty calls. But, Dee?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m looking forward to Sunday.”

“Me too. Until then, take care and stay safe.”

“Will do, chef. You too.”

Then I’m left sitting there, staring at a pile of admin that has far less appeal than thinking about Sunday. I feel like a teenager again. Now I’m counting down the days to my first—albeit double—date with Rhodes.

Before I can start daydreaming like a mooning girl with a crush, my office phone rings with a situation in the kitchen. *Duty calls.*

IT'S NOT until after Harvey's bedtime on Thursday night that I get a chance to speak to Flynn in person and without our curious ten-year-old hanging around.

"You wanna watch *Iron Chef* or *Law & Order* tonight?" he asks, remote pointed at the television as I sit down and stretch out at the other end of the couch. I'm in pajama pants and a hoodie, a glass of red in my hand, and I'm still trying to work out how exactly to broach the subject of Rhodes with the man who knows me better than anyone.

"Penny for your thoughts? 'Cause that wine in your hand might distract you for a while, but it definitely won't give you any answers," he says, grabbing my attention. My eyes snap to find his amused ones looking my way.

I frown at him. "It's annoying when you do that. Get out of my head."

"Sweetheart, you've been a bundle of nerves since I got home."

I sigh. Sometimes getting along with your ex-husband isn't as great as it sounds—like, say, *now*.

It didn't even take us long to get to this point. We were always good at the best-friends part. It was the being in love and passion stuff that fell by the wayside.

I turn to face him, crossing a leg under me and cradling my glass in my hands. "Okay, so I'll just preface this by saying I know I don't *have* to tell you, but I also want to. And this was bound to happen. I didn't see it coming though, and it's weird to talk about this with you, because it's new—newborn baby new—and I—"

"Breathe, Dee."

I slowly inhale then exhale and my tense muscles relax. Right ... I can do this. I don't know why I'm nervous. I mean, he's dated.

“You’ve met someone,” he says, like the damn infuriating mind reader he is.

My eyes jump wide, narrowing as his shoulders shake with laughter. “You’re such a jerk, you know that?” A disbelieving snort escapes me. “Seriously, you *always* do that.”

Flynn shrugs, lifting his tumbler of whiskey to his smirking lips. “So, I’m right. *That’s* what has you so wound up? You were nervous to tell me you’re interested in someone?” He reaches over and gently squeezes my knee. “Dee, this is a good thing.”

“Wait ... what?”

He pulls his arm back and furrows his brows. “It’s not a good thing?”

“I mean, yes. It is. A good thing, I mean. But I’m...” *Losing my god damn mind*, I tilt my head. “Were you worried when you first told me about Sophie.?”

“A little bit, but I also knew that you’d only want the best for me and you have always wanted me to be happy.”

“I have. I do.”

“So, my question to you now is why would you think that I don’t want the same for you?”

“I know you do. It’s just—”

“Weird, strange, new territory?”

A dry laugh bubbles out of me. “All of the above.”

“Exactly. But you and I aren’t exactly normal exes, are we?”

“Thank fuck for that.”

His eyes crinkle. “So, there’s nothing I want more than for you to actually get out there and *live* your life alongside everything else you’ve achieved. There’s never been a doubt that we love each other, Dee. It just ran its course. But I know more than anyone that you’re a good woman with a lot to give, and any decent man will see that.”

“Probably indecent ones too.”

“Only if you’re really lucky,” he retorts.

I bark out a laugh and shake my head.

“But seriously, I’m not going to go all jealous ex on you. Might screw with his head a bit, to keep him on his toes, but I want you happy, and I want to see you with someone who *makes* you happy.”

“Wow. So, it’s not hard?”

“Wouldn’t go that far. I was shitting myself before you met Sophie.”

“Yeah, and she *knew* about me.”

“To be fair, your vlog was blowing up, and you’d finished that local media tour, so I didn’t want to throw her in the deep end when she turned up to see you were in fact *that* Dee Duncan.”

“Probably a good plan there. But you had nothing to worry about. I knew you wouldn’t sleep around just because we weren’t together like that anymore.”

His lips twitch. “Probably should’ve while I had the chance.”

I snicker. “You’re as likely to do that as I am. We saved ourselves for our wedding night, for god’s sake. We missed our whoring around days.”

“Man, why didn’t we listen to everyone when they said to try before you buy?”

“Because we both wanted the lifelong guarantee?”

“Probably,” he says with a smile. “So, wait, does this mean you haven’t explained our somewhat peculiar living arrangements with him?”

I avert my gaze, earning a *tut-tut* from Flynn. “I didn’t think it was exactly a first-meeting-worthy conversation starter.”

“Probably a good plan there,” he replies, repeating my words back to me. “And now?”

I can’t stop the smile that tugs at my lips. “We’ve got a double date with his best friend and girlfriend on Sunday.”

“Nice. No pressure. An easy casual get together without the risk of awkward lulls in conversation, which means you won’t psychoanalyze everything that happens and everything that’s said and start worrying about how it’s going.”

“So fucking annoying how you do that,” I mutter, taking a sip of my wine.

The smartass smirks. “It’s true though.”

I roll my eyes. “Maybe. Doesn’t mean you have to point it out.”

He laughs to himself. “I figure if you know that I know, maybe you’ll be more aware of it. Or better still, not do it, and therefore you can relax and be your gorgeous, charming self and have him eating out of your hand by the time the night’s out.”

“It’s not my *hand* I’d want him eating.”

“Damn,” he says with a dry laugh. “I may be fine with you dating and all, but let’s not share bedtime stories just yet, deal?”

I giggle and hold out my arm, shaking his hand in mine. “Deal. And he won’t stay over or anything ... I mean, if it gets to that point.”

Flynn nods. “Never thought you would. Well, not without us sitting down and talking about it first. Not sure we’re ready for sleepovers and passing each other in the hallway. And what about Harvey?”

“So, um ... about that ...”

His amused eyes turn curious.

“He, ah ... right. Okay. So, Ezra asked if he could introduce me to Rhodes—that’s the guy—and Harvey overheard, so when we went to the BBQ on Saturday, he

picked out who he thought Rhodes was and stated in no uncertain terms that he loves his mama and what he'd do if I got hurt."

Flynn's brows shoot up. "That's my boy. So, what did he say he'd do?" There's no mistaking the pride and amusement in his tone.

"Essentially, that he'd kick him in the nuts. Although I wonder if that suggestion came from Axel."

"Damn. I *really* like our kid."

I grin. "Me too."

"Well, then, whatever happens with Rhodes, tell him Harvey's warning goes for me too."

I laugh at that but also sigh. "Yeah, sure. *That'll* have him coming back for more."

Flynn shrugs. "He'll want to regardless, Dee. Trust me. You could wear a burlap sack and talk his ear off, and he'd *still* want to date you."

"You haven't even met the guy."

"Don't need to. I *will*, but I don't need to. I already know you wouldn't waste your time on a man who isn't worthy. You've got good taste in men. I mean, look at me." His shit-eating smirk so big I'm surprised he can breathe.

"You're *such* a dork."

"A good quality dork though. A *doctor* dork."

I down my wine and hold out my glass for him. "Okay, then, *doctor* dork, you can prove how good you are by topping up my wine."

"What the lady wants, the lady gets," he says, moving to his feet and taking a bow as he divulges me of my glass.

"I've trained you well."

"Now *that* is something I should warn this Rhodes about," he mutters as he walks out of the room.

I gasp. "Heard that!"

“Meant you to!”

I laugh, glad that Flynn and I made sure we worked toward the respectful, loving, and successful co-parenting friendship we have now. Life would be a hell of a lot harder without it.

And for all I know, my date with Rhodes on Sunday could be the start of the next significant relationship in my life. Bring it on.

Rhodes

“I’m leaving,” I call out as I grab my wallet and keys from the counter.

“Wait.” Jake appears in the doorway. “Hang on. I just have to make sure you’re respectable.”

I roll my eyes, but to pass inspection, I hold out my arms and do a 360 turn before meeting his gaze and raising an eyebrow. “What’s the verdict?”

He twists his mouth and sways his head from side to side. “You’ll do. I mean, I probably would’ve worn loafers instead of sneakers with those jeans since you’re going to a bar.”

“An *ax-throwing* bar, and it’s a Sunday afternoon, not a Friday night. I’m going for smart casual.”

“Emphasis on casual,” he retorts.

“Yep. Stop trying to make me nervous. I’m hitting my stride in the confidence stakes with Dee. Don’t need you derailing my progress,” I say jokingly.

“Okay, yeah. I get that.” He crosses the room until he’s in front of me, his expression turning serious. “Is it weird? For you, I mean?”

I think on that for a moment. “Is it bad if it feels natural? I *was* nervous, but something about Dee makes me feel at ease. It’s like I already know her, which doesn’t make sense at all. It just feels *right*.”

“Good,” he says with a firm nod. “Be yourself. She’ll either like you or run for miles. And hey, if this works out, you might end up on one of her videos.”

I reach out and cup his shoulder. “I can tell you right now that it will never happen, whatever the outcome. But it certainly helps that you’re being so okay with all of this.”

Jake rolls his eyes. “Dad. Mom passed away, and that sucks—it’ll always suck—but she didn’t want us to put our lives on hold and not be happy. Of all people, you know that.”

That I do. “Love ya, kid.”

“Love you too. Now go. You never leave a lady waiting. Don’t you know that?”

“Your grandmothers have taught you well.”

Jake’s lips curl into a smirk. “That one came from Pop actually. He said he wooed Nana Nora from the first day he met her.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Yep. That’s definitely my dad. You staying home?”

“Well, since I’m not sitting my license for a few more weeks, I figure I’ll hang out here and catch up on homework.”

“Be good then. I left money on the counter for you to order in.”

“Nice. Now hurry before you really are late.”

I hold my hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m going.”

“Remember to woo, Dad. And open doors for her. Chicks love that,” he calls out as I walk along the hall.

I snort. “Says the *single* kid.”

“I *choose* to be single. I’m waiting for a showstopper, like Uncle Marco.”

“Bye, Jake.”

“Woo, Dad. And don’t scare her off.”

Good to know my kid has confidence in me. But as far as supporting me in this new stage in my life—*dating*—he’s a

cheerleader, life coach, and wingman all wrapped in one. I thought he fluked it with giving advice to Marco when he first met Renee, but now he's moved his good intentions on to me. He'll probably make sure all of us guys are hooked up and settled down before he starts college. *Heaven help us all!*

Thirty minutes later, I pull my SUV into a parking space outside a renovated two-story home. It's not so different from my own house. Mine is still a work in progress though. It's the same house Lily and I bought when she was pregnant with Jake. Jake and I made a deal after we lost Lils that we'd finish it by the time he left for college.

Not that I'd ever sell it. There's too much history and far too many memories. I often think about how good it would be for Jake to raise his own family in the house one day.

Now it's time to potentially make new memories. With that in the forefront of my mind, I lock the car and walk up the path to the porch. I'm about to knock when the door swings open and a man looking strikingly similar to Harvey appears.

"Hey, you must be Rhodes. I'm Flynn," he says, holding out his hand.

I shake it and smile, relieved he's not making this weirder than it has to be. It makes sense he'd be here since Dee said he had a standing date with Harvey on Sundays. "Yep. That's me."

Silence stretches between us. We both stand there, looking at each other.

"Oh, shit, sorry. Do you wanna come in? Dee's in the bedroom finishing getting ready."

I laugh and rub the back of my neck, stepping inside behind my date's ex-husband. "It's okay. We both know this is kind of awkward, right?"

Flynn snorts. "Honestly, yeah, it's the first time I've had to deal with meeting the guy dating Dee, but that's to be expected when we share a house, right?"

I open my mouth to reply but freeze at his revelation. Thank fuck I cover quickly. "Right. I guess that makes sense

with Harvey and all.”

Flynn’s gaze narrows slightly before widening. “Oh fuck. You didn’t know, did you?” He scrubs his mouth. “Damn. I dumped her in it. Look, sorry, but it is just a living arrangement. It works for us, it works for Harvey, and I’ve got a girlfriend that I’m kinda crazy about. So please don’t feel threatened or go all alpha dog on me,” he says, his lips twitching.

How can I hate this guy now? “Thanks for explaining it. I’m surprised, but I’m sure Dee meant to tell me.”

“To be fair, Harvs and I should’ve left by now. You’ve kinda been blindsided, but it was completely unintentional.”

“You know, you’re making it hard for me not to like you?” I say, making him laugh.

“Good. Because you’re the first guy Dee has gone out on a date with in two years, so I’m glad you’re not a dick either.”

Footsteps grab my attention, and when I look up I meet Dee’s slow-growing smile as she walks down the staircase toward us, her eyes going from soft and warm to wide and worried when her gaze shifts to a grinning Flynn leaning against the wall. “Oh fuck.”

“That’s what I said,” Flynn said.

“Um ... I mean ...” Dee’s gaze switches between me and her ex, before fixing on me as she reaches the entryway, all color drained from her face. “Okay. Flynn, this is Rhodes. Rhodes, this is Flynn.”

My lips twitch. “We’ve met.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Shit. Okay. Um ... it’s kind of a big deal to say ‘by the way, I live with my ex-husband and we co-parent our son together.’ It’s not exactly pre-first-date conversation.”

She’s not wrong.

“True.” I drag my eyes over her face then down her body and back up again, my lips curving into a hopefully reassuring smile, because right now Dee looks like she wants to run back

into her room and lock the door. Reaching out, I lace my fingers with hers and give her a gentle squeeze. “It helps that Flynn doesn’t think I’m a dick either.”

Dee’s narrowed gaze jerks Flynn’s way. “What did you say? Flynn Michael Duncan, I swear—”

I chuckle and shake my head. “As far as meeting ex-husbands on a first date goes, this *is* a first for me, but he was gentle, I swear.”

She scrunches her nose and meets my gaze. “You’re ... okay with this?”

“Well, he’s not a dick either, so once I got past the shock, it was all good.”

“Yeah.”

“You look gorgeous, by the way.”

Dee steps back, not letting go of my hand as she looks me up and down slowly in the same way I did to her. She shrugs. “You’ll do.” A smile tugging at her perfect, pink-painted lips. There’s this pull to Dee that I didn’t expect, and in person, it’s so much more powerful than when I was mesmerized by her eyes and her infectious smile in her videos.

Flynn clears his throat, and as if in slow motion, both Dee and I slowly swing our heads his way as Harvey comes running down the hallway toward us. “Hey, Rhodes. Hey, Mom. Hey ... Dad?” the boy says, his eyes switching between the three of us. “Is Jake here too?”

A snort escapes me, and I huff out a relieved breath. Never have I appreciated the cluelessness of a ten-year-old more than I do right now. “Hey, bud. Jake’s at home. It’s just your mom and me going out today with Marco and Renee.”

“Damn.”

“Harvey,” Flynn and Dee warn in unison. The boy bites his lip and shrugs his shoulders in an ‘I’m cute. Love me’ kind of gesture, and I have to swallow down a laugh.

Then, as if this weird scenario rolls right off his back, Harvey looks to his father. “I’m ready to go, Dad.”

“Right. Okay. Then grab your gear bag and let’s hit the road.”

Harvey tackles Dee’s legs, hugging her goodbye then waves at me before disappearing down the hall.

Flynn pushes off the doorway and holds out his arm. “Nice to meet you, Rhodes.” He shakes my hand again, his lips quirking. “And sorry for the awkward yet probably memorable introduction.”

“Good to meet you too. Thanks for not being a dick,” I reply. We both chuckle, looking to Dee, who is watching our exchange with wide eyes and a gaping mouth.

“See ya, Dee. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Then Flynn gives us a chin lift and walks in the direction his son went.

Dee’s cautious gaze locking with mine. “Um ... wow. That was ...”

I purse my lips to stop myself from laughing at her. Fuck I wanna kiss her. Before our date. Before we leave the house. It may be backward, but it’s all I can think about now.

My attention goes to her mouth, her tongue darting out and tempting me more. When I look up, I’m met by her hooded emerald eyes, and I lock my knees to stop the urge to wrap my arms around her shoulders, pull her close, and kiss her till she’s dazed and her mind is clear of anything else but me. It’s a surge of possessiveness I wasn’t expecting—one I haven’t felt in a hell of a long time.

I dip my chin and watch the emotions flit across her face. It’s like turning pages of a book to sneak a peek inside, and I love how she’s not holding anything back. Her lashes flutter closed, and I fight against the almost overwhelming urge to brush my lips against hers. But I want to take my time, build it up until that moment comes when we’re both consumed with the need to taste more than we need to breathe.

Poised with my mouth less than an inch away from hers, I wait as her eyes slowly open.

“Rhodes?” she whispers, making my lips curve up.

As I straighten, she scrunches her nose and frowns, looking adorably confused. I grab hold of her hand. “We’d better get going. We wouldn’t wanna be late, would we?”

Her eyes widen before narrowing on mine. “You’re a tease, Rhodes Anderson.”

I can’t help but laugh under my breath as I open the front door and usher her outside. “I promise I’ll make it worth your while, Dee Duncan.”

“You’d better.”

Dee

I'm still trying to recover from the events of the last ten minutes when Rhodes leads me to his SUV and closes the door behind me before rounding the hood and hopping into the driver's seat beside me.

I click my seat belt on in autopilot, my mind going a million miles a minute, trying to work out if there's a worse way this date of ours could've started.

"So ..." Rhodes says, leaving my street and driving toward the freeway. "Flynn seems nice."

I do a double take to make sure I heard that right. "*That's your reaction?*" I spin in my seat and bug out at him.

His lips twitch. "Am I supposed to be mad? Maybe cancel the date and call it quits now when I've been looking forward to today all week and the highlight of my day was watching you walk down the stairs wearing a smile that could light up a room and knowing it was just for me?"

"Well, when you put it that way, I guess I—"

"Those jeans help though."

My mouth drops open, but it's half-assed indignation because he likes my butt, and I *like* that. *A lot*.

When I don't say anything, Rhodes frowns and reaches over the center console and rests his hand on mine. "Did you expect me to run for the hills? Was I surprised to meet Flynn? Yes and no. You said he was going out with Harvey today, I

just figured they might've left already. Was it a little awkward at first? Sure. But we said we weren't going to censor ourselves, right?" He squeezes my hand before putting it back on the wheel and driving onto the freeway onramp heading downtown.

"We did."

"And we also agreed not to agonize over it. I meant what I said. Flynn isn't a dick, and I like that. It would make it a lot harder if he was. Let me tell you though, your son has impeccable timing."

I giggle at that. "He's adorably clueless, and I'll be a little sad when he realizes that how we live isn't the norm."

Rhodes shrugs. "So, tell me how you live then?"

Now this I can do. Leaning my arm against the door, I look over to the driver's seat. "Long story short, and probably not a fun first-date talking point, but I live my life with no regrets and I've already said I'm nothing but honest."

"And believe me, I appreciate that."

"Right. Okay. So, the *Cliff Notes* version is that Flynn and I had a come-to-Jesus moment when we were overseas and we decided that after being married for twelve years, having a mortgage and an amazing son together, we were better friends than lovers and better parents than husband and wife." I study Rhodes's expression, curious—but no longer worried—about how he'll react.

"Wow."

My head jerks back. "Really?" I ask, earning a quirked brow.

"Yeah. That's really responsible and self-aware." He glances my way. "If I wasn't already impressed with the two of you and how you interact, I am now."

"Who are you, Rhodes Anderson?" I ask, my voice filled with awe.

His brow furrows, his lips twisting into a cute half-smile. "What you see is what you get with me."

“Just when I think I’ve got a read on you, you go and blow me away. Are you the knight in shining armor who came to my rescue when I was mugged or the guy who chases a homeless kid down and lets him go with a bed and meal arranged at a local shelter. Or, the cool single dad who gets set up with the woman he’s been watching online and barely blinks? And don’t even get me started on the awesomeness that is your son.”

“Honestly, what you see is what you get. I’m a firefighter, a dad, and I guess your everyday average Joe,” he replies.

“There’s nothing average about you. *Believe* me. Rhodes?”

“Yeah?”

“As long as you know that I’m looking forward to discovering everything else about you. I think I might make it my new mission.”

“Have at it, baby. At least then we’d be even.”

RHODES PULLS into the parking lot of the Showtime Entertainment Complex. I’d heard about this place when it first opened and always wanted to go.

Rhodes laces his fingers with mine as we walk inside the venue, spotting Marco and Renee standing to the side waiting for us.

Marco’s eyes drop to our joined hands, a grin covering his face by the time we reach them. “Hey, you two.”

“Hey,” Rhodes replies, looking around. “This place is mind-blowing.”

“Yeah. We came here a few months ago and had a blast.” Renee looks between the two of us. “And what better place to come for a double date?”

Marco turns his warm gaze on his girlfriend. “Right. Let’s go. Our booking starts in ten minutes, which is enough time to get drinks and find our table.”

“We’ll follow you guys.” The other couple move ahead of us and I step forward, stopping when Rhodes turns my way. I meet his eyes with curiosity.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, of course. Why do you ask?”

“For a first date that hasn’t even started yet, you’ve had a lot to think about.”

I melt inside, and I let it all hang out, not hiding the fact I like his thoughtfulness, again asking myself how this man is single. “I’m good, honey.”

He lifts his brow. “Would you tell me if you weren’t?”

“Oh, yeah. Something to know about me—I’m a talker.”

“Maybe Flynn can give me some pointers,” he muses.

I struggle not to laugh as I roll my eyes. “And he’s got ex-husband jokes.”

“He’s a bigger man than I would be.”

“Oh really?”

“Yep. If it was me meeting the guy wanting to date my wife—knowing what a catch she is—I’d totally be a jerk.”

My lips twitch, trying to imagine a scenario in which Rhodes Anderson would ever be an asshole. “Is that so?”

“Hell, I want to be a possessive jerk now to the three guys I’ve already caught checking out your ass.”

I lean in, tipping my face to his and smirking at him. “What I wanna know is why the guy I *want* to be ogling me isn’t doing that instead of watching others do it?”

His brows lift, his eyes flashing with surprise. I like keeping him on his toes. Sometimes my frank honesty can be refreshing, sometimes not so much. I’m happy in this instance, Rhodes gets me.

Rhodes quickly recovers and closes the remaining distance between us until our chests are almost touching. His spare

hand is now resting on my hip, the heat of his touch making a tremble course through my body.

“How about we make a deal, just for tonight?”

“Okay ...” I murmur. I might get into trouble here, but I find myself willing to do anything he might ask of me.

“Let’s live in the moment? No pressure. No expectations. Just you, me, Marco, and Renee, hanging out with friends and enjoying ourselves. Drinks, food, and good old-fashioned fun where I will—more than likely—beat the pants off you at whatever game we play.”

“Is that so? You think you can beat me?”

His eyes turn molten. “Depends what we’re playing ...”

And damn if *that* doesn’t warm me from the inside.

“C’mon, love birds. You coming or what?” Marco calls out.

Rhodes rubs his hands together. “Oh yeah, this is gonna be fun.”

“Well, after you teased me back at my house, I say you might be right. It’s only fair.” I shoot him an amused glance and let him go before walking away with an extra spring in my step and swaying my hips knowing he’s watching.

The rumbling growl coming from the man behind me makes me smile.

A chirpy, mid-twenties, hipster-looking dude approaches the four of us with a huge grin on his face. “Hey, ladies and gents. My name is Trent, and I’ll be your trusty, talented, and sometimes funny ax coach for the next hour or so.” Trent goes over the safety precautions before launching into an explanation of how the game works. “The goal is for an individual to beat their competing player or for a team to get to a certain number of points first. There are three rounds of five throws per person, but even if a winner is declared after the second round, we’ll still go ahead with the third, because who doesn’t wanna throw axes at a bullseye for fun, am I right?”

Although, you two boys look like you've chucked more than a few axes in your time."

We all laugh and nod our heads. Trent's upbeat attitude is infectious, and it has me itching to give it a go.

"Right, so I'll be off to the side observing and I won't intrude or step in unless someone asks or I have to. But first, let me demonstrate how to hold and throw this auspicious little wood chopper." He grabs an ax from the holder and twirls it in his hands before holding it up in front of him. "Dominant hand on top, the other one below, then all you gotta do is face the target ..." He turns around and steps to the edge of the throwing lane, looking back over his shoulder at us. "Then you lift it over your head like this, and it's a case of rocking your hips forward and sticking your butt out, using your body to catapult the ax forward, and *hopefully* lodging the blade in the target."

God, he makes it sound and look easy. Lucky I've never been afraid to make a fool out of myself in the name of having fun.

Marco and Renee stand back and let us go before them.

The first ax I pitch down the lane spins end over end before hitting the target with the metal butt. It drops to the floor like a lead balloon and I huff out a frustrated breath. "This is a lot harder than it looks."

Rhodes appears beside me, shooting me a hot-as-hell smirk. "If it helps, I did the same thing my first time?"

I roll my eyes. "Of course, you did. And let me guess—you're about to tell me you are classed as an expert-level ax-thrower now?"

He chuckles behind me as I walk toward the target and bend over, taking my time to reach out and slowly pick up the ax. A quick check over my shoulder confirms what I'd expected to see—Rhodes's eyes pinned to my butt. *Maybe distracting him is the key to winning this damn game.* And if that doesn't work, at least we'll have fun flirting while he kicks my ass. With a little wiggle of said derriere, I straighten

and make my way back to my date, dragging my gaze up his body without shame and flattening my hand on his shoulder when I reach his side. “You’re up, honey. Maybe you can show me how *good* you are at this game.”

His attention drops to my lips then up again and damn, just the heat in his eyes has my body sparking to life. *How does he manage to do that to me with just a look?* I keep wanting to grab his face and kiss the hell out of him.

“What game is this again?” he asks, his deep, hoarse tone making my knees weak.

“Why, ax-throwing, of course,” I say innocently as I flex my fingers against his shirt. “It *is* our first date, after all. And unlike *some* people, I’d never *tease* anyone without knowing I was prepared to follow through. That would be kinda cruel, don’t ya think?”

Rhodes shakes his head slowly, his eyes dancing with amusement. “Oh, we’re playing now, sweet cheeks.”

My brows jump up and I grin. “Sweet cheeks?” I lean in, bringing my face so close that his heavy breath washes over my skin. “But how will you ever find out how *sweet* my cheeks can be if you don’t win ...?” I blow him an air kiss and walk to the table where Marco and Renee are standing.

Renee is beaming, and Marco’s head is dropped, but there’s no missing his smirk. “You right there, brother?” he calls out to my date, grabbing an ax from the rack outside the throwing area.

“Yeah ...” Rhodes answers rough and low before clearing his throat and looking over his shoulder at us girls, his eyes locking on mine. “If we didn’t need to win before, we need to now. I’m finding myself somewhat ... *motivated*.”

I can’t help but snicker.

“Now I need to know,” Renee says, leaning onto the table and turning her body toward me. “Because I was already thinking of making this interesting. I mean, girls versus boys seems fair. Unless you want to pair up with Rhodes. it *is* a date, after all.”

“Oh no. It definitely needs to be a battle of the sexes.”

“Awesome. At least then I can have a little fun with Marco. They may be the boss men at work but believe me. You’ve gotta make sure things are equal at home.” Renee waggles her eyebrows.

“I *can* hear you, princess,” Marco says, not looking back.

She winks at me. “I know, Lieutenant. Why do you think I said it?”

Rhodes grips the handle, one hand slightly higher than the other, planting his left foot in front of his right in the ‘expert’ stance our games ax coach showed us. Then he lifts the ax and throws it at the target, a sigh escaping my lips as I admire his flexing arm muscles

“Girl ...” Renee says, holding her fist out in front of me and bumping her knuckles with mine. “You get your eye candy, and I get mine. This double date thing is the best. Idea. Ever.”

Between rounds two and three—with the score being one win apiece, girls vs boys—Marco and Renee head over to ‘Food Truck Alley’ on the far side of the warehouse to get us some snacks, leaving Rhodes and I alone with newly fetched drinks in hand.

“Having fun?” he asks.

My mind is a little distracted by his leg brushing against mine. So far, this game of ours has morphed into a challenge to see who can drive their date crazier. Accidental touches, soft hands resting on arms, shoulders, hips, the small of my back—anything and everything *decently* possible to distract one another.

And by god is Rhodes good at the art of distraction.

“Yeah, I am. It helps that Renee’s damn good at this ax-throwing thing. Otherwise, it would’ve been a thrashing by now.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You seem to be getting better.”

I snort at his massive overstatement. “If by getting better you mean hitting the target once in that last round.”

“Definitely better,” he says, his lips curving up into a wicked grin.

“At least I don’t mind being beaten when I like the view of my opponent.”

Rhodes chuckles. “I’ll make sure to tell Marco you think so.”

Rolling my eyes, I giggle and nudge him with my elbow. “Take a compliment, Rhodes.”

“I’ll take anything from you, sweet cheeks.”

“How about dinner this week then? I still owe you that thank-you meal, and I’d love to cook for you.”

His gaze goes soft. “And a restaurant full of other diners?”

I lean in and drop my voice to a whisper. “You see, the perks of being the boss is that I can delegate and use the kitchen I have for filming in for private guests.”

Rhodes’s brow arches. “You entertain a lot of private guests?”

“Not so far. Only Harvey and my parents, and now, hopefully, you ...”

“I’d be honored then,” he replies, reaching over and placing his hand in mine. “My shifts probably don’t fit in well with you this week though. I’m working tomorrow, then Tuesday and Wednesday I’m off. Thursday—work, and Friday and Saturday I’m free.”

I purse my lips. “Why wouldn’t they work for me? I have staff. My kitchen runs like a well-oiled machine. I’ll let my restaurant manager, Suzy, know that I’ll be there but not *be* there. I’ve been looking forward to feeding you since we first met.”

His brows jump up. “You have?”

“Oh yeah. I use my food to express myself.”

Rhodes leans in, his leg pressing firmly against the length of mine now. “I think you’re expressing yourself just fine so far. It helps that you uploaded a new video today with ‘How to Win Your Date Over One Meal at a Time.’”

I wink at him, my smile widening. “Glad you liked it. Let’s say dinner next Monday, that would be your day off, right?”

The smile he gifts me is so big it’s blinding. “I’d love to.”

“Now...” My lips twitch. “We haven’t discussed what the prize is when I beat you at this game.”

Rhodes’s eyes roam my face, pausing on my lips before lifting to mine. He shoots me a slow-growing smirk. “Winner’s choice,” he murmurs, and the rough rasp of his tone has my thighs clenching together out of instinct alone.

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

“I’ve got my eyes on the prize, sweet cheeks,” he says, not looking away from me—even when Marco and Renee slide a couple’s platter of bar snacks on the table in front of us.

Rhodes proves his point by stepping up for his final throw, and with his eyes locked on mine, he heaves the ax over his shoulder, scoring a bullseye and making my heart race and soar simultaneously.

After a great evening, we bid farewell to Marco and Renee. And with Rhodes’s hand in mine—something I find he likes to do a lot—we make our way into the parking lot.

When we reach his car, he unlocks the doors and lets me go. Then without a word, he’s facing me and slowly pressing my back against the car.

I slide my arms around his waist and rest my palms on his shoulder blades. “You finally going to claim your prize?” I whisper, sounding like a wanton woman ready to mount her man. It’s not like I’d say no, but nothing between us feels the slightest bit casual. And at this stage in both of our lives, I’d hazard a guess that after waiting this long, Rhodes isn’t about to screw around just to get laid. Lord knows it’s not worth adding sex onto my already full plate unless it comes with all the benefits of a committed relationship as well.

He braces his forearm on the door above my head, bringing every inch of his hard body flush against mine. He's toned, but he's also got shape. Fit, but without angles that'll poke an eye out.

"If I had my way, I would've been kissing you all night. Every time you licked your lips or smirked at me, I wanted to sink my teeth in and steal a taste."

As if punctuating his point—or simply taking his time to play with his winnings—he runs his palm up my side, grazing the side of my bust, leaving goosebumps in his wake. His hand slides to my neck before cradling my jaw, the pad of his thumb tracing the edge of my mouth.

A whimper escapes my lips, and his eyes flash molten and hot, ready to burn me alive.

Holy God. Bucket needed in the parking lot. A woman is about to spontaneously combust here.

We stay there staring, our breaths shallow and fast, our hearts racing in sync with the other, our bodies touching chest to thigh and every delicious inch throbbing incessantly between us. It's like time stands still. The world is revolving around us, yet we're still here stuck in an augmented reality, waiting for that final push to take what we want.

"Please," I whisper, and his resistance snaps. He gives me his weight, his hands clutching my head, holding me in place, tilt my chin up. Locking our eyes together, he ever so slowly lowers his mouth toward mine—the wait to feel his lips on mine so exquisitely painful. I can't take it anymore, and I grip the back of his head at the same time I surge forward, and we crash together in a tangle of mouths and lips and tongues and teeth.

It's not soft and slow. It's hard and fast, desperate, and completely honest. I want to dance in the rain and offer thanks to the universe above. There's no pretense, no pretending. This isn't a precursor to get me into bed. This is the pent-up passion that has been building all night—if not all week.

My nails bite into his scalp as he rolls his hips against mine and groans as he plunges deeper, his tongue exploring my mouth, tasting me and making me moan. It's seven at night, and we're making out against his car—in a parking lot, no less—and it's still as hot as it was when I used to do it as a teenager.

As far as memorable first kisses go, this has jumped straight to the top of the list. Bar none.

Desperately needing air, I suck in a breath when Rhodes tears his lips from mine. “Damn, sweet cheeks. You can kiss.”

“Believe me, you're the master of anticipation. You made *me* nearly jump *you*.”

“I like to delay gratification. What can I say?”

“Well, I'll tell you one thing. I may like to win, but if that's my reward for losing, I'm winning regardless.”

His eyes sparkle with amusement as he grins down at me. “I've been wanting to kiss you for a fuck of a long time.”

“And now that you have?” I ask, resting my hands right over his racing heart and looking up at him.

He runs a finger down my cheek, his big hand cupping my jaw. “Now, I'm gonna be doing it a hell of a lot more often.”

“Promise?”

He laughs as he brushes his lips against mine once more. “It's a god damn guarantee.”

Rhodes

After a crazy, busy week, Jake and I meet up with Marco, Gio, and Luca—the other Rossi brother—for a run around the Busse Woods Trails. It's all for a good cause though, because in five months, we're all running in the annual Ovarian Cancer Charity Run—something we've done for the past four years. At first, Jake and I did it to honor Lily's memory and help others battle the horrible disease that took her from us. Now it's a way to memorialize her and help raise money that can go toward one day finding a cure, so that no one else has to be lost.

The plan today is to do an easy five miles, but Gio and Luca have been known to do crazy distances whenever the mood hits them. As we stretch against the car in the parking lot, I'm mentally preparing myself to be guilted into running the full course today, which would mean a whole world of pain tomorrow.

At least if I can't walk after this, I'll have two days to recover before my dinner date with Dee on Monday.

We've been like ships in the night this week, but we've stayed in touch. That's not to say I didn't send a bunch of flowers to the restaurant on Monday morning after our date.

I'd been ready to take her and claim her as mine right then and there. I've never felt that before. Not with anyone, but everything feels so natural with Dee that I'm making a point *not* to question it. I'm going to enjoy it.

This is not a quick slam and scam scenario for me. I like Dee. She's funny and smart, ambitious, and caring. Her sexy body, stunning smile, and husky moan have a lot to do with it as well.

I swear she almost had me embarrassing myself when we were making out against my car. So fucking hot, and responsive, and greedy—I loved it.

“Earth to Dad?” Jake says, snapping me out of my daze.

“Yeah, kid?”

“Stop mooning over your *girlfriend*,” he says with a shit-eating grin. The problem with raising a kid who's the perfect mix of me and his mother is that he's quick off the mark and doesn't miss a thing.

“She's not my girlfriend yet. We're still getting to know each other.”

“Look, Dad. I know it's been a while for you, but when a guy likes a girl and a girl likes a guy, you lock that girl down before someone else snaps her up. When it's someone as cool as Dee Duncan, you do that quickly. You get me?” he says, his expression serious.

“Relationships don't work that way. You can't just ‘lock someone down,’ Jake.”

The teenage love guru rolls his eyes. “Yes. You do. You said her ex was cool with you. Her *kid* likes you. *I* like *her*, and whenever you two message each other, you get this weird smile on your face I haven't seen since Mom. Admit it, Dad. You're *really* into her.”

Gio wraps an arm around Jake's shoulder. “Yeah, *Dad*. Tell us you really, *really* like her.”

“God. Here we go.” I roll my eyes and search the sky for some divine intervention.

“Who do we like?” Luca says, walking into the conversation without a care in the world, Marco following him and standing beside me.

“Oooh, are we talking about girls? Can we do it while running? Or do you guys wanna sit around with your fingers up your asses while we discuss Rhodes’s love life?”

I jerk my head Marco’s way. “Yeah. What he said. Let’s go.” Leading by example, I jog away from them toward the start of the official trail.

“Dad, no pressure, but you know the third date is important, right?” Jake says, moving beside me.

I give him the side-eye. “You been watching those YouTube dating videos again?”

“Look, he’s got some good advice,” Marco says.

I snort. “It’s not my first rodeo, kid.”

“Well, in fairness to Jake, it’s not like you’ve had to date for a while,” Gio says from where he’s running behind me.

Luca bursts ahead and turns to face us, running backward as he does. “I’m an expert at modern dating. Ask me anything—I’ll help you out, brother.”

“When did you last have a girlfriend?” I ask, earning a middle finger from him.

“Not all of us are as lucky as Marco, who goes to a damn house showing and ends up meeting the love of his life. Sheesh. That shit only happens in books, I swear.”

“Or movies,” Jake adds.

Luca nods. “Exactly.”

“And you would know this how?” Gio asks, not even breaking a sweat as we hit the one-mile marker.

“Reading romance novels. They’re surprisingly enlightening.” Luca says this like it’s completely normal. For others it is. For Luca Rossi—fuck no.

“Is that right?” Marco muses. “Let me guess. You’ve been stealing Mama’s bodice rippers? The ones with that long-haired, shirtless guy on the front?”

I turn my head. “Wait, are you talking about Fabio? My mom used to have those too.”

“Are we *seriously* running five miles talking about fucking romance books? Or are we gonna find out the goods from Rhodes about his love life?” Gio says, sounding far too interested in whether I’m getting laid or not.

Thank heavens for Jake tagging along. “Hello? Son here. Don’t wanna know deets about what Dad is or is not getting up to. As long as he’s happy—that’s all I need to know.”

Marco snorts. “Dude, you *wanted* your dad to meet someone.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t mean I need to hear the locker-room talk. Jeez,” he says, running ahead and leaving us in his dust.

“What’s that about?” Gio asks.

“He’s all good.”

Gio looks from Jake to me, arching a brow. “You sure it’s not all becoming too real for him?”

“What do you mean?” It hits me. *Lily*.

I shake my head. “He’s good. He’s even told me what to wear for my dinner with Dee on Monday. Right down to booking me in for a damn haircut in the afternoon.”

That makes my friends chuckle.

Marco smirks at me. “Then he really doesn’t wanna hear how you made out with Dee against your car.”

I narrow my eyes at him.

Gio spits out his mouthful of water. “Damn, Rhodes. Keep the goods from Jake, but don’t hold out on me.”

“Yeah. It’s not like G has anything going on in *his* love life. He has to live vicariously through yours,” Marco teases as we pick up the pace to catch Jake and Luca. My muscles are starting to burn in a good way.

“Better than listening to Luca’s exploits. That guy needs to look for quality over quantity.”

I snort. “Maybe not hitting the clubs with Scotty would be a good start.”

“He’ll figure it out,” Marco says, sounding all sage-like. For a man who waited years to find his showstopper, he’s a relationship man now through and through, and I couldn’t be happier for him.

Seeing him fall in love gave me hope, and the more time I spend with Dee, the more hope I have that we do get a second chance to find happiness.

It doesn’t take away from what Lily and I had. It’s just a different path with another fantastic woman, who could potentially change my life for the better. Only time will tell.

I’m looking forward to finding out.

By the time we do six miles then walk a couple more back to the parking lot, we are all dead on our feet.

Then it’s home to chill out with Jake and do chores as per our usual weekend routine when I’m not working or sleeping.

It’s when we take a break from working in the backyard that I tackle Gio’s point about Jake and Lily and how he feels about Dee and I dating.

I sit down on the porch steps and nudge him with my shoulder. “You all good, kid?”

He screws his lips up, looking at me strangely. “Well, yard work sucks and my muscles are a bit tight, but other than that, I’m good. Why?”

“G seems to think you might be feeling a bit weird about me dating Dee.”

He jerks back, his brows lifting so high they almost touch his hairline. “God no,” he says, and I let out the breath I was holding. “I *wanted* you to start dating. In a million years, I didn’t expect Uncle Marco to set you up with Dee Duncan, but she seems nice, and I hope I’ll get a chance to know her better. She obviously makes you happy, so how *can* I be weird about that?”

“Because of your mom ...”

He shakes his head. “Look, Mom is a hard act to follow, but I *want* you to meet someone and be happy. In a few years, I might go away to college, and I don’t like the idea of you being in this big empty house without me. You’re not *that* old, you’ve still got a lot of life to live. And I appreciate you working hard and focusing on me, but you’re a good-looking dude. You deserve a good woman who’ll be there for you, just like you’re here for me and like you were for Mom.”

“Damn, kid. Hit me right in the feels,” I mutter, lifting my beer to my mouth and taking a long sip to swallow the growing lump in my throat.

“Besides, she’s a good cook. What else could a growing kid ask for?” He pats his flat stomach. “I *am* jealous that you get to go to Delish before me though.”

“You wanna tag along? I’m sure Dee won’t mind.”

He snorts. “And be the proverbial third wheel? Thanks, but no thanks. Seriously, Dad, I want to see you happy again. If that’s with Dee, all the better. If it doesn’t work out and you meet someone else, so be it. The main thing is that *you* start living again, because you’ve put in the hard yards with me, and Mom wouldn’t want you to be alone. She said that.”

My head spins around so fast I almost keel over. “You remember that?”

“Of course, I do. She also made me promise that we’d look after each other, and this is me doing that. Mom was a rock star. What’s to say Dee won’t be the next headline act in the concert that is your life?”

What on earth did I do in a past life to deserve him. “Love ya, Kid.”

Jake’s lips quirk up on the side. “Yeah, Dad. Love you too. But are we done with the *D* and *M* now, ’cause I’ll never get a chance to practice my driving with you today if we sit out here gabbing all day.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, okay. As long as you know you can talk to me anytime, yeah?”

Jake places his hand on my arm. “Dude, relax. I’m cool, you’re cool, Dee’s cool. Don’t screw it up, and I’ll be happy.”

“Why do you think I’ll be the one to screw it up?”

“Cause times change, old man. My job is to help you get up with the times.”

I laugh at that. “Right. Good to know you’ve got my back, kid.”

“Always.” He smirks before putting his bottle of water down and moving to his feet. “But I won’t complain if you bring me home some of Dee’s cooking after your date. Just saying.”

I snicker. “Duly noted.”

“I mean ... it’s only fair, right? Call it payment for services rendered.”

My lips twitch and I lift my brow. “Right. So, it’s gonna cost me to get your sage dating advice?”

He shrugs. “Hey, it’s cheaper than a hooker, Dad.”

Then he’s walking away, leaving me speechless.

RHODES: Hey, sweet cheeks. How’s your night going?

Dee: Hey. It’s good. Chilling with Harvs at home after teaching him how to make potato gnocchi with a pesto cream sauce.

Rhodes: Damn. Do you offer lessons? ’Cause I know a sixteen-year-old who loves to eat. Would be great if he could cook as well. Haha.

Dee: I would for Jake. He already asked me at the BBQ.

Rhodes: Shit. He doesn’t waste time, does he?

Dee: It was after he told me to go easy on you.

Rhodes: And how’s that going for you?

Dee: After the way you kissed me last Sunday, I'm starting to think there's nothing rusty about you at all.

Rhodes: You're not too bad yourself.

Dee: Good to know. Feel free to leave a Yelp review online for future kissing recipients.

Rhodes: Grr.

Dee: I knew I'd get the caveman to make an appearance.

Rhodes: If you're not careful, he'll come out next time I see you.

Dee: I'll look forward to it. I've designed a special menu for our date on Monday.

Rhodes: Care to share?

Dee: Oh no. That would ruin the surprise.

Rhodes: You could serve me boxed mac and cheese, and I'd still enjoy it

Dee: I'm screwing my nose up right now. You do know you're dating a chef, right?

Rhodes: Haha. I was trying to be charming.

Dee: You don't have to try, honey. You probably charm the pants off women without breaking a sweat.

Rhodes: I wouldn't know. Might be interested in testing that theory with you though.

Dee: Damn. Is it Monday yet?

Rhodes: Sweet dreams, sweet cheeks.

Dee: And there you go again. Good night. Stay safe at work tomorrow. I have plans for you, Rhodes Anderson.

Rhodes: I have plans for you too, Dee Duncan.

Dee: Can't wait. And, Rhodes ...

Rhodes: Yeah?

Dee: Can't wait to taste my cooking on your lips either.

Yep. Dee Duncan has me hook, line, and sinker. And I, for one, am *not* complaining.

Lils, I've got a live wire on my hands. Lucky for me, you got me used to it. Lucky for me, I have a chance of getting used to it again.

Dee

Rhodes: This is Jake. I know Dad won't ask, but I have no shame. If you make anything good, PLEASE take pity on me and send a doggy bag home. I promise I'll love it. Especially if it's that risotto and your chocolate lava cake you demonstrated online today. That looked AMAZING.

Rhodes: Although, kinda weird when I know the title 'From First Date to First Mate: How to Turn Him on With Food' is about my dad.

Rhodes: Also, this message will self-destruct, because I cannot have Dad knowing I hacked his phone again. He's running out of pin combinations that he'll still remember. Take pity on him. He's old.

Rhodes: Wait ... not THAT old. I mean ... he's hot for a thirty-nine-year-old, right? Okay, I'm going now, 'cause he's just getting out of the shower, which means phone fun time gone. BYE.

The first text stops me in my tracks. The second and third throw me over the edge and have me laughing my butt off as I walk out of my office and toward the front of house to check-in. I managed to squeeze in a quick shower and outfit change too, because there's a difference between serving guests in chef whites and trying to impress the man you want to kiss again—maybe *more* than kiss again—on a date where you're cooking for him.

And why the hell am I nervous about making Rhodes a meal tonight? I've cooked for politicians and royalty—well, it

was some third cousin twice removed—and even celebrities. I’ve made dishes for other chefs I’ve admired and looked up to for years. Yet cooking for Rhodes for the first time has me on edge?

Knowing I need to calm down, and with thirty minutes to go before he’s due to arrive, that leaves me with two options: drink or call someone to give me an ego boost.

I save the former as a last resort and opt for door number two in the form of a group text recently formed between Renee, Skye, Gilly, and Faith.

Dee: Quick. Someone tell me I’m the best chef you’ve ever met.

Faith: What do I get out of this text-a-compliment service?

Skye: Your buffalo wings were pretty damn good.

Faith: Skye, you’re pregnant. You’re at the ‘eat anything’ stage.

Skye: Amen to that.

Renee: Dee, that man would eat anything and everything you offer up to him on a plate.

Skye: That’s what she said!

Renee: Oh my god, I didn’t mean THAT.

Skye: Why not? I would mean that. Tonight’s the third date, isn’t it?

Faith: Technically the second. BBQ with firehouse and family doesn’t count.

Skye: True. No chance for anything sexy to go down at my place. So, second date rules apply then. Easy peasy.

Dee: Wait, there are rules for different dates? When did that become a thing?

Faith: Probably around the time you were graduating high school and shackled up with your husband.

Skye: BOOM. She kinda has a point there.

Dee: Says Faith who MARRIED her childhood sweetheart!

Faith: And thank god I did! He doesn't care about first, second, or third date rules. He's a take what he wants kind of guy.

Gilly: Ezra is an any way he can get it guy.

Dee: Eww.

Faith: Double eww. That's our brother.

Gilly: Yep. And thank god for him.

Dee: Have any of you got some actual advice? I'm on the verge of freaking out. What if I screw up the risotto and he thinks I'm all show and no substance?

Renee: Babe, he calls you sweet cheeks. According to Marco, that's not a Rhodes thing to do. He's also whistling at work.

Skye: It's true. Rhodes isn't a whistler. He might hum along to some song on the radio or something, but he doesn't whistle like he's a man who's got the girl.

Dee: He hasn't got me yet.

Gilly: Not what I heard.

Renee: Not what I SAW.

Dee: Damn.

Faith: Busted.

Skye: Haha, this is gold. Delilah Baker, one word: RELAX. And another word: ENJOY. Rhodes wants you, not your damn risotto.

Faith: In all fairness, Skye. It is a damn good risotto.

Skye: Damn. See, if I send Cohen to the restaurant, can we buy your best offering?

Dee: Sure.

Faith: Skye, can you still see your toes? 'Cause after Dee's risotto, you won't be able to.

Surprisingly, I'm a lot less tense after that little five-minute pep talk. And Skye is right. Rhodes is not with me because of the videos or the profile or the rave reviews about the most popular rice dish on my menu. I know that. It was a momentary speed wobble. A little self-esteem reality check. Maybe it's because I really like Rhodes. It's been a long time since I've doubted my ability to deliver a mouthwatering, rave-about-it-for-days meal for anyone I've cooked for.

I may not have seen Rhodes coming into my life the way he did, and I certainly didn't expect my brother to set us up together, but I have absolutely zero regrets about it now. He makes me smile, he makes me laugh, he turned me on with an almost kiss, and then *definitely* delivered on everything he promised at the end of the night.

He's smart, he's honest, and he's a good dad. Oh, and he wasn't a dick to Flynn, which means he got my ex-husband's tick of approval. *Apparently that's a thing.*

Which makes me wonder if I'd have gotten Rhodes's wife's acceptance too? I don't let myself go too far down that path, because I haven't asked about her yet. And Rhodes hasn't said much about her either. I'm hoping tonight could allow us to broach the subject. I think it's important, for him and for me. Maybe I'll bribe him with Jake's doggy bag.

With a quick time check, I quickly make the rounds and touch base with Suzy, then move toward my filming kitchen and get the risotto started. I leave it to cook before waiting for Rhodes to arrive at the back door, which he does, not even a minute late.

When I lay eyes on him, I instantly feel a whole lot better for seeing him. "Hey."

He smiles and steps in, looking over my shoulder before wrapping an arm around my waist, holding his hand against my hair, and lowering his head. Then he's kissing me surely, thoroughly, and only pulling away when I sag against him. "Hey. How are you?"

"A hell of a lot better now." I run my hand down his chest and lace my fingers with his, feeling lighter than I have all

week. It's funny how being around someone can lift your mood. Although in Rhodes's case, it's just the thought of him lately. I'm like a giddy teenager. It would almost be embarrassing if I wasn't enjoying it so much.

He laughs, his eyes crinkling at the sides. "Funny that. I am too."

"Let's see if I can make you feel even better," I say before leading him along the hallway and through the open door to my filming kitchen. "Welcome to the chef's private dining room." I stop to close the door behind us, letting him walk inside and look around as I engage the lock. I follow him over to the big stone-covered center island that doubles as a workstation, and watch him run his palm over the countertop.

"You film in here, don't you? I recognize it."

"Oh yeah, I forgot you're a fan," I tease.

He glances over at me with a wry smile as I move to the other side of the bench.

"You might say that. Is that a bit weird for you?"

"If you'd stalked me, I'd make you wait for my cooking."

His eyes widen. "I didn't—"

I wink at him and giggle. "I'm joking. Besides, you're far too cute to let a little fan-boying hold me back."

"I'm going to have to watch myself around you," he replies with a shake of his head. "Something tells me you're gonna keep me on my toes for a while."

I beam at his intimation that he plans on whatever this is between us going on for 'a while.' "Mayyybe ..."

"Right, now tell me what I can do to help." He starts rolling his shirt sleeves up and moving around to join me.

It shocks me—but given it's Rhodes, I don't know why I'm surprised. "No, no. This is supposed to be *me* cooking for *you*."

He rests his hands on my hips and turns me toward him. "Would you deny me the chance to assist *the* Dee Duncan in

her kitchen?”

“Well, when you put it like *that* ...”

After bringing his face closer, he brushes his lips against mine. “Let me help you, sweet cheeks. I’ve been looking forward to it all day.”

Rhodes might’ve been a fan of mine, but I’m fast becoming an *equally* big fan of his, *especially* if he keeps touching me every chance he gets. Cupping his face in my hands, I flex my fingers against his stubbled cheeks and smile. “Will you help me cook us dinner, honey?” I ask, loving the gentle look he’s giving me.

“It’d be my honor, chef.”

Wanting to kiss him again, I lift on my toes and press my mouth to his, moaning when he wraps me in his arms and takes over the kiss. When we pull apart again, he rests his forehead on mine, our eyes locked. “Lucky I locked the door. At this rate, we’ll *never* get fed.”

“Not complaining, sweet cheeks.”

“Okay, then. Let’s get started.”

“Yes, chef,” he says, shooting me a cheeky smirk before looking around at the numerous bowls of pre-prepped ingredients.

I move to the big industrial refrigerator and start pulling out what we’re going to need. “Because I’m an overachiever, who wanted to impress my date, I may have gone a little overboard with the menu,” I explain, handing things off to Rhodes when he holds out his hands to help.

“This date of yours must be one hell of a guy,” he muses.

I laugh. “Yep. He’s a firefighter, like you. Rather handsome and claims to be rusty at dating, but so far he’s proving that to be a lie.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep. At least he’s a great kisser though. *Really* good. I’m hoping he plans to kiss me *a lot*. His nice butt doesn’t hurt his

case either,” I continue, earning a deep chuckle that I feel everywhere.

“He sounds like a catch.”

“It seems that way, yes.” My face starts to ache from grinning too much.

When I return to his side, he bumps my hip with his. “I’ll stop seeking compliments if you tell me what culinary delights you have in store for us tonight.”

I roll my eyes and sigh melodramatically. “Needy men, I dunno. Lucky I really like you, Rhodes Anderson.” I turn around and hold up my handwritten list of dishes for him, putting on my best presenting voice. “So, tonight, we’re starting with a little snack of grissini with goat cheese and black-truffle dip. For the appetizer, there’s oysters three ways—mignonette sauce, a Vietnamese chili dressing, and Oysters Kilpatrick.”

“Wow,” he says, sounding genuinely impressed.

Happy that he is—and that he’s not averse to seafood, which was a big risk—I continue. “And over there in the pot I should be stirring, is our main of sweet corn and crab risotto.”

“Damn.”

My lips twitch as I glance over at him. “Either I’ve reduced you to single-word answers or I haven’t done my job right.”

He lifts his brow and smirks. “Or maybe I’m wondering if I have a shit-show in hell of keeping up with you to help cook this delicious meal.”

“Don’t worry, honey. I promise I’ll go easy on you ... with the cooking anyway.”

“Honestly, I’ve watched you cook online, and I was mesmerized. Seeing you do it in front of me might be a dream come true.”

“Oh, you wait. If you’re impressed with all of that, then dessert is gonna knock your socks off.”

“Just my socks?” he says with a sexy smirk so hot I momentarily consider delaying our meal.

“Behave. I can’t cook and be thinking about everything I wanna do to you.”

“Now *this* I want to hear. How about you keep going, and I’ll sit over here far away from you while you tell me all these things you’ve been thinking about doing to me.”

“Maybe I wasn’t always the one *doing*.”

“Even better. Because I’ve got my own little mental wish list going too.”

“Do tell me about these plans you said you had for me ...”

He chuckles, his eyes alight with an equal measure of humor and heat. “Where’s the fun in that? I’ve been looking forward to seeing the master at work in her element.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Then he languidly runs his eyes down my body and back up, sending a wave of heat in its wake that makes me lock my knees to stay upright. When his hooded gaze meets mine again, there’s no mistaking the direction his mind has gone. *By god, I like where it’s going, too.* Although, if this keeps up, dinner will be out the window and we’ll be dining down on each other.

“How about we keep adding to our wish lists while we cook, because that risotto smells amazing and everything else you’ve described sounds just as good. And *maybe* ...” he says, leaning in close. “Maybe one of my fantasies has been to cook with you, too.”

That makes my chest warm and my lips curl up. “Okay then. You can grab those two ears of corn and strip off the kernels for me while I stir the rice, make the dressings for the oysters, and pour us a glass of wine.”

“How about *I* get us the wine, and then I’ll strip the corn. But first, I have to do this.” Then his hand is wrapped around the back of my neck and he’s closing the distance between us

for a long, wet, thorough kiss—something I’m learning Rhodes does *very* well.

He grins at me when I moan at the loss of his mouth. “Like that,” he rumbles.

“Not as much as I do, honey.”

“Debatable,” he murmurs, his eyes drifting to my mouth again.

I flatten my hand on his chest. “You’re gonna have to stop looking at me that way if you ever wanna eat.”

“Yeah ...” he says, *not* changing the way his eyes are eating me up. He shakes his head as if trying to snap out of a daze. “Right. Wine then corn.”

“Sounds good.” I smile before flexing my fingers against his heart and moving away to finish the main course.

“DAMN, DEE. THAT WAS FUCKING AMAZING,” he says, placing the cutlery on his empty plate and leans back in his chair.

Having gorged ourselves on all three courses so far. It’s fair to say we’re well-fed and happy, especially if the satisfied grin on Rhodes’s face is anything to go by.

I lift my glass to my lips and take a sip of the 2018 Far Niente Chardonnay I paired with the risotto. “Glad you enjoyed it.”

“I knew it would be good, but I don’t think I’ve eaten that well in years, probably since before Lils got sick.” He wraps his fingers around his glass before freezing, his gaze jumping to mine. “Shit. Sorry.”

Tilting my head, I see his bunched brows. “For what? You had a wife, Rhodes. You have a son. I have a son and had a husband. The difference is that mine is still in my life on a daily basis, and you lost yours far too early.”

His eyes soften. “Yeah. But it’s not good form to bring her up during a fantastic date with a woman I hope to see again.”

“You wanna see me again?” I ask, my lips quirking into a small smirk.

“Well, you’re cooking doesn’t suck.”

“Nice to know.”

“And you make the art of cooking a hell of a lot more interesting.”

I shift forward in my seat, leaning into an elbow on the table. “That was because I had a sexy man in my kitchen cooking with me.”

His eyes flash again. *Fuck I like that look on him.* Then his expression turns serious again. “But I am sorry. Jake and I talked about it after Lily passed away, and we agreed we would never forget her, and part of that is by talking about her.”

I reach over and hold my hand out, the weird tightness in my chest easing when he laces his fingers with mine. “I love that though. I can’t imagine what it must’ve been like to live through losing the love of your life, and to have Jake to think about while all of that was going on. But I also can’t imagine you’d ever forget her, Rhodes. I’d want to hear about her.”

His body jolts. “You do?”

“She’s as much a part of you as Jake is. And to state it plainly, so there’s absolutely no doubt in your mind, I like you, Rhodes. A lot. And I want to spend time with you—and Jake—and want you to meet Harvey again too.”

“I want that,” he says with no hesitation, no uncertainty.

This man, god, he kills me with his honesty. It’s so fucking good. Flynn and I lived in denial for such a long time, trying to keep a steady ship and not rock the boat by admitting what we both knew to be true. Since then, I made myself a promise to always be honest and put my needs way up the list.

Rhodes isn’t finished. “I also want it known that I don’t date—not until you—and I know it hasn’t been long, but this

feels right between us and I'm not a fan of sharing, so—”

“You asking me to go steady, honey?”

He chuckles and shakes his head at me. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

“Then do I get your class ring or letterman jacket?” I tease.

“Haven't had those for a long time. I could probably give you one of my CFD tees.”

I giggle and sigh dramatically. “Oh, I guess that'll have to do.”

He rubs his thumb over my knuckles. “I'll try to limit bringing Lily up.”

“Don't you dare.”

His eyes widen and his glass stills.

“I'm serious, Rhodes. We said we wouldn't censor, and with all indications being that I'm going to want to see you for a while, you'll have to interact with Flynn, because he's still a big part of my life too.” I squeeze his hand to make sure I have his attention. “You accepted meeting my ex-husband and barely skipped a beat. You've gotta trust that I can do the same. Lily was your wife and Jake's mom. She's important, and I wouldn't be the woman you deserve if I can't accept that.”

“Fuck I wanna kiss you right now.”

I arch a brow. “What's stopping you?”

“Absolutely fucking nothing,” he spits out as he surges up and rounds the table before pulling me to my feet, wrapping me in his arms and slamming his mouth onto mine. My lips part and my tongue seeks his. My hands glide through his hair and hold him in place, my body threatening to overheat as we make out like teenagers, the world around us fading away. It's sublime.

A little while later—after feeding each other my famous chocolate lava cake and tasting it on each other's lips, which

might be my new favorite way to eat *anything*—Rhodes regrettably says he should head home.

“Before you go,” I say, releasing his hand and walking over to the fridge. I pull out a paper bag with the Delish logo on it and move back to him where he stands watching me with a confused expression. “This is for Jake.”

“You made my kid a doggy bag?”

I shrug. “It’s nothing. We had leftovers, and it’s better than letting it all go to waste.”

“You know you’re gonna be his favorite now, right? Probably more than me.”

“You’ll be the one delivering it so we might share that top spot. Not a bad place to be.” I grin up at him. “Especially if it scores me brownie points with his dad.”

“All you have to do is breathe to do that, sweet cheeks.”

I huff out a breath, making him growl.

Hand in hand, we walk out to his car before making out against the wall. It leaves me pent up, and for a brief moment, I wish I could drag him back to the kitchen and say goodbye with other parts of my body.

“Thanks for dinner, Dee,” he rasps against my lips, his body still pressed against me.

“You’re welcome. Thanks for helping me cook it.” I roll my hips, earning a deep groan that courses through me.

“Don’t tease me when I’m on a knife’s edge here.”

“Oh, really?”

He turns to where we just came from, down the hall. “Any other time, any other place, I’d be showing my appreciation in more *creative* ways.”

Absolutely nothing could wipe my grin off my face in this moment. I slide one of my hands down over his butt and push him against me. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“That’s a promise, sweet cheeks.”

My lips quirk up. “Feels to me like it’s *you* with sweet cheeks right now.”

Rhodes chuckles and kisses me while doing it. “Check with Harvs about mini-golf this coming weekend. And since Jake’s license test isn’t for two more weeks, he’ll be up for an outing too.”

“Big step,” I murmur, looking deep into his soft blue eyes. “Going out with our kids.”

“I think we’re old enough and wise enough to know not to waste time when it comes to something that feels this good and this right. We’ll go at whatever pace feels right between the two of us, but nice and slow with the kids.”

My heart stutters before it melts into a puddle at my feet—pretty much the same thing my entire body is threatening to do. “Rusty my ass,” I murmur, earning a panty-dropping grin from the man.

He leans in so our lips are barely touching, his warm breath fanning over my skin and making me tremble. “Seems I’m finding my groove when it comes to you.” Then he kisses me once more—this time soft and slow and gentle. He pulls away and gifts me a smile that makes me feel like the luckiest woman in Chicago.

Thank heavens for knights in shining armor and matchmaking brothers, because holding Rhodes in my arms, I never wanna let him go. And though that should scare me, it absolutely does not.

Rhodes

As much as all the guys at work have given me ‘advice’ about what to do, when to do it, and Scotty’s constant questions about whether I *have* done it, I’m not going to wait *X* amount of days to call her. I’m not gonna play games, because I’d hate for her to do that to me, and in the three weeks since the setup, there’s been absolutely nothing but straight-up honesty. This thing that’s building between us is as easy as breathing. Even accidentally mentioning Lily didn’t annoy Dee. In fact, she was fucking perfect in her response to it.

It’s a hard thing to discuss, and not because I’ve been holding myself back for six years or grieving my wife. Jake and I gave ourselves to the end of the year that she died to simply grieve, processing everything as it came flying at us; the missed milestones, birthdays, family traditions, and the little things. Like no longer coming home to a house filled with delicious baking smells or crawling into bed after a twenty-four and just holding her in my arms for the peaceful ten minutes we’d get before Jake would wake up or Lils would have to get ready for work.

After that year, we shifted to celebrating her life and remembering all the good things. Now in almost everything we do, we carry her with us.

Then there’s Dee, and I don’t know what it was that first drew Jake to her videos, but when he showed me that first one where she was talking about box food being sustenance for aliens, it was like I had been lost and suddenly found again.

It's the only way I can describe it. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was definitely a case of interest, intrigue, and many hours spent watching her old videos.

After meeting her, kissing her, and dreaming of all the things I wanna do to and with her, that feeling has only intensified.

Checking the time and noting I've still got a good three hours until Jake gets home, I consider asking her for an impromptu lunch date. Maybe a burrito or hot dog and quick walk around Grant Park. Picking up my phone I dial her number.

"Hey, handsome. I was just thinking about you."

My brows go up. "Is that right? Funny that. I was thinking about you too."

She laughs. "Hence the call."

"Uh huh. How are you?"

"I'm good. Been hanging at home this morning. I had a late night in the kitchen since my manager called in sick, so the struggle to get out of bed this morning was very real." She sighs. "Thankfully, Flynn has consultations all day, which means he was able to see Harvs off to school and let me sleep."

"You work long hours. It's good he's there to help." And the only jealousy I have is that fact that it wasn't me there for her.

"And now you see the beauty of my ex and I getting along and co-parenting in harmony." "

I chuckle. "Maybe I should entice you to come over with the offer of a massage."

"God," she moans, and I feel that sound right in my dick. "That would be amazing."

"My hands are always willing and able, sweet cheeks. They're yours if you want them."

She falls silent. “You shouldn’t tease me, honey.” Her voice is warm and low and reaching me in all the right places. *Damn, she’s good.* “I know how you make me feel when you’re hands are on me, so I can imagine how they’d be *all* over me ...”

Yep. My dick is definitely wide awake and eager to please now.

“Are you home alone?” she asks curiously.

“Sure am. Why?” I smile. “You wanna come keep me company?”

“I’d love to.”

I wait for a but that doesn’t come.

“On one condition ...”

“Name it. I’ll do it,” I say.

If it was any other guy at work saying this stuff, I’d be ribbing the crap out of them. But instead of Dee and I being at the three-week stage, it honestly feels like we’re at the two-three month one already. Maybe it’s the fact we’re older and wiser and over the whole dating bullshit that goes along with new relationships. *Or maybe it’s ’cause she’s Dee, and she makes everything easy.*

“I’ve arranged cover for the restaurant tonight, thank god, but I’ve gotta go drop some keys off, so my condition is that you let me bring you lunch.”

“You’re honestly asking if you can feed me? Dee, you can do that anytime.”

“Good. ’Cause that means it’s up to you to provide the entertainment ...” She lets her statement hang between us and my brain and dick yell ‘hell yeah’ while my heart is lying back in its deck chair sipping a piña colada.

I go for subtlety. “It’s past noon ...”

“Oh, Rhodes, don’t you know it’s called an afternoon delight for a reason?”

“Sweet cheeks, I said I didn’t date. Didn’t say I’ve lived the life of a monk ...”

“Oh, thank god for that,” she says.

And for a moment, I think she’s joking. She’s not.

“At least one of us has recent practice with anything, ’cause I’m at twenty-five months and counting.” She laughs but my brain is stuck on her confession. “And now he goes quiet ...”

Ever since I left her in the doorway to the restaurant, I’ve been consumed with finding a way to continue our hot make-out session in private. It’s not like sleepovers are an option—not an easy one anyway—she has Harvs to worry about and a restaurant to run, and I have my own list of obstacles. I’m not against her staying overnight, but I’d want to prepare Jake for that since it’s never happened before. I’m willing my heart to slow down and my balls to loosen up a bit when she speaks again.

“Rhodes, I wasn’t meaning I was gonna come over and jump you. I’m in no rush or anything. It’s just—”

“You’d better hurry, baby. I’m in a giving mood, and you’ve opened the floodgates.”

“Well, I *hope* it’ll be *you* opening those, but I’m not adverse to lending a hand to get to that goal.”

I growl earning a cheeky laugh from my girl.

“Down, boy ... at least for thirty minutes, then you can be whatever you want.

“Dee, why aren’t you in your car already?”

As soon as we end the call, I’m up out of my seat and stripping my clothes off as I walk through the house, across my room, and into my ensuite to clean up.

True to her word, thirty-five minutes later, I’m opening my door to a grinning Dee with a black Delish bag hanging from her fingers.

“Dee Duncan delivers Delish,” she says with a sly grin.

“Damn, I should get delivery more often if it comes in a package like that.”

She bats her lashes dramatically and clutches her chest. “Flattery will get you *everywhere*, Mr. Anderson.”

“In that case, get your butt inside so I can eat that amazing smelling food with you.”

“You definitely know how to sweet-talk a girl.”

“Only the ones I like,” I whisper as she walks through the door. I sweep her into my arms, earning a squeak before I steal a kiss from her and groan at the contact. It may have only been three days, but by my count, that’s three days too damn long.

She laughs against my lips as she presses lightly on my chest. “Hey. I said I *brought* you lunch, not that I *was* the lunch.”

“Well, that’s disappointing.” I hold out my arm to usher her into the living and dining area, chuckling to myself as she swings her hips in time with the bag hanging from her fingers.

“I didn’t say I wasn’t planning on being a sweet after-lunch-*snack* though.”

Fuck. I follow her like a drooling puppy dog, not embarrassed by it at all. It’s then that I get it—what first drew me to Dee—it’s her sparkle. That’s corny as hell, but it’s the pizzazz she has, her laugh, her effervescent love of life that she shines far and wide. In person, it’s with her smart mouth and wicked sense of humor. At the restaurant, it’s her personality and passion for good food that you can sense in the air and taste with every bite. In her video blogs, it’s her determination to teach the world how to make quick, easy food instead of ready-made alternatives. All of this runs through my head while Dee moves into the living room.

God, I thought I was a little obsessed over her before we met. Now I might be a lost cause.

Being with Dee makes me feel on top of the world, and I’m determined to stay here and work hard to keep her by my side.

But before that, I need to eat.

Walking through to the dining room, she stops and looks at the bookshelf where there are photos of Jake and I, family, friends, and finally, Lily.

She glances over her shoulder at me. “I thought Jake was you through and through, but he has her eyes.”

“Yeah. They changed. Sometimes they’d be blue. When I’d pissed her off, they’d be electric green—something Jake also inherited. It was hard to stand my ground when she’d point those my way, and I find Jake has that trick up his sleeve too.”

Her lips curve in a knowing smile. “I bet you give in every time.”

I chuckle, looking at the ground and shaking my head. “Pretty much.”

“Wish I could’ve gotten some tips. Might come in handy one day.” She shoots me a wink before continuing to the kitchen.

I stay there, dumbfounded and amazed, staring at Lily’s photo, partly kicking myself for not thinking about the fact that my new girlfriend kinda got slapped in the face with my past. She just took it in stride and didn’t even miss a beat.

“C’mon, honey. This food may travel well, but I promise you won’t wanna wait,” she calls out from the kitchen, snapping me from my thoughts.

As if she has a sixth sense, by the time I reach her side, she’s already found the plates and cutlery.

I move behind her and brush my lips against her neck, pressing my front to her back, nuzzling against her skin and breathing in the sweet scent of her jasmine perfume. “Sorry, I didn’t think.”

“About what?” she says quietly.

“The photos.”

She stops what she's doing and covers my hands wrapped around her waist with her own, leaning her weight into me. "Honey, I'd be disappointed if you *didn't* have photos. You said you live your lives now memorializing her. You wouldn't be the man I'm coming to know you are if you hid her away."

"Fuck, Dee. Are you real?"

She releases a contented sigh. "As real as it gets, honey."

"That's good. Because I think I'm fast becoming addicted to you."

She tilts her head, giving me better access. "You sure you're not just horny?"

I chuckle below her ear, sucking gently. "I'm definitely that. But it's not food making me feel that way."

"There are worse things to be addicted to," she rasps, a soft moan vibrating in her throat.

I nip her collarbone before soothing the sting with my tongue. "Like?"

"Anything and anyone that's not me."

I drop my forehead to her shoulder and laugh. "Yeah, I think you're right about that."

She snickers and steps away from me, leaving me in a rather uncomfortable predicament. She looks down, her gaze flashing with heat, definitely looking pleased with herself before she narrows her eyes. "Now stop trying to nail me in your kitchen before I can feed you."

My brows lift up. "You saying I can nail you in my kitchen *after* you feed me?"

"Well, shit, I walked right into that one, didn't I?" She giggles. "Let's save that until we have a lot of guaranteed uninterrupted time, yeah?"

"Isn't this only our third date?"

"Didn't know you were counting," she says with a smirk. "Isn't that usually the girl's job?"

“You calling me a girl?”

“Noo ...” Her smirk widens before her eyes soften. “It’s nice. But also, I don’t think the ‘third date rule’ applies to us.”

I frown. “It doesn’t?”

“Nah. ’Cause it’s starting to feel like I’ve known you forever.”

“I agree.”

“See, it must be right. Look at us—we’re already thinking the same.”

I almost drool as she spoons out a roast pumpkin, prosciutto, and pearl couscous salad she made on a video last month.

She glances sideways at me and her lips twitch. “I’m guessing you saw my video where I made this?”

“Yeah, and then Jake and I tried to make it and I still managed to fuck it up.”

“Then I made a good choice. It was between this or a moussaka my sous-chef, George, had just pulled out of the oven.”

“Damn,” I frown, peering into the unfortunately empty Delish bag. “That didn’t fall into your hands as you were leaving?”

“Next time, I promise.”

“*I* might hold *you* to that before we even get a chance to have sex in my kitchen.”

She hands the plate over to me. “Get away, you horny animal.”

“Grr.”

“GOD THAT WAS AMAZING.”

Dee shrugs, putting her empty plate on the coffee table in front of us. “It’s pretty simple to make. I could show you some time.”

“I’d like that. You know what I want more though?”

She looks over and arches a brow.

“A taste of that sweet after-lunch-snack you promised.”

Her lips curve up on one side, her green eyes sparking with heat.

She turns in her seat on the couch to face me. “Well, what are you waiting for?”

I crawl over her and brace my hands beside her head before slowly lowering my body onto hers as she stretches out beneath me. “Hi,” I murmur, placing a kiss on the corner of her mouth.

Her hands glide around my shoulders and flatten on my back, pressing me against her. “Hey there.”

“Thanks for lunch.”

“It’s what I do.”

“And what else do you do?” I trace her smile with the tip of my tongue.

“Kiss me and find out.”

Don’t have to tell me twice.

I groan against her lips, kissing her soft and slow before deepening the kiss when her fingers run into my hair and her nails scrape gently against my scalp.

She whimpers into my mouth, giving me as good as she gets as she spreads her legs wider and hooks her calves behind my thighs, allowing my hips to fall in between. My hard cock presses against her core, my pelvis rocking into hers. She thrusts on an upward glide, increasing the pressure. Her body trembling, her grip in my hair tightens.

I tear my mouth from hers and kneel between her legs, dragging my fingers to the hem of her top and jerking it over

her body before throwing it onto the floor. I do the same with mine, loving the way her eyes rake over my chest, her gaze falling with need and heat.

When she pulls me back to her, our skin on skin for the first time, it turns wild like a spark has been lit, the fire between us roaring to life.

As our mouths fuse together again, her hands are everywhere, running up and down my back, gripping my ass and rocking my hips harder and faster. Her whimpers turn into moans, and I'm desperate for more. I bury my face in her neck, nipping and sucking the soft, silky skin there, loving the way she's going wild and fucking thrilled I'm the one doing it to her too.

I shift my body lower, reaching between us to pull down her black satin bra. Cupping her breast in my hand and wrapping my lips around her nipple, I draw deeply, making her arch into me.

"Honey ..." she rasps, the sound shooting straight through me to settle in my balls as they draw up, my cock throbbing, begging for release.

"Baby, you're fucking fantastic," I groan, needing to taste her mouth again.

"Rhodes ... I'm close."

Even fucking better. "So fucking sweet," I murmur, raking my teeth against her lip before delving deep. My tongue rolls around hers, our hips thrusting harder and faster now. It's exquisite torture.

I reach between us again, but this time I lift up and lock eyes with hers. Her blown pupils show me how far gone she is and drives me to see just how much more it'll take for her catch fire for me.

I make quick work of the button at her waist before tugging the zipper down and diving my hand inside her underwear, closing my eyes and releasing a loud guttural groan when I find her swollen and wet for me. "Fuck baby."

“Yes ...” she moans as I stroke her core, my thumb swirling over her clit. Her movements turn erratic, her eyes hooded. She hooks her hand around the back of my neck, crushing her lips to mine, and this kiss turns feral. It’s all teeth and tongue, groans and moans, whimpers and growls. “I’m gonna come. Fuck.”

“Yeah, Dee. I wanna hear you. I want to hear you scream my name down my throat as I make you come all over my hand.”

“Yes. Jesus. God. So good.”

“Not god. Just a man who loves the feel of you and wants to feel more. Give it to me, Dee. Take yourself there.” I push two fingers inside her and flick her clit with the tip of my thumbnail, and she’s crying out, her body convulsing with wave after wave of her climax.

“Rhodes. Honey. Yes!”

And my chest swells, my heart racing as she comes apart at the seams under my hands.

I slowly ease her back down, gliding my hand out of her pants and locking eyes with her as I bring my fingers to my mouth and groan deeply as her taste overwhelms my senses. “Best fucking after-lunch-snack I’ve ever had,” I murmur before I lose myself against her and kiss her soft and slow and sweet, her hands lazily rubbing over my shoulders and back.

“Now *that* is an afternoon delight,” she says when we pull apart, both trying to catch our breath.

“Sign me the fuck up,” I mutter, touching my lips to her neck.

There’s a noise at the front door, and we both go completely still. At the sound of a key sliding into the lock. My eyes nearly pop out of my head as I realize we’re about to be sprung and Dee’s half-naked body is still pressed to mine.

“Fuck.” I scramble off the couch as Dee does the same. I quickly snatch her T-shirt from the floor as she rights her jeans and bra, and together we manage to get her tee over her head. We both quickly sit and try to act casual while I think about

anything and everything completely unsexy to get my angry hard-on to calm the fuck down.

Jake walks into the living room and stops in his tracks when he sees us sitting on opposite ends of the couch, looking as guilty as hell.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here, kids?”

I narrow my gaze, staring daggers at the shit-eating grin he shoots me before he laughs under his breath and shakes his head. “What have I told you about having girls over, Dad?” he says, enjoying this far too fucking much.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah. What *have* you said, Jake?”

He points to us. “Ah ha! Sprung. Kids these days. And what about you, young lady? Do your parents know where you are?”

“Jake ...” I warn half-heartedly, struggling not to burst out laughing with the taste of her still lingering on my tongue. Just my luck Dee and I get interrupted the first time we get it on. I was enjoying the hell out of her too.

“Hi, Jake. It’s nice to see you again,” Dee doesn’t even try to hide the humor in her voice.

“You too, Dee. Probably didn’t expect it to be like *this* though. But what’s a guy to do, right? I come home early from school, looking to take a load off and relax, and I walk into *this*,” he says with an over-dramatic sigh.

I raise a brow. “What *are* you doing home so soon?”

“No driver’s ed training today, remember, Dad? Maybe you had *other* things on your mind?” he says, wagging his brows.

“Yeah, yeah.” I rub the back of my neck. *Have kids they said. It’ll be fun they said.*

“Right. Well, I’ll leave you two *lovebirds* alone. But see you Saturday, Dee. I’ve decided Harvey and I are gonna team up and kick your asses at mini golf.”

Dee’s eyes soften. “Looking forward to it.”

“And thanks for the doggy bag. That risotto was the shit.” And with that poetic compliment, he’s walking out of the room, waving his hand over his head.

I shoot a cautious look Dee’s way, only to find her grinning from ear to ear, her lips twitching. I lift my arm as she struggles and fails to hold in her laughter. It’s when she snuggles into my side and dissolves into a fit of giggles that I press my lips to her hair and chuckle against her temple. “Told you we need guaranteed uninterrupted time.”

She lifts her head and tilts her face toward mine. “Let’s organize that as soon as we can. Although ... sneaking around like teenagers could also be fun.”

“Jesus. You might just be the death of me,” I mutter, touching my lips to hers. She smiles and kisses me softly. “But what a way to go.”

Dee

Rhodes and I had agreed that the best course of action would be to play Saturday really low key. It's a chance for Harvey to see Jake again—something he'd been asking me about a lot—and also a casual introduction to the whole 'Mommy has a boyfriend' concept.

I may be taking this really slowly with my son, but I really like where things with Rhodes and I are going in a way that I don't see it being a short-term thing, which means Rhodes and Jake could become regular features in our lives. I wanted to make sure Harvey had absolutely no reservations.

So, when Flynn and I sat down with him to discuss the 'day date with the kids' idea, Harvey's reaction made my eyes sting. "I always wanted a big brother. Billy Nelson doesn't have a big brother. He's only got a sister, and she never lets him do anything with her. I bet Jake would let me do stuff with him."

I ruffled his hair while Flynn just grinned at him then looked over at me and winked.

"Is it time to go yet?" Harvey asks me for what seems like the tenth time this morning.

I make a point of slowly looking at my watch and humming and hawing while he bounces excitedly in front of me. "Moooom ..." he groans.

Laughing, looking him up and down, taking in his black shorts and bright red T-shirt. "Well, I think since you look so

handsome, and you even have your shoes on. We are ready to hit the road.”

“Yes!!” he says with a fist pump before tackling me with a hug and running back out of the room. “Dad! We’re going now.”

“Have you got your shoes on?” Flynn calls out, making me giggle. If Harvey doesn’t have to wear footwear, he won’t. He’s been that way since he was a toddler.

“Yeah, Dad,” He sighs, giving me a glimpse of what a future will be like with a tween and then teenager. At least if things go the distance with Rhodes and I, he’ll have already survived the teenage years with Jake and will have hopefully learned a few tricks and tips to pass on to me.

With a last look in the mirror, I move downstairs to find Harvey waiting impatiently by the front door and Flynn leaning against the door shooting me an amused smirk.

“Ah, and she goes with *those* jeans. There’s no way you’re gonna win now,” he teases.

“They’re my Lucky jeans.” Casual date means comfy yet still sexy enough to distract Rhodes from kicking my ass, so I paired a loose-fitting Delish V-neck tee with my favorite butt-lifting jeans—because I’m almost thirty-seven, and gravity doesn’t care how much you lunge or squat or Zumba.

Flynn’s grin widens. “Lucky by brand, not by nature. At least Rhodes will learn about your never-give-up attitude.

“Thanks for the encouragement,” I mutter.

Harvey steps forward and grabs my hand, giving me a squeeze and looking up at me. “It’s okay, Mom. I can be your partner if you want? The Duncans vs the ... What’s his last name again?”

“Anderson, baby.”

“Right. The Duncans vs the Andersons. We can make it a competition, and then I can win for you.”

“Damn, kid. Maybe we should do that.”

“Then again, Jake might want *me* to be his partner, and then I’d have to decide if it’s kids vs parents.”

Flynn chuckles and I join him. “Let’s hit the road, and we can decide who partners with who when we get there. How does that sound?”

“Yeah! Let’s go then.” Harvey turns and gives Flynn the same tackle-hug he gave me earlier before grabbing my hand again. And with a goodbye wave and a mouthed “just relax” from my ex-husband, Harvey and I walk out the door—destination City Mini Golf.

Forty minutes later, we’ve parked and fed the meter on the eastside of Columbus Avenue and are walking hand in hand toward Millennium Park before spotting Rhodes and a glued-to-his-phone Jake waiting for us.

“Hey.” I step forward to give Rhodes a hug.

“Hey, sweet—Dee.” He catches himself, and I snort, earning myself narrowed albeit amused eyes before he turns to Harvey. “Hey, Harvey. Good to see you again.”

“Hello, Mr. Rhodes. Hey, Jake,” my son says, almost vibrating with excitement and anticipation. When I say he was so looking forward to seeing Jake again, I caught him practicing conversations in the bathroom mirror last night. It was equally adorable and heartwarming.

Jake slides his phone into his back pocket and grins. “Hey, bud. I hear you and I are gonna kick some serious parent-butt today.”

Harvey’s chest swells. “Yeah. My dad and I play all the time, and sometimes he lets me win. I don’t tell him I know that. I pretend I’m super good and he must be bad for losing to a kid.”

“Oh yeah, Harvs. You and I are going to get on so well.” Jake jerks his head to the side. “Wanna come in and we’ll make sure we get the good putters. Winners need the *best* equipment. Right?”

Harvey nods excessively before the two of them walk away.

“Now”—Rhodes closes the distance between us—“I can give you a proper hello.”

I open my mouth to say something, but he uses the opportunity to wrap an arm around my waist before gently gripping my chin and kissing me like it’s leading to the bedroom, not that we’re standing in a central city park outside a mini-golf course. I have to grab his biceps and hold on as he kisses and nips and explores every inch of my mouth with his tongue. I fight to keep up and give as good as I’m getting back from him. “Damn, honey. *That* is a welcome.”

He grins, his eyes crinkling at the sides as we stand close in each other’s arms. “We didn’t talk about PDA and Harvey, so I decided to go for friendly not intimate.”

My stomach flips, and warmth fills my chest. “Thank you. I guess tepid warmth would be a good approach. Slowly but surely.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’m onboard for however you want this to go today. Harvey knows we’re dating, right?”

I nod, and he continues.

“And Jake is old enough to get what’s what. So, I’ll follow your lead on all of this. Making sure you’re comfortable and Harvey is okay with everything is a priority, yeah?”

“Stop making me want to kiss you again,” I murmur, melting against him. He chuckles and brushes his lips gently against mine.

“Not going to happen, sweet cheeks. I’m going to get you addicted to me as much as I am to you,” he says quietly, moving to press a kiss on my jaw. “But until I can do *more* than this ...”

His voice is soft and low and my body is demanding everything and now.

Giving my libido whiplash, he straightens and tangles his fingers with mine. “We should really get inside, because Jake is a good kid, but there’s no telling what tricks of the trade he’s passing on to your son.”

I giggle and shake my head. “Right. Let’s go stop the teen from corrupting the tween, shall we?” Rhodes leads me inside the gates and toward the concession booth where we find the kids waiting for us.

“Jeez. Take your time, slow pokes,” Harvey says with a laugh. “Right Jake?”

“Maybe they’re scared that they’re going to get beaten by a couple of kids.”

Harvey looks up to Jake, and I’m already seeing hero worship at play. “Yeah.”

“You paid?” Rhodes asks Jake, who scoffs and shakes his head.

“You think I’m going to pay when I know you will anyway. You always said, you date, you pay. So, Daddio ...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhodes muses, laughing under his breath as he steps up to the window. “Two adults, a student, and a child.”

“You want a family pass? It’s cheaper,” the booth attendant asks.

“Sounds good,” Rhodes pays for all of us, and we’re directed to the next window over where the young guy behind the counter goes to Harvey first.

“Hey, dude. I can tell by looking at you that you’re a bit of a putting shark. Am I right?”

Harvey blushes a little and bumps one shoulder. “Yeah. I’m not bad.”

“Oh, you’re one of *those* guys. The ones who make you *think* you’ve got a chance when really they’re going to whip your butt.”

“That’s me.” He stands a little bit taller under the attention.

“Better get the best putter for the best player,” the attendant winks at Harvey before looking the rest of us up and down then turning away. He returns with four putters and four different-colored golf balls a minute later.

He hands me the scorecard and pencil. “And for the lady, ’cause we all know these guys will try and cheat to impress you.”

“You’re not wrong there.” I laugh when my three playing partners big and small scoff in defense.

The attendant holds his fist out to Harvs. “Good luck, putting shark. Make sure you do a victory dance at the end when you win, okay?”

And after an exploding fist bump—from both of them—Rhodes runs his arm around my waist and the four of us follow the signs toward the first hole of eighteen.

Halfway through our game, I’m starting to think Brad was right about Harvey. Or else Rhodes and Jake are playing bad for his benefit. Whatever the case, I don’t think I’ve laughed more on a family outing in years. Jake is a born entertainer, and you can tell the relationship he has with Rhodes is rock solid. They look out for each other. They’re always joking, teasing, or cheering each other on.

Whereas Harvey has been focused on two things: impressing Jake and winning.

But I’m relaxed, I’m happy, and I’m definitely enjoying the subtle and sometimes discreet ways Rhodes has been flirting and touching me. The current hole we’re on has a windmill that rotates to block a ball-sized tunnel through to the other side, and so far I’ve missed it three times, much to Jake and Harvey’s glee.

Rhodes comes up behind me, cloaking my back with his and holding me close as he mimics my stance and reaches around to cover my hands over the grip. “Now *this* is how we *should* be playing mini golf. Definitely much better,” he croons in my ear, sending a shiver through me. I discreetly push my ass into his pelvis, my lips curving into a smirk at his barely audible groan and the growing hardness I find.

“Behave, sweet cheeks.”

I turn and meet his eyes over my shoulder. “And where’s the fun in *that*?”

“Oh, we’ll have fun in this position, just not when our kids are right there.” Rhodes’s voice is laced with humor and heat, which makes me laugh and clench my thighs together in the same breath.

“Step away from your teammate, Dad. No cavorting allowed,” Jake announces rather loudly.

Rhodes groans and shifts back, taking a deep breath as he does. “Damn smartass.”

“Pleased to be of service, Dad,” he says with a smirk before turning back to me. “C’mon, Dee, chant the rotations in your head and hit the ball on the count of three so that you’re through the gap before you hit four. Get it?”

“Yeah. Let’s give it a shot, right?”

“Ha, get it, Mom? Give it a *shot*,” Harvs says, hilariously stating the obvious and making us laugh.

“See, I’m not just a pretty face.”

“No, you’re a damn sexy one too,” Rhodes murmurs behind me.

I whirl around and point a finger at him, narrowing my eyes. “Behave, Mr. Anderson. You’re not supposed to distract your own teammate. Besides,” I say, lowering my voice, “if I don’t get the ball in the hole, you won’t get the pleasure of watching my ass when I bend over to collect it.”

“My eyes have been glued to your ass since the minute you first arrived, *Ms. Duncan*. So don’t worry about me.”

“Good to know these jeans are appreciated,” I say with a wink.

“Everything about you is.”

My breath hitches, but I quickly cover up my reaction. There will be time for that later, whenever Rhodes and I can arrange our adult alone time. Something that is *definitely* overdue.

“C’mon, Mom. Hit the ball already,” Harvey calls out, making me roll my eyes.

“Kids these days, I dunno ...” Then I bob my head in time with the rotations, taking Jake’s advice and counting. When I hit three, I tap the ball hard with the head of the putter, and thankfully it slides past the blade of the windmill in time to a chorus of applause from my three male cheerleaders.

Harvey runs and hugs me tight before straightening and trying to look cool again. Jake offers me a high five, and Rhodes wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him, touching his lips to my temple.

God, I could get used to this.

We’ve just finished the horrible windmill hole when a familiar voice calls my name. Turning around I spot Faith and Bryant walking toward us, golf clubs in hand.

“Hey, sis,” I say as we hug each other. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Curing world hunger.” Bry embraces me after his wife. He shakes hands with Rhodes and Jake before ruffling Harvey’s hair.

“They’re playing mini golf too, Mom. Jeez.” Harvs states the obvious, yet again.

I roll my eyes at him and return to my sister. “I mean, where are the kids?”

“We left them at home. I mean, they’re old enough to watch each other now, right? Toddlers are so mature these days,” Faith teases. “They’re with Bry’s parents. They offered to give us a break for a day date. It was either this or day *drink*, and we opted for the more responsible adult option.” Her eyes dance with amusement as she looks between the four of us. “And how about all of you? Who’s winning, Harvs?”

“Me! But Jake’s helping. Mom and Rhodes aren’t playing very well.”

“Is that so?” my sister replies with a laugh. “Let me tell you, I kicked Uncle Bryant’s butt.” She holds up her hand, and Harvey doesn’t leave her hanging, smacking his palm against hers triumphantly.

“You rock, Aunty Faith.”

“I know, but not as much as you, Harvey Duncan. You’re a rock star.” She smiles warmly at my son. “You’ll have to come out with us to the driving range one day. We can see how far and how hard you can really hit a golf ball.”

Harvey turns to me, his eyes pleading. “Please, Mom. That would be *so* cool.”

“Of course, bud. Anytime you want.”

“Right.” Faith looks at me. “We won’t hold you up any longer.” I can see the questions in her gaze, all of which I cannot answer.

Rhodes’s gentle laughter from beside me grabs my attention.

“Yeah. Prepare yourself for a big phone call later, Bry. I think your wife is expecting a date debrief tonight.”

My brother-in-law pulls my sister into his arms and chuckles. “I’m used to it with these two. Even as kids they’d sneak into each other’s rooms and whisper all night until Patricia would catch them out and send them to bed.”

“Hey. It’s not our fault they separated our bunk beds and made us get our own rooms.”

“Faith,” he says, trying to hold back a laugh. “You almost made her pass out when you were trying to test a hypothesis about hanging upside down for too long.”

Faith’s eyes meet mine, and we both dissolve into giggles.

“Oh no. Now we’ll never finish the game,” Harvey says.

“Why’s that?” Jake asks.

“Once Mom and Aunty Faith start giggling, they’re lost forever,” he replies dryly.

I simmer down and quirk a brow at my son. “Hey, mister. You do know I can hear you, right?”

His lips curve up, and suddenly I have images of a teenage Harvey doing the same thing to me. Dammit. Why do kids

have to grow up?

“Well, we’ll leave you all to it. Have fun. And, Rhodes, you should come over and see the renovations we’ve done,” Bryant says, shaking Rhodes hand again.

Rhodes’s head jerks back. “You’re renovating *again*? Jeez. I haven’t even completed renovation round one on my place”

Bry shrugs. “Whatever the wife wants, the wife gets.”

“And this wife wanted to change my theme to mid-century modern, starting with tiles.” Faith flashes us a beaming smile.

“Cool. I’ll definitely call around for a beer on one of my days off then. Maybe I’ll bring Dee and some of Faith’s design ideas can rub off on her too. Lord knows I need all help I can get with colors and fabrics. That was always Lily’s domain. Jake and I make do, but there’s something to be said about a woman’s touch, right?” He pulls me into his side again and, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, I wrap my arms around his waist, anchoring myself to him like he’s doing to me.

I crane my neck to meet his gaze. “Oh, *maybe* you’ll bring me along, huh? To my own sister’s house. Jeez. Get set up, they said. He’s a good guy, they said.” I’m trying to hide my surprise at the ease in which he talked about me helping renovate while seamlessly mentioning his wife’s name in the same breath. It’s definitely an adjustment for me, but I’m slowly getting used to the fact that Lily is still a big force to be reckoned with in the lives of the Anderson men.

“Damn, I think I like it when you’re a little feisty,” he murmurs, snapping me from my thoughts.

“See you,” Faith and Bry say, seemingly enjoying this show far too much.

I wave goodbye but don’t look away from Rhodes’s beautiful blue eyes, totally ensnared in his charming web. “You *want* me feisty? Oh, honey, you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Is that so,” he murmurs, his gaze dropping to my mouth, my tongue instinctively darting out to wet my dry lips. The

rumbling growl deep in his chest has me pressing myself closer to him.

“Um ... guys?” Jake says.

We both turn our heads at the same time to meet the amused grins of both Jake and Harvey.

Jake winks at us. “We’re just going to go get some snacks.”

“You want my wallet?” Rhodes asks.

“Nope,” he replies, jerking his head in the direction of the food carts we saw when we first arrived. “C’mon, Harvs. Let’s go refuel for the rest of our butt-kicking mini-golf mission.”

“Oh, man. I could kill a hot dog right now.”

“Me too. And fries.”

“And donuts.”

“A mini-man after my own heart.”

“Don’t you mean stomach?” my son asks, and I bury my face in Rhodes’s chest to stifle my giggle.

“That too, bud. Let’s go,” Jake replies as they walk away, leaving us alone, Jake looks back over his shoulder and shoots us a devilish, knowing grin. “Don’t worry, parentals. We’ll take our time.” And then to Harvey, he says, “Had to get you away from the adults, bud. They’re gonna kiss, and we don’t need to see that, right?”

“Yeah. Eww. Girls are gross.”

Rhodes is still chuckling when he cups my face and gently tilts it to meet his. “Lucky for me, I don’t think girls are gross ...” he murmurs against my lips. “In fact, I think *this* girl is a tease and a flirt, and I’m the one who’s going to get lucky when I peel her out of these jeans later.”

I arch a brow, my lips twitching. “Is that so? And when, pray tell, did you plan on telling *me* that you were gonna be peeling me out of *anything* later?”

He presses his forehead to mine. “Adult alone time, sweet cheeks. Jake is going to a movie with friends tonight. That means—”

“That means adult alone time,” I breathe, when inside I’m melting and swooning and doing high fives all around the joint.

“Fuck yeah.” His eyes flash with heat before his hand is tangled in my hair and his tongue is in my mouth. It’s definitely not the most *appropriate* kiss for the ninth hole of a mini-golf course, but then again, with Rhodes kissing me like an unspoken promise of all the fun we’ll have later, I don’t mind one single bit.

After downing hot dogs and fries and pop, Jake and Harvey *did* end up kicking our butts, winning by a clear five shots.

But with Rhodes by my side, it’s safe to say that my mind was *not* on mini golf.

Rhodes

Dee: So ... still want me to come over tonight?

Rhodes: You think for one second I'm going to say no to adult alone time with you after teasing me all day in those jeans?

Dee: It was a few hours. Surely it wasn't THAT torturous.

Rhodes: Anytime I'm around you and can't touch you is torturous.

Dee: That's a yes to coming over then?

Rhodes: Why aren't you here already?

Dee: See you in twenty then.

"This is like living with a mooning teenager, I swear," Jake says sarcastically.

Looking up, I find him leaning against the doorway to the living room grinning at me.

Raising a brow, I drop my phone in my lap. "I think you're confused. I'm the dad, and *you* are the teen."

"Yeah. Yet you're the one grinning at your phone while texting, whereas my phone's on vibrate and I'm playing it cool by not responding straight away."

I chuckle. "Or maybe your phone's on silent so I don't know you're not getting any texts at all."

Jake clutches his chest in mock pain. "Ouch. That one hurt, Dad." His wide smirk makes me shake my head.

“You still heading out?” I ask.

He narrows his eyes. “Uh huh. Although *maybe* I should stay home and *supervise* ...”

“Don’t you da—”

He throws his head back and laughs. “Gotcha!”

“Why did *I* have to raise a smartass,” I mutter, rolling my eyes.

“But to answer your question, yeah, Dad. I’m going out. Kyle’s dad is picking me up and playing security guard for the night.” I arch a brow and shoot him ‘the look,’ and he soon holds his hands up in surrender. “Yeah, I know. It’s no skin off my nose. Saves wasting money on an Uber, and he’s a bit like you anyway.”

“How?”

“He’s cool.”

“Thank god. I can go to my grave having succeeded in being a cool dad.”

“It’s true. All my friends say so. Obviously being a badass firefighter doesn’t ruin your cred either.”

“Good to know. You need some money?”

“Nah. I’m good. So, Dee is coming over?”

“Yeah. You okay with that?” I ask, my tone turning serious.

Jake’s head jerks back, his eyes flashing wide. “Dad, this is *your* house. *You’re* the adult in this relationship.” He waves his hand between us. “It’s not up to me to say anything. But if it makes you relax, I’m fine with Dee staying the night. It’s not like I’m a light sleeper, and I’m not naive enough to think you’ve been celibate for the past six years.”

My mouth drops open, earning an amused gaze from my son.

“You’re a grown man, you’re not a virgin, and if anyone is gonna practice safe sex after all the lectures you’ve given me,

it's you. So have fun. I'll text you before I come home to give you the head's up, and I won't be a smartass and embarrass you around your girlfriend. Deal?"

I look at him in wonder, again thinking that when god was handing out sons, I lucked out with mine. "You're a pretty good kid, you know?"

Jake's mouth quirks up. "You mean wise? Handsome? Pretty damn cool?"

"Humble too," I say with a laugh.

"Yeah that."

"Okay. So, you sure you're okay with it?"

He rolls his eyes. "Dad. Relax. Have your girl over. Don't act like I'm a ball and chain holding you back. I *want* you happy, and Dee makes you happy. It's as simple as that."

"You make me happy too, kid. And proud."

His chest puffs out a little. "Well, of course. I'm awesome." He looks me up and down. "Go have a shower and clean yourself up. You wanna make a good impression, don't you?"

I push myself to my feet and walk past him, bumping his shoulder as I go. "You're lucky I love you. Otherwise, I'd start to get a complex that my kid thinks I'm a lost cause."

"Nah. You're not *that* bad. A little direction is all you need."

"Gee, thanks," I scoff. "Let me know if Jeff arrives before I'm out. Okay?"

"Sure thing. Don't forget the aftershave. Chicks love that shit."

"Chicks probably don't like being called chicks either," I call back.

"Whatever. *Women*, then. Happy now? And I'll tidy up in here too. Can't have Dee thinking we live in a bachelor pad or anything."

. “Thanks, kid.” I reach out and ruffle his already styled hair, earning a groan of protest. And as I walk down the hall to the shower, I’m smiling.

We did good with him, Lils. I hope I’m making you proud, baby.

And even not getting an answer to that, I know in my heart that she’d be smiling at me with her cute lopsided grin.

Fifteen minutes later, I see Jake off at the door, waving to Jeff. Us parents have a group chat where we fact-check and keep our fingers on the pulse of everything going on in our children’s lives, and we all take turns at playing the cab of mom and dad. It’s great for me given my work schedule and the amount of time Jake has with an empty house. Sometimes he stays with my parents or Lily’s, but generally, he’s home. I definitely hit the jackpot in the kid lottery with that one, because—touch wood—so far, apart from the need for a few minor attitude adjustments, Jake’s never done anything to break my trust.

It’s why his grandparents and I have all put in to buy him a Ford truck to give him when he passes his driver’s test next week. He’s been saving his allowance for it, but we all felt he deserved it, and we know he’ll be responsible with it.

Just after Jeff pulls away, Dee turns into my driveway, grinning at me through the windshield.

When she gets out and walks along the front path and up the stairs toward me, her smile has me mesmerized. The pull between us is not only physical—it’s more than that—a feeling that just continues to grow stronger the more time we spend together. And after today’s seemingly successful outing with the kids, it’s another tick joining the many others already marked off that have me thinking Dee was *meant* to come into my life. “Hey, sweet cheeks.”

“Before I come inside, I have a question to ask ...” she says, somewhat confusingly. “And I’ll preface this by telling you that whatever your answer, it’s totally okay and I’ll still stay. Alright?”

My brows bunch together as I read her nervousness, something I haven't seen from Dee before.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, absolutely nothing. It’s just, well, your answer will determine whether I have to go back to my car or not.”

“Okay, now you’re confusing me.”

“Sorry. Sorry,” she babbles, scrunching her nose up. “Right. So, I talked with Harvey, and Sundays are Flynn’s day with him anyway. So, I was wondering if I’ll need the overnight bag I have in my car?”

I step forward, a slow smile creeping over my face as I stop in front of her and rest my hands on her hips. “You saying I get you all night?”

She looks at me with her big green eyes and bites her lip. “I mean, yeah. If you want a sleepover—I’m game if you are.”

I sweep her into my arms, laughing at her squeak of surprise as I carry her inside and close the door with my foot.

“Rhodes, my bag. I need to—”

“I’ll get it later.” I grab her underneath the ass as she hooks her legs around my hips and I stride down the hallway.

“But what about Jak—”

I stop outside my bedroom door and press her back against the wall, dipping my head so we’re nose to nose, her warm breath fanning over my lips as I lock eyes with hers. “Jake is out till eleven. He also knows that you’re coming over, and apparently he *really* likes his dad and you too, because he said he’s fine with you staying over.”

Her mouth drops open, her surprise morphing into soft warmth.

“Dee, in a minute, I’m gonna take you to my bed, strip those fucking sexy jeans off that delectable ass of yours, and I’ll devour your body until you tell me to stop or I exhaust myself with all the different ways I’ve imagined making you come. If either of those options don’t gel with you, now would

be the time to say so.” My voice is rough with lust, visions of her laid out before me with hours to explore each other without any interruptions blowing any fantasy I’ve had about this woman in the past few weeks—okay, *months* since I first saw her videos—out of the water.

She doesn’t even hesitate for a moment. Her hands grip my hair and tug my mouth to hers, her lips crushing against mine as she kisses me hard and deep and wet, her moans and my guttural groan echoing off the walls.

I guess that’s a hell yes.

Still kissing her, I move us sideways and carry her across to my bed before putting a knee to the mattress and lowering her on to it and covering her with my body. Our lips don’t separate as I clutch her head with one hand and drag my palm down her chest, cupping her breast in my hand and rubbing my thumb over her hard nipple.

Dee’s back arches into my touch, her fingers tensing in my hair and pulling tight. I plunder her mouth as her tongue wrestles with mine, her body hot against me as I roll my straining erection against the seam of her jeans.

Her hands run down my back, scrambling to grab hold of the hem of my shirt and dragging the material up.

I tear my mouth away from hers just long enough to brace an arm on the bed and rip it off before throwing it away to a destination I don’t care about. Knifing off the bed, I pull her with me and place my hands on the hem of her top. With the jerk of her chin giving me permission, I glide the shirt over her chest. She helps me remove it, then we’re both stripping to our underwear.

Dee stretches out on the mattress in front of me again, and I near on dive on top of her with a groan—mine—and a moan—hers. Our lips lock, my cock throbbing and telling me it desperately wants more and it wants it now. But I ignore the need to bury myself deep and focus on stripping Dee naked so that I can start the journey of discovering every inch of her body. “Fuck, baby. You’re a dream.”

Her lips curve up wickedly. “I’ll become a nightmare if you don’t get back down here and kiss me again.”

“Is that so?” I drag my gaze all over her exposed skin, cataloging every curve, every line, every freckle. I smooth my palms over her arms and to her shoulders before gently pulling her up to bring us chest to chest. My hands continue to move, gliding and touching as I lean my lips in so we’re touching but not kissing. Her breath fans over my skin, driving me crazy as her body goads me into giving in and taking her mouth again. I undo her black bra and, tilting my head, brush my lips against her shoulder as I somehow find the patience to slowly glide it along her arms and onto the floor.

I glance between us, taking in this magnificent woman—the star of my dirtiest dreams and filthiest fantasies is in my bed and almost fully bared to me. I want to throw my head back and howl at the moon, but that would be a waste of precious time I *could* be using to make Dee scream my name over and over again.

But Dee proves she isn’t a meek, shrinking violet when she growls in frustration, frames my jaw in her hands, and slams her mouth to mine. “Fast first, honey. Slow, later.” As if to punctuate her point, she kisses me again, sucking on my tongue while her hands roam everywhere. Falling back onto the mattress, she pulls me onto her. Our bodies align, my hips rolling into hers as she thrusts up. The switch in speed makes my head swim and my cock throb.

I shift down the bed, straddling her thighs and wrapping my lips around her nipple. I roll the other between my fingers, loving the way she arches into my mouth. Her hands in my hair encourage me lower, and when I drag the tip of my tongue along the edge of her black satin underwear, any plan and self-control I had to take my time with Dee jumps out the window and runs down the road. I’m like a raging fire, and Dee is the fuel making me burn bright.

“Please, Rhodes. I want to feel you.” Dee’s voice is a rough, velvet whisper, and it unleashes something inside of me. I tear her panties away with her help before I splay my hands on her spread thighs, my gaze drifting from her flushed

face to her exposed sex. And if I wasn't done for before, I am now. She braces herself on her elbows as I hook her legs over my shoulders and lay my chest on the bed before dragging my flattened tongue from her clit to her soaked core. Her taste explodes on my tongue, my senses jumping into overdrive. Then her fingers are gripping my hair, and I'm eating like a starving man who's never going to dine again. My own hands frame her hips and roll her against my mouth, wanting to reach every single inch of her, needing to drive her absolutely crazy with lust until she can't take anymore and begs for release. I want the memory of my name being torn from Dee's lips to haunt me every single time I'm in my bed without her near me.

I slowly push one finger inside her, vibrating my tongue against her clit, but it's not enough. I want to bury myself deep and make us fall off the edge together.

Surging over her body, I pull off my boxers and flick them away with my feet, leaving my bare cock sliding against her wet core.

"Rhodes ... I need ..."

"I just need to get a condom, yeah?" Then I'm kissing her hard and fast and pushing off her to stand beside the bed.

She frowns and scrunches her nose up, making me wonder why the fuck I don't have protection in my nightstand. It's not like I didn't *know* this could happen.

"Where are you going?"

Bending at the waist, I lean into my hand beside her head and touch my mouth to hers again, unable to get enough of her. "Since we promised to be honest ... I don't have sleepovers. I don't bring women home, which means I *don't* have condoms within reach."

Her lips form an *O*, which of course I have to kiss with a grin on mine.

"So, as much as I don't want to break the mood, I'll be right back." I straighten and stride out of the room and along the hall to the main bathroom where I grab what I need from

the vanity. I damn near run back to my bedroom before shutting the door and locking it behind me, grinning at a still puzzled Dee, who's now sitting up, leaning against my headboard, naked as the day she was born with absolutely no shame or embarrassment. My cock bobs in approval under her gaze. She looks me up and down, her smile widening when she spots the box of condoms in my hand.

She arches a brow. "Do I wanna know?"

"I'm a responsible parent of a sixteen-year-old, who I'm not going to talk about when I have plans for you. But I'll be replacing this box tomorrow—since, if I have my way, we'll be making a dent in this one in future."

"How about being responsible and putting one of those on and getting back into this bed with me?"

"Best fucking idea ever."

She nods at the box.

"How about you get on that before I have to take matters into my own hands ...?"

My eyes jump to her arms as she lifts them to her breasts and palms over her nipples before dragging her fingers over her stomach toward her spread legs. She lies flat on her back in the bed as she does it and gives me the best view ever as she runs two fingers over her clit then lower... pushing them inside where my hands and tongue just were.

"*Fuck!*" I rip the box open and separate a foil packet from the strip, dropping all but the one condom onto the floor. I bring it to my mouth and tear the packaging with my teeth before spitting it out and moving to put the latex ring on.

"Wait!" Dee says, low and breathy. She crawls on her hands and knees to the edge of the bed, craning her neck to meet my eyes and crooking her finger to bring me closer. Her warm breath fans over the head of my cock before she licks around the tip and swallows me whole, her fingers wrapping around the base and working in tandem with her lips as she draws me deeper and deeper with every stroke.

My balls pull tight, and I grit my teeth, nowhere near ready to have this finish before I've lost myself inside her. Nothing less than that will do. I gently glide my fingers in her hair and pull her off me, loving her hooded, glazed eyes locking with mine as she moves sideways.

Dee lays herself out in front of me, legs spread, hands roaming over her skin as I hurriedly roll the condom down my length and move to the bed. I press every inch of me into every inch of her, clutching her head and tilting her face to slam my lips on hers right as I align myself at her entrance. Her expression morphs with pleasure as I push my cock inside her. I clench my teeth at just how fucking good she feels—how right *this* feels—Dee kissing me, meeting me stroke for stroke, thrust for thrust, both of us speeding up, our desperation growing as the pressure inside gets stronger and stronger.

The tingling at the bottom of my spine is a sure-fire sign that this inferno is about to explode. I snake a hand between us, not breaking our kiss for even a second as I roll her clit with my thumb. Dee cries into my mouth and tears her lips from mine, sucking in breath. Her moans grow louder and rougher until she wraps her limbs tight around mine and screams out, “Rhodes. Fuck. Yes!” over and over again. She clamps around me, leaving me with no hope to control my own release. One more thrust as I plant myself deep, and my hips jerk as I come hard and long, biting the crook of her neck and growling her name. My vision turns white as I drop my weight against her and nuzzle her skin gently, my muscles twitching at her soft palms roaming slowly over my sensitized skin.

Dee brings her mouth to my ear before sucking the lobe between her lips and nipping me. “If I have a hickey, honey, you’re gonna owe me big time.”

I brace myself on one arm, meeting her amused gaze, her lips twitching. Arching a brow, I smirk at her. “Is that so?” My eyes drift to the red mark blooming on her throat, my inner caveman beating his chest with pride, my gentleman side

wondering how something so fucking hot and good could ever be bad.

“You’re good at the sex, Mr. Rhodes.”

“Feel free to leave a yelp review, sweet cheeks.”

She giggles, making my smile widen. Running her fingers over my lips and into my hair, she slowly brings my mouth against hers and we kiss lazy this time.

I press my lips to the tip of her nose and, reaching between us, hold the base of the condom tight as I pull out of her, loving her breathy whimper when I do. As I move to my feet, I reach out to pull the mussed-up covers over her to keep her warm.

“Rhodes?” she whispers, placing her hand on my forearm.

“Yeah, baby?”

“I really, *really* like you.” She smiles, and I swear the entire room brightens.

It’s then I realize I’m gone for this woman, and I’m far from complaining about it. It could’ve been a day, a week or four, and I wouldn’t care if it was too much or too fast. I *know*, and the emotion in her gaze conveys the meaning of the words she’s giving me.

“I really, *really* like you, too,” I reply, my voice soft and gentle. “Let me clean up, and I’ll be back.”

Her eyes flash. “Good. Because you made big promises about wearing me out, and I hope you’re a man of your word.”

My rumbling growl fills the room, but it’s soon drowned out with a better sound—that being my girlfriend’s infectious giggle.

Game fucking on.

Dee

Bang. Bang.

“Wakey, wakey. Rise and shine, people,” a voice yells from the other side of the bedroom door.

I slowly open my heavy eyes to be met with Rhodes’s naked chest, my body plastered against his from shoulders to feet.

Bang. Bang.

“C’mon, old folks. It’s time to join the land of the living and get some fresh air into those lungs. I’ll meet you downstairs. You’ve got forty minutes until we have to leave,” Jake adds before giving the door one last friendly thump and walking away until all I hear is Rhodes’s huffed laughter.

I turn my head to look up at him, my wide eyes meeting his lazy, hooded ones. He cups my cheek and runs the tip of his thumb over my lips. “Morning, sweet cheeks.”

“Morning, honey,” I say before lifting up and kissing him quickly. That was the intention anyway, but he’s Rhodes and his voice is all raspy and rumbly, and when his tongue touches mine, I immediately want more. Which means I’m soon flat on my back with this delicious man spread out on top of me, and he’s clutching me to him while *devouring* my mouth.

Lifting his head, he smiles down at me. “Definitely a good morning now, apart from the brat waking me up for the run I’d forgotten about.”

“Wait, what?” I gasp in horror. Running ... on a *Sunday*? Surely he doesn't mean—

His blue eyes fill with amusement. “Yes. We run on Sunday mornings. Well, at least one of the weekend days. We have a training schedule we've gotta keep to.”

“Okay. Well that's alright. I can leave when you guys do and—”

He shakes his head. “No, baby. It's a family rule. If someone stays over, they have to come on the run too.”

My words of protest are on the tip of my tongue when the best excuse ever hits me. “Wait. That's okay. I can't come because I don't have any running gear with me.” I breathe a quiet sigh of relief, my inner Dee relaxing and snuggling back down to revel in her weekend laziness.

“That's okay. Renee keeps a spare set here for the days when we run straight after a twenty-four and before she goes to work. I'm sure she won't mind.”

Dammit. I must huff out the frustrated little growl I *thought* I made in my head, because soon Rhodes has dropped his lips to mine and is laughing as he kisses me again.

Thankfully, another argument/stalling tactic comes to me. I gently push my hands on his chest and quirk a brow, eyeing my new boyfriend suspiciously. “Hang on. You said women don't stay here.”

Rhodes is not even trying to hide his laughter. “They don't, but Jake's friends do, and it's one rule for all. Sorry.” He shrugs, but he's not sorry at all. Maybe distraction might be the key to my escape from his crazy running idea. “Alright. But who the hell runs at ...” I lift my head and glance at his alarm clock beside the bed before my gaze snaps back to glare at him. “... eight on a Sunday morning?”

“Jake, Marco, Gio, Luca, sometimes Renee, and me.”

“Well there's obviously not enough room for all of us in one car, so maybe I'll stay here and cook you a hearty breakfast for afterwards?”

“Baby. You can do that *and* come with us. But if it’s too far, we can stop early, and I can make it up later.”

Make it up later? Who is this man? Miss a run and make it up, all day long you’ll have good luck? No. Wrong. All day long you’ll be unable to walk!

I pull out the big guns and pout, which doesn’t succeed in any way other than to make Rhodes laugh as he kisses me happy again. *Damn this man. Does anything work on him?*

“Okay, I *suppose* I’ll come. But I’m telling you—I’m only going to slow you down.” I roll over onto my back and cross my arms over my chest.

Rhodes shifts to his side and smooths my hair away from my face. “That’s okay, sweet cheeks. Haven’t you realized by now that you’re the one who sets the pace?”

All I can do is think about that hot-as-hell-carry-me-into-his-house move he pulled as soon as I told him I had an overnight bag. Note to self—sometimes straight to the point has *delightful* consequences.

“Okay. Well, we’ve got ...” I glance at the clock again. “... probably thirty-five minutes left. Why don’t you cuddle me and tell me why you all run on a schedule that means we *can’t* stay in bed all day.”

“Firstly, as much as I’d love to do that, my morning-alarm-clock brat is sixteen and impressionable, so he needs to see that you’re *not* just here to ravage his father.” His gleaming grin says he’d like nothing more than to be ravaged by me, which makes me snicker. “And to answer the other question, we have our PT test coming up and, in three months’ time, we’ve got our annual fundraising run for ovarian cancer research that we participate in every year to honor Lily.

I reach out and stroke my fingers over his face, loving the way his expression softens and he leans into my touch. “I’ll go on the run with you,” I whisper, my throat tight.

“Thank you, baby. It’s important to me—you are too.”

Well, fuck.

Narrowing my eyes, I point my finger at him. “Don’t you make me cry now, Rhodes Anderson. That would *not* make me happy. It’s *far* too early for that kind of nonsense.”

“I agree. And we’ve got ...” He looks to the clock this time. “... thirty-one minutes left before we have to leave. Maybe we should use that time to *not* talk.”

“Yes.” I lean in to smack my lips against his, but when he goes in for another, I roll away and get out of bed, grinning at him as I make my way to his bathroom.

Halfway there, I stop mid-step and slowly turn around, taking in the beautifully presented master. There’s dark blue walls with half-height wainscoted panels lining the room. There’s a built-in wardrobe along the far wall and plush carpet under my feet. This room has a woman’s touch written all over it.

“Hey.” Rhodes stands in front of me, rubbing my arm with one hand and resting the other on my hip, pulling me close. “What’s wrong?”

“This is the master bedroom.”

“Yeah ...”

“And this is the house you bought with Lily, right?”

Rhodes’s forehead bunches, his mind working overtime behind his eyes before they widen. “Dee, it’s not—”

I shake my head. “Sorry. It’s silly, and I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s not my place—”

He jerks back. “It sure as hell is your place—well, I hope it will be. Dee, this isn’t the original master bedroom. After our year of grieving, Jake and I decided to renovate this place. His room now is what *was* our old master, and I knocked a wall out and added the ensuite to this one.”

Biting my lip, I’m relieved but also confused. “Wait. Then are you interested in interior decorating or something?”

His eyes widen before he buries his face in my neck and bursts out laughing. “Fuck no. That’s all Mom’s doing. And maybe Skye and Mama Rossi too.”

“It’s nice.” I try to sound upbeat and *not* the embarrassed mess I truly am. As always, something must give me away, because Rhodes straightens and stares into my eyes.

“We don’t censor ourselves around each other, remember? You don’t think I’ve thought about you living in the same room, maybe sleeping in the same bed as you and Flynn shared? But we talk about these things. Just like I talked to Jake before you came over last night, you no doubt had to tell Flynn you might not be home, right?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I just—”

“Stop apologizing, Dee. It’s natural. It’s *human*. Lily may no longer be with us, but her memory is everywhere in this house. I know that. I also understand your questions.”

“You do?”

“Sweet cheeks, I’m a man who gets protective and territorial when I’m with a woman, and you just happen to *live* with your ex-husband and father of your child. A man who you spent years with. A man who I’d be worried about had I not met him and seen for myself that he’s a good guy.” He runs a line of kisses over my shoulder, pausing where he left a mark last night and soothing it with his tongue.

Thank god I have makeup in my bag to cover it.

“Don’t hold back with me, because I like where this is going between us, and I don’t care it’s only been six weeks. Because six weeks with you feels the same as—”

“Six months.”

He smiles and his eyes crinkle. “Exactly. But to add to what I said about this room. Just as I respect Lily enough not to bring another woman into our marital room and bed, I also respect you enough not to do that. Everything in this room was bought new about four years ago.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and throw sass to mask my emotions, tilting my head and arching a brow. “Do you respect me enough *not* to make me run?”

“Nice try, baby. I’ll give you an *A* for effort.”

“Shit.” I drop onto the bed as Rhodes’s expression turns curious.

“What?”

“My bag is in the car since *someone* held me hostage in this bed all night.”

He quirks a brow. “A hostage is someone kept against their will. But since I did do a *very* thorough job of exhausting you, I went downstairs, grabbed your bag, locked your car, and put it in my closet.”

My mouth drops open. Is this man honestly for real? “Just when I thought you couldn’t get any better, Rhodes Anderson, you add thoughtfulness to the growing list of pros to dating you.”

His voice drops low. “Growing list?” My eyes drift down and see my list isn’t the only thing that’s growing right now.

“Stop looking at my dick, Dee, otherwise we’ll never get out of bed.”

My lips curve into a wicked grin. “Well ...” I say in a singsong voice, earning a growl.

Then I’m plucked off the mattress and planted on my feet in front of him. The only thing between us is the top sheet that I managed to bring with me. Rhodes’s amused eyes shift between our bodies, his hands gripping my hips and pulling me hard against him. “We’ve gotta go do this run, sweet cheeks. There’s plenty of time for looking and *touching* anything you want of mine *after* we get back.”

I jut my chin. “I’m gonna hold you to that. Nobody makes me run in the morning and doesn’t pay for it.” I step around him and sway my hips as I walk to his bathroom, yelping when his palm taps my ass.

“I’ll happily be in your debt forever, Dee.”

“You’d like that too much,” I call out as I turn the shower on before facing him again and dropping the sheet, not surprised when I find Rhodes’s hungry gaze eating me up.

He closes the distance between us and slides his fingers into my hair as he kisses me soft and slow before nipping my bottom lip as he pulls back. “Fuck yeah, I would. Meet you downstairs?”

I nod and steal one more kiss. “Thank you for last night, Rhodes,” I whisper, staring deep into his eyes.

“I should be thanking you, but you’re welcome, baby. Best morning ever, waking up with you in my arms. Best way to set me up for the day.” Then he kisses my nose, and I’m left standing there wondering how the fuck I lost the upper hand in that situation. But also, why I don’t give a damn, because I meant what I said. I really, *really* like Rhodes Anderson.

I must if I’m willingly—albeit, begrudgingly—going on a *run* with him. *Jeez*.

IT’S AFTER OUR RUN—WELL, I ran two miles before I waved the white flag and walked the rest of the way— and the downside of being in the honeymoon phase of a new relationship as a single parent is the vanishing opportunity for spontaneous shower sex when there’s a sixteen-year-old in the house.

Rhodes did make a point of personally bringing me a fresh towel, showing he’s ever the responsible host. I repaid the favor by letting him watch me wash myself, following his directions about parts of my body that I might’ve missed and helpful suggestions as to where I could clean more thoroughly, and even then telling me of a very useful pulsing feature on his detachable shower head.

By the time I’d turned off the water and stepped into the towel he thoughtfully wrapped around my relaxed body, he’d kissed me deep and long and promised retribution as soon as we had adult alone time again.

“I’m gonna go downstairs and see if Jake wants to help me make us all some lunch,” I say, looking into his languid gaze.

He quirks a brow. “You’re leaving me here like *this*?” He punctuates his point with a roll of his hips, making me smile.

“I’m rather looking forward to seeing what kind of payback you might dish up.” I quickly brush my mouth against his, earning a growl when I touch the tip of my tongue to the seam of his lips before stepping out of reach. I do pause at the door to watch him strip off his running shorts, enjoying the view of his tight, naked ass as he steps into the shower box and turns the water back on.

“Hey, Rhodes?”

“Yeah?” he looks over his shoulder at me, and I make a point of dragging my eyes slowly over his body, seeing the benefits of watching and delayed gratification. “More than two strokes and it’s playing with yourself.” I shoot him a wink then giggle as I close the door behind me.

Having dried off and dressed again—this time in loose-fitting lounge pants and a Blackhawks tee—I move along the hall to the kitchen where I find a fresh-faced Jake sitting at the dining table reading something on his phone.

He lifts his head and jerks his chin up. “Hey. I was beginning to think I needed to send out a search party.” My eyes go wide and his lips twitch. “Nah. Just kidding.”

A surprised giggle bursts out of me as I stand there and stare at this kid. “You’re hard to get a read on, you know.”

Jake shrugs. “Not really. I’m a growing young man who has his head screwed on straight and his eyes on the prize—and it *isn’t* sleeping my way through my junior year. I also want to see Dad happy, and happiness seems to ooze out of his pores whenever you’re around.”

I bite my lip to somehow stop my heart from bursting all over the floor.

“But I *am* really fu—freaking hungry, so I was looking up some of the recipes on your website and seeing what we have in the kitchen.”

“Okay. Show me what you’ve found.”

His eyes flash before he pushes his chair back and walks over to me, putting his phone on the countertop in front of us. We scroll through a few of the light-lunch recipes in conjunction with the relevant demonstration videos I've done for them. A lot of them are already in Jake's favorites on the vlogging platform's website.

"What about my chicken pot pie? It may not be super healthy, but it'll fill you up."

His lips tug on one side, the beginnings of a dimple pop out. When I narrow my eyes at him, his grin gets bigger. "Dad tried to make it a few months ago and failed miserably. I swear the smell of burnt milk lingered for days after that."

"What are you two up to?" Rhodes says, coming up close behind me. He wraps an arm around my waist and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"I'm trying to persuade Dee to make the dish-that-shall-not-be-named."

Rhodes chuckles and points his finger at his son. "Hey, kid. Don't embarrass me in front of my favorite chef. I kind of like her. Besides, she can probably make that meal with her eyes closed."

I look up at him and scrunch my nose, waving my hand in front of us in a 'maybe/maybe not' gesture, making them both laugh. "Cutting the vegetables can get a bit dicey with your eyes closed, even with *my* knife skills."

"Okay, little master. How about you wow us with your *skills*, and Jake and I can be your sous-chefs?"

"*Or* ... you could pour a coffee, sit over there and read the paper, while Dee and I cook for you." I don't miss the way his eyes are begging his dad to do that exact thing.

I turn in Rhodes arms and tip my face to his. "Yeah, *Dad*. Why don't you go take a load off and let us cook for you? Besides, an old man like yourself must need to recuperate after such an energetic morning ..."

Rhodes's lips twitch and his eyes fill with amusement just as Jake starts making gagging sounds from behind us. I gasp

when it clicks what I've said. "Oh my god, no. *No*. I didn't mean," I splutter before whirling around and pointing at the laughing teen. "You have a dirty mind, young man."

Jake holds his hands in the air. "Hey. I said I'm focusing on my future, not that I'm blind, deaf, and dumb. I am my father's son, after all."

Rhodes buries his face in my neck and laughs before straightening and giving me a discreet tap on the ass. "Feed me, beautiful. Make my son's day by letting him cook with his idol."

And damn if that doesn't melt my heart too.

I shouldn't have been surprised, but every step of the way, Jake is an avid participant. He asks questions, he checks if he's chopping the vegetables the right size, and when I correct his cutting technique to make it smoother and easier, he shows he has natural talent.

"So what do you wanna do after you finish school?" I ask while I'm greasing the pie dish.

"I kind of sway between medical school or something like a cop or a firefighter." He nods toward the living room where Rhodes is sitting on the couch watching a football game on TV. "I see Dad go to work, and even knowing he could get hurt or worse, but he's trained to make the best decisions and follow protocol to ensure he gets to come home at the end of every shift. It's honorable, and I like the idea of serving the community and helping people."

I blink rapidly, wishing I had an onion to blame for my wet eyes. "And med school? Do you want to be a doctor for the same reason?"

He looks up from the chicken he's browning on the stovetop and studies me for a second before he nods. "Yes and no. You know about Mom, right?"

"Yeah, Jake," I say softly.

"Right. So, I've always thought that if I could ever do something to help families and kids who were in the same situation, then I would do it."

“That’s very thoughtful.”

He shrugs like it’s no big deal, even though we both know it is. “So research then?”

“Yeah. I like the idea of helping in any way I can so that other people don’t have to go through what Mom went through.”

I pause for a moment before I move beside him and wrap an arm around his shoulders, giving him a gentle squeeze. “You’re a good kid, Jake Anderson. Your mom would be very proud of the man you’ve become.”

“I hope so. I’ve got a good Dad, that helps too.”

Glancing over at his father, I sigh and—not for the first time—thank the universe for making our paths cross, and for giving him and Jake each other too.

Jake turns my way and snickers, having caught me gawking at Rhodes. “She’d have liked you, you know?”

My body jerks at this unexpected revelation. “I hope so.”

“I may have only been ten, but Dad has made sure I remember her. She was all about being positive and shining her bright light on those who need it. It helps that you’re hot and you make him laugh, and you don’t let anyone get away with shit.”

“Stop before you make me cry,” I say with a snuffle.

“What, you mean *again*?” he teases. When I meet his eyes, he pulls out the same charming ‘butter wouldn’t melt’ grin his father has shot me a few times. “Am I good enough for lava cake?”

“I dunno. You didn’t say you wanted to become a chef. That would’ve earned *huge* brownie points.”

He smirks. “Oh, I do this for fun. I figure if I learn how to cook, then the chicks will dig it. Hey, maybe you should do a video called ‘Food Men Can Make to Impress Their Dates.’”

Bumping him with my shoulder, I shake my head, trying hard not to laugh but ending up doing it anyway as we get

back to the task of finishing lunch.

No kitchens or food items were harmed in the making of the meal, and not only did I get to watch Jake have a blast cooking with me, but it also gave me a new video idea—maybe even a whole new business idea—which I make a mental note of to brainstorm later: online cooking lessons for kids. Maybe a home economics course aimed at teaching the basics and working up to making things like pie and lava cake.

To make a good afternoon an even better one, Jake further proved just how great he is when he not only cleared the dishes away, but also announced he was walking to his grandparents' house three blocks over and wouldn't be back for a few hours, giving us even more unexpected adult alone time.

Something Rhodes did *not* waste any time on making the most of.

Rhodes

I keep checking the clock all shift, which is never a good thing to do on a twenty-four. But today's a little different, because in a few hours, Jake is going to be taking his driving test at the DMV.

He's been working toward it for months. He's studied and practiced, and if anyone deserves to pass with flying colors and get his permit, it's my son.

Unfortunately, his appointment clashed with my shift, but my dad, Don, and Lily's dad, Connor, are taking him together, and Jake promised to call me as soon as he gets out, whatever the outcome.

Little does he know, we've got something planned for him. Dad and Connor are acting as wingmen in our endeavor, because if we're on a callout when he finishes, they're going to bring him to the firehouse. And if we're not, Marco and I have arranged with our Captain to run an errand that just happens to take us past the DMV office. Because nothing short of saving lives and property will stop me from being there for this next important milestone in Jake's life.

Marco, our friend and colleague, Zach, and I are all sitting in the big open space living/dining/kitchen area of the firehouse when Scotty walks into the room, four big white bags in his hands, and a bunch of giant blue balloons trailing behind him with the strings tied around his wrist. "Scotty, what's with the balloons?" I ask.

After dumping the bags on the dining table, he shifts the strings from his wrist to a chair then grins at me. “You only get your license once, right?”

“That’s if you get it the first time, yes ...”

“Well, Jake’s a hell of a lot smarter than me.”

“That’s a given,” Marco calls out, earning the middle finger from Scotty, who rolls his eyes at his lieutenant and turns back to me.

“Therefore, if we’re gonna congratulate him, it’s gotta be big. Most of us have watched him grow up. You’ve gotta let us all celebrate this too.”

He’s not wrong. I was already working here when Jake was born. Marco and I met at the academy, and Scotty wasn’t that far behind us, joining the CFD a few years later. Zach has been here about eight years, but all of us at the station are like family. And our partners, girlfriends, wives, and kids are all part of that family just as much as our blood relatives are. When you put your lives in each other’s hands every single call we attend, you get close. Even Scotty.

I get up and cross the room before reaching out and opening one of the bags. My mouth drops open at the sheer amount of streamers and party horns and hats, and a shiny foil sign that says it’s fifteen feet long on the label. Quirking a brow at him, I nod at the bags. “I said a few things, not the whole shop, dude.”

“Hey. Some of us don’t have sixteen-year-old sons, and we’re living vicariously through you. This is a big moment in a teenager’s life. First you get facial hair, then your voice breaks, and then you get your license and then you can get laid.”

I groan, Marco whistles through his teeth, and Zach throws his head back and laughs.

“Stop right there, Scotty. I thought we’d kept Jake away from you so he *wouldn’t* be corrupted,” Marco says, joining my side.

“Hey. I resent that,” he mutters as he spreads all the different party supplies over the dining table. “I actually learned a lot of things at the shop yesterday.”

“You did go to the *party* shop, right? Not the sex shop next door?” Zach muses, walking over to join us, taking in the loot, and shaking his head. “Dude, you got a piñata. This is a celebration, not a five-year old’s birthday party.”

Scotty grins and holds up a papier-mâché Tiki. “Now hear me out. Nothing says congratulations like hitting a cardboard vessel full of candy with a stick more than this.”

“That piñata is a tiki. This isn’t a luau.”

“Not my fault they were out of unicorns.”

My eyes are nearly bugging out of my head, but I let *that* little nugget of goodness go and move on. “Again, I appreciate you helping me out with all this, Scotty, but don’t you think you got a bit too much?”

He waves me off and pulls out a cardboard party hat before reaching up to place it on top of Zach’s head. “Look! It’s perfect, right?” The hat is in the shape of a red, black, and white racing car helmet with the words ‘Vroom vroom’ on it.

“It’s *something*, alright.” Zach’s lips twitch as he pulls it off and studies it.

“Scotty ... just wondering, was the sales assistant female by any chance?” Marco asks, and suddenly realization hits.

“*Now* it all makes sense.”

To his credit, Scotty shrugs, his lips curling into a guilty smirk as he lifts his hands in the air. “Look, can I help it if an attractive female wants to talk me into buying a bunch of stuff for my ‘son’s party?’”

I can’t stop the chuckle that bubbles in my chest. Only Scotty would get conned by a woman into dropping a ton of coin at a party store. “Please tell me you didn’t invite said attractive female to your *imaginary* son’s birthday party.”

“Hey. If she calls, I’ll fess up. If she doesn’t, she got a good sale out of me.”

“Or me, since I gave you a fifty for all of this. Usually, the only person I give money to and don’t get change from is Jake himself.”

“This is for Jake. It’s an investment in his future as a stud who gets all the chicks when he’s driving around like the coolest kid at school.”

“*Or*, you know, he’s already a good kid *and* a cool kid, and he probably doesn’t need a car to get laid,” Marco says.

“Hey! Enough of that. I’m far too young for grandchildren.”

“Why are you worried? Didn’t you tell me you had to raid the emergency-condom stash last weekend when you—”

That earns my best friend an elbow in the ribs, which makes him grunt and shoot me a ‘what the fuck’ look. Zach’s eyes bug out of his head before he chuckles under his breath.

Friends, who’d have ‘em?

“Wait, you got laid, Rhodes? Who’s the lucky girl?” Scotty asks, the party-supply-girl discussion all but forgotten.

I level him with a pointed stare. “She’s not a *girl*. She’s my girlfriend, and *no*, I’m not going to talk about my sex life at work.”

“You told Marco,” he retorts.

“He’s also been with me for close to twenty years, and Jake’s my god son. That gives me certain need-to-know privileges.”

Scotty tilts his head, his mind working overtime. “But wait, you have an emergency condom box? My parents would never have done that.”

“Your parents probably didn’t think you’d need them,” Luca strolls into the kitchen with a workout towel wrapped around his shoulders, his hair wet.

“Hey. I’ll have you know I went through *more* than my fair share of condoms when I was in high school.”

Luca smirks. “Was that third-year senior, or fourth?”

“Fuck you, Rossi,” Scotty retorts with a laugh, sobering when he catches the quirked brow of Marco.

“What have I told you about telling your lieutenant to fuck off, firefighter?” he asks.

Scotty blanches but narrows his eyes when Marco can’t keep up the act any longer.

“Jeez, Scotty. Breathe. I’m screwing with ya.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket with a text.

“Oh, and if you ever need a pick up line at a party, just pull out a party blower like this. It’ll *definitely* get you a laugh—or a phone number,” Scotty says as I open my messages and smile at Dee’s name on screen.

Dee: Any news yet? I was thinking I could arrange dinner for Jake tonight and send it to the house.

Rhodes: No news yet, and how come my son gets takeout to his door and I don’t? Have I not earned that privilege yet?

Dee: You earn it every time we’ve had adult alone time in the past two weeks. But it’s only once you get your driving permit for the first time, and I know that Jake likes my lava cake, so ...

Rhodes: Wait ... how do you know that?

Dee: ’Cause he stole your phone that night I gave you a doggy bag to take home to him.

I bark out a laugh, realizing the room has gone quiet. I turn to find four sets of eyes watching me like I’ve grown two heads or something. I ignore them and return to my phone.

Rhodes: That kid. Swear to god, he’s going to turn me gray.

Dee: Oh, I dunno, I think you’d look good with a few more grays. You could be my sexy, silver fox.

Rhodes: You’d like that, would you?

Dee: Yep. It’s truly unfair how guys can look hot with that salt-n-pepper look, yet women still color their hair until they

can't anymore.

Rhodes: I think you'd look sexy whatever color hair you had.

Dee: Smooth, honey. Real smooth. You already know I'm a sure thing. No need to sweet-talk me.

Rhodes: I've never sweet-talked you. I only speak the truth. Honesty policy, remember?

Dee: Damn. Can you stop being so perfect? You're gonna give me a complex

Rhodes: Hey. You cook like a dream, you run with us even though you hate it, and never before have I seen a woman wear a pair of jeans that makes me jealous of the damn denim. Do you need me to go on? Because I'm barely scratching the surface when it comes to you, and I can't wait to burrow deeper and stay there.

I don't even hesitate to press send, because when it comes to Dee, she may say she's a sure thing, but I mean every single word. The more time I spend with her, the more things I learn about her, the more I want to know. She's a slow riser in the morning, but the minute I kiss her and roam my hands over her skin, she sparks alight like a freshly lit fuse. She's a dream with Jake, she's the best mom to Harvey, and the fact she and Flynn put their own lives and interests aside to keep a steady ship for their son after they split up is more than I think most other adults would ever consider.

Scotty is still proudly showing off his party shop wares when my phone vibrates in my hand.

Expecting it to be Dee, I freeze when dad's name appears on the screen.

Dad: You better get your butt here, son. Because our boy just passed with flying colors, and I know you're the one person he's going to want to see when we walk out of this office.

"Fuck yeah!" I yell, earning the attention of the entire crew now gathered around the dining table. "Luc tell the Cap we're

offline for twenty minutes. I'll have my handheld on if he needs us.”

“On it,” Luca says, running out of the room and toward the Captain’s office. As he goes to leave, the captain’s daughter London happens to be in the hallway and the two of them crash into each other. There’s no mistaking the blush that covers the young woman’s cheeks as Luca says something I cannot hear before rushing away. *What was that about I wonder?*

While we wait for Luc to come back, I bring up my conversation with Dee and type another message.

Rhodes: He passed! On route to see him now.

Dee: That’s awesome. Tell him congrats for me and that he’s earned lava cake on demand for a month.

Rhodes: And what do I get?

Dee: You get me on demand for as long as you want. If you wanna swap that for dessert ...

Rhodes: Saving this text as evidence. Talk soon, sweet cheeks.

A minute later, party supplies loaded, the guys and I are headed to the DMV office, my chest swelling with pride and my heart full.

We’re only in the parking lot for five minutes before Dad, Connor, and a beaming Jake step out onto the sidewalk. ‘Drive My Car’ by The Beatles is blasting from Zach’s cellphone, and all of us are looking a sight in cardboard race car helmet hats, party blowers in our mouths, and a huge ‘Congratulations’ sign hanging from the side of the truck. As soon as we see him, the guys start cheering and clapping as I move forward and shake hands with Dad and Connor, both of them seemingly just as proud as I am. I lock eyes with my son and pull him in for a huge bear hug, lifting him off the ground as I do it.

“Thanks, Dad. One more tick off the list,” he says for my ears only.

“Your mom would be crying right about now.”

He laughs, and we pull apart, my hand hooked around his neck and pressing our foreheads together. “Got something for you.”

Jake looks over my shoulder at the guys, grinning from ear to ear. “You mean my own personal CFD cheer squad? Wait ... is that a tiki piñata?”

I snort. “One guess who was in charge of decorations.”

“God, Scotty is something else.” He turns back to me. “Right. If it’s not this—which is fucking cool—what is it? Dee’s lava cake?” Jake’s expression is so hopeful I throw my head back and laugh.

“She sends her congrats, and apparently you have dessert on demand for a month.”

He actually does a fist pump at that. “Awesome.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I shake my head at him.

Connor comes over and nods at me. A silent conversation passes between us before he cups Jake’s shoulder. “Don, Rhodes, and I, along with your grandmothers, decided to band together and get you something to show you just how proud we are of the man you’ve become and the man we know you’ll continue to be. So close your eyes and give me your hand ...”

Jake closes his eyes, and I don’t miss his breath catching as Lily’s dad drops something into his outstretched palm. Slowly, he opens his eyes, his mouth dropping wide at the blue Ford key ring with the car key attached for the 2005 Red Ford Ranger XLT truck we bought for him.

“No way,” he rasps, his voice thick with wonder. He jerks his gaze to me first, then his grandfathers before he looks to the parking lot where Connor left it after arriving ‘late’ for Jake’s appointment.

“No fucking way! Yes!” He hugs Don and then Connor, then turns to me and shakes his head in disbelief. “You said I’d have to save up five grand for you to match my savings. You

totally lied,' he says with a laugh before tackle-hugging me then near on *running* toward his new truck.

Dad comes up beside me and hooks an arm around my shoulders. "You did good, son."

"Thanks," I say gruffly. It's hitting me that this is another step toward Jake growing up and getting closer to being an adult.

"Proud of you. And I know if Lils was here, she'd be crying buckets already," Dad adds.

I snort, because he's not wrong. "She'd have also insisted we install GPS to track him in it."

"You mean you haven't?" Connor chuckles.

"First thing I did. I'm not an idiot. He's a good kid, but I was a sixteen-year-old boy with a car too."

"Yep. Know that, 'cause it was around that time Lily started talking about the cute football player at school with the cool old mustang."

Don soon joins us laughing. "That car. I swear it was off the road more times than it was on."

"At least we got him something reliable."

"He's a credit to you, Rhodes."

I look between my two dads, the men who've always had my back before, with, and after Lily. Not once did I ever feel alone, and in the hard times—moments like this when there's a milestone in my son's life that Lily and I always wondered about—I've known Lily is right here with us, cheering him on, blowing her own party whistle, and beaming from ear to ear with tears streaming down her face, because that's just the kind of woman she was.

And ironically, she'd also be the kind of woman who'd be texting me to see if he'd passed yet and promising his favorite meals on demand for a month when he did.

I pull out my phone and bring up my text string with Dee, smiling as I type out a message for her and counting down the

hours until I can see her again.

Rhodes: I can't work out whether my son liked the lava cake boon or his new truck more, but I do know that his dad likes you a hell of a lot and is looking forward to crawling into my bed to find you in it in the morning. Get some sleep, sweet cheeks, because I'm in the mood to show you my appreciation.

Not even thirty seconds later, I receive her reply.

Dee: See what I mean, honey? You're perfect.

Rhodes: If you think I'm perfect, then that must mean you're perfect for me.

Dee: Stop being swoony when I'm not there to jump you.

That makes me smile.

"Now that's a good look on you, son. Wanna tell me what has you smiling like a loon?" Connor asks from beside me.

I slide my phone into my back pocket and glance between my father-in-law and my dad, who's also now watching me closely with a curious expression on his face.

"The *woman* who put this smile on my face is called Dee."

Connor's slow-growing grin hits me right in the middle of my chest. He cups my shoulder and gives me a squeeze. "Well, I hope to meet her at your birthday party in a few weeks then." *In other words, bring her along.*

"What birthday party is that?" I ask, playing dumb, because I'd already overheard Jake on the phone with Dad double-checking my shift schedule.

To his credit, Connor doesn't even try and cover his slip of the tongue. "You know your mother wasn't going to let you turn forty without a celebration. But I'm serious, Rhodes, bring Dee. I haven't seen you smile like that in years, which means she's special, and if she's special to you, we want to welcome her into the family."

I find nothing but absolute sincerity in his gaze. Lily's parents are the gift that keep giving, even six years later. "Okay. I'll bring her."

“Good. But let’s not tell the moms,” Dad adds with a wicked grin. “Maybe the surprise can be on *them* this year, instead. If anything, it’ll give Connor and I some entertainment besides Scotty trying to be funny.”

Laughing, we walk over to join the guys and Jake who are all still surrounding his new truck

Dee

It's been situation-normal for the last few weeks. I film, edit, and upload two videos a week. I work at the restaurant during school hours, deferring to my restaurant manager and head chef the rest of the time, and for just one night a week, I run the kitchen like I used to. I find this keeps my finger on the pulse with my staff and also helps with morale and camaraderie, as well as giving them the opportunity to show their boss—me—how good they really are.

The afternoons and nights are spent with Harvey and Flynn when he's home. There has also been a lot of adult alone time with Rhodes, but as far as actual sleepovers go, we give ourselves one weekend night a week. Harvey knows where I am and that I'll be back after his time with his dad. Otherwise it's been stolen moments during the day or going over for a few hours after Harvey has gone to bed for the night. Once, Rhodes and I *planned* to go see a movie, but somehow got waylaid and ended up eating polish sausage sandwiches from Jim's Original on the side of the road, then making out like teenagers in the front seat of his car.

Life is good, and the more time that passes, the deeper I fall for the guy and Jake and the promise of what a future with our combined families could look like—the more I want to dive in headfirst and get on with it already. I've never been surer about my feelings before, which doesn't say a lot for my first marriage. A lot of it has to do with the stage of my life I was in when Flynn and I first met and how well I know myself and what I want now that I'm closer to forty than thirty.

There's a lot to be said for maturity when dating after a divorce—albeit an amicable and mutual one. You know what you don't want, and what your must haves and must *not* haves are. You also know that when you find a rare diamond with a heart of gold, who is thoughtful, kind, sexy, charming, a great dad, and an incredible man, lover, and friend—you hold on tight. And as a divorced thirty-seven-year-old woman, I knew I might find another partner to spend time with, I just never anticipated I'd meet a man quite like Rhodes.

Now it's a Saturday afternoon, and I'm snuggling on the couch with Harvey as he reads me a book about ocean animals that his Auntie Faith gave him while I wait for Rhodes to pick me up.

Skye and Cohen had a beautiful baby boy a few weeks ago, and remembering what it was like to have a newborn, Rhodes and I decided we'd wait until they'd settled in at home and at least got into some sort of routine before visiting. Rhodes worked yesterday, so after sleeping this morning, we're on our way to meet the baby.

My phone vibrates against the coffee table with a text message.

I pick it up, expecting it to be Rhodes. Instead, it's Skye texting in our girls group chat. Recently, it's become a bit of a parenting forum with all of us moms—except Renee, who isn't there yet—giving Faith advice about teething babies who never sleep and Skye about everything new-mom related.

Skye: I never thought I'd ever send a text like this but, Dee, can you PLEASE bring some cabbage with you and maybe a mouth guard for my vampire baby?

Dee: Cabbage, check. I'm guessing those milk makers are working overtime. And mouth guard, that's probably frowned upon until at least six months ...

Skye: What about numbing cream then? Is that a thing? Like maybe the stuff that is supposed to prolong orgasm. Would that work?

Dee: On your nipples? Um ... NO.

Faith: God I don't envy you. Those first six weeks of nursing were SO much fun. I swear my nips are permanently deformed after my two milk demons

Dee: It's also probably frowned upon to call your children demons.

Gilly: Oh no, demons definitely works.

Renee: Just saying, you ladies are TOTALLY making motherhood sound fantastic.

Skye: It's all good until you squirt your husband in the eye and almost blind him.

Gilly: Hey, some men like that. Breast milk, I mean. Or being squirted on. Wait ...that doesn't sound right.

Faith: Eww. That's our brother you're talking about.

Dee: We're close, but not THAT close. Haha.

Gilly: Skye, lanolin cream and nipple shields. Maybe Dee can get you some on the way over.

Dee: Now THAT I can do. Any other requests?

Skye: My brain back? This morning I put the laundry in the dishwasher and poured my freshly brewed decaf down the sink before I'd even had a sip. Then I cried about it.

Faith: I shouldn't laugh, but that's funny.

Skye: Cohen laughed too until I threatened a home vasectomy and suddenly he was my perfect husband again.

Dee: If it helps, it does get better.

Skye: I hear you make a pretty mean lava cake. That would make me feel better.

I laugh, earning a puzzled look from Harvey.

Dee: I'll see what I can do. See you soon.

Gilly: If you're delivering desserts, your favorite sister-in-law is also a fan.

Dee: You're my only sister-in-law

Gilly: Therefore I'm your favorite.

Faith: Sisters rank higher, and I have a three-year-old who loves to see her Aunty Dee.

Dee: Let's see if I can sweet-talk Rhodes into making a few pit stops.

Skye: Do what you have to do, Dee. Take one from Rhodes for the team.

Faith: Not sure Dee sees that as a hardship.

Renee: Rhodes does seem to be very 'happy' these days.

Dee: Not talking about it with my kid next to me.

Gilly: It's okay. We'll wait till Rhodes's birthday party to get the details.

Wait ... what?

Dee: Please tell me I've missed a memo somewhere. Rhodes is having a birthday party? How do I not know this?

Renee: Oh shit.

Gilly: I'm sure he'll tell you.

Faith: It's supposed to be a surprise. Maybe he doesn't know about it?

Renee: He knows. His father-in-law let it slip a few weeks back.

A few weeks? Father-in-law? Then it clicks. Lily's dad. Lily's parents will be there. Maybe that's why. I mean, I get it. I can't imagine inviting Rhodes to an event with Flynn's parents. Although, I also can't imagine *not* at least *mentioning* it.

"Mom? You just went stiff." Harvey sits upright and looks at me.

I school my confused frown and smile at my son. "I was surprised, that's all."

"Ooh. I like surprises. Well, except if they're for me. Then I wanna know what it is."

"I know that 'cause you always try to peek at Christmas presents, don't you?" I lean and tickle him, laughing as his

squeals fill the air.

“Now, Mom has to call the restaurant and put in a few dessert orders for Aunty Faith and Gilly. Do you wanna run to your room and make sure you have everything packed for when Rhodes and I drop you off at Nana and Pop’s place?”

“Yep.” He jumps to his feet and kisses me before running away.

I turn back to my phone.

Renee: Dee, I know he’ll invite you. That man is in so deep I doubt he’ll ever wanna come up for air.

Gilly: Seriously, Dee.

Dee: I didn’t even know it was his birthday soon.

Skye: Probably ’cause you don’t show each other your birthday certificates before jumping into bed.

Dee: I should’ve known though. What kind of girlfriend doesn’t know when her man’s birthday is ... and it’s FORTY. That’s a big one.

Faith: Ask him when you see him. He probably had a man moment and assumed you’d be there anyway.

Okay. That I can do. Honesty policy rules apply. Just ask, communicate, clear up any confusion, and then go from there. Yes, that’s exactly what I’ll do.

Skye: And if he makes you sad, tell him he gets no more cooking—or cookie—from you.

Skye: Sorry. Ignore me. I’m hormonal, horny, and helplessly leaking breast milk everywhere. I’m a hot mess of a dairy farm.

Faith: Oh my god, Skye. Now all I can imagine is you turning into a fembot and squirting milk out of your norks like a lethal weapon.

Gilly: Thanks for that visual, now Ez is looking at me strangely.

Dee: Tell him to be nice to his wife, otherwise Faith and I will beat him up like we used to do. Okay, ladies. Thanks for the entertainment. See you soon, Skye.

Skye: Don't forget the cake!

"THOSE TWO ARE NATURALS," Rhodes says as we pull out of Cohen and Skye's street after a short visit. By the time we'd run all our errands and got there, baby Austin had just woken up.

"Yeah. I remember being freaked the fuck out when I first brought Harvey home. *And* Flynn was starting his internship, so he knew stuff but not the stuff you need to know."

Rhodes laughs. "Yep. The hands-on stuff you can never learn beforehand, because babies don't come with instruction manuals."

In the comfortable silence that falls between us, I contemplate whether I'd actually want to go through the newborn stage again. There comes a point where you pass the constant dependency age and it seems like there's a sliver of light at the end of the parenting tunnel.

Rhodes reaches over and squeezes my hand. "You're thinking really hard about something over there. Wanna share with the class?"

I turn my body toward his as much as my seat belt will allow and study him. "Would you ever want more kids?" I blurt out. Rhodes's head jerks, his eyes widening.

"Shit. That's the last thing I expected to come out of your mouth."

Grinning at him, I shrug. "Well, I guess seeing our friends starting their families, and remembering what it was like when we were younger and going through it all with our own kids, it makes you wonder."

"Okay. That makes sense."

“And I like this thing we’re building.”

His lips curve up, his fingers flexing against mine. “We’re already built, sweet cheeks. Now we’re driving those foundations deep so nothing can shake us.”

I squeeze his hand too tight at his words that he grunts.

“You like that.”

“I like *you*.”

“Thank fuck for that, otherwise I *would* have to stalk you,” he says, making us both laugh. “But to answer your other question, if this thing with us continues the way it’s going and you had your heart set on having another baby—and you wanted to have that baby with me—”

“Um ... I’m not thinking about *practicing* making babies with anyone else, honey,” I say in a ‘duh’ voice.

“Good,” he growls, his voice gruff and rumbly and all kinds of sexy. “What I mean is, if you wanted to have that baby with me, then I couldn’t think of anything more beautiful than creating a life with you. We make damn cool kids by ourselves. Combine our DNA and we’d have a genius.”

“You didn’t say *you* wanted another one, though.”

“Because I have Jake, and you’ve given me Harvey, and together, I think those two will keep us on our toes for a while. I think we have two amazing kids between us, and that’s enough for me.”

“I like that.”

“You do?” he asks, tilting his head and glancing sideways at me while keeping his eyes on the road.

“You sound surprised. I’m a thirty-seven-year-old single mom with a kid and a restaurant that I may not run day-to-day, but I am still the face of the business and have to do all the important stuff behind the scenes. And I also have this sexy boyfriend who works hard, and when he has time off, I enjoy being with him. So none of that is conducive to starting all over again and having a baby.”

“Really?” He actually sounds surprised.

I reach over and rest my hand on his head. “Yes, really. Especially that last part.”

“I *did* like that bit.”

My lips twitch. “Oh you did, did you?”

“Yep. and the bit about spending time with me.”

I scrunch my nose up, and he growls when he catches me doing it. “Don’t do that when I can’t kiss that look off your face.”

I twist my mouth to the side. “What look is that?”

“A look that has me grateful we’re almost home. At least then I can bury myself inside you when you’re turning me on.”

I remember that there’s still something I haven’t asked about, and I must wear my nervousness on my face.

Rhodes turns to me, his brows bunched together in a frown. “Okay. Now *that’s* a look I don’t like.”

“Before we get home and get distracted by each other, can I ask you something under the terms of our honesty policy?”

“You can ask me anything at any time, Dee. If it’s mine to tell, then it’s mine to give you.”

“Stop being swoony,” I mutter, making him chuckle and his lips quirk.

“Nope.” His eyes turn soft and gentle. “What do you wanna know?”

“Gilly let slip that you have a birthday party coming up ...”

“*Fuck,*” he splutters before he slows the car down and pulls over outside a random house about ten minutes from his place. He turns off the engine and faces me. “I’m so fucking sorry. I had every intention to invite you, but then life got in the way and I forgot. The entire *party* slipped my mind, because I’m not exactly jumping for joy at hitting the big four-oh. That’s no excuse, I know, but I truly meant ”

“I thought—”

In the blink of an eye, he’s reached over, undone my seat belt and hauled me to his side, his hands tangling in my hair and holding me there ensuring he has my complete attention. “You thought that because it’s my birthday and both my parents *and* Lily’s parents were going to be there, that I *wouldn’t* want to introduce them all to the woman who has entranced me, who makes me laugh after a bad day, smile at just the thought of her, and has my kid eating out of the palm of her hand?”

“Well, when you put it like that ...” I murmur, biting my lip and looking away, but Rhodes’s flexed fingers in my hair bring my gaze back to his.

“I’ve already told Connor, Lily’s dad, and my dad about you and that I want them to meet you. That’s when they let it slip about the moms’ surprise party plans. I’m sorry that I forgot to mention it.”

“I might forgive you ...”

He brings his face close to mine. “If ...?”

“If you tell me when and where, I can make sure Harvs is taken care of and Suzy is fine to cover me at the restaurant should any emergencies crop up and—”

“Firstly, Harvs can come too.”

My mouth drops open.

“And second, it’s three weeks from today, and I’ve taken the entire weekend off, so if you and Harvey want to stay with us for those nights, I’d love that. Jake has even been asking about seeing Harvey again.”

My head jerks back, my mind spinning like a Ferris wheel on overdrive as I try to catch up.

Instead, I lean my forehead to his and breathe through it until my heart stops racing. Because it may have only been ten weeks since I first laid eyes on this man, but I’ve fallen head over heels in love with him.

“Dee?” he whispers, his voice thick. “Is this a good moment or a ‘shit, he really screwed up’ moment? Because I really wanna kiss the hell out of you, and we’ve gotta get home to my kid.”

“It’s an ‘I can’t believe you’re real and you’re here and that you’re mine’.”

“Dammit. Now I wanna fuck you, and we can’t do that in the car on the side of the road. It would be just our luck for Gio to be on patrol and catch us.”

A giggle escapes my lips at that prospect.

“You’re mine too, Dee. I’m yours and you’re mine. That’s how this works. We’ll take it slow with the kids, but I can’t stop how I feel about you.”

“And how’s that?” I whisper, my heart pounding against my chest.

“You know I love you,” he says, like it’s a foregone conclusion.

The side of my mouth quirks up. “Well, considering I just worked out that I’m in love with you, too, that’s news to m—”

Rhodes shuts me up by slamming his mouth on mine and thrusting his tongue between my lips. I grip his shoulders, his jaw, and do everything possible to get as close as I can to him.

When we pull apart, I stare at him with wonder, my breaths coming hard and fast as I try to slow my heart rate.

Rhodes’s blue eyes roam my face as his perfectly parted lips suck in much-needed air. “I’m the luckiest bastard in the world.”

I shoot him my most wicked grin. “How about we go home and test out just how *lucky* you can get.”

Rhodes

“I’m impressed that Dee is still sticking to the running,” Marco says as he drives the rig toward the elementary school we’re on our way to visit. “She’s not up to our distance, but considering we’re training for something specific and Ezra told me she’s not a running kind of girl, it’s surprising.”

My lips quirk up. “Maybe I give her good incentive to come with us.”

“Like?” Scotty pops his head between the two front seats.

“Your ears flapping?” I ask.

“Nope. Just looking out for my favorite lieutenant,” he says with a shit-eating grin.

Marco snorts and shakes his head. “Stop kissing ass just because Rhodes doesn’t give you as much crap as I do.”

Scotty shrugs, making me chuckle. “Maybe. Or maybe you’re already hooked up and happy, and I like seeing Anderson smile. He’s a bit easier on us when he’s not so ... *tense* ...”

“Damn, Scotty. Them’s fighting words,” Luca calls out from behind us. “He’ll have you on muck-out duty for weeks if you keep this up.”

“Nah,” Scotty replies, slapping my arm. “Rhodes has always looked out for me.”

“I could look out for you a lot better if you weren’t poking the Rossi bear over here and sat your ass back in your seat.”

“Damn, Lieutenant. That’s cold. I was being nice too.”

I roll my eyes and smirk at Marco.

“By the way, does Dee have a sister? I watched one of her videos, and da—*fuck*.” Scotty rubs the back of his head, and I turn my head to find him glaring at Luca. “Luc, what the hell was that—ouch. Quit it.” This time it’s Zach on the end of Scotty’s none-too-impressed glare. “Stop whacking my head.”

“Was seeing if I could knock some brain cells loose. You forget we *know* you, Jones. I’m not sure we’d willingly let you loose on any single woman.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” he grumbles. “Must be good at something if Hayley came back for more.”

Marco growls and spears Scotty a death stare in the rearview. Hayley is Renee’s sister. She and Scotty had a one-time thing earlier in the year, but as far as we all know, it was once and done. *Apparently not ...*

I glance at Scotty to find his hands up in the air in surrender, his eyes locked on Marco’s in the mirror. “Okay. Okay. No talking about that.”

“Smart man,” I snort before facing the front again.

Soon enough, Marco is pulling into a no-parking zone outside the front of the school. “Right,” he says turning round in his seat. “Cap says this is a straight demo and show-n-tell. Nothing flashy. Just take a group and give them a tour of the truck, let them turn the sirens on if they want, and then the teacher will get some photos of them in the driver’s seat.”

“How old are these kids?” Zach asks. “Seems a bit pre-K.”

“Nine and ten. This is a part of their careers-week curriculum I’m told. They each signed up for things they were interested in. This is the first-responder group.”

“All good. We all know how much Jake liked to hang around the firehouse when he was younger,” Luc says, bringing a smile to my face.

“Yeah. And now I barely see him ’cause he’s always out *driving*,” I mutter.

“That boy has goals. He’s not gonna fuck it up by doing anything dumb, and if he does, he’s got three firefighters and a cop to ride his ass. And that’s *before* Connor and Don even get involved,” Marco says with a smirk. “Anyway, he’s a good kid. He has to be—he takes after his godfather.”

“*Say hello to my little friend,*” Luc says in a terrible Al Pacino impression, holding up one hand and then two, and then making a show of slapping Scotty around the ears.

“Hey! Quit it,” the man screeches, making us all laugh, which we’re still doing when the front doors to the administration building open and a middle-aged woman appears, followed by two lines of kids, many of whom are almost pushing each other out of the way to look our way.

“Rhodes!” A familiar, excited voice says. I search the group and sure enough, there’s a wide-eyed and amazed Harvey waving then pointing my way and talking to the guys around him.

“You’re so gonna make his fucking day, aren’t you?” Marco murmurs.

I nod. “You’re right about that.” Then I step forward to greet the teacher and introduce us to the group.

Forty minutes later, all the kids have looked around the rig, asked a million questions, and taken turns at trying gear on. This is part of the job that never sucks.

“Harvey Duncan, can you come up to the front and help me with a little demonstration?” I ask, watching Harv’s eyes go wide and his friends’ expressions turn to shock, wonder, and envy.

He stands and walks over to where Marco, Luca, and I are waiting in front of the group of sitting kids.

“Hey,” I say when he reaches us. “This okay?”

“Um ... *yeah.*” I can tell he’s trying to temper his excitement, but there’s no missing the way he’s holding his shoulders back and his little chest is puffed out.

“Okay,” I reply with a nod before turning my attention back to the group. “So, when there’s an emergency, and a fire engine is needed, the dispatcher—that’s the person who takes the call when you call nine-one-one—will give the call a priority depending on whether it’s urgent or not. Then the bells at the firehouse will ring out. That’s when we have to jump into action, and we have about a minute to get our gear on and hop into the fire engine and hit the road. So, I decided we should make a bit of a competition out of this.” I turn to Marco and Luca and wave my arm at them. “Marco and Luca here are brothers, and they’re always wanting to beat each other—at *everything*.” I reach into my pocket and pull out the stopwatch I stashed there for this very moment and hold it up for everyone to see. “Harvey is going to be in charge of the timer, and when he says ‘go,’ the guys are going to race each other to see who can get geared up the fastest. So, with a show of hands, who here thinks Marco—the oldest brother—is going to win?” About two thirds of the kids put up their hands. “And what about Luca? Who thinks he can beat his big brother?” The rest of the children signal their support.

I turn toward Harvey and hold out the stopwatch. “Okay. So, in a moment, I want you to yell ‘go’ and then stop the clock whenever the first person has finished putting their helmet on. Sound good?” I say, earning a beaming grin and an unmistakable nod.

“Right.” I check that Marco and Luca are set with their gear in front of them.

The rest of the guys standing in a line at the side watching with amusement as the brothers nudge each other with elbows and gesture to the kids to make some noise.

“Okay, everyone, be quiet so the guys don’t miss Harvey’s signal.” I nod down at Dee’s son, and grin at him. “Ready bud?”

“Yep.”

“It’s all up to you now. You start them off whenever you’re ready.”

“On your marks, get ready, and *go!*” he yells, and the guys jump into action while I give a running commentary as the Rossi boys do what they do best—work as fast as possible while joking and jonesing around with each other.

They’re putting on their turnout gear and suspenders, then head cover and jackets. When they’re neck and neck, Luca quickly slips his helmet onto his head and raises his hands over his head in victory with a big “Done!”

Harvey’s eyes widen as he quickly stops the timer and lifts it up my way.

I make a show of widening my eyes like it’s the fastest time I’ve seen. “Wow! That was done in fifty-five seconds flat! Let’s give Marco, Luca, and my helper Harvey here a big round of applause,” I announce, joining Harvey’s classmates as they clap and cheer. I give Harvey’s shoulder a squeeze. “Thanks, Harvs. You can help me anytime.”

“That was *awesome!*” he whispers. “Best day ever!” Then he gives me a hug around my waist and runs back to his friends.

“Now *that* makes it all worthwhile, man,” Marco says, bumping my shoulder.

What can I say? The man isn’t wrong.

DEE: You certainly made my boy’s day today. He called me as soon as he got home and raved about you. I think you’re his hero.

Rhodes: He’s an awesome kid.

Dee: And you’re a good man who made my son feel like the king of the world and most popular kid in the class today.

Dee: Which means now I’m feeling kinda grateful.

Rhodes: Is that so ...?

Dee: Such a shame you're working until tomorrow and I have a private breakfast event I'm catering for in the morning.

Damn.

Rhodes: You do know that this is torture, right?

Dee: Have you eaten yet?"

Rhodes: Not yet. Scotty and the new candidate, Kyle, are on cooking duty, and Scotty tries to put that shit off for as long as possible, usually until someone gets sick of waiting and just cooks instead.

Dee: Can you hold them off for an hour ...?

Rhodes: Yeah. Why ...?

Dee: Tell them dinner is being delivered in an hour and the wait will be worth it.

Rhodes: Sweet cheeks, what are you up to?

Dee: That's for me to know and you to find out.

Dee: But I promise you ... it's not only going to be worth it for the guys ... See you soon.

I turn around from where Luc, Marco, and I are chilling on the couch and let out a high-pitched whistle. "Dinner's being delivered in an hour, so, Scotty and Kyle, you better go make sure the rig is squeaky fucking clean and ready to roll out for our next call."

"What's on the menu?" Scotty asks, looking like a kid on Christmas morning who got everything he asked for.

"Don't know. Don't care. Whatever it is, it'll be fucking delicious. So you better get to work, otherwise I'm sure the guys and I can sit back and make sure no food is wasted."

"I thought you were my friend," Scotty says with a pout.

I snicker and shake my head at him. "I am. But if my woman is feeding you lot, you can bet your ass I'm making you work for it."

"Dee's bringing us food?" Luc asks, suddenly all on board with this conversation. When I nod, he gets to his feet. "Then

I'm gonna help them with the rig, because I remember how good her food was at the BBQ, and that's all the incentive I need to get the chores done before she gets here." Then he's rounding up Scotty and Kyle, and the three of them walk out toward the garage.

"Food deliveries. Someone scored brownie points today, didn't he?"

"Harvey? He *definitely* did. Dee is just *grateful* ..."

Marco smirks knowingly and shakes his head. "Yeah. *Sure*. That's exactly why Dee is bringing food for the crew halfway during a shift." He leans in close. "And 'cause I'm your best friend, I'll keep the guys distracted so you can give her a *tour* of the firehouse."

"You *are* a good friend."

"Indeed. But don't worry," he says, straightening and shooting me a wink. "I'll cash in the favor you now owe me some other time."

Shaking my head at him, I can't help but chuckle. "Of course you will. What else are friends for?"

Just over an hour later, Dee walks in, her arms laden with four big catering trays as she comes through the door. Luca and Scotty rush to her side before I can even get there.

"Damn that smells good, Dee. What did you bring us?" Scotty asks, taking two of the trays off her hands.

"There's lasagna, green salad, those buffalo chicken wings you all loved at the BBQ, and then my specialty Greek orzo dish. And in that one ..." She points to tray Luca has just placed on the dining table. "... there's dessert for now or later. All of it will keep in case you get a callout too," she says before turning her body toward mine. "Hey, honey."

"Hey," I say, wrapping an arm around her waist and kissing her lightly on the lips. "You've probably just become Firehouse 101's favorite person."

Tilting her head, she smirks at me with amused eyes. "Is that such a bad thing? Especially if it means I can visit you

occasionally.”

I dip my chin to bring my mouth to her ear. “You can visit me whenever you want, baby. My day was already good, but you’ve just made it even better.”

She winks, her lips curving into a devilish grin as she lifts her hand to my chest and flexes her fingers against my shirt. “I’m sure there’s still room for improvement.”

Fuck yeah, there is.

I look over my shoulder and meet Marco’s eyes, and with a jerk of his chin, I know I’m covered for at least a while—or until the bells ring.

After taking her hand in mine, we walk out of the living area and along the corridor, toward the back of the station. “So, do you want a tour?” I ask.

“I want to know where your office is.” There’s absolutely no mistaking the low husky tone in her voice. My Dee is feeling grateful, and who am I to deny her—even though I’d never want to in a million years.

As soon as I’ve led her into my office and shut the door, she’s pressing my back against it and crushing her lips to mine. With a groan, I grab her hips and hold her to me, letting her control the kiss for as long as I can stand it before I drag my arms up her back and into her hair. I chase her tongue with mine and deepen the connection, swallowing her moans as we attack each other’s mouths hungrily.

She tears her lips from mine, running them over my stubbled jaw and down to my throat as my hands roam over her back and ass, grinding my hard cock against her, desperate to feel more of her. “How long have we got?” she whispers, dragging her teeth over my neck.

“Not fucking long enough,” I grind out, loving the feel of her but wishing I could lay her out on my desk and bury myself inside her. The memory would definitely improve my mood when doing paperwork later.

She straightens and brushes her lips against mine, pinning me in place with her heated gaze. “Guess I’d better get to

work.” She drops to her knees and works my belt open before I can even utter a single word. Quick as a flash, she reaches inside my pants and pulls me out before locking eyes with mine. She wraps her lips around the tip and swallows me whole.

“*Fuck, baby,*” I groan just as the head of my cock hits the back of her throat.

I rest my hand on top of her hair in the way she likes me to do, watching as she takes me down deep, humming against the sensitive skin and sending jolts of pleasure through my entire body. When she adds her hand to the mix and strokes me tightly in rhythm with the searing hot heat of her mouth, there’s no way in hell I’ll last long.

Still jerking her hand up and down, she moves to my balls before laving them with her tongue and humming. The vibrations make it hard to hold on to any self-control I’m fighting to keep. The whole time, her eyes stay aimed at me. “I’m going to take your cock in my mouth, and you’re going to take what you want. I want the *boss* to take what I’m offering him,” she says before she does exactly that, lifting her lips to the head and swirling her tongue around the sensitive skin before taking me deep again, lightly running her teeth against my aching shaft as she pulls out and does it all over again. Then she moans and reaches around, grabbing the globes of my ass in her palms and pushing me deeper, until I can’t stop rocking my hips.

The erotic sight of my cock disappearing between her lips drives me closer to the knife’s edge. “That mouth ... *damn,*” I grunt.

When she smiles victoriously, her lips stretched tight around my cock, I snap, thrusting in and out. Her moans and whimpers fill my ears as I push deeper and deeper. The sight of her own hand diving between her legs and knowing she’s getting off on this is all it takes for me to shove between her lips again and again.

As soon as Dee’s throat tightens around the head of my cock, I lose the fight. And with a flex of my fingers against her

hair as my only warning, my vision turns white as I growl out my release, my hips jerking as she swallows me down, only stopping when I gently ease her off me.

With her hand still working between her legs, I'm already moving before she knows what I'm doing. I carry her over to the bed lining one side of my office and lower her onto it, jerking her shorts down her legs before diving in face first. Her back arches off the mattress as she quickly buries her face in my pillow, and I suck her swollen clit between my lips at the same time that I push two fingers inside her. I go at her hard, wanting to give back just as good as she gave me, ignoring my reinvigorated cock in the meantime. This is all for Dee, and the entire world could catch fire and it would not stop me from making her come right now.

Thank fuck it doesn't take my girl long—she's so turned on and on a hair's trigger already—I thrust my fingers deep and curl them up as roll my tongue over her clit, and then the sweet, muffled sound of her climax wracking through her fills my ears.

When she finally comes back to earth, I'm kneeling on the floor beside her head. Dropping my lips to hers, we taste each other as we kiss, lazy and slow.

A satisfied smile transform her face. "Best. Day. Ever."

"Love you, Dee."

"Love you too, honey. Also, *really* loved *that*."

"Me too. It was worth missing out on the food."

"Well you *did* eat ..." she says with wicked grin.

My lips twitch. "So did you."

"Touché."

"Indeed. Now let's get cleaned up, and *maybe* Marco did me a solid and saved me a plate."

She shrugs and holds out her hands for me. I pull her to her feet, then we quickly set out to right out clothes again. "If he didn't, there's plenty where that came from. I have an in with the chef, you know ...?"

“Hmm.” I lean in and take one last, long, slow and deep kiss. “I think I have an *in* with her too.”

She laughs against my mouth, and I enjoy every second of it. “Good. Because you can be *in* her, whenever you want.”

“Or just with her. Because sometimes, seeing her is just as good.”

“Dammit. I have to kiss you again. You can’t say sweet, swoony stuff like that and *not* expect me to kiss you.

I can’t help grinning at her and leaning in so she’s all I can see. “Have at it, sweet cheeks. Never gonna stop you doing that.”

Dee

“Why are you looking peaky?”

“I’m not. I’m fine. *Perfectly* fine.”

“Sure you are. That’s why you’re pacing a path into the rug,” Flynn says, looking amused from his stretched-out perch on our couch. “Why are you nervous? You weren’t worried when you met my parents for the first time.”

“Because you were raised by Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver. I just had to play the nice, respectable girl, who their son wanted to sleep with—I mean *date*—and charm them with my perceived innocence.”

Flynn arches a single brow. “Nice ... respectable ... *innocent*? Dee, we’d been banging for about three months at that stage.”

“Yes. But *they* didn’t know,” I snap.

Flynn rolls his eyes at me. “Well, they sure as shit guessed when we got caught making out in the back seat of my dad’s Buick.”

The memory of that night makes me gasp. “Oh my god. I’d forgotten about that.”

He tilts his head and looks up at me. “Bet you’re not nervous now.”

I bite my lip and shake my head. “Thank you.”

“Honestly, you’re an easy sell, but if I was in Rhodes’s shoes—a widow, a single father, and not dating for how long did you say?”

“Six years.”

His eyes widen. “There you go—*six* years—then the decision to introduce the woman I’ve been seeing for the past three months is not one I’d make lightly. Which *means* ...”

“Which means he *wants* me to meet them and for them to meet me.” I study him for a moment. “And how are *you* with me and Harvs meeting the parents and going to this party tonight?”

Flynn swings his legs over the side of the couch and leans his elbows onto his legs. “Honestly, I’m happy for you. I wondered how it would feel, you know—you dating, putting yourself out there, but Rhodes kind of ...”

“Fell into my lap?”

Flynn chuckles and shakes his head. “The way I heard it, it was *you* that needed saving, and there was no falling-into-laps involved.”

“Okay, two things. Stop talking to my brother, or mother, or whoever is giving you the goss.”

“Father. But carry on,” he muses.

My mouth drops open. “I never thought *Dad* would be the one to rat me out.” Flynn, Dad, and Ezra play golf every now and then. Flynn does it a lot for networking, as does Ezra, and Dad is just a retired old man who wants a reason to get out of the house occasionally to have time to himself without Mom giving him a honey-do list.

“Hey,” Flynn replies, holding his hands in the air. “I do kind of know what’s been going on. You’ve been giving me the friendly cliff-notes version—which I appreciate by the way. You’ve gotta ease me into this whole ‘the mother of my kid is dating another man’ situation.”

“Yeah, unlike you, I’ve had a bit of time to get used to you and Sophie.”

He points at me. “See. Exactly. It’s not easy, but—”

“Life never is.”

“Nope.” He pushes to his feet, crosses the room, and puts his hand on my shoulder. “Now, to end this little TED Talk— stop pacing, stop being nervous, and go powder your nose or something. Not that you need it, because you’re beautiful, and you’re going to impress every single person you meet tonight. But the fact you *are* nervous tells me that Rhodes is a good man and must be worth it, because *you’ve* cooked for celebrities and didn’t even break a sweat.”

“I love him, Flynn,” I murmur.

He leans down so his eyes are on my level, his lips curved into a wry smile. “I know you do. This is a good thing, sweetheart?” He straightens, kisses the top of my head, then steps back. “When are you going to realize that men like Rhodes and I will do absolutely anything to earn the love of a good woman like you.”

“And Sophie,” I add, watching as Flynn’s expression softens.

“And Soph.”

“And we’re set for you to pick up Harvs from Rhodes’s place in the morning?”

“Yep. It’s all sorted. Harvs has packed all his stuff for tonight, and he made me promise I’ll be there at nine a.m. sharp, because—”

“You pinky promised you’d take me indoor rock climbing this weekend, and a Duncan man never goes back on a pinky promise,” Harvs announces, walking into the room looking cute as hell and far too grown up in a bright blue button-down shirt and black jeans paired with his favorite—and thankfully clean—pair of white sneakers.

“Son ... did you maybe spray some of my body spray on?” Flynn asks. He bites his lip and tries hard not to laugh and also gag, because as soon as Harvey entered the living room, it’s like we’ve been transported smack bang into the toiletries aisle at Walmart.

The boy at least has the decency to look a little guilty. “Um ...”

A snort escapes my lips before I can cover it with a cough, and I don’t miss the twitch of both Duncan males’ lips.

“At least let me rinse *some* of it off, Harvs. You don’t wanna clear everyone’s nostrils at the party.”

“What do you mean?” Harvey lifts his arms and smells under them. “I think I smell awesome.”

“You smell like your dad, but also like you’ve *bathed* in it, baby. It’s the same as with chocolate, less is more.”

That seems to make sense to him. Flynn winks at me and leads our son to the main bathroom .

About five minutes later, I’m upstairs checking myself in the mirror one last time and grabbing my overnight bag when Flynn calls out from downstairs. “Dee, Rhodes is here.”

I grab my bag, give myself a spritz of my Coco Mademoiselle perfume, and make my way down the stairs, remembering the first time Rhodes picked me up and Flynn answered the door and how nervous I’d been. Ironically, now I’m excited every time I see the man I love get along with my best friend and father of my child.

My past and hopefully my future intermingling—it’s more than I could’ve ever hoped for.

“Hey,” I say as walk down the stairs. Rhodes tips his gaze my way, and going by the flash of heat in his eyes, he approves wholeheartedly. I’m wearing a bronze-colored silk cami underneath a relaxed linen blazer, my favorite skinny black jeans, and leather knee-high boots. It’s smart, sexy, and I knew it would grab Rhodes’s attention and keep him distracted if *he* was nervous too.

He takes my bag out of my hand when I reach him and wraps an arm around me, brushing his lips gently against my cheek. When I look over at Flynn, he nods approvingly at me. Harvey is standing beside Jake talking his ear off and oblivious to anything except him.

“We’d better get going. If I’m going to pretend I have no idea that this party is happening, then I need to arrive on time or else my mom will have a conniption.”

“Good to see you again, Rhodes. Don’t be a stranger on my account,” Flynn says as the two men in my life shake hands before he turns to Harvey and ruffles his hair. “Bye, kid. Be good, and I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning. Rhodes said he’ll make sure you’re ready by nine.”

My head jerks to Rhodes then Flynn, and I begin to wonder how much I missed. “Um ...” I say, a little freaked out.

Flynn smirks and leans in, dropping his voice to a stage whisper. “You be good too, Dee. And don’t be nervous.”

My mouth drops open as Rhodes chuckles beside me and squeezes me tightly.

“Let’s go, guys. We don’t want Grandma Anderson blowing up my phone.” Jake laughs, Harvey smiles, looking adorably confused but joining in on Jake’s amusement.

We’re at the bottom of the front stairs when Flynn calls out to us. “Rhodes, look after them for me.”

“Always, Flynn.”

“Yep,” my ex-husband replies, looking between us with an intense, warm gaze. “I know you will.”

This is not just a goodbye ... This is a *moment*—a passing of the torch. My tear-filled eyes meet Flynn’s soft ones, and it’s clear that was Flynn giving Rhodes his seal of approval, and that means more to me than I ever thought possible.

Rhodes didn’t miss it either. He pulls me into his side and presses his lips to my temple and holds me there. “C’mon, sweet cheeks. Parties to be surprised with, kids to feed, parents to introduce you to.”

Nodding, because I can’t trust myself to speak, I blow a kiss to a smirking Flynn and let Rhodes lead me to his truck.

I wonder what I could call a video where I’m so deliriously happy that all I want to eat is candy. Maybe ‘Foods to Make

when Life is Good.'

"SURPRISE!"

"Happy Birthday!"

"Woo-hoo! Party time!" Both Scotty and Harvey yell. *Heaven help me.*

I try to step away from Rhodes to give people the opportunity to greet and hug him, but his fingers tighten in mine and keep me there.

"There's my boy," says a short, sprightly woman with curly brown hair and a huge, warm smile as she embraces Jake. "As handsome as his father."

"Ugh, Mom. I'm right here. You know, your *actual* son?" Rhodes teases, earning narrowed eyes from his mom.

"I *suppose* you're alright," she adds with a smirk before she wraps him up in a hug. Then she turns that bright smile my way, and I'm suddenly being released by Rhodes and pulled in for my own big welcome. "And you, Dee, you're as beautiful as Rhodes says. I'm Nora—Rhodes's mom if you hadn't guessed."

My head jerks to my smiling boyfriend. "You talked about me?" I mouth.

His brows bunch together and he tilts his head. "Why wouldn't I?" he mouths back.

"Don, my husband, told me you made videos on the internet, so when Jake came over, I got him to show me some." She leans in close. "I hope it's not weird, but I made a couple of your recipes for tonight."

My heart swells and this time it's me pulling her in for another hug. "I love that. It's very sweet."

"Would you believe that Jake made some not-so-subtle suggestions about *which* dishes we should do for the party,

then got Don involved, and before I knew it, the two of them had planned the entire menu *and* written the grocery list for ingredients.”

“You’ve trained them well,” I say with a wink.

Nora turns to Rhodes with a beaming wide grin. “Ah, yes, I totally like her already.”

Her son claims me once again, reaching out to tip my face up to meet his. “That’s good, because I do too,” he murmurs before laying a hard and fast kiss on my lips right there in front of his *mom*.

“Happy birthday, son,” A deep voice announces. Turning my head, I’m met by identical blue eyes on a handsome, older version of Rhodes. And when he smiles, I swear I’ve fast forwarded into the future and I’m getting a glimpse into what Rhodes will look like in twenty to thirty years. Going by his dad, the future is looking bright for me if we go the distance.

“Damn, son. You do have all the luck, don’t you?” Rhodes’s dad teases, holding his hand out my way. When I slide my palm against his, he leans in and winks. “I’m Don, and I’ve taught my son everything he knows.”

“Grandad, stop,” Jake groans.

“What’s he doing?” Harvey asks.

I press my lips together as my body shakes with silent laughter. Rhodes claims me back. “Stay away, old man. She’s mine.”

“I’ll win her over. You know I will.”

Resting my head against Rhodes’s shoulder, I give up the fight and giggle at him. “He’s totally just like you.”

“Except I’m much more charming and handsome, right?” he asks, quirking a brow.

I nod overenthusiastically. “Oh yes. For sure. Absolutely.”

Nora laughs, the sound as endearing as tinkling bells. She’s totally the kind of mom I imagined would have raised Rhodes.

She's all soft and sweet and full of joy, but you can tell she's the boss of the family. *Just like my mom, and just like me.*

There's another older couple standing off to the side, hand in hand, their curious gazes on us.

"Nana!" Jake calls out, walking toward them hugging them both affectionately.

Rhodes slides his hand into mine and puts his mouth close to my ear. "That's Connor and Celeste, Lily's parents. Do you still want to meet them?" He lifts his head, his gaze focused on my face as he waits for my answer.

Therefore, there was never a question for me, not about this. I nod and give his hand a squeeze, lifting up on my toes and lightly kissing his cheek. "No time like the present."

By the time we reach them, Harvey is beside Jake and telling Lily's parents all about the firefighter visit to his school and how awesome it was. They both listen to his every word, and it's only when Harvey looks across the yard and spots Marco that his attention is diverted. And after waving a quick 'bye,' he's tugging Jake's arm to go join the fire crew. That leaves Rhodes and I standing in front of Connor and Celeste, silence stretching between us.

I smile at Lily's mom first, then her dad. "Hi. I'm Dee. It's an honor to meet you."

Celeste's mouth drops open before it transforms into the most beautiful smile—the same one I've seen in the photos of Lily back at the house. "It's nice to meet you too. I'm Celeste, and this is my husband, Connor."

"Hi, Connor."

"Hey, there yourself, Dee. I must tell you, we went to your restaurant last year. The food was amazing."

My smile brightens. "Thank you. I must not have been working that night, but I'm glad you enjoyed it."

Celeste leans in. "Connor is a little bit obsessed with your desserts. When Rhodes told him who he was bringing to meet

us, he made me watch your lava cake video and make it for him.”

Upon hearing that, Rhodes throws his head back and bursts out laughing, earning puzzled looks from his in-laws. “Everyone is in love with Dee’s lava cake. Jake even stole my phone before Dee cooked for me for the very first time and requested it in a doggy bag.”

Celeste giggles, and the sound is so mom-like it warms my heart.

“I might have to get some cooking tips off you.”

“You don’t need any help, lovely. You’ve always kept me well fed. I mean, look at this belly.” Connor rubs his stomach and grins over at me. “This is not the body of a man whose wife doesn’t know how to cook.”

While Celeste blushes and moves closer to her husband, Rhodes presses his lips to my temple. “See, what did I tell you? Nothing to worry about. I love you, so they love you.”

He’s right. I don’t even know why I was nervous. Actually, I do, but having met Nora and Don, and now Connor and Celeste, I had nothing to worry about. And with that knowledge, I finally relax completely.

“MOM? Can I sleep in Jake’s room?” Harvey asks once we’re back at Rhodes’s house.

We stayed at the party for almost four hours—enough time for everyone to devour Celeste and Nora’s amazing food, sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to Rhodes—with Jake and Harvey helping to blow out the forty candles on the cake—and for Don to give a heartwarming speech about how proud he was of his son. He also welcomed Harvey and me to their crazy family.

IT WAS A FUN NIGHT, and now I have an amped up ten-year-old boy who is excited to spend his first sleepover with

his new teenage idol.

“I dunno, baby. You’ve got this awesome big bed in here, and Jake’s probably not tired yet. Maybe you can just see him in the—”

“Hey, Harvs. I was thinking,” Jake says, popping his head through the guest-bedroom door. “Do you wanna come bunk in with me tonight? You know, just in case I wake up scared in the middle of the night or something. It’d be good to know I’ve got a friend there. I’ve even set up a mattress on my floor for you.”

Not for the first time tonight, I have to push my tongue against the roof of my mouth and blink rapidly to stop myself from crying like a mushy girl.

“Mom, can I?” Harvey asks hopefully.

“Sure, baby. Jake might need you.”

Harvey rolls his eyes, not so clueless after all. “Okay. Yeah sure.” His tone totally suggests he thinks *I’m* the clueless one, and it makes me smile.

Having settled the boys in and making sure Harvey is okay, we say goodnight, and Rhodes leads me by the hand along the hall to his room before shutting the door behind us. “I love you. Do you know that?”

“Yeah.”

“You were spectacular tonight. I would never have thought you were nervous at all.”

“I wasn’t—” I narrow my eyes. “Flynn told you, didn’t he?”

“Yep.”

“Not sure I’m over the moon about my ex and my boyfriend colluding together,” I mutter, looking away.

Rhodes cups my jaw and turns my eyes to his. “And I’m not sure of the last time I’ve felt this happy, and it’s all because of you.”

I tilt my head, my chest tight and my heart fit to burst. “I haven’t even given you your birthday present yet either.”

“Hmmm,” he says, pulling me close and dipping his mouth to my neck. “I was planning on unwrapping *you* as my gift. What is it?”

I try to hold back my giggle. “Axe-throwing lessons.”

He slowly lifts his head, the sight of his wide eyes and parted lips has me laughing.

“Really?”

I shake my head, still snickering. “No, but the look on your face was priceless. I’ve actually booked us a weekend away in Boston for some time later this year.” His expression turns from surprise to smoldering.

“You planning on putting up with me for that long, sweet cheeks?”

“Maybe I was hoping you’d stick by *me* till then.”

“For a dirty weekend away?”

“Mmm hmm ...”

“With you naked the *entire* time ...”

“That could ... be arranged ...” I moan.

“Uninterrupted adult alone time?”

“Absolutely.”

“Fuck yes. Best birthday ever,” he says before he puts a shoulder to my belly and picks me up, carrying me into his bathroom.

“What are you doing?” I shriek, wrapping my arms around his waist as I hang backward.

“Birthday rules apply, which means whatever the birthday boy wants, he gets.” He ever so slowly drags my body down against his hard-in-all-the-right-places one.

“And what *do* you want?” He reaches out to turn the water on in his big walk-in shower before gripping my hips again.

“I want you naked and wet and rubbing up against me.”

I bite my lip. “Is that *all* you want?”

“We’ll start there and see what pops up.”

Looking between us, I quirk a brow at his tented pants. “Doesn’t seem to be a problem in that department yet, old man ...”

“Fuck it,” he mutters, then I’m up in the air again and he’s carrying me fully clothed into the shower, getting the both of us dripping wet and distracting me with his mouth and other body parts until the water ran cold.

It seems Rhodes *is* right again. Best. Birthday. Ever.

Rhodes

“I’m off, Dad,” Jake says, popping his head through the living-room door.

I turn my gaze toward him from where I’m sitting on the couch with Dee’s head in my lap as we watch a movie. “What’s the plan?”

“Driving to Linc’s place to hang out. Might go get some food, otherwise, I’ll just stay there and come home by eleven.”

“You need money for gas?” Dee asks, making me smile. I love how she treats Jake as if he’s her own.

My son’s eyes soften at the woman in my arms. “Nah, I’m good. Thanks though.”

“Just don’t eat crap food. If you’re gonna do takeout, at least make sure it’s *good* crap food.”

His lips twitch at that.

I snort and glance down at her. “Good crap food?”

“Yep.” She grins up at me.

Shaking my head, I meet her eyes. “You’re such a food snob. I should’ve known.”

“No, I’m a crap food connoisseur.”

“Who would’ve thought? My top chef is a takeout puritan.”

Her eyes darken.

“Hello? Kid here,” Jake says, his voice full of humor. “Yes, Dee. I think the plan was pizza. So probably Lou’s. Not as good as *yours*, of course, but it’ll do in a pinch.”

Dee nods. “I’ll allow it.”

Glad you approve,” Jake mutters. “See you when I get home.”

“Drive carefully and no funny business.”

“Yeah, Dad.” He turns toward the front door.

“I’m serious, kid,” I say, gently easing myself off the couch and following him.

“I promise, Dad. Not gonna screw up, especially not when I’ve got my sweet ride to look after.”

“Trucks can be replaced. You can’t.”

“I know,” he murmurs. “I’ve got my phone tracking on. Feel free to stalk me as much as you need to. Engage the parents collective. Whatever makes you feel better. Got nothing to hide and nothing to lie about.”

I hook my hand behind his neck and bring my forehead to rest against his. “Sorry. I trust you. It’s other people I don’t.”

He snorts and cups my shoulder, giving it a squeeze before straightening. “I know. I’ll be good. See you at eleven. Love you, Dad. Bye, Dee,” he calls out before he grabs his keys from the rack and leaves the house.

I rejoin Dee and get settled again, lying behind her and wrapping my arm round her waist as she restarts the movie.

We did good with our kid, Lils.

I imagine if she *could* talk to me, she’d be rolling her eyes right now and saying ‘*Stop talking to me and enjoy your night.*’

“You okay?” Dee asks, snuggling in deeper.

I nuzzle my lips into her neck, my hands starting to roam her front. “Mmm hmm ...” I try to ignore the niggling bad feeling in my gut and focus on Dee.

“Are we gonna make out like teenagers on the couch?”
There’s no missing the humor in her voice.

When I push myself up and brace myself over her, she rolls onto her back and pulls me on top of her. My eyes roam her face, and again I’m hit with just how lucky I am to love and be loved by this woman. “Yep.”

Her lips curve into a salacious grin. “Excellent. ’Cause Dad won’t be home for *hours*.”

And that’s how I end up laughing and kissing her at the same time ... and missing the rest of the movie, because with Dee in my arms and an empty house, there was no fucking chance I was ever gonna *concentrate*.

WE MUST’VE DOZED off on the couch, because the next thing I know my phone is buzzing on the floor.

Dee stirs and burrows deeper into my chest. “What time is it?” she mumbles.

“Dunno. Could be Jake calling though. Haven’t heard him come home.”

“Hmm,” she hums as I reach over her and pick up my cell, frowning when I realize it’s nearly midnight and Cohen is calling.

“Hey, Co,” I say, my voice still thick with sleep.

“Rhodes. It’s Jake. He’s been in a MVA. He got clipped by a car running a red.”

My entire body goes still, and Dee must feel it ’cause she quickly sits up, her hand resting on my chest as she watches me.

“Is he okay?”

“Yeah. I’m here for the other driver, but I checked with the other crew when I recognized Jake’s truck. He’s bashed around and probably has broken ribs from the impact and seat

belt, but he's fucking lucky, man. They're cutting him out 'cause his door was smashed shut.

I can barely breathe as my heart thumps against my chest like a battering ram trying to crush me. "Where are they taking him?"

"Northwestern. ETA twenty once they get him out."

"I ... shit, man. I can't ..." I can't speak. I can't think other than to go straight to the worst-case scenario.

Dee eases the phone from my hand and puts it to her ear. "Co? It's Dee. I've got him. We'll meet you there. And hey, can you give Marco a heads up." She looks my way as I stand, my body finally reacting. *Jake. My boy. Fucking late for curfew and some asshole crashes into him. I wanna throttle him and lock him in the house till he's thirty all at once.*

"Yep. We're leaving now. And thanks, Co. See you soon." Dee immediately takes control—grabbing our coats, getting me into the car, and driving us toward the hospital. The whole time she's taking calls and making them. She calls my Dad on my phone and asks him to call Connor to let him know.

All I can do is sit there and stare out the window, struggling to even comprehend that my boy was hurt and I wasn't there for him.

Dee reaches over and squeezes my knee. "It's gonna be alright, honey. Cohen said Jake was conscious and coherent, just a bit shaken and scared. As soon as he sees you, he'll be fine. Don is coming too, and Marco and Renee have already left."

I nod and cover her hand with mine, but I can't talk. The words won't come. Until Jake's in front of me and I can see with my own eyes that he's in one piece, I won't be able to breathe easy.

Look after our boy till I get there, Lils.

WE'RE unable to see Jake when we arrive, and although they say he's stable, I'm told I won't be able to see him while they're checking him over. I even tried to pull some strings with some of the ER staff I recognize, but rules are rules. Co comes and sees me before he has to leave as he's still on duty and explains they're sending Jake for a CT to check for internal bleeding and clear him of anything serious. As far as I'm concerned, they can give him the works as long as it means he's okay.

Mom and Dad arrive about fifteen minutes after we do, and we all sit in the family waiting room for what seems like hours.

Marco, Renee, and Gio come too, G updating me on the details of the accident that he's learned so far. Apparently the other driver failed a field sobriety test on the scene and walked away with scrapes and bruises. He's been checked out by a doctor and was discharged into police custody. Jake's truck, however, is wrecked.

Dee has not left my side except to get us coffee refills. She's been my anchor in the storm, and I'm not even sure I would've gotten here without her taking charge.

We've been here for three hours, and it's after three in the morning. I hold Dee in my arms and she rests her eyes on my shoulder.

"You okay?" Marco asks, having sent Renee home with Gio.

"No," I reply honestly. "Shouldn't have let him go out tonight."

"You can't keep him locked up. He's a good kid. What happened tonight wasn't his fault."

I nod once. "Yeah. But I could've taken note of the bad feeling I had in my gut. Something felt off, and I ignored it."

"You gotta admit, as far as teenage shenanigans go, Jake's been an angel."

"Compared to some of the stuff you got up to, boy, my grandson is a fucking saint," my dad adds with a small smirk.

“Marco’s right though. You can’t wrap him in cotton wool and protect him from everything.”

“I can damn well try!” I say, a little louder than I meant to. “He’s all I’ve got left of her.” This time, my voice is barely a whisper.

Dad’s eyes soften. “He is, but he’s not. You’ve had a good woman, and it broke all of our hearts when she had to leave us. But now you’ve got a son who’s almost grown, a fine, strong woman sleeping in your arms, and your memories. Jake is almost a man. He’s going to make mistakes like missing curfew and being in the wrong place at the wrong time. We all did it, and we all know he’ll probably do it again. You can’t stop it. All you can do is make sure he learns from it. Show him he scared you, tell him it shaved twenty years off your life expectancy getting that phone call, but remember what it must’ve felt like to be a sixteen-year-old kid, on your way home, and then having your life literally crashed into.”

“Fuck. I just need to see him.”

“Mr. Anderson?” the doctor says from the waiting room door.

Dee stirs, and I dip my head to kiss her hair. “Gotta go talk to the doc, sweet cheeks. Stay here, and I’ll find out when we can see him. Yeah?”

She nods and tips her face up. I brush my lips against hers and make my way toward the door, taking one step and one breath at a time.

STANDING THERE at the edge of the room, my entire body shakes with anger and fear and relief—all of which are fighting for supremacy. Finally having him in front of me, I check every single body part is intact from his toes to the hair on his head.

His eyes slowly open, and his head turns. “I guess that’s my NBA career over, Dad. Better call the scouts.” But the

smirk on his lips is strained.

His eyes are glassy, and from the splint on his arm and the gash above his right eye, I'm guessing he's in a bit of pain. Before I came in, the doctor gave me a full run down: two broken ribs from the seat belt, broken wrist from the steering wheel, a gash on his forehead from hitting the side pillar instead of bulls-eyeing the glass, and whiplash. He's fucking lucky he didn't get more injuries but I'm also thankful as hell that I'd taken him driving in all kinds of weather conditions so he knew how to react.

I cross the room and lean over the bed, bracing myself against the mattress as I hold my head to his temple. "Fucking scared the shit out of me, kid."

"I'm ... sorry, Dad. So fucking sorry."

I lift up and meet his eyes, finding them filling with tears, and my heart stutters, because the last time I saw my kid cry was five and a half years ago. He had a nightmare and came running into my bedroom calling out for Lily. Right now, having just had another version of a nightmare, it's written all over his face that he's been waiting for is to see me. My heart splinters at the thought of him being scared and alone.

He throws his good arm behind my shoulder and clings to me. He buries his face in my chest and lets it all go. Knowing my boy, he's been holding this in since the crash. Sobs escape him, his entire body shaking with them. "So ... rry. I was... and then ... out of nowhere ... scared I wouldn't see you."

"It's gonna be okay, Jake. I swear. You can break bones, and they can heal. But you, I can't lose you." My own eyes sting, but I don't fucking care. Seeing my only son in this hospital bed has brought everything back to me.

I straighten and gently lay my hand on his shoulder, staring into his bloodshot eyes and swallowing the giant lump in my throat. "Don't you *ever* scare me like that again. I lost your mom, and it destroyed me. I can't lose you too. I wouldn't survive that."

He nods and pulls me in for a hug again.

A throat clears behind us. Standing up, I turn to find Dee's big green eyes shining our way. "Hi. Um ... the nurse said I could bring your dad through."

I nod, turning back to Jake as Mom, Dad, and Dee walk over. I expect Dee to come straight to my side, but instead she stands at the foot of the bed, all her attention on my son.

Again, there's something weird niggling at me, but I dismiss it because I'm tired. I'm relieved. As dad said, I had years shaved off my life tonight, and everyone I love is in this room, safe and sound—albeit a little battered and bruised.

At least one thing is for sure, Jake will be homebound for a good few weeks after this, which means I'll have time to calm my nerves about letting him out of my sight again.

Hopefully.

Until then, I'm sure Dee will keep him well fed with all the lava cake and comfort food he could ever want, and Harvey can play games and entertain him.

Our family—by blood and by choice—will rally around us like they have tonight and cuddle him until he's one hundred percent again. Then life will be back to normal.

Dee

A week later

Monday

Rhodes: Hey, sweet cheeks. Do you wanna come over tonight?

Dee: Hey. I'm not sure when I'm gonna be able to leave the restaurant. Then I want to spend some time with Harvs.

Rhodes: Okay. I missed you last night.

Dee: While you were working and saving lives?

Rhodes: I miss you whenever you're not here.

Fuck, he's killing me.

Dee: We'll catch up soon. Maybe I'll pop round tomorrow and see Jake.

Rhodes: Not me?

Dee: Well, you'll be there too.

Rhodes: Okay. Text me later when you're home.

Dee: Will do.

Wednesday

Rhodes: Sitting in my office doing paperwork and remembering the last time you were here.

Dee: You mean when you cleared your desk and had your way with me on it?

Rhodes: Yeah. That particular memory is distracting as hell.

Dee: Does Jake need anything? I can call by there on my way home later.

Rhodes: He's staying at Connor and Celeste's tonight. No way will they not spoil him.

Dee: Okay. That's good.

Rhodes: Everything alright?

Dee: Yeah.

Rhodes: You seem a bit ... distant. That's all.

Dee: Everything is fine, honey.

FRIDAY

Jake: Hey, Dee. Thanks for the lunch delivery. Thanks for letting me be your lemon lava cake guinea pig. I volunteer to be your food test dummy at any time.

Dee: Hey. You're welcome. Hope you're feeling better.

Jake: Yeah, I am. You should've delivered it personally. I wanted to say thank you.

Dee: You just did.

Jake: I mean for coming to the hospital and being there for Dad. I know it can't have been easy for him. I'm glad he has you.

Shot to the fucking heart, kid.

After seeing Rhodes and Jake a few times this week, I can now admit that things definitely aren't fine. And the fact I've been blowing off Rhodes all week—not sleeping over there, barely spending more than an hour here and there with them—I can sense he's now realizing it too.

But I can't help it. I'm a girl, and sometimes we overthink and twist things in our heads and can't get past it. That's where

I'm at now.

Things have been so easy, so fast, so intense with Rhodes that I fell into a comfortable lull where I went with the flow and didn't stop to think about anything else. I love the man. There's no question in my mind that he'd ever do me wrong. If things keep going the way they're going, I can see us having a long and happy life together.

The problem is with me. I let a seed of doubt settle in my brain and allowed it to take hold, to burrow in and grow, digging in roots and making itself at home. And try as I might, it's been at the back of my mind ever since I saw Jake and Rhodes together in that hospital room and the words they shared, ever since I heard Rhodes, Marco, and Don talk in the waiting room.

And it all comes down to one big, formidable force that I don't feel I can ever equal. Lily.

I lost your mom. I can't lose you too.

He *lost* his wife. He didn't *choose* to leave her. There was no *choice*. The decision was taken out of his hands. Fate had other plans. And now he has me, and I love him more than I loved Flynn—my *husband*—yet I'll never be able to truly know if it'll ever be the same way for Rhodes when it comes to me.

I've been questioning that and struggling with it ever since the night of Jake's accident, and with it comes guilt, sadness, disbelief that I could even fathom being jealous of a dead woman—a wonderful, amazing, spectacular woman at that. I've been asking myself if I can live the rest of my life feeling this way, always wondering, never relaxing, feeling I have to prove myself, not fully trusting whether his feelings for me will be enough. It's a *me* issue, not a Rhodes or Jake issue or even a Flynn issue. It's all me, and until I can sort it out in my own head, I know I won't be able to explain it to anyone else, let alone Rhodes.

SATURDAY

Rhodes: Saw your latest video.

My breath catches, and I struggle with what to reply. Stuck for ideas for a new vlog, I decided to do a video about food to make you smile when you're feeling down. I figured it would be cathartic, maybe help anyone out there struggling with much bigger problems than the one I'm wrestling.

Dee: Did you like it?

Rhodes: I always do. But you weren't yourself, baby.

Dee: I'm okay.

Rhodes: Honesty policy, sweet cheeks. You're either lying to me or lying to yourself.

Dee: I'll be okay.

Rhodes: Wouldn't mind seeing that for myself. Why don't I come pick you up and I can make sure you're alright?

Dee: I can't tonight. Flynn has plans, so Harvey and I are having a mom/son movie marathon.

Rhodes: Maybe Jake and I could come over and join you then?

Dee: You won't wanna watch these ones. We kind of have a weakness for old-school Disney.

He doesn't reply for a while. And when he does, my heart aches.

Rhodes: Okay. Well, let me know when you want to do something? We haven't had much time alone since the accident, and I know I've been focused on helping the kid, but that doesn't mean I can't see you as well. You're important to me, Dee. I hope you know that. I love you.

Dee: I know. Say hi to Jake for me.

Rhodes: Will do. Call me later?

Dee: Yeah, if I don't fall into a junk-food coma.

Rhodes: You're a takeout snob, remember? No way you'd let anything bad pass those lips.

Dee: True, but everyone needs popcorn and cheap, greasy pizza now and then.

His next message doesn't come through for a few minutes.

Rhodes: I know something is wrong, Dee. I hope you know you can talk to me. You can tell me if things have changed ...

"Why do you look like someone just ran over your puppy?" Flynn asks, startling me.

I jerk my head his way to find him studying me. "I'm fine."

"Yeah," he says, pushing off the doorframe and walking over to the one-seater chair next to the couch. "And you forget that I can read you like a damn book. So quit the bullshit and talk to me."

"I'm fine."

He arches a brow. "You said that already."

"Well, I am."

"Then why have you been here for the past two weeks and not stayed with Rhodes at all? Did something happen?"

"No ..."

"Dee ..."

"What?" I snap.

Flynn's eyes soften. "Talk. To. Me."

"I can't. Harvey will come in soon, and—"

"Our son is in the shower. So, you've got a good ten minutes until I have to drag him out to save all the hot water. What's wrong? You've been ... not yourself."

"It's dumb."

"Nothing's dumb if it's bothering you."

"Okay. *You'll* think it's dumb."

"Try me."

I tilt my head. “Aren’t you going out tonight?”

“Nope. So, you’re stuck with me. Now tell me what’s wrong. Maybe I can help untangle whatever it is that’s tying you up in knots.”

“I’m just being a silly girl who can’t stop thinking that sometimes things are too good to be true.”

“You mean Rhodes?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

I scrunch my nose up. “What do you mean why?”

“I mean exactly that. Why are things too good to be true?”

“You wanna know?”

“Wouldn’t have asked otherwise, sweetheart,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I can’t explain it.”

He huffs out a breath. “Then don’t explain it. Tell me. Break it down. Does he make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Did something happen that made you *unhappy*?”

“Well, no, not really ... Maybe?”

Flynn shakes his head and reaches out to touch my arm. “Now *that* you have to explain.”

“I’m just struggling with the idea that our situations are different.”

“Us?”

“Well, no. Mine and Rhodes.”

“You’ve lost me. You’re both single with kids. You like each other, you spend time together. Harvey loves seeing them and staying over. I’m not seeing the problem here.”

“Isn’t it strange for you, seeing me move on?”

“It was, but I’ve been waiting for you to get out there and go after what you want for a while. When we spilt up, it was because we loved each other enough to want the best out of life, and we knew that it wasn’t going to happen by staying married. Now, I’ve moved on, but you’ve been in limbo.”

“But—”

“Then you met Rhodes, and I started to see that old Dee that you’d lost over the years. The one who lights up a room whenever she walks into it. The one who smiles at a man and makes his day. You had a new spring in your step, and you seemed like you’d finally found your happy.”

“Flynn ...”

He shakes his head. “No. You’re missing my point. This isn’t about knowing I couldn’t give you that anymore. That ship has sailed. Rhodes helped you find yourself. He was the kind of happiness you’ve been looking for. And don’t say he’s not, because I know that man loves you. It’s clear as day whenever I see him look at you. So I have one question, and I’m invoking the honesty policy, because we’ve never lied to each other and we’re sure as shit not gonna start now.”

“Okay ...” I hold my breath as I wait for the proverbial axe to fall.

“Why are you not letting yourself have that? What’s changed?”

I look down at my hands, my mouth suddenly dry as I try to breathe through the tightness in my chest.

“You and I *chose* to separate. We *chose* to not be together anymore.”

“And ...” Then his eyes flash as realization dawns. “You’re shitting me?” he says in disbelief.

“I told you it was dumb.”

“It’s not.” He leans forward and places his finger under my chin, lifting my eyes to meet his. “What’s dumb is that you’re sitting here talking to *me* when you should be talking to the man in question.”

“I can’t,” I whisper.

“Why?”

“Because what if I’m right? What if he tells me he could never love me as much as he loved Lily? What if—as much as he wants to, as much as he tries—I could never be *that* woman for him?”

“You’ll never know unless you talk to him, and avoiding the issue is just making it worse because it’s going to fester and turn bad. Don’t let that happen, Dee.”

“I’m trying not to.”

He glances at my phone then back to me. “By making excuses not to see him?”

My eyes jump wide. “How do you—?”

His lips curve into a knowing smile. “Cause I know you, Dee. You don’t spend over a decade with someone and not know everything about them. Rhodes has had four months. He’s still learning about all the little nuances that make up Delilah Baker, and unless you stop avoiding him and start *talking*, that man has no idea what’s going on in that cute little head of yours. Right now, he’s probably just as confused as you are and wondering what he’s done to push you away.”

“But he hasn’t done anything.”

Flynn leans in, eyes still locked to mine. “*Exactly*,” he says before moving to his feet. “Now. I’m going to save our water-heating bill from further damage, and you can think about the fact that maybe—this time—your issue, while valid, is also all in your mind. You can’t work through it without talking to the man himself. Believe me, putting your head in the sand doesn’t solve anything. We both know that. We did it for the whole last year of our marriage when we knew things had changed but couldn’t admit it. Don’t make the same mistake twice, Dee. Rhodes is everything I could’ve ever wanted for you. Let him be the one to fix this.”

“You mean fix me?”

“Whatever it takes, sweetheart. But this time, I can’t do it. It’s down to you. Any answers you need, he’s the only one who can give them to you. Not to freak you out even more, but I’m starting to think he’s the only man who can give you everything you’ve ever wanted. And, Dee?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted for you.”

Rhodes

Enough is enough. I've tried to give Dee space. I've tried to be understanding. But after almost two weeks of Dee not being herself, it's time to call her out on it. I'll use our damn honesty policy if I have to, but all I know is that when she comes to see me tomorrow night, she's not leaving until she tells me the truth. Because there's nothing worse than having all of someone and knowing without a shred of doubt that they're the person you see a long-lasting future with, than having them pull away without any obvious reason or explanation.

Even Jake has sensed something is up. That's why I gave him Dee's phone number, so he could text her the other day. I figured if it was something I'd done, at least she wouldn't brush my son off. And I was right. She didn't. Ever since the accident, she's been present, but just ... different. Well, whatever caused the change is about to be fixed or I'll go down fighting.

Rhodes: Can you come over tomorrow night? I think we should talk.

Dee: Okay.

And that's all I get. No 'What do we need to talk about?' or 'Is everything alright?'.

Fast forward twenty-four hours, and Dee's car is pulling into my driveway. I arranged for Jake to stay at my mom and dad's tonight, and I was honest with him about the fact that I thought something was up with Dee and I needed time to talk it out with her and make sure everything would be okay. He

was wholeheartedly in favor of it and even had the cheek to ask, “What took you so long?”

I already have the front door open when she moves up the front path toward me. Her body language is tense, almost defensive, as if she thinks she’s approaching battle.

Surely she knows by now that I’m all for ‘making love, not war.’ I’m also not about to let her walk away without a damn good reason why. We didn’t fight, I didn’t lie to her or stand her up, or do anything else that could warrant her version of ‘silent treatment.’ It hasn’t even been silence, she’s been distant, which is decidedly worse. “Hey,” I say, leaning into the doorframe.

“Hey.” She stops in front of me like she doesn’t know what to do.

I step forward and run my fingers through the hair at her temple until my hand is cradling the back of her head and I have her eyes on mine. I relax a little when she leans into my touch. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, sweet cheeks.”

“I was here a few days ago.”

“Yeah. You *were* here.” I step in, bringing our bodies in close. “But you weren’t *here*.” Then I lower my mouth to hers and kiss her soft and slow, my fingers flexing in her hair as she melts into me, chasing my tongue with hers.

When I pull back, her lips are swollen and her eyes are a hell of a lot more relaxed than when she first arrived.

“Feeling better yet?”

Her teeth dig into her lip, but she doesn’t answer me. Taking that as at least *some* progress, I reach out and grab her hand and walk inside before closing the door behind us and leading her into the living room.

She places her purse on the coffee table and looks around. “Where’s Jake? I thought he’d be here.”

“He’s at Don and Nora’s. I told him you and I needed time alone to talk.”

Dee's mouth drops open. "You what? Rhodes! He's still recovering. You didn't need to kick him out of his own house."

I pin her in place with a pointed stare. "Yeah, I did. But no, I didn't kick him out. Mom and Dad love having him there, especially Mom. She can fuss and fawn over him and make him all his favorite foods while Dad has a buddy to watch all the sports he wants with. It's a win-win situation for everyone."

"But—"

"*And* I wasn't lying to my kid about why I wanted the house to ourselves. We need to sort this out, Dee, and we need to do it without any distractions." I give her a moment to collect herself and walk past her and through to the kitchen. "Would you like a drink?"

Her head spins around and she shoots me an adorably confused look. "Um ... sure. A wine?"

"Well, look at that, I have your favorite white right here in the fridge waiting for you." I pour her drink and grab myself a beer before handing her the half-full glass.

"Rhodes ...?" she asks as she takes it from me.

"Yeah?"

"What are we doing?"

"We're about to sit down, have a drink, and then talk."

She nods jerkily before following me to the couch and taking a seat. Her posture anything but relaxed.

I wait for her to say something—anything—but she's too busy gripping her wine glass in both hands. *Fuck it.* I need to know what the hell is wrong so that I can start working toward making it better again.

"Dee?" She turns her head my way and takes a deep breath, slowly closing her eyes before reopening them. "Baby, you've gotta talk to me. Tell me what's wrong. If I don't know, I can't make it right, and there's no fucking way I'm letting you hold me at arm's length, not anymore. Not when you gave me all of you and I made a promise to myself that as long as I

could, I'd never let you go. What we've got is too good, too special, too important ..."

"I know," she whispers. "I've just been trying to work through some stuff in my head."

I move over, ease the wineglass out of her hold, and place it on the table before covering her hands in her lap with mine. "Tell me, Dee."

She shakes her head and squeezes her eyes shut. "I can't."

"You can't what?"

"I can't talk about it."

I rub my palms over the back of her clasped hands. "We can't get past this if I don't know what I'm up against." Searching her eyes for clues, there's worry and concern there as she bites her lip and averts her gaze.

"Look. We don't have to talk about this now. It's been a long day, and I bet you're tired too. Why don't we just go to bed, and we can discuss this in the morning," she says, trying to delay our conversation.

It's only eight o'clock, and that's early even for us. When I narrow my eyes, she releases a resigned sigh as if hoping I'd let this go for tonight. *Wishful thinking sweetheart*. "I'll have absolutely no problem taking you to bed once you tell me what the hell is wrong," I say.

"Please, Rhodes. I want to talk. I do. It's just ..."

"I think it needs to be now. Because to lay it all out there, I didn't find you after six years of *not* finding you, to give up without a fight. You've been different ever since Jake's accident. Was it that? Did that scare you? 'Cause I swear to god I get that. I was fucking terrified."

"I know, and I hated that for you. For all of you."

"So it *was* that? Baby, that's not something you work through by yourself. You do it with people who are going through it with you. Is that why you've been putting space between us?" I ask, my heart easing a little because this is something I can deal with.

Her head jerks from side to side, and my heart jumps in my chest at the wide-eyed look of worry covering her face. “I can’t. It’s stupid. It’s something I just have to get through. I’m sorry I haven’t been here. I never meant to ... I mean ... I was just trying to process stuff on my own, and I couldn’t do it when I was with you.”

I frown, because that makes absolutely no sense to me. “Sweet cheeks, we promised to be honest with each other, remember?”

She grabs her glass, downs the rest in one go, and leaves it on the table before walking over to the doors leading out into the backyard. She stands there looking more beautiful than ever, gazing outside as if coming to a decision in her mind. She’s quiet for a long time before she lets out a breath and breaks the silence filling the room. “Please don’t hate me for what I’m about to say.”

“Okay. I promise. Just tell me, baby. Please. This is killing me.” I say, and yet she still can’t look at me.

“These past few weeks, I’ve been wondering whether I can live the rest of my life being second best.”

My head jerks back like I’ve been slapped. “Why would you ever think that?” I hold my muscles tight. Every part of me itches to jump up and go to her. But she needs to get this all out before that happens. “Dee, please look at me.” Her body stills, and she slowly turns her eyes to mine. “You are not a woman who should ever be second best, and you have not—and never will be—with me. This is not our first rodeo, and we both have baggage, but never—not once—have I ever thought of you as runner-up.”

“When we started this, I was a single, divorced mom. I made a *choice* to end my marriage with Flynn. It was a decision we made together, because we both knew that we were only holding each other back from future happiness.”

I nod since this isn’t news to me.

“But you *lost* the love of your life. You didn’t *choose* to separate from her. She was taken from you, and that’s

something you can never get back.”

My brows furrow. “I’m not sure where you’re going with this. None of this is anything that we both don’t already know.”

She swallows hard, her eyes wet with unshed tears. “This is where I’ve gotten things twisted up in my head. I fully admit that.”

“I love you, Dee. That’s something I’ve only ever said to one other woman in my life. I don’t take it lightly, and I mean it every single time I say it.” There’s a force behind my words, and I hope to hell she’s hearing it, feeling it, and letting it sink in.

“I know,” she replies quietly. “But I heard what you said at the hospital ...”

I go completely still. *I* can’t even remember what I said at the hospital. I was so worried about Jake and what his injuries might be that I was running on autopilot. “What did you hear?”

“That losing Lily destroyed you,” she says, her voice breaking.

“It did. But I had Jake, and my parents, and the guys to help me through. And when Jake was hurt and in hospital, I had *you* by my side.” Her head snaps my way and I push to my feet before slowly approaching her. “And it was *you* that got me to the hospital and stayed strong by my side until I could see him.”

“Anyone would do that.”

“I didn’t need anyone to do that. I needed *you*.” I stop in front of her. I reach out and cup her shoulders, turning her body my way, needing her full attention so that what I’m about to lay on her sinks in once and for all.

“Six months ago, a beautiful, sassy, enigmatic woman made my dead heart beat again, and she’s continued to breathe life into me ever since.”

Dee’s mouth drops open with a soft gasp.

I smile down at her as I place my thumb under her chin and push it closed again. “Lily may have shown me I could love. *You* were proof I could love and let myself be loved like that again.”

She stares at me with those big blue eyes of hers, and I know I’m getting in there.

“Did I choose to lose my wife? Fuck no. Would I want that to happen again? Absolutely not. But does that mean I should put my life on hold and never have the chance to fall head over heels in love with you?” I step closer, eliminating the last remaining space between us. “Should I have ignored everything I was feeling just from *looking* at you, before I’d even *met* you? Or do I tell you that it taught me life is too fucking short to lose one love of my life, let alone two? Especially when the love I feel for both is completely different, completely separate, and cannot be compared.”

The well of tears in Dee’s eyes finally break and fall onto her cheeks. I cradle her face in my hands and try to swipe them away with my thumbs.

“The one who taught me how to love was taken from me far too soon, and the one who changed my entire life and taught me to love again is standing in front of me telling me she thinks she can’t be enough, when all she’s ever been is too much. I love you, Dee. I love you in a way I’ve never loved anyone before, and that’s because of Lily, not despite her. She’s my history; you’re my future. “

“Oh my god. I’m *such* an idiot,” she whispers tearfully.

“No, you’re not. You had a moment—we’re all allowed those. But I’m not going to let *you* get in the way of *us*, and that’s something I will never apologize for.”

Her lips part, but she doesn’t say anything.

“She would’ve wanted you for me.”

Dee jerks at that statement before shaking her head. “No, she wouldn’t. Because there’s nowhere else in the world she’d want to be than by your side.”

She trembles as I pull her body close to mine and I'm standing so close I'm all she can see. "You're right, but when she knew she wouldn't get the chance to be with us any longer, she made me promise I'd find someone who made me feel alive again, and loved, and like I'm one of the most important people in their world." I cradle Dee's face, tipping her chin so my eyes can lock with her wet ones. "The first time I saw you, something told me that would be you," I say, resting my forehead on hers. "And, baby, I wasn't fucking wrong."

Dee kisses *me* this time, and it makes me want to beat my chest and growl in victory. Her tongue spearing between my lips, seeking mine and tasting deep and long, both of us pouring all of our passion and fears into this kiss, as if we've spent years apart, not mere weeks.

When we pull apart, we heave in much-needed air, her nose scrunches up and she's glaring at me. "Don't call me, *baby*. 'Cause when you do, I swoon, and we can't have a serious, adult, potentially life-altering conversation if I'm weak at the knees and thinking about jumping you."

My eyes soften as my lips curve into a slow-growing, shit eating grin. "If it gets a reaction like *that*, there's no fucking way I'm going to stop calling you baby ... *baby*." My voice is rough and low. "Besides, I know the look you get when you *want* to jump me."

Dee's eyes flash. "What look?" She tries to wriggle loose from my arms, but I tighten my grip and keep her right where she is.

I pin her with a stare and shake my head, my gaze never once looking away. "Oh, no you don't."

"This is important, Rhodes. We're talking."

"Not anymore we're not. We're done talking. You love me. I love you. We've untwisted whatever it was that had you doubting us, and *now* ..." I lower my mouth to her ear. "I'm going to spend the rest of the night making sure you know it deep down to your fucking bones."

"Well, um ..."

An amused grunt escapes my lips as I run my hands up her back and tug her body flush against my hard one. “You were saying?” I rumble.

“Maybe we should ... Ah, fuck it.” She jumps into my arms and her lips collide with mine. I turn around and push her back against the living room wall, caging her in as I plunder her mouth.

“I agree,” I murmur as I run my lips along her jaw. “We should. Actually, we need to. I *definitely* need to. And from the way you’re squirming against me, you do too.”

She drags her hands through my hair and tugs my head up, touching her mouth to mine again.

“I love you, Dee, and I know I always will.”

A sob escapes her and she crushes her mouth to mine before pulling away and burying her face in my neck.

“Hey. What’s wrong?” I say, rubbing my hand over the back of her hair.

“Nothing. I’m just happy.”

“Okay ... so why the tears?”

“First you were being sweet. Now it’s because I’m ugly snot crying, and you’ll never want to sleep with me again if you see me like this.”

I chuckle, which earns a cute little growl akin to a baby lion cub. “I’ll never not want to look at you, sweet cheeks, ugly snot crying or not.”

She lifts her head and narrows her red-rimmed eyes at me, all brimstone and fire but still absolutely irresistible. “Prove it.”

“With pleasure.”

And that’s all the talking we do for the next few hours other than ‘yes,’ ‘more,’ ‘fuck,’ and my favorite, ‘*please.*’

LYING in bed later that night with Dee draped over my side, her fingers drawing lazy circles on my naked chest, the only thing on my mind is how happy I am to have Dee back here where she belongs.

She lifts her head to look at me. “So, I think we need to expand on our honesty policy and maybe set some ground rules,” she says, her voice soft and husky.

“Okay ... hit me with them. There’s a rule of my own I wouldn’t mind implementing.”

“Whatever happens, don’t let me ruin this.”

“I promise you, I won’t ever let happen.”

“So what’s your rule then?”

I roll her to her back and lean over, holding her head in one of my hands. Locking my gaze to hers, I love how bright and clear her eyes are, gone is the doubt and fear I saw when she arrived earlier. Now I have my Dee back, I want more nights like this. In fact, I want all of them. “My proposed rule is that you think about spending every single night in my bed ...” Her expression goes from relaxed to shocked to one of contemplation. Then, to my surprise, a slow-growing smile stretches wide over her face.

“I wholeheartedly agree.”

“What?” I whisper with a laugh. “You will?”

“I mean, unless you weren’t serious, then I—”

I shut her up by kissing her speechless, then that leads to another kind of celebration, which ends with us *both* yelling yes in far more satisfying ways.

“I love you, Dee. Best thing I ever did was accidentally stalk you,” I murmur against her lips, earning a giggle.

“Maybe we should go thank that kid Pete. After all, if he hadn’t run off with my purse, who knows if you’d have said hello.”

“Oh, I would’ve. It might’ve taken you publishing a video called ‘Food to Feed Stalkers You Want to Date,’ but we

would've crossed paths eventually. Nothing this good could be anything other than meant to be."

"Maybe I *should* film that video. Might see what other stalkers I have out there."

"Don't you fucking dare, sweet cheeks."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll tie you to this bed so that you can never leave."

Then she's laughing against my lips. "Don't make promises you can't keep, Rhodes Anderson."

"Believe me, Dee Duncan. That's one you can count on."

Epilogue

Rhodes

With Harvey and Dee walking hand in hand behind us, Jake and I make our way to the group of familiar faces already waiting for us. All of the crew are here including Zach, Scotty, Marco and Luca, along with Gio. There's also Cohen, Ezra, Bryant, and the other two Cook brothers, Jamie and Jax, along with their wives and children.

Gio makes a point of checking his watch. "You guys are cutting it close. Who's fault was it? Did ya take too much time doing your hair, Jake?"

Jake shakes his head and laughs. "Nah. Blame the parentals."

Everyone turns their attention to me. Dee's giggle gives us away. I hold my hands in the air. "Hey. Don't lay this all on me. Dee is just as complicit."

Ezra groans. "Dude, that's my sister."

"And mine!" Faith adds.

"And my mom!" Harvey joins in even though he has no clue what the joke is.

"What can I say? It's a Sunday morning, and for once, I didn't get dragged out to run."

“Decide to warm up another way, huh?” Scotty flashes a shit-eating grin, making the entire group groan and Marco whack the back of his head. He rubs his scalp and glares at my best friend. “What was that for?”

“There are kids present, idiot,” Marco replies with a ‘duh’ voice.

“Jake’s not a kid.”

“No, but Harvey is.” Marco jerks his chin our way.

“Oh, shi—shoot. Sorry, bud.”

“It’s okay. Mom and Rhodes said they were sleeping. It’s important to rest before a big run. Right, Jake?” He stares up at my son, who grins at me then Harvey.

“That’s right. How about we go and see my grandparents? They’ve all just arrived, and I *bet* Nana Nora brought us snacks for the walk.”

Due to the accident, Jake hasn’t been able to keep up his training with the rest of us. And when Dee and Harvey told us they wanted to walk the race as a show of support, Jake volunteered to do it with them, which lead to all the wives putting their hands up. Now what is usually a Firehouse 101 and Jake tradition has grown into a *rather* large event all in Lily’s memory, making it all the more meaningful.

“Should we go register and start stretching?” I turn to face Dee, who’s moved beside me. “You gonna help me stretch, sweet cheeks?”

Her lips tip up into a salacious smile. “I thought I did that a few hours ago.”

“You did. That’s probably why I’m feeling so lax and limber.”

Her eyes dance with amusement. “Would’ve been hard to explain if you’d overexerted yourself though.”

I lean in and rest my forehead on hers. “Would’ve totally been worth it.” Then I kiss her gently. “I’m also thinking it’s time we try and get Gio a girlfriend. Then he might have other

things to keep him busy rather than watching the clock like a fucking hawk.”

Renee sidles next to Dee and hooks her arm over her shoulder. “Funny you should say that. He told us at lunch yesterday he’s advertised for a roommate. Says he’s going to buy Marco out of his half of the house and take over the mortgage himself.”

My brows lift at the news. It makes sense, of course, but Gio has always been a lone wolf and a bit of a homebody, much preferring to stay home than go out looking to get laid with Luca and Scotty. The fact he’s willingly going to invite someone to share his house with him is an interesting development. “I wonder if Marco and I will get vetting privileges,” I ponder, earning a snort from Dee and approval from Renee.

“We should volunteer our services,” Renee says. “And make sure the roommate is female. If anyone deserves to live with a woman who’ll keep him in check, it’s Gio. He’s always giving the rest of us shit. Maybe it’s time for him to get a taste of his own medicine.”

Dee laughs. “You’re so mean.”

“Hey. Do you remember who gave me shit right in front of you when we first met?” I say with a smirk.

Both of the girls snicker. “*And* called Marco to tell him what happened?” Renee nods.

“Well you *did* stalk me,” Dee adds.

My mouth drops open. “I did no such thing, and I’ll deny it until my dying days.”

Renee winks at me “Yeah, yeah. We believe you.”

I shake my head. “Anyway. I’m gonna go over with the guys. See you at the start line?”

“I’ll be wherever you are,” Dee says softly, lifting on her toes and giving me one last kiss.

“Move in with me?” I hold her to me and smile against her mouth.

“Considering I’m doing that *tomorrow*, I’d say you already know the answer to that.”

“Just checking.” I touch the tip of my tongue to her lips briefly before letting her go.

“Take care of my girl, Jake?” I meet my son’s eyes over her shoulder.

“Done deal, Dad.” Don and Connor walk beside him while Harvey is being doted on by my mom and Celeste behind them. To say Harvey has been wholeheartedly adopted by all of the grandparents would be an understatement, and he loves every single minute of it.

I meet Don and Connor’s eyes and lift my chin. “You old men ready for today?”

“We were born ready, and even if we weren’t, we’d still run anyway.”

“Yeah, I know.” My voice thickens with emotion. Dee reaches out and squeezes my hand, drawing my eyes to hers. “See you at the finish line, sweet cheeks.”

She smiles and shines that bright light of hers my way. “I’ll be waiting for you, honey. Go get ready. We’ve got a wonderful woman to remember today.”

“That we do.”

She’s wonderful too, Rhodes, Lily says in my head. Dee’s exactly who I wanted for you and Jake. She’s perfect in every way.

So were you, baby. So were you. Then together with Don on one side and Connor on the other, we walk over to my other family and get ready to run for Lily.

Dee

“Mooom, do you know where my soccer ball is?” Harvey calls out from down the hall.

“It’s in a box!” I yell back.

“Didn’t we pack it in the box with *stuff* written on the side?” Jake shouts from the kitchen.

“I can’t find it,” Jake continues.

I snort and shake my head. “Why do we suddenly sound like *The Waltons*?”

“Who are the Waltons? Are they our neighbors?” Harvey asks, making me laugh out loud.

“Isn’t that an old person TV program?” Jake bellows.

“Good night, John Boy. Good night, Elizabeth. Good night, Daddy. Good night, son. Good night, Mary Ellen ...” I murmur to myself with a smile.

“I can’t see any boxes with *stuff* on it. Maybe Dad is bringing it with him,” Harvs hollers.

“I’ll come and help you find it, Harvs. Gimme a minute,” Jake offers. For an almost seventeen-year-old guy, he’s really taken to the little brother concept like a duck to water.”

Out of interest, I check the label on the box *I’m* unpacking and giggle when I see ‘*bedroom stuff*’ written on the side.

“They all have *stuff* written on them,” Rhodes replies, appearing in his—now our—bedroom doorway with two more boxes labeled ‘*Dee stuff*’ on the side.

Looking up from where I’m sitting cross-legged on the floor, my lips twitching. “The word *stuff* has a lot of uses.”

He pushes off and slowly stalks toward me—and it’s totally a stalk, there’s no other word to describe the long, measured strides and the hunger in his eyes. “It does, does it?” His voice is low and rough, and all kinds of hot.

I lick my lips and crane my neck as he stops in front of me. It takes everything I have not to squirm as he gazes down at me. “How about ‘Honey, all the *stuff* you wanna do to me will have to wait till the kids are asleep?’”

“*Or ...*” He bends and hooks his arms under mine, hoisting me up so I’m plastered to the front of him. “Maybe you can give me a taste of the *stuff* you want me to do to you later ... hmmm?” His arched brow and sly smirk are my undoing.

I slide my arms around Rhodes’s neck, and standing there, in the middle of our bedroom, with our sons still yelling a conversation back and forth, I lift on my toes and press my lips to those of the man who says I changed his life. What I realized six weeks ago when Rhodes asked Harvey and I to move in with him, is that before Rhodes ran to my rescue, I’d been treading water—and had been for at least two years. It’s only since then I’ve felt myself moving forward and doing it while falling head over heels for the man who just makes everything feel so damn easy.

“Do you think we could lock the door. I’m craving a taste of *you*?” I murmur against his lips.

He groans and grips my ponytail, tilting my head to the side before spearing his tongue in my mouth and rendering me speechless. The hungry, carnal, desperate kiss drives all thoughts of *stuff* from my brain.

It’s one of the ones where Rhodes is frustrated he can’t lay me out and take me like he wants to, and I’m right there with him, meeting his tongue stroke for stroke, my hands roaming wherever I can reach until we’re pretty much screwing with our clothes on.

When he finally pulls back, his pupils are huge, his gaze still promising to devour me. “I promise to make it up to you later. Then we can *both* taste each other,” he mutters, his attention dropping to my mouth again.

Brushing my lips against his jaw, I step away and try to cool my jets. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Fucking hope so. By the way, Flynn called, and they were about ten minutes away with the final load from the house.”

“Okay,” I say quietly, my throat tightening.

Rhodes’s eyes soften before he wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his chest, his chin resting against

my temple. “Hey. It’s alright. This is a big day for everyone.”

“It’s just ...”

“The end of an era?”

“Yeah. Kind of. It’s not like we won’t see him ever again.”

“Considering Harvey is gonna be there half the time, and then there are holidays, events, parties...”

“I know. But it’s different.”

Rhodes puts enough space between us to reach out and cup my face, his gaze locking with mine. There’s no jealousy or worry there—just understanding and so much love I can barely stand it.

“You’ll never know how fucking happy I am that you’re taking this chance with me, Dee. This is a huge step—for all of us—but whatever you need, whenever you need it, I’m here. Okay?”

“I love you.”

“Thank fuck for that. Otherwise sharing a bed for the next fifty years could’ve been rather awkward,” he replies with a smirk.

I tilt my head and scrunch my nose. “Fifty years?”

“Yeah. I figure if I can keep you till I’m ninety, then I might deserve you.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, placing my hands on his chest and leaning on him. “Now I really *do* want to lock that door. Stop turning me on when I can’t do something about it.”

As we’re about to kiss again, the cross-house yelling match resumes, and Rhodes chuckles against my lips, which might just be right up there with my favorite kisses.

“Flynn and Sophie are here,” Jake calls out.

“Mommy, Dad’s here,” Harvey repeats.

“Coming!”

“You will be,” Rhodes says before giving me a hard and fast kiss.

I giggle and step around him as I walk toward the bedroom door. “And *that* will have to tide you over until I do.”

“I get you in my bed and in my life. Just knowing that is all I need.”

I stop and look over my shoulder at him. “You say I changed your life, Rhodes Anderson, but while I was doing that, you restarted mine. And I’ll love you forever for that reason alone.” Then I move toward the front door to help my ex-husband and his girlfriend move the last of our stuff into the house my boyfriend and his son lived in with his late wife; the house that Rhodes and I are going to make our own.

Once again I’m stuck with how the most complicated situations on paper can turn out as if they were destiny in reality.

All I know is that I’m happy, my son is happy, and the man who caught my attention with ‘Are you okay?’ almost six months ago will never have a life without happiness again, because that’s what we both deserve.

A few hours later, after Harvey’s new bed has been successfully constructed under the watchful eye of project manager Jake, Rhodes and I walk onto the porch with Flynn and Sophie to see them off. “Thanks for your help today. We really appreciate it,” I say to both of them.

“You’re welcome. And we’re all set for dinner at Delish next week?” Sophie asks.

I nod. “Yes ma’am. Table for six on Thursday, Rhodes’s night off.”

“Awesome. Well, have a good first night together in your new home, and we’ll see you tomorrow.” She turns to Flynn and kisses his cheek. “I’ll just wait for you in the car, babe.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Rhodes follows her and leaves Flynn and I standing on the porch alone.

“So,” he says, facing me, his lips turned up on one side. “This is it, I guess.”

“I don’t know how to feel. Is that weird?”

Flynn chuckles and shakes his head. “Thank god. I was starting to get a complex that this was easy for you.”

“It’s not. It’s ... *different*. But it’s good.” I reach out and grab his hand. “It’s the next step.”

“It is. And I’m happy too because I can finally move on and not worry anymore.”

My entire body jerks. “What?”

“Dee, all I’ve been waiting for is for you to find your happy. You’ve got a man who would move heaven and earth to see you smile, and that’s all I ever wanted for you. Knowing you’ve got that ...” He looks to where Sophie is getting into his car. “... I can enjoy my happy too.”

I wrap my arms around him and hug him tight as he does the same to me. “We had a good run, but it’s the right time.”

“Yeah.” He shifts back and presses his lips to my forehead. “And don’t think you’re getting rid of me that easily. I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart, and neither are you. We’re still Dee and Flynn. You’re still my best friend. We’ve just expanded our circle. And Harvs is gonna be fine.”

“I know. You might even lose him to Jake at this rate. He idolizes him.”

Flynn grins. “Maybe. But then again, I get a week of non-Jake time in between to win him back.”

I laugh and shake my head. “True. So you’re all set for tomorrow?” As part of our discussion about Harvey and I moving in with Rhodes, we decided that Flynn and Sophie would live in our old house and Harvey would switch between the houses

“Yep. We’ll swing by tomorrow night and pick him up.”

“Awesome.”

“Okay. Time to go. I’ll see you both tomorrow,” Flynn meets Rhodes’s eyes as he steps onto the porch, the two men sharing a look. Flynn holds out his hand to Rhodes. “Good luck with this one,” he says, shooting me a wink.

“Thanks. Something tells me I’m gonna need it.”

Oh my god. It’s like I’m not even here.

Flynn laughs. “Have a good night.”

Then he walks down the path to get into his car.

Rhodes wraps his arm around my shoulders and turns me into his side, dipping his chin and brushing his lips against my temple in that way that makes me melt. “Guess you’re stuck with me now, sweet cheeks.”

I tilt my face to his and smile. “Funny, I can’t imagine ever feeling stuck when I’m with you. Just lucky.”

Rhodes quirks a brow. “You offering to help me get lucky tonight?”

I snort and brush my lips against his. “Let’s go get the boys, and we can talk more about how lucky you’re gonna get once we’re home from dinner.”

Rhodes’s eyes flash and suddenly my back is against the house and his body is pressed hard against mine. “Say it again.”

“Lucky?” I whisper, earning a growl.

“Not that.”

“*Home ...*”

“Love hearing that from your lips. Home. Mine. Yours. The boys. *Ours.*”

To stop him being so damn sweet I might jump him, I kiss him instead, which is exactly how the boys find us five minutes later.

“Eww, gross,” Harvey says.

“Don’t worry, Harvs. You’ll get used to it,” Jake replies.

Rhodes and I stop kissing and start laughing.

Be happy, I hear in my head. Except this time it’s not Flynn saying it.

It’s what I imagine Lily Anderson would sound like.

Next up is Gio Rossi and his new roommate, female firefighter
Alex in Miracle Worker

Miracle Worker

AN OPPOSITES ATTRACT ROOMMATE
COP/FIREFIGHTER ROMANCE

Alex

I park my pride and joy, my Ducati motorcycle, alongside the tall brick garage of the firehouse, and cut the engine. After flicking out the kickstand with my boot, I swing my leg over and ease off my helmet. As I shake out my long brown hair, I take the opportunity to survey what will be my new home away from home—so to speak.

It's definitely a far cry from the small station we had back in small-town Iowa. There, my father was the former fire chief and my twin brother was his incumbent—I couldn't sneeze without someone knowing about it.

When I was growing up, my mama used to always tell me that good things come to those who wait. Which is why, just six months after she passed away from a stroke, I jumped at the chance to further my training and experience with the Chicago Fire Department, my ultimate goal being to become an arson investigator. And it was time for a change. I'd lived in the same town my whole life, I'd finally pulled the plug on a relationship I'd let go on for far too long, and I was living back at home to help Dad after Mom's death.. I love my family, but working *and* living with them definitely made it hard to spread my wings. That's why I'm here in Chicago. I'm finally expanding my horizons beyond my tiny Iowa bubble with hopes of making my own mark on the world.

But now that I'm here at my new firehouse to meet with the Captain and confirm my shift schedule, it's finally hitting me *just* how far away from home I truly am.

I've been here a week, and I'm already in love with the new city, along with all the opportunities it promises, but I'm realizing how I took having my family and friends around and the small-town closeness for granted. I still have Adam on speed dial, and Dad's mandated regular check-ins, but I'm also a tiny goldfish who has jumped from a tiny pond into a giant lake, and that's going to take a little time to get used to.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Butterflies jump inside of me as I walk through the front door of the station in search of the Captain's office. I don't miss the curious eyes of a few of the crew floating around as I stand in the entryway, feeling a little like a lost puppy. Thankfully, a rather handsome man wearing a duty shirt, uniform pants and boots walks toward me from the garage, veering my way as soon as he spots me. "Hey. Can I help you there?"

Plastering on a smile, I hold out my hand. "Hey. I'm Alexandra Maxwell—Alex—the new transfer. Can you point me in the direction of the Captain's office?"

His brows lift and a slow-growing smile curves his lips. He reaches out and shakes my offered hand, the glint of his silver wedding ring catching my eye.

"Alex, eh? We'll you're definitely not the man we were all expecting."

I snort. "Not last time I checked."

"I'll have to take your word on that," he says with a chuckle. "I'm Cohen, head paramedic here and apparently, your impromptu welcoming committee. I'll show you the way to Cap's office if you want?"

"That'd be great. Thanks."

"No problem. Gotta drop off my reports anyway," he says, waving a pile of papers in the air. "So where're you coming from?"

"Iowa. But please, don't make any pork jokes," I say with a faux groan. "I swear, everyone I've met in this city has something to say about that. I grew up on a farm. We had pigs.

We also had cows and goats. Doesn't mean I'm all about the hogs."

He grins and shakes his head. "Not a word from me. But how *are* the pigs doing anyway?" I narrow my eyes, which just makes him laugh. "Besides, it's not me you've gotta worry about. I'm not the joker in this firehouse."

"And who's that? Maybe you can give me the inside word so I know what to expect. I'm anticipating at least a little hazing."

"Where's the fun in warning you? You should be fine, though. We're not *complete* animals around here. My wife would kick my ass if I gave the new girl any shit," he says with a smirk just as a loud voice comes out of an open door to our left.

"No, Scotty, you can't have Hayley's new address. Yes, I'm sure, and no, you can't use my phone to try and find it."

"*Lieutenant*," the man whines. "I'm not going to bother her. I just want to—"

"Give it up. She's hooked up with one of the team physios now. You really think you're in with *another* shot at that, man? Besides, she's almost my sister-in-law."

"I just wanted to catch up with her. Say hi, you know? She changed her number and must've forgotten to update me."

A snort escapes my lips before I can stop it, earning a smirk from my guide.

Cohen and I stop in the doorway and I sneak a glance through to the workout room to find a guy in a navy long-sleeved Henley and standard issue uniform pants on his back lifting weights, another in a shirt with *Lieutenant* written on his chest standing behind him and acting as a spotter, and a third in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips and a pout wearing turnouts and a tee. *Hello, Mr. Whiner.*

Cohen taps his knuckles on the doorframe and all eyes turn our way.

“Lieutenant Marco Rossi, meet Alex Maxwell,” Cohen says.

The Lieutenant looks over, lifting his chin. “A few days early, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir. Just checking in with the captain to get my schedule.”

He nods. “None of this sir business. Marco is fine. Rossi or Lieutenant when we’re on a call. The man trying to build up his strength here is Luca, my brother.”

“I can kick your ass anywhere, anytime, *Lieutenant*. Remember that,” Luca retorts with a smirk. “Hey, Alex. Nice to see you’re *not* a guy.”

Marco reaches out and whacks him around the head. “Dude. Don’t make me send you on another sexual harassment seminar.”

“Fuck no.”

The man who must be Scotty walks toward us with furrowed brows. He looks from me to Cohen. “Thought we were getting another guy.”

“Alex here assures me she’s definitely not male,” Cohen says, amusement lacing his voice. *Apparently a female firefighter is a novelty in these parts.*

Scotty’s expression becomes even more puzzled. “How in the hell did you ...”

“Scotty ... shake your new colleague’s hand, three seconds or less, then step away. We can’t have you scaring her off before her first shift,” Marco jokes.

“Yeah, yeah. Give me some credit. Nice to meet you, Alex.”

“You too, Scotty,” I say as I shift aside and let him walk by.

It’s obvious Scotty is the firehouse clown/goof that everyone loves to tease, but it’s good-natured ribbing, so he must be a decent guy. Luca and Marco remind me of my own

brother and the rest of the crew back at my old firehouse. They'll be part of the core group of stalwarts—the career firefighters who trained here, serve here, and will retire here. They're the guys I want to shadow and learn from because they're always the kind who follow the book but scribble in the margins sometimes too. And since I've always been one to draw all over the damn page and sometimes off it, I totally dig that approach.

“Don't let us keep you,” Marco says. “But I do know you're starting with us on our next rotation, which is Monday morning at seven.”

“Thank you, sir ...” I begin, until Marco narrows his eyes. “Sorry, *Marco*.”

“Good enough,” he says with a laugh. “Enjoy your weekend off.”

“Not sure I'm going to enjoy looking for a place to live. The hotel life is not for me *or* my wallet.”

Luca sits up and quirks a brow at his brother, the two of them exchanging a silent conversation before Luca turns back to me. “We might be able to help you out there.”

“Oh. Do you have a spare room?” Living with shift workers would be my ideal situation, but I'm not sure that living and working with a colleague at the same station is the solution either. *Still, beggars can't be choosers.*

“We don't. But our brother Gio does. Got anything against cops?”

My eyes widen. “Ah, nope. Living with someone who knows all about shift work and what we see day in, day out, would definitely be ideal.”

He nods. “Come see us on your way out, and I'll grab your number and pass it on. As long as you're quiet and tidy, you'll be fine.”

“I can be quiet ...” I say with a shrug and a wry grin. *Sometimes, anyway.*

Luca throws his head back and bursts out laughing. Marco just smirks. Something tells me I'm missing something here.

"You'll be perfect. See you soon then," Marco says with a nod.

Cohen and I resume our journey toward the far corner of the firehouse.

"I'm guessing Scotty is the station clown," I say as we walk past a room of neatly made bunks.

"Knew you'd pick that one up."

"Kinda hard not to."

"Good guy. Seriously lacking common sense when it comes to his personal life. But he has our backs when needed."

"Good to know," I murmur.

"And Gio, the cop—do you know him?"

Cohen snickers. "You could say that. He's my brother-in-law."

I stop dead in my tracks. "Wait ... is this some big family outfit?" Jesus, and I thought my hometown was small.

"Seems that way. I ran the gauntlet and married Luca, Marco, and Gio's baby sister."

"And you're still standing today?"

"Yep," he says with a proud grin. "It was hard work, but totally worth it." He shakes his ring finger in the air.

"My brother and fire crew would've had you hung, drawn, and quartered."

"They sound protective. Maybe they would've dragged me through town from the back of the pig truck?" he teases.

I bump him with my shoulder with a laugh. "Shut up."

"But seriously, Gio is a good guy—one of the best I know. You can't go too far wrong with him as a roommate."

Here's hoping he's right. New city. New job. And as long as Gio Rossi isn't some anal-retentive neat freak with a stick

up his butt, a new place to crash. Things are starting to fall in place. It's almost like they were meant to be.

Gio

“You good there, Marco?” I ask with a smirk as he runs a hand through his hair for what must be the fifth time in as many minutes. He’s pacing across my living room, his complexion a lot paler than normal, and he’s more nervous than I’ve ever seen him before. Even more than when he built up the courage to ask head cheerleader and senior Madison Meeks to prom when he was a junior.

But this moment has been a long time coming. It’s not even a snap decision. He bought the engagement ring for his girlfriend, Renee, months ago, and he’s had tonight’s proposal planned for just as long. He’s had more than enough time to psych himself up for this, yet he’s a nervous wreck right now.

“Why are you even worried about this?” Luca asks from his perch on my top-of-the-line recliner, his hand emerging from a bag of chips before he stuffs them in his mouth. “You love each other; you *live* together. You’re pretty much a done deal anyway. You know she’s gonna say yes, so quit pacing. You’re starting to make *me* nervous, and I have the constitution of a donkey.”

“That’s cause you’re a jackass,” Marco says, his lips curving up for the first time since he arrived. I hold my fist out to bump with his, which earns a grunt from Luca.

He flicks his fingers Marco’s way, salt scattering everywhere as he does so, making me wince. I glare at him. “Luc, do you mind?”

“What?”

“Get a bowl or something, you animal. I’ve already cleaned up today.”

His eyes widen as if he didn’t even think of it. “Shit. Yeah. Sorry, G. Wouldn’t want you to have a meltdown over a few crumbs, right?” He pushes to his feet and stops next to our oldest, definitely-freaking-out brother on his way to the kitchen. “Marco, take a chill pill and fucking relax. Renee is gonna love the ring, she’s gonna say yes, then she’ll take you home and you’ll be the one making *her* say yes a hell of a lot more. She’s put up with you for this long without running a mile; she’s a keeper.”

Then with both Marco and I stunned silent by his *almost* sage-like words, Luca grins and walks into the kitchen.

“I mean ... it’s rare for me to say this, but he’s not wrong,” I say.

Marco shakes his head as if coming out of his stunned stupor and meets my eyes. “Logically, I know that. But this is ___”

“Big. Yes, I know.” I walk over, cup his shoulder, and stare at him. “But Renee loves you, and proposing is the next logical step.”

He nods. “It’s one of the most important moments of our lives.”

“It is. And memorable. So I’ll finish this little pep talk with wise words from the great Jake Anderson.” That earns me a lip twitch. Jake is the seventeen-year-old son of our best friend, Rhodes, and fancies himself as a bit of a matchmaker and love guru. Funnily enough, he hasn’t set anyone wrong with his advice yet. *Thank god he hasn’t set his sights on hooking me up with someone.*

The longer I wait to speak, the more tense Marco gets, his shoulders tight, his jaw clenched, and his foot tapping on the floor. “Four words: don’t fuck it up.”

Marco’s brows jump up before he’s shoving me away with a laugh. “Fucker.”

“Whfft dd imf muss?” Luca mumbles, walking back in with a bowl full of chips *and* a bottle of beer from my fridge.

I’m not *that* anal retentive when it comes to keeping my house clean, but having lived alone for more than a year since Marco moved in with Renee, to say I’ve become a bit of a neat freak might be an understatement. But now that I’ve bought Marco out of the house and it’s mine and mine alone, it’s my castle, and I damn well like it *not* to be covered in crumbs.

Marco looks at Luca and shakes his head. “Brother, how on earth are you ever gonna find a woman?”

“What? I’m a catch,” Luca replies.

“That a ton of women have caught and thrown back,” I tease.

Luca flips me the bird as he sits back down in my chair. “Maybe I’m just picky.”

Marco rolls his eyes and moves toward the front door. “Anyway. Thanks for talking me down off the ledge.”

I grin. “You better text us when she says yes.”

“Or after the celebration sex, anyway,” Luca adds with a grin.

Marco smirks. “So late-morning tomorrow then?”

“How about you?” I ask, turning to Luca, who’s still stuffing food in his mouth.

“What about me?”

“You got plans tonight too?”

“Not planning on dropping down on bended knee for anyone, if that’s what you’re asking,” Luca says. “But Scotty, Corey, and I are hitting the clubs if you wanna join us.”

“Nah. I’ve got an early shift tomorrow.”

He rolls his eyes and scoffs. “Like you’d come anyway.”

“I *could*.”

“Doesn’t mean you *will*. Does it?” he says, redirecting his attention to the hockey highlights on the TV. “Maybe if you

found a *roommate* you could have more of a social life...”

“I’m trying. But they’ve either got pets, or personal hygiene issues.”

I shudder at the memory of the barista who called by yesterday to look at the spare room. As soon as he walked in, the place was filled with the smell of coffee grounds and egg. I don’t even know how that’s possible, considering he looked freshly showered, but it was a clear no from me. “Thinking maybe I should just give up and live by myself.”

“And keep working OT to cover the mortgage? C’mon, G.”

“I know. It’s just slim pickings in the roommate market at the moment apparently.”

Marco and Luca share a knowing look, and my Spidey senses spark to life. “What?”

“Met the new firefighter at 101 yesterday,” Luca says. “They’ve just moved to town and have been staying in a hotel, but they’re looking for a roommate.”

I rub my chin. “Do I really want to live with *another* firefighter though?”

That earns me the middle finger from Marco. “Seriously? You can’t go wrong with another first responder. At least someone will likely always be here, and they’ll also understand your shift work commitments too.”

He’s got a point. “What do you know about him?”

Marco’s eyes widen and he goes to open his mouth but Luca gets in first. “Not much. Moved here from Iowa. New to the city. From what I’ve seen, Alex seems like good people.”

My brothers may give me shit for being an old man in a thirty-four-year-old’s body, but they’ve always had my back just as I’ve always had theirs.

And I *do* need a roommate. Not just someone to help cover the mortgage *and* stop me from turning into a workaholic hermit, but as much as I like living alone, it also sucks sometimes.

I'm happy with my life—even though it's one where I work so much I barely get time to do anything except sleep. But it's not permanent. Although I do have to remind myself that if I'm all work and no play at *all*, then I'll never get a chance to find the good things, or be ready for them when my turn comes.

I sneak a glance at Luca who's almost finished the bowl of food in his lap and is now licking his fingers clean. With Luca splitting his time between the firehouse, his condo, and my favorite armchair more often than not, I guess I'm not *that* alone. But I guess there's no harm in just meeting this Alex to see if we click, right? Worse-case scenario, we don't, and life goes on with the status quo. What have I got to lose?

AFTER THE GUYS have gone and with an hour to go before the Cubs game starts, I grab my phone and type out a text message.

Gio: Hey Alex. I'm Gio, Marco and Luca's brother. They told me you're looking for a room and passed on your number. Let me know if you're still interested and want to come 'round for a look some time.

Alex: Hey. Definitely still interested. Anything is better than hearing my hotel room neighbors go at it AGAIN. Let me know when you can meet.

Gio: Well, I don't want to disturb your Saturday night, so how about tomorrow morning?

Alex: Sounds like a plan. Send me the address, and I'll see you then.

I do as asked and put my phone down. I have a good feeling about this. Marco and Luca may love to give me shit, but they wouldn't steer me wrong when it came to a potential roommate. Gut feelings are often my first line of defense, so at least by meeting Alex in person, I can get a read on him and go from there.

The next morning, I'm sitting in my living room, coffee in hand, contemplating a day of cleaning and laundry before going to my parents' place for our monthly lunch, when I hear a motorcycle rumbling outside my place.

Curiosity piqued, I make my way toward the front door, planning to discreetly check out what's going on. Taking a look at the door camera screen in the entryway, I watch as the head-to-toe leather-clad rider hops off their bike and heads toward my porch. Frowning, I unlock the top drawer of the hall table and open it so that my sidearm gun is visible but obviously not in my hand. *You can never be too careful.* Then I swing the door open.

"Hi, I'm—" The stranger's head dips down, looking behind me before their entire body jerks. Taking a quick step back, they put their hands up in the air in surrender. "Hey, man. I'm just here to look at the room! It's me. Alex," her high-pitched voice rushes out. *Then again, I do have my gun in plain sight..*

I freeze. And as I study my visitor, I might just have discovered a well-buried leather fetish I didn't know I had because the way those tight leather pants cling to those shapely—definitely not male—legs has my body paying attention in entirely inappropriate ways.

My gaze slides up to curvy hips and waist, then over her rounded chest, and I stop breathing. Because by the time I lock eyes with her challenging ice-blue gaze, one thing is absolutely clear.

I'm an idiot.

And Alex is as far from a man as you can get.

Alex

I don't think I've been more freaked out in my entire life than when Gio opened that door and his firearm was so openly displayed. Well, maybe that one time when Adam pushed me into the pig stall when we were eight after he'd just finished telling me how pigs eat humans, making me scream just as our pregnant sow, Bertha, decided to nuzzle my arm, looking like she was hungry and thought I'd make a good meal.

"Look," I say, willing my heart to stop trying to jump out of my chest. "I'm not a criminal and I'm not armed. You can search me if you want. I swear. I'm just here to look at the room."

"Shit," he mutters, quickly slamming the drawer shut and locking it before turning his very apologetic gaze my way. "I'm sorry, okay? But in my defense, Marco and Luca never said you were a *girl*."

I roll my eyes and rest my helmet on my juttled hip. "Seriously, what is it with people in this city thinking I have a dick? I'm a woman. Alex can be short for Alexandra too, you know. Although, I'm just an Alex." Her hands go to the zip on her jacket. "But if you need me to prove it, just say the word. You don't need to whip out your damn *gun* though."

"I get that now."

"And it was *you* that messaged *me* and said to come around and look at the room. Didn't think you'd take that as an invitation to use me for target practice," I snap, letting my temper loose. Probably not the best impression to be making

on a prospective landlord. I take a deep breath in and slowly exhale, blowing out the tension as I do it.

“Look, let’s have a do-over.” I hold my arm out. “Hi. I’m Alex. I’m the new firefighter at 101 and, as you can clearly see, I’m also a woman. I’ve just moved here from Iowa. I’m a career firefighter, legacy even, and when I met your brothers the other day, they told me you were looking for a roommate, and I just happen to be desperate for a place to live that isn’t a hotel with room service that my ass *really* can’t afford to indulge in.” Gio’s lips curve up, so I forge on. “So, if you’re one of those dudes that can’t handle living with a woman, no harm, no foul. I’ll go.”

That gets him. His head jerks back, his brows knitted tight, but I don’t let it sway me.

“*But* I really hope we can move past this rather awkward first meeting and see if we can’t cohabit in relative peace and quiet because—as I said—I *am* rather desperate. I promise I’m house-trained, and I’ve got a lot of experience living with men —”

His eyes widen, and I realize what I just said.

“What I *mean* is, I lived with my brother and my father for the past six months after my mother—bless her soul—passed away, and then with my ex-childhood-sweetheart slash comfort-zone-I-now-regret for years before that, so I’m a good roommate/housemate. I promise.”

The man tilts his head as if studying me. His eyes are wary and cautious—and maybe a little tinged with guilt—before his expression morphs, his lips curving into a wry smile. And because I am a single woman who hasn’t had the time or the inclination to enjoy male company recently, I don’t miss the fact that his grin makes him look even more stupidly attractive. *So not good. Avert, abort, step away from the hot guy, Alex.* I have been known to go a little crazy about stupidly attractive men—especially tall Italian-American drinks of water like the one standing in front of me right now.

From his short chocolate-brown hair to his hazel eyes and golden olive skin, to his perfect brows most women would kill

to have and a jaw so square you could chisel stone with it, he's beautiful. Then there's the body, which looks the perfect balance of built but not cut in his navy-blue tee and grey sweatpants, which I definitely don't focus on for too long because every woman knows grey sweatpants are to women what a red flag is to a raging bull.

He rubs the back of his neck with his hand and with a sheepish smile, holds out his arm, nodding down to his outstretched hand. "Okay, Alex. Let's try this again. I'm obviously Gio. And you can blame my asshole brothers. They failed to tell me that you were *you*, so they probably wanted this exact kind of awkward first meeting to happen. That's no excuse for scaring you, though, and I apologize."

And now it all makes sense.

"Right," I say, shaking his hand, biting the inside of my cheek to distract me from the way his biceps move. "I happen to know all about asshole brothers since I have one—a twin, even—so this time, I'm gonna give you a pass."

His brows and the corner of his mouth tip up simultaneously. "Seems we've got something in common already. Want to come have a look inside?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

"Now I see why Marco and Luca didn't tell me more about you."

I frown. "Why's that?"

"Cause you're a smart-ass."

"Yep," I say proudly as I step inside the house. "Is that gonna be a problem?"

Closing the door behind me, he chuckles and shakes his head. "Probably why you say your brother is an asshole too, right?"

I laugh. "Pretty much. But I've only got one, thank god. You've got two."

"Might have to share some tips with me on how to deal with them then. Something tells me you probably give your

twin a run for his money.”

Gasping in mock offence, I hold my hand to my chest as I fight off a grin. “Did you ... just call *me* an *asshole*?”

His face falls. “What? No!” he splutters. “I was just—”

I decide to put him out of his misery. “Ha! Gotcha!”

Chuckling, we reach the hallway and come to a stop in an open-plan living and dining area with two big couches and a healthy dose of masculine knickknacks scattered around the room. As to be expected—and far from disappointing—there’s also a big-screen TV mounted on the wall. The place is even *clean*. Actually ... it’s immaculately so. Suddenly, I’m not so sure that this will be a roommate match made in heaven after all. Then I remember Luca’s words from yesterday, combining it with my new knowledge that they set their brother up something wicked. Because I’m *anything* but tidy. And Gio looks like he’d be the type to put plastic covers on the sofas.

“So, it’s pretty average for the area,” he says.

My head jerks his way. “Average?” I’m totally lost now.

“The house size. You totally zoned out, didn’t you? Look, I promise I’m not some macho guy who watches sports twenty-four/seven when I’m home. Don’t get me wrong, I like football and I’ll be a Cubs fan till I die, but I’m not—”

“What football team?” I blurt out, giving him my full attention as I put all thoughts about him being a pedantic neat freak on hold.

“What?”

“What team do you go for?” I ask, hitting my stride. “Because I’ll tell you now, I’m pretty much a sure thing unless you tell me you’re a Bucs fan. If you say that, I’ll walk straight out the door.”

Gio barks out a laugh and shakes his head at me, his lips twitching.

“A sure thing?”

“A sure *roommates* thing.” I grin back at him, and we stay like that, staring at each other, just smiling like idiots. Until Gio’s body jolts and he snaps out of it, turning his back on me and walking towards the doorway that leads to the kitchen, effectively shutting down whatever the hell just happened.

“So, this here is the kitchen.” And like that, Gio switches from friendly and maybe a little flirty to *all* business. I guess platonic flirting and joking around might *not* be on the agenda. *Oh well, not like we’ll be living in each other’s pockets all the time, right?*

Although, me being me, and that being someone who likes a challenge, I decide it might just be my new mission to make Gio Rossi relax a bit and just *be*. Get him out of his head. Because it’s the only way I know how to handle the hard stuff I have to deal with on the job, and the way he’s holding his broad shoulders so tightly that they’re almost touching his ears says all I need to know about the man he is.

A good one, but also a cop who *doesn’t* always leave the job at the precinct door.

And I sense a bit of a kindred spirit. A bit of kismet maybe ...

“Ah, Alex?”

My gaze jerks to his. “Yeah, kitchen, living, doesn’t have shit taste in football teams, check.”

That earns me a snort. “Wanna see your room then, smarty pants?”

“Lead the way, officer.”

“Smart-ass hose jockeys,” he mutters, but he does it with his mouth turned up.

I snort and shake my head. “Stick-up-their-butt po-po,” I retort, not quietly. That earns me a chuckle as I follow him down the hallway and try to focus on anything but his butt.

Roommates, Alex. Friends, hopefully. *No checking out the landlord.*

The room is bigger than I expected, and even has its own bathroom, which is an unexpected but definitely not unappreciated bonus. Better still, Gio explains that I'm welcome to use the double bed and other furniture in the room if I want since it was Marco's, and he left it when he moved out.

"So, what do you think?" he asks when we finish the tour and are back in the living room.

"It's a room without noisy neighbors having sex all night—not that I'm against people getting themselves some, just not all night, every night, when I'm trying to sleep. Or the old dudes yelling obnoxiously at some sports game on the television, and here, I don't have the temptation of room service cheeseburgers, which my generous curves will *seriously* thank me for." His eyes drop down before jerking back up, amusement written all over his face. "So, if you think you can handle living with a fire and the shift work, then I'm good to go ..."

"Since I work shifts too, there's no worries about me being inconsiderate when it comes to sleeping and downtime."

I tilt my head, schooling my features. "And the guys said it was sweet to pay in sexual favors. Is that still the case?" I ask, as all the color drains from his face.

"What? No. I mean, shit. Sorry, but fuck no. God! I'm going to kill those two," he growls, stalking to the kitchen counter and picking up the cell phone lying there.

"Wait! Wait!" I say, choking with laughter. "I totally made that up. I'm just playing with you, Gio."

"Fuck. You're such a smart-ass. I can already tell you'll get along far too well with my sisters."

"You have sisters too?"

"Two of them. One older. One younger. And you work with my brother-in-law, Cohen, too."

"Yeah, I've met Cohen. You guys definitely like to keep it in the family, don't you? If I move in, am I gonna be adopted by your mama too?"

Gio smiles and nods. “Pretty much.”

“Hey, as long as she feeds me, she can adopt me anytime.”

My eyes kind of glaze over a bit as I lose myself in his smile. I quickly recover, but not before my cheeks heat as a flush washes over me. I bet this man is never short of a date or a bedmate.

I need to get outta here so I can stop thinking my new roommate is hot. I don’t have time to moon over him or any man. I’m here to work and learn and spread my Iowa wings in the Windy City. But a little eye candy at home is okay. I mean, I may be focused on my career, but I *am* still a red-blooded female.

“So, that’s everything. Is there anything else you want or need to know? Any questions? Concerns? Disclaimers?”

I cross my arms over my chest and bite my lip, making a show of thinking really hard about absolutely nothing. “Do you have a problem with clowns?”

Gio jerks in surprise. “Doesn’t everyone?”

I tilt my head to the side. “What about houseplants?”

His brows furrow. “I guess a bit of greenery is okay. *Why?*”

Nodding, I tap my finger against my chin. “All right then. Last one, do you promise not to cooperate when—not if—my brother and/or my father call you to check up on me? Because *believe me*, they will.”

To his credit, he tries to fight his laughter for as long as he can, and the smirk that curves his lips is definitely one of those sexy, all-knowing ones that never bode well for me—mainly because those panty-melting kind of grins are my kryptonite. *Not with the roommate, Alex. Behave!*

“I guess there’s only one thing left to say then,” I say.

“What’s that?”

“When can I move in?”

Gio

After sorting out the details and giving Alex my bank details for her first month's rent and a security deposit, I gave her a spare key to the house so she could start moving her stuff in whenever she wanted. It seems that will be today, since her first shift at Firehouse 101 is tomorrow

. She tried to hide it, but I could tell she was relieved that she could move in straight away. So on the roommate front at least, it's so far, so good. Given our less-than-ideal introduction, I'm more than happy about that.

It's not that I wasn't open to having a female roommate, but I definitely wasn't expecting a helmet-wearing, leather-clad *Alex* to rock up to my door this morning. Things would've gone a hell of a lot easier if I had—something I'm planning on bringing up with my brothers when I see them. It's just unfortunate I couldn't stick around to help her out, but before she left, I made it clear that it's now her home too and she is welcome to make herself comfortable.

I park outside my parents' house and see I'm the last to arrive, so I let myself in, calling out, "Hey" as I do so.

"We're out the back," my father replies, his voice leading me in the direction of the kitchen and dining room. With the temp reaching 75 outside, we'll be eating in the backyard, Mama having recently cajoled my dad into finally renovating the area before summer hit.

I walk down the hall and stop in the doorway, my gaze sweeping the room and spotting Marco and Luca sitting at the

dining table, Renee sitting on Marco's lap. I don't have to even ask how last night went given the look of absolute happiness—and exhaustion—written over their faces. A quick glance at Renee's ring finger confirms that fact, along with the glass of champagne in her hand.

"Congratulations, you two," I say, crossing the room and pulling her up, then giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"Hey, she's mine. Find your own," Marco says, snatching his fiancée back and earning himself a giggle when he nuzzles her neck.

"Ugh, you two are far too happy," Valentina groans as she comes in from outside where the rest of the family are. "Hey, little bro," she says as we hug.

"Hey, Val. How're things?"

"Good. Busy, but good." Val is an aesthetician with her own spa. It's something she enjoys, but being the boss, it also means that—like me—she works far too much and doesn't have much downtime.

"How come you didn't give *me* a hug when I got here?" Luca says, feigning offense. Val giggles and shakes her head, wrapping her arm around my shoulders and cuddling into my side.

"Because Gio's my favorite brother ..." That earns arched brows from all three of us guys, which seem to make her laugh louder. "Today anyway." She turns to our mother, who walks inside and heads to the stove. "Need help, Mama?"

"I'm okay, Val. I could do with a wine top-up though," Mama replies with a grin.

"I've got you, Ma." I walk around the kitchen island and move to the fridge, pulling out a half-full bottle of Chardonnay and a beer for myself. I pour Mama a glass. After giving her a hug and a kiss, I screw the top off my bottle and lean back against the counter.

"Thank you, baby," she says.

“You’re welcome, Mama,” I say as Luca and Marco mimic me. I take a long swig before glancing over at my brothers. “You two are dead to me.” Marco and Luca totally set me up to look like a damn idiot, so it serves them right that they’re about to get in trouble with Mama.

Mama’s gasp has my smirk widening. Fair’s fair. Her eyes narrow on the two of them.

“What did you do, Luca?” Mama’s stern voice asks.

Luca feigns offense. “Mama. Why do you automatically assume it’s me? Maybe we actually *helped* him.”

She narrows her eyes, and I grin because that look has had our father quaking in his boots, and he’s the most strong-willed man I know. There’s no way Luca can hold out under the intensity of Mama’s gaze.

“In my defense, we had Gio’s best interests at heart ...” There’s no one else in this world who could have Luca Rossi nervous other than Mama. Then again, it’s the same for all three of us brothers.

Mama’s hands move to her hips and she quirks a brow, an invisible red warning sign flashing above her head. “Again, Luca, what. Did. You. *Do* to my boy?”

I can’t stop the snorted laugh that escapes me.

He doesn’t answer, and Marco doesn’t say a thing either, choosing to stay quiet with his arms wrapped around Renee’s waist. To her credit, Renee looks clueless, which means she wasn’t in on my brothers’ ruse.

I continue my quest to decimate my brothers with death via Mama. “Ma, I have a new roommate. Her name is Alex—*Alexandra*.”

Mama’s face brightens immediately, and I inwardly groan at my mistake because one of her goals in life is to marry off all of her children.

“Ma ...” I warn her but she waves of her hand.

“That’s good news, Gio. Very good news.” Her voice is soft and warm. I’m going to have my work cut out for me

when it comes to making sure Alex isn't railroaded. Then, Mama frowns. "Wait ... what do Marco and Luca have to do with this?"

"Oh, now I can help with this one," Cohen announces from the back door, where he's leaning against the frame, his son and my nephew, Austin, cradled in his arms. "*Alex* is the station's new transfer from Iowa, and we all stupidly assumed that Alex was a man ..."

"Which she's not," I add.

Cohen nods, his lips curving up. "*Definitely* not. Anyway, your *sons* thought they'd help out and suggest Gio's place when she told us she was looking for a place to stay. And I'm *guessing* that Marco and Luca failed to tell G that Alex *is*, in fact, *Alexandra*."

Mama shakes her head and looks at me. "I don't understand. Why would her being a woman be a problem? You've lived with your sisters before. A woman's touch around the house might be nice."

"It will be, Ma. But since your sons didn't tell me I'd be meeting a woman, our first encounter was a little awkward."

"How awkward?" Cohen asks.

"There was a weird moment. And I may have had my gun on display," I reply.

Her eyes widen, as Cohen's low chuckle fills the air. Renee whirls around and stares at Marco, who—to his credit—holds his hands up in the air.

"Don't look at me like that, Princess," he says. "We didn't tell him, but that's because he *assumed* Alex being a firefighter meant she'd be a dude."

Unfortunately, he's not wrong ...

Everyone's eyes turn to Luca, who just shrugs. "What? Why are you all looking at *me*? I didn't pull a gun on an innocent woman who's new to the city and has probably never seen a gun in her life."

“Nah, she’s from Iowa. No way she hasn’t seen a gun,” Marco adds.

“Not with all those hogs roaming the streets,” Cohen says with a nod.

“Wait ... they don’t just have pigs walking down the road ... do they?” Renee asks.

I snort and shake my head. “There’s more to Iowa than pigs.”

“There is?” Luca, Cohen, and Marco ask in unison, all of them with shit-eating grins on their faces.

“They also grow the most corn in the entire country,” Mama replies, grabbing the attention of everyone in the room. “What? I watch *Jeopardy*. It was one of the questions last week.”

I quirk a brow. “There was a topic about Iowa?”

“It was about grain production,” she continues. “Did you know that most of it isn’t even edible; it’s for stock feed. Anyway, enough about that. Tell me about this *Alex*.”

Now *I’m* the one with everyone’s attention. *Sheesh, what is this? Interrogate Gio hour?* “Um ...”

“Wait ... so even *you* don’t know much about her? Jeez, G. What if she’s a serial killer or something?” Val asks.

“She’s not a serial killer. She’s working on my truck, remember?” Marco replies.

Val doesn’t look convinced. “And? All you know is that she’s a girl, she’s a firefighter, and she’s from Iowa.”

“She’s got a twin brother,” I offer up, kicking myself for not asking my new roommate more questions. Then again, I was more focused on making up for my bad first impression than *interviewing* her.

Renee giggles and shakes her head. “That’s not much to go on, G.”

I shrug. “I got a good feeling from her. Besides, the Captain wouldn’t have approved the transfer if she wasn’t

good people, right?” I ask Marco.

“Right. But still ... what if she’s,” he whispers with a smirk, “a vegan?”

“Oh, she won’t be a vegan. She’s from pork country,” Luca says in a ‘duh’ tone.

Cohen arches a brow at my brother. “There are probably plenty of vegans and vegetarians in Iowa, Luc. The pig-to-person ratio doesn’t dictate whether people actually *eat* pork or not. Besides, even if she is, doesn’t mean there’s anything *wrong* with her.”

“Who knows? I just know that I could *never* live without meat. More meat, I say!” Luca sends puppy-dog eyes Ma’s way. “Especially when it’s Mama cooking it.”

“Suck up,” I mutter against my bottle as Marco groans, Renee snickers, and Val rolls her eyes. Cohen just chuckles and shakes his head.

“Boys ...” One look at Mama’s amused expression and warm gaze tells me she loves us bickering now just as much as she did when we were growing up. All we need now is for Skye to come in from outside where she’s helping Dad with the grill, and it would be like we were kids again.

“Shit,” Val groans. “You’re letting a complete stranger move in with you. This is going to be a disaster. She could be a con artist, or a complete crazy woman, or worse ...” My sister drops her voice to a whisper. “She could be *messy* ...”

I suppress a shudder. God, I hope Alex likes living in a clean house like I do. It’s bad enough when Luca comes over; I’m not sure I could handle a roommate who wasn’t tidy too. It’s not like I’m a complete germophobe. I just like to keep my space, my sanctuary, clean and ordered, with everything living in its rightful place. There’s nothing wrong with that. “We only just met a few hours ago and she’s moving in this afternoon. We’ll get to know each other as we go.”

I hope, anyway. My gut instinct when I talked to her didn’t send up any red flags and after a decade as a cop, I trust my gut—kinda have to in this city,

“She’s already met Scotty and hasn’t run a mile. That has to count for something, right?” Cohen says. We all laugh at that.

“*Or ...*” Marco meets my gaze and waggles his brows. “It could be the best thing that ever happens to you. Look at me.” He rests his chin on Renee’s shoulder. “I went to a house viewing and found my princess.”

Val and Mama look like they’re about to melt into a puddle on the floor, whereas Luca makes gagging noises and Cohen just laughs.

I groan though because I feel the change in the air, and it’s the kind of change that never means good things for a Rossi man. All the women in the room grin at each other, exchanging knowing looks—ones that tell me I’m in trouble because there are hearts in their eyes, and that means plans I won’t like are being concocted. But I haven’t survived thirty-four years on this earth and in this family without learning one thing—there’s no stopping Rossi women—and a soon-to-be Rossi woman—on a mission. And right now, that mission is me and my new roommate.

I narrow my eyes and point my finger out, moving it between all of them, even Mama. “No. Whatever you’re all thinking, stop it.”

“Gio, my boy. You let us women do what we do. This Alexandra is new to town. She needs friends, people to show her around,” Mama says.

I hold my breath, hoping she isn’t about to say what I think she’s going to.

“She needs a family while she’s here. That can be us. Our family can be *her* family,” Mama finishes.

“Damn, G. I actually feel sorry for you,” Cohen says with a wary laugh—one that stops the minute Mama’s narrowed eyes slice his way.

“Cohen Cook, you may not be my blood, but you’re one of my sons all the same.”

“Yes, Mama,” Co says, sounding contrite. I snicker to myself, loving how quickly he falls under Mama’s thumb just like the rest of us.

“And *you*, Gio Rossi. You will invite Alexandra to our next lunch. You’ll also get to know your roommate and make sure she feels welcome. *Capiche?*” There’s only one woman that can make me feel like I’m ten years old again, and she’s looking right at me.

“Yes, Mama.”

Then it’s like a switch is flicked and my mother is all smiles and sunshine again. “Right. Now, let’s eat.”

Alex

One thing my parents always instilled in us kids was punctuality, which is why I'm up with the birds and walking through the firehouse doors half an hour early for my shift on Monday with a huge smile on my face.

Last night, I had the best night's sleep I've had since arriving here. Not being in a hotel room had a lot to do with it, but it was also nice to be in a bed of my own, in my own space, excited for my shift today in a job where I'm not known for my last name. I'm not weighed down by expectations—either self-imposed or from my family—and can just *be*.

“Hey, Alex,” Marco says as soon as I enter the big open-plan living area of the station. “You're nice and early.”

I shrug. “I like being on time, and I figured I could get settled in and packed away before our shift starts.”

“Good idea. I'll show you to your locker then.” He nods toward the hallway I'd walked down on Friday, and as we pass the outgoing crew members, he stops and introduces me. Five minutes later, we reach the locker room. He stops in front of an empty one halfway along the row. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks,” I say, dumping my bag down on the bench and opening it up while Marco takes a seat.

“So, did you get settled into Gio's okay?” Marco asks.

“Yep. And thanks for that, and the furniture. Kinda makes up for not telling your brother about me.”

The Lieutenant throws his hands in the air by his head, his eyes full of amusement. “In my defense, that was more Luca’s doing than mine. Besides, sometimes G needs a bit of a spark in his life.”

“He seems pretty low-key and down to earth,” I reply as I place my toiletries bag in my locker beside a plastic container full of snacks that I always like to keep stocked up. When you’re working twenty-four hour shifts, snacks are life.

“He is. But he’s all work and no play.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” It’s just not for me. I spent *far* too many years working and living a humdrum life because that was what I *thought* was expected of me—by my parents, the townsfolk, my ex-boyfriend ...

“Not at all. But having recently met *my* reason for living, I can definitely see the upside to having a life outside of the job. That’s something my little brother is yet to learn.”

“Is this a big brother talk? ’Cause I have one of those, and I guess if Gio is anything like me, he doesn’t much like taking brotherly advice.”

“Pretty much.” Marco chuckles as he moves to his feet. “It’ll just be good for him to have someone else around the house—that’s all I’m saying. Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. Meet us in the garage in twenty and I’ll run through the start-of-shift procedures with you.”

I open my mouth to tell him it’s not necessary, but he beats me to the punch.

“I know you’re not a rookie. You’ve got a few more years in your boots than others on this shift, but it’s a new station, new crew, so if you can humor me for half an hour so I can do my duty as your lieutenant, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure thing, Marco. And thanks. I guess things are gonna be a bit different in the city.”

He waves me off. “Pfft. Just bigger and maybe better equipment. The basics are still the same. See you soon.”

I finish what I'm doing and after a quick bathroom break, I wash my hands and stare at myself in the mirror, my brand-new navy-blue shirt looking crisp and bright and ready to be dirtied up. "You've got this, Alex," I say to myself. "You've been training for this your whole life."

With my affirmation cup full, I tighten my ponytail and head toward the garage, ready to dive headfirst into this new opportunity.

I was expecting to have to line up when I got to the garage. I figured things would be more formal and regimented in the big city. Instead, I find the crew of all guys milling about, talking to each other. That's until my presence is noted, and it feels like my first day at school as everyone's attention turns my way.

Rhodes steps forward and shakes my hand. He's the other lieutenant who I met in the Captain's office the other day. "You'll be the new shiny toy for a while."

"Cause I'm a woman?" Everyone I met on Friday seemed nice and friendly so I never considered that 101 wouldn't be welcoming of a female firefighter. I didn't think I'd have to.

"God, no. And definitely not going to bite on *that* one. I just meant because you're new here. Nobody cares what gender you are," he replies.

A sigh of relief escapes me and I square my shoulders. "All good then. I can deal with being shiny and interesting for a while."

Rhodes shoots me a proud grin. "Yeah ... let's see how *that* goes." He chuckles. "Well, let's get the introductions out of the way, then Marco can run you through everything. But don't hesitate to reach out and ask for help if you need it, okay? Nobody expects you to hit the ground running like a Chicago lifer."

"Thanks. And I will," I reply as he leaves me standing beside Marco.

"Right, everyone. This here is Alex, our new firefighter transfer coming to us from Iowa. She's not a rookie but

she *is* a newbie for Firehouse 101. So if she needs help, help her. No giving her any shit either. None of that crap. Cap's orders."

I wouldn't be surprised if that was my dad's doing. I have no doubt he would've called the Captain when he found out what firehouse I was assigned to.

"Yes, sir," the crew all reply without hesitation. It says a lot about the type of guys they are, and I'm totally here for it. A surefire way to tell you're in a good firehouse is by the respect the crew has for their colleagues and their superiors.

Marco meets my eyes, dropping his voice low. "Don't think you're the type to take any crap, but don't keep quiet either. All right?"

"Understood."

"Good." He waves his arm out, dismissing me, and I go stand next to Luca, who grins at me. Then it's situation normal as Marco runs through the maintenance and errands that need to be done during the shift, and a few outstanding issues from the crew we're taking over from.

Once we're dismissed, we all get to work doing equipment checks and making sure everything is ready to go. An hour later, me and a few of the guys move to the kitchen for some much-needed coffee. Just as I'm watching the Keurig fill my mug, Scotty sidles up to me.

"Hey. I figure you might need a mentor. You know, since you're new and all. If so, I'm your man."

Oh God, save me.

I lean a hip against the kitchen counter, cradling my mug in my hands, thankful that I came in on Friday and got Cohen's heads up about Scotty being a good guy deep down. "Appreciate the offer and all, but I'm only new to town. I'm not new to firefighting. I was pretty much born with a hose in my hand."

"Really?" Scotty says, his eyes alight. "So you're telling me you *like* playing with pipes."

I roll my eyes with a groan. *I walked right into that one.* “Wouldn’t *you* like to know. But my dad was my old fire chief, and my twin brother and I entered the academy straight out of college then worked side by side ever since. Until now, obviously.”

“Wow. So is your brother here too?”

“Nope. Just me.”

“Does that mean you’re all alone in the big city? Well, you can think of me as your friendly neighborhood helper when you’re on-shift ... and off-shift if you want. You know, if you need to be shown around the city and stuff.”

There’s no sleazy tone in his voice, thank God. But if there was one of these guys I’d pick as the type to like the appeal of a shiny new toy, it’d be him. And after being stuck in a predictable, boring, white-picket-fence-destined relationship for way too long, the very last thing I’m looking for is anything resembling a romantic entanglement—let alone a workmate with intentions.

“Thanks, Scotty,” I say as I catch Luca, Cohen, and another firefighter, Zach, coming toward us, their expressions curious, their eyes switching between Scotty and me. It’s as if they’re prepping to jump in if needed. “Do you like skydiving?”

His eyes jump wide and he shakes his head a bit before catching himself. “Um ... never tried it. You *do* that?” He looks dumbfounded, like he could never imagine little ol’ *me* jumping out of a plane.

“Oh, for sure. I’ve got fifty jumps under my belt. Hoping to scout out some good local places.”

I have to bite my lip at his lost-in-the-weeds expression. Seems I have the station clown lost for words. *One-nil to me.*

“I could take you, you know. There’s no better feeling in the world than taking that last big breath at the open door of the plane before throwing yourself out of it. You’d love it. It’s *such* a rush. The wind in your hair as you embrace your mortality...”

I take pity on the man. Then again, in one simple conversation, I've made it clear as mud that I'm no wilting flower and that I can also hold my own when it comes to any of them. *Perfect.*

"I'd be up for a jump sometime," Luca says. "Scotty, you'd love it. Barreling toward the ground, hoping and praying you've packed your chute right. It's amazing."

Scotty pales to a whole new shade of white before he mutters something about "stuff to do" and makes himself scarce.

Luca and Cohen start slow-clapping.

"You serious about skydiving?" Luca asks.

"Are *you*?" I ask Luca. "Because I haven't gone in over a month and I'm getting itchy feet. I'm definitely keep for a jump soon."

He bobs his head. "Sounds good. I know a few places not too far out of the city too. There's also an indoor place that does the trick if you're short on time."

"I like that idea too." I nod toward the door where Scotty escaped. "Is he going to be okay?"

Luca chuckles. "For sure. You just surprised the pants off him, and he's not used to that. He'll be making you laugh the very next chance he gets."

"That's good. Sometimes I can be a little too much for people. I try to tone it down, but at work ..."

Zach grins at me. "Just be you. Better to be true to yourself in this place."

Cohen's expression matches Zach's. "Knew we didn't have anything to worry about with you," Cohen says. "My wife is gonna have a field day with this."

"Why?" I ask, scrunching my brows together.

"Cause Gio's fucked," he murmurs just as the bells start to ring over the speaker, and I lose the chance to ask what he means.

“No rest for the wicked. Let’s go, Iowa. Time to show us what you’re made of,” Luca says, emptying his cup in the sink and urging me to follow suit before rushing with me toward the garage.

I’ve imagined worse nicknames so if that’s the best they’ve got, you won’t catch me complaining. “Iowa, Hmm. That fits. I’ll allow it.”

“Good. Just be happy it’s not Peppa Pig. That was Scotty’s first suggestion.”

“Hey? What? I heard my name,” the man in question asks, coming up behind us as we reach the line of boots and turnout gear set up earlier.

“Nothing, Scotty,” the entire crew says in unison, including me, before we start laughing.

Good roommate. Good workmates. Dream job. Life doesn’t get much better than this.

So far, so good, Chicago. I can’t wait to see what this city has to throw at me next.

Gio

“Hey,” I say as I walk into the house but get no response, likely due to Tom Cochrane’s “Life is a Highway” blasting loudly throughout my home. Dumping my keys on the hall table, I move to the living room and call out again stopping when I come across Alex shaking her shoulders and hips in time to the music as she stirs something that smells delicious on the stovetop. *I guess I did tell her to make herself at home.*

Chuckling to myself, I decide to leave her to it as I head down the hallway still undetected, figuring I might as well clean up before trying to say hello again. It’s probably the first time in the week since she’s moved in that we’ve both been home and awake at the same time with her twenty-four on/forty-eight off schedule, and me picking up extra shifts too.

Marco had text me yesterday to tell me she’d settled in to the firehouse just fine, telling me she’d even managed to render Scotty speechless more than once.

Deciding to clean up before thinking about what to do for dinner, I grab a quick, hot shower, then wrap a towel around my hips and walk through to my bedroom. I shut the bathroom door behind me, noticing the house is significantly quieter now that there’s not a rock concert being held in my living room.

Moving toward my closet, I pull out some sweats and a tee along with some boxers, and I lay them on the bed. Just as I unwrap the towel and start drying myself off, my bedroom door slams open and Alex bounds in, waving a rolling pin

above her head like it's Thor's hammer, and she's ready to attack.

"Whoa!" I splutter

"I'm calling the cops, mother fu—*Gio?* Oh, hell. Um—"

I stare flabbergasted at an equally shocked Alex, her weapon arm falling down to her side, her eyes wide and her chest heaving. My heart thumps against my ribs as I try to calm my own breathing, all the while trying to process what the hell just happened.

Her gaze drops ... then drops again, before jerking up to my face.

"Ah hell," I curse, one hand moving to cover my junk, the other blindly grabbing at anything on my bed to cover myself up with. To her credit—and my relief— Alex turns around to face the wall, giving me privacy.

"I'm *so* sorry. In my defense, I didn't know."

"Didn't know?" *Do I have a third nut I don't know about?* Just to be sure, I move my hand out of the way to make sure everything is as it should be down there.

A soft gasp escapes her, and looking up, I catch Alex's deer-in-the-headlights look in the mirror facing my bed, the mirror giving her a full-frontal view of my uncovered body—*again*. Her cheeks turn pink before she drops her gaze to the ground.

"Didn't know what, Alex?" I ask again as I quickly pull on boxers then my sweats, making sure the important bits are covered before I can inadvertently flash my new roommate with the goods a third time.

"That you were home. I didn't hear you come in, and I figured you would've said hi or something when you did. So when my music stopped and I heard a door shut and then footsteps, my brain went to the worst-case scenario and defaulted into self-preservation mode."

"With a rolling pin? Don't you have pepper spray or something in your purse?"

“No. I just have a whistle,” she says before she turns around to face me. “Hold up. Why are we discussing weapons of choice to use when I mistakenly think there’s someone in the house?”

“Cause *you* thought I was a home invader, and instead of running out of the house and maybe calling the cops, you ran in here all hot air and bluster, armed with a kitchen utensil. I think this warrants a conversation.”

“Do you have to be shirtless for it? It’s kind of distracting, that’s all.” She waves her hands in front of her, gesturing to my chest.

“Not like you haven’t seen me already, roomie,” I reply, unable to fight my smirk.

She snickers as she lifts her eyes to mine. “I’m sorry.”

“For accosting me with a weapon of pastry creation or copping a look in the mirror?” I ask with a questioning brow. Her lips twitch up and I frown. “What?”

“Get it? *Copping* a look?” she replies with a giggle.

I roll my eyes and fight a snort at her goofy sense of humor.

“I kind of just went into fight-or-flight mode.” Her shoulders go back and she glares at me. “Besides, you could’ve at least *told* me you were home.”

“I tried, you were too busy being mid-hip shimmy.”

“Oh,” she mumbles, her shoulders visibly dropping. “I was cooking our first roomies dinner.”

My head jerks back. “That’s a thing?”

She shrugs. “I wanted to say thank you for letting me move in, and since it was the first time we’ve been home at the same time ...”

Damn.

“Shit. Okay, well if you’re not traumatized from seeing me naked and dinner’s not ruined because you ran in here like a modern-day Wonder Woman, I’d like that.”

She gifts me a wide, genuine smile, and for a moment, I forget that I'm standing there shirtless in a pair of grey sweats and my new roommate has already seen me naked. Because that smile is dangerous and has trouble written all over it.

Remember she's your roommate, Gio.

She steps forward and holds out her arm to me. "Truce?"

My brows bunch together as I shake her hand. "For what?"

"We've only met face-to-face two times, and you've already pulled a gun on me, and I've stormed in ready to bash you with a rolling pin. I'd say we're even now."

"Truce then," I agree with a nod and a shake of her hand.

Alex steps back and doesn't hide the full-body perusal she gives me. "Brilliant. Well, not that I'm complaining—because *damn*, who knew you had *that* hiding under there?—but growing up, we always ate supper fully dressed."

I bark out a laugh and shake my head. "I *think* I can manage that."

"Awesome. See ya soon, roomie," she says before turning around and skipping her way out of the room. Stopping in the doorway, she shoots me an amused smirk. "By the way, shrinkage *obviously* isn't an issue. Good for you."

I'm left standing there with my mouth agape and absolutely no comeback.

And it's not until Tom Petty starts blaring from the kitchen again that I realize I better get moving.

Life is going to be interesting with Alex Maxwell around. But maybe that's exactly what I need.

"THIS SMELLS DELICIOUS. Thanks for cooking. Unexpected, but not at all unappreciated."

"You're welcome, roomie. It's no hassle when I'm the one who's been home all day," she says, beaming from across the

dining table at me. “We haven’t talked about splitting cooking or chores or anything, but I wanted to make a good impression, and I thought we could use this dinner to get to know each other a bit.”

I quirk a brow and chuckle. “Accosting me in my bedroom didn’t tell you everything you needed to know?”

She rolls her eyes, a smile playing on her lips. “Hey. I was defending myself.”

“From a bathing criminal, and with a deadly kitchen utensil no less,” I remark dryly. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“It won’t happen again. Besides, you’ve got *nothing* to be ashamed about.”

My head jerks back. “Who said I was embarrassed?”

“Oh. Well, good then. Some men can get quite funny about a woman they’re not sleeping with seeing them naked.”

“Seen a lot of men naked, have you?” I ask, lifting a forkful of the pasta bake to my mouth and tasting the meal for the first time. “Damn. This is good.”

“Firstly, no, I haven’t, but even if I had, it wouldn’t matter. Isn’t the saying ‘it’s not the size of the boat, it’s the motion of the ocean? Although, what woman wouldn’t choose a superyacht over a dinghy if given the choice.” She winks. “And as for the food, of course it’s good. My mom made sure to teach me how to cook as soon as I could stand on the kitchen stool beside her.”

“She taught you well then.”

“Thank you. Nothing’s worth eating if it’s not made well, and I like that it’s one of the many memories I’ll always have of her, you know?”

“Too true.” I take another mouthful. “Although some nights I’m too tired to cook, so if I’ve run out of meals in the freezer from Mama, takeout is a necessity.”

“For sure. But since I like to cook, how about we split the cleaning jobs, but on my days off, I’ll cook for us—if you’re home, of course.”

“I’m usually home, unless I’m on nights or get called in. So that works.”

She tilts her head, her brows bunching. “You don’t date or anything? I don’t know if I believe that.”

I shake my head. “Not lately. Right now, I’m either working to pay the mortgage or too tired from working. Besides, I’m way past the trawling-clubs-to-pick-up-women stage, and too suspicious to do online dating. Curse of my profession, one might say.”

“I hear you on that. I swear, you hit thirty, and the whole dating scene seems like too much hard work. Whatever happened to serendipitous meetings or just coming across someone during your day-to-day life who takes your fancy?”

I’ve often wondered that myself.

“Anyway, back to cooking,” she continues. “Working the jobs we do, you gotta have good fuel to get through the long shifts. There’s nothing worse than having a cheeseburger sitting in your gut when you get a call-out.”

“Or when you’re running after a suspect.”

“Do you do that often? Run after people?”

“Sometimes. Depends where I’m stationed. For now I’m a training officer with a rookie to assess, so I’m on patrol at the moment.”

“And you like it? Being a cop, I mean?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Didn’t want to be a firey like your brothers?”

I shake my head, putting my cutlery down and picking up my beer. “Nah. Marco and Luca were always destined to do that. I wanted to serve the public though. So after a detective came to my high school for careers day, I went home and talked to my parents. Together, we came up with a plan—college, then straight to the academy. And here I am. “I sip my beer and place my bottle back down. “How about you?”

“I’m legacy. Adam and I just naturally followed each other into the fire academy after college. Then we went straight from there to working under Dad. Now Dad’s getting close to retirement and grooming Adam to take over as fire chief.”

“Is that why you transferred to the CFD?”

“Kind of, but not really. Adam was already my lieutenant, so I didn’t have any issue with working for him. I just wanted to do something different. Make my mark, spread my wings. You know, typical small-town girl stuff.”

“Nothing about you screams small-town *anything*, Alex. Not from what I’ve seen,” I say quietly. I’m realizing that there are many layers to this woman, and how long it’ll take to uncover them all. But there’s something about her that makes me wanna try.

Silence falls between us, and I feel a sudden need to fill it. “So, how was your first week? Marco’s told me you’ve been handling Scotty and his ‘Scotty-ness’ like a pro.”

Alex snorts. “It’s been really good. The job is still the same, obviously. It’s just on a much bigger scale and with much newer, sometimes fancier equipment to do it with.”

I nod.

“And as for Scotty, he’s quite entertaining when he wants to be. But straight away, he struck me as a people pleaser—you know? Like one of those guys who just want to make everyone happy? They’re harmless, usually hilarious, and once you set boundaries, they’re a lot of fun.”

“Boundaries?” My voice drops low, taking both of us by surprise if Alex’s wide eyes are anything to go by.

“Hold up, Hulk. Cool ya jets. It’s fine. All he did was offer to show me around town.”

“What? Why would he do that?” Scotty may be a decent guy, but he’s also a skirt chaser—or maybe in Alex’s case, the male version of a fire bunny. *A fire buck? A badge buddy? How about ‘not on my watch?’*

Alex shrugs. “He was just being friendly.”

“I can show you round the city if you want,” I blurt out without thinking.

Her brows shoot sky high as her lips curve up. “That sounds good. Maybe once my stuff has arrived from back home and I’m a little more settled in. You sure?”

I nod. “Wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want to, Alex.”

“Good then. It’s a date.”

My head jerks and she just snorts.

“You know, like a roomie date. A strictly platonic, get-to-know-your-roommate kind of date. Not a *date* date.”

I’m chuckling by the time she finishes her lengthy explanation. I lift my beer to my lips and take a drink.

“Anyway. I sorted Scotty out real quick. He might’ve turned a little green around the gills after I invited him to come skydiving with me.”

Choking on my mouthful, I splutter and wheeze as I struggle to swallow the liquid. Alex starts giggling, her eyes dancing with amusement.

“You right there, roomie? I know I’ve seen you naked already, but I might have to draw the line at mouth-to-mouth—well, in the first week anyway,” she says.

Finally recovering, I shake my head at her. *Skydiving? Just thinking of that makes me shudder.* ”Man, you’re a live one, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been called worse.” Her expression falls just for a second before she schools her features and plasters on a smile, puffing her chest out as she does it. *Wonder what that was about?* “I like to think of myself as spirited. But I just like living life to its fullest.”

“Like skydiving and motorcycles?”

She grins. “Yep.”

“I bet you kept your parents on their toes growing up.”

“Probably no more than you Rossi brothers. You forget that I’ve met Luca.”

I chuckle at that, because she’s not wrong. “You haven’t met Skye or Valentina yet. By themselves, those three are manageable. Get them together, and it’s every man, woman, and child for themselves.”

She tilts her head. “Where are you in the birth order?”

“Second youngest. First angel child. Marco and I are the more sensible ones out of us kids.”

“I note you said more sensible, not *most*.”

Without thinking, I wink her way. “Can’t give away all my secrets.”

Her eyes widen then warm as she lifts her wineglass in the air. “Well then, here’s to new roomies.”

I fist my beer bottle and raise it to tap against her drink, deciding to wait until she’s taken a sip before finishing the toast. “And to not seeing each other naked again.”

Alex coughs and splutters this time, and I can’t help but lean back in my chair and grin at her as she narrows her eyes with a smirk.

“*Touché*, Officer Rossi. Well played,” she says, her eyes full of amusement. “But let it be said: you’re far from hard to look at.”

I laugh quietly and shrug as we return to our meals. I make quick work of mine, because I wasn’t lying when I told her it was good.

When we’re both finished, I stand and gather our empty dinner plates.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” she says, throwing her hand out to stop me.

“Mama trained me well. The cook doesn’t clean. So let me do the dishes while you sit back and relax.”

“You better be careful, roomie. I could totally get used to this.”

“Keep cooking meals that good, and I’ll gladly clean up when you do.”

“Is that because of your manners, or because you’re a *teeny*, tiny bit of a neat freak?” Her lips twitch.

“You noticed that, huh?”

“Dude, every time I’ve come home from the firehouse this week there hasn’t been a single thing to clean, and I’ve lived with three men in my life, and it’s very rare for there to be *nothing* to pick up.”

“Safe to say, I might be a *little* bit of a neat freak then.”

She nods. “I’ll keep that in mind—as long as you don’t hold the current state of the kitchen against me.”

My heart stutters a bit—as does my step when I stop to look over at the damage. Boy, is there a mess in there. I tamp down my panic though. Well, I try to. “Okay.” My voice is tight and not at all reassuring, something Alex’s laugh confirms.

She shoots me a sympathetic, albeit amused, look. “As I said, I’ll keep it in mind ... *from now on*.”

“Much appreciated.”

“One last question. Did you mean it when you said to make this place my own?”

“Sure. It’s your home too.”

“Awesome. I’ve got stuff being sent from back home that’s arriving soon, and I figured I might go shopping later this week to grab some new things. You know, put a little Alex touch on the place.” Then she shoots me a smile so stunning it probably guarantees she gets her way 99.9 percent of the time. *’Cause it’s definitely working on me.* “I think this cohabitation thing is gonna work out just fine, roomie.”

“Me too. It’ll be nice to have a feminine touch around the place,” I say, looking over the living area, which is crisp, clean and rather ... masculine. I’ve always erred on the side of functional and practical when it came to furnishing the house. Perhaps it could use a warmer touch.

Alex moves from the table to the sofa while I head into the kitchen. With a silent resigned sigh, I step forward and get to work.

She did say she'd keep my 'neat freak' nature in mind in future. I guess the least I can do is keep my 'neat freak' expectations in check too, right?

I can only hope that the future comes sooner rather than later.

Alex

“Hello?” I say sleepily into my phone, the bright sun streaming through my blinds and nearly blinding me.

“Aww, listen to you, A2. You sound wrecked. A few weeks working in the big city already too much for my little sister?”

I smile as I roll over onto my back in bed and stretch out my limbs. Now that my vision has cleared, I hold my phone out to see it’s nine a.m. Yesterday was the first day of my two RDOs, so I took it easy and since my Iowa stuff had arrived, I spent the day going through it all. Today, I have plans though, and they involve hitting the shops to stamp my ‘feminine touch’ on the place, as Gio described it.

But I’d be able to do it better if I’d had a few more hours sleep.

“You know I like my lazy mornings. Especially the day before a shift.”

“Yeah, sis. Just ribbing ya. So, how was it, anyway? Fill me in on the adventures of Alex.”

I roll my eyes but snuggle down and settle in. “The guys are good; the two lieutenants on the shift are great. It’s a lot like back at home, except—”

“Bigger?”

“Yeah. And there’s a bit of the thrill of the unknown too. Like, each time the bell rings, I’m not sure if it’s going to be a

standard, run-of-the-mill kitchen fire, or maybe a ten-floor-high apartment building blaze.”

Adam splutters. “You’ve had a big fire already? You’d think they might ease you into it.”

I put on my best Elle Woods voice. “What? Like it’s hard?”

My twin chuckles.

“Adam, you and I have the same amount of years on the truck. I’ve done nothing and seen nothing that either one of us wouldn’t be able to do with our eyes closed.”

“Talk about hitting the ground running.”

That brings a satisfied smile to my lips because as much as Dad and Adam didn’t like the idea of me leaving for the bright flashing lights of Chicago, my brother especially understood the burning desire I had to do it regardless. It was just something I had to do, and so far I have absolutely no regrets.

“I love it, Adam. So far, so good, as they say. So feel free to pass that along to Dad, too.”

My brother laughs. “Will do. Safe to say it’ll put his mind at ease that his princess is safe.”

Apart from freaking out with a rolling pin and meeting my new roomie at the door with a gun. But Dad and Adam don’t need to know about *that*.

“And the new place—you all settled in?”

“Yep. My stuff arrived a few days ago, so thanks for organizing that. And I’ve even managed to cook Mom’s pasta bake for Gio already too.”

“You’re *cooking* for him?” Adam asks, sounding surprised.

“He’s my roommate. It was a ‘welcome to living with me’ kind of dinner.”

“I hope you cleaned up after yourself then, ’cause Lord knows, you’re not the *tidiest* cook.”

I gasp in mock offense. “I’ll have you know *he* offered to clean up. Same rules apply for Rossis as they do with the Maxwells.”

“The chef doesn’t clean up,” we both say in unison, and we laugh.

“Well, good. And it’ll come as no surprise that both Dad and I are feeling a little bit better knowing you’re living with a cop.”

I roll my eyes. “I *can* take care of myself, you know.”

“Alex—”

“*But* I’m glad you can worry a little less. I’m honestly doing okay. I promise.”

“Would you even admit if you weren’t?” *Probably not.*

“Um ...”

He chuckles. “Yeah, just as I thought,” he says, as bells fill the phone line. “Ah, hell. I gotta go.”

“Duty calls, brother. Fires wait for no one—not even overprotective, barely-older-than-me brothers.”

“Too true. Stay safe. Talk soon.”

“You too, Adam. I’ll call Dad on the weekend, okay?”

“Sounds good.”

“Bye. Tell the guys I said hey.”

“Will do. Bye, sis.”

Then he’s gone, and I’m left with a smile on my face. Time to get up and get ready to go shopping and start my mission for the day—liven up Casa del Rossi, Alex style.

I’ve just grabbed my phone and purse from the kitchen counter, and am ready to walk toward the L station, when there’s a knock at the door.

A few moments later, I peer through the peephole to see a beautiful blonde with a baby boy perched on her hip and bright green eyes looking straight at me, as if she somehow *knows* I’m watching her.

“I promise I’m not here to discuss your car’s extended warranty, if that’s what you’re worried about,” she says.

I can’t help the startled laugh that escapes me. Swinging the door open, I meet her grin with a welcoming smile. “Hi.”

“Hey. Alex, right? I’m Skye, Gio’s sister.” Explains the beauty and the smart mouth. Then I connect the dots.

“You’re Cohen’s wife, right?”

“Yes, ma’am. And you’re the new firefighter at 101 who’s hopefully keeping all the guys in line. If *any* of them have been an ass to you already, you better *believe* I’ll make each and every one of them pay for it. Even the lieutenants,” she says, her smile widening..

“I look down at the adorable baby she’s carrying “They’re all good guys, and it looks like you’re taking care of the next generation there too. Sorry to say though, Gio’s not here. He’s working days this week.”

“Damn. I could’ve *sworn* he said he’d be home today. Oh well.” She shrugs, not looking at all disappointed by this turn of events. “I guess that just means I can visit with you, right? You know, get to know the woman living with my brother. Unless you’ve got plans, of course ...”

To her credit, she plays mock surprise very well. She almost convinced me she didn’t already know that her brother wouldn’t be here—which of course means she’s here to check out his new roommate.

“I was actually just heading out to do a bit of shopping,” I say.

“Grocery or other? Because if it’s for anything other than food, then that sounds like an *awesome* idea that I could totally get behind.”

I chuckle at her exuberance. She reminds me of a few of my friends back home who went down the white-picket-fence route straight out of school—married, kids, a minivan, the whole shebang. They’d always be keen to do something if it meant leaving the house and getting some adult time away from their kids and husbands.

Skye doesn't strike me as a person who'd have an issue making friends, but she's a woman with a connection to both my home and work life, and if she's Gio's sister, what's the harm in spending some time with her? She might even be able to point me in the right direction when it comes to buying things he'll like too.

"Do you want to come along? I was just gonna catch the train," I say.

"Oh, pfft. I have a car. Austin and I can drive you to wherever you need to go. The bonus is, since it's almost lunchtime, we can grab something to eat while we're at it."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Awesome. Then you can grill me for dirt on the Firehouse 101 crew and my brothers, and I can get to know the woman who's hopefully gonna help teach my brother to relax and enjoy life a bit—no offense."

I like this girl already. "Okay. Let me lock up and we can go."

Three hours later, Skye, her son, Austin, and I have done quite the damage to our credit cards after hitting up Walmart, Target, Home Depot, and Bath and Bodyworks—because no house is a home without ten million different-smelling candles. Now, we're sitting at an outdoor table outside a Mexican restaurant at the local mall, having worked up an appetite.

She picks up her cell and types out a message, giving me a chance to look over at a sleeping Austin in his stroller before her phone chimes and she giggles. She places it face-down and looks my way. There's definitely mischief dancing in her eyes as another text comes through, which she ignores.

"What are you up to?" I ask.

She feigns innocence. "Who, me? *Nothing* ..."

Snorting, I shake my head as I take a sip of my water. "Yeah, not buying *that*. You forget I work with your family, and from the little I know about them, you're all a little nutty in your own way."

“I’d totally be offended if you weren’t one hundred percent on the money with that. Anyway, all I did was send Gio a message to tell him that I shop-napped you and that he can thank me later.”

“Um ... okay ...”

“C’mon. I love my brother, but he takes life far too seriously sometimes.” She pauses for a moment. “Actually. Well, maybe it’s that he’s forgotten how to relax and take it easy. It’s my duty as his baby sister to tease him now and then.”

I laugh softly. “I hear you about that. My brother, Adam, takes his job as older brother a little too far sometimes as well. He was grilling me earlier about the fire crew and making sure I wasn’t having a hard time.”

“Yeah, that won’t happen. Although considering I’m married to one of the crew, and he threw down the big brother gauntlet to prove he loved me, I can say with absolute certainty that I *get* you.”

I hold my glass up and clink it with hers. “To overprotective family members. And to playing our part in driving them crazy for shits and giggles whenever and wherever possible.”

Skye’s smile widens “Amen to *that*. God, I wish I wasn’t still on maternity leave. I kind of miss the shenanigans at work. I’m sure you and I would run rings around the guys if we worked the same shift.”

“Especially Scotty.”

“Oh God,” she says, tapping her palm against her forehead. “That man has a heart of gold but he’s hard work. We had a party last year for Rhodes’s sixteen-year-old son, and he turned up with Tiki torches, of all things.”

I splutter, a startled laugh escaping me. “You’re joking?”

“Nope,” she says, accentuating the *P*. “It was both hilarious and kind of sweet at the same time. A lot of the crew have been together for years. We’ve all been there for each

other through thick and thin—injuries, marriages, breakups, kids, all of it.”

“I know I’m only new and I’m still finding my feet, but I really like the vibe of the place. It’s definitely made the transition from small-town station to big-city firehouse a hell of a lot easier.”

“And living with Gio?” she asks, just as our server arrives with our food before leaving us to it.

“Well, we’ve had a couple of ... *interesting* experiences already, but I kind of think I might be the yin to his yang.”

“And you’re not a vegan, since you ordered the chicken.”

“God, no. I love meat far too much. Growing up on a farm means I’ve been a carnivore since I was old enough to chew. Why’s that?”

She shakes her head, a smile playing on her lips. “Oh, it’s nothing. Luca and Val—our sister—were teasing G the other day at lunch about how you might be a vegan, or messy, or both.”

I take a mouthful of my grilled chicken salad, coincidentally dropping Caesar sauce on my top, which makes us both giggle. After grabbing a napkin, I wipe it off. “Well, I’m definitely not going to win housewife of the year, and I’m sure your brother almost had a coronary at the state of the kitchen after I cooked us dinner last week. But now that I *know* he’s a neat freak, I’m going to at least *try* to be a shadow of my messy self.”

“Don’t you dare!” Skye says. “Gio is black and white, and you’re neon technicolor. You’re exactly the kind of woman that man needs to loosen him up a bit.”

My body jolts at that but I swallow back my initial reaction to her insinuation. “You know we’re just roommates, right?” Then something hits me. “Or have I stumbled into some sort of ‘find a Rossi a wife’ campaign?”

“That is *brilliant!*” she says with a snort. “But no. Well, not from *me*, anyway. You might have something to worry

about when it comes to Mama and Val, though. They're always on the lookout for new meat."

I choke and start coughing, quickly picking up my glass for a drink. "What?"

Skye waves me off. "It's nothing. I promise. Mama is just ... you know that emoji with hearts instead of eyes?"

I nod.

"Well, that's her when it comes to seeing us kids happy and loved up. Marco is engaged, so he's off the hook. Val has spent years working hard on her career, so now she's in her thirties and trying to play catch-up by dating as if her life depends on it. Luca is still very much in playing-the-field mode, which just leaves—"

"Gio."

"Yep. But don't worry. I swear, I just wanted to get to know you." She holds her hand in the air. "Scout's honor."

"That's good. I think you're underestimating your brother though. I thought he was uptight to start with—I mean, after the whole gun incident—but we're pretty much on the same wavelength with life. It's quite nice, actually."

She tilts her head, studying me as she does. "And what is that wavelength, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Well, I, for one, am not looking for a relationship. I was with the same guy for over a decade when I should've ended it years earlier, and Gio seems to be focused on work and establishing himself, and he said himself that he's not interested in dating anyone right now. The same as I am. Sorry to disappoint your sister and mother, but I think Gio and I will be good friends and roommates—nothing more." *Even if his body is the stuff cop fantasies are made of.*

"But what if you meet someone and catch feelings?"

I shrug. "What will be, will be, I guess. But I'm not *looking*."

"*Hmm*," she says, returning her attention to her lunch.

“Hmm?”

“It’s just. Well ...” She shakes her head from side to side. “Actually, no. Forget I said anything.”

“Oh no. We’ve completed the sacred ritual of shopping together and now eating together. The circle of friendship is complete. So now you *have* to tell me.”

“Okay. What I was going to say is that it just seems like you’re *exactly* the kind of woman my brother needs. And yes, I get that you’re new in town, and you’re still finding your feet, and from what Cohen tells me, you’re here to spread your wings. But maybe don’t close yourself off to anything. Believe me, I was pining after my husband for months and months before he finally saw me as a woman and not just his EMT partner. Even then, it still took him months to realize that he could have his cake and eat it too. But there’s also nothing wrong with a bit of casual, no-strings fun. Dating or not dating, everyone has needs, right?”

I open my mouth to argue her point but she keeps going.

“*But*, since we have completed the circle of friendship, how about I play interference with Mama and Val when you come to family lunch next month?”

“What?”

“Oh, didn’t Gio tell you? Mama heard you were a single girl, new in town, and those heart eyes were a little crazy. You know, like in *The Mask* when his eyes popped out of his head and rolled across the room.”

My eyes widen.

“Yeah, pretty much like *that*,” she adds, and we both laugh. “Come along, eat Mama’s honest-to-goodness food, and just get to know the crazy Rossi clan a bit better. You’ll already know Marco, Luca, Gio, myself and Cohen. So you’ll be ahead of the curve when it comes to meeting the Rossis. And in return, I promise to have your back when Mama starts booking wedding venues.”

“*What?*” I ask, my chest seizing for a second.

She barks out a laugh. “I’m *joking*. Well, she’ll probably be distracted with Marco and Renee’s wedding plans for a while anyway. That’ll buy you some time.” She giggles again, and now I’m shaking my head at *her*.

“Gio and I hardly—”

“Know each other. Yeah, I get it. All I’m saying is that while you’re finding your feet, maybe keep your eyes open. You never know.

“You’re just as much of a matchmaker as your mom, aren’t you?”

She grins against her glass as she holds it to her lips. “I’ll neither confirm nor deny. I will say that I look forward to hearing about all the ways you go about helping my brother *lighten* up. If that happens to be doing the horizontal mambo?” She shrugs. “So be it.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And you’re exactly what Gio needs. But until he figures that out, anything you can do to get him to relax and remember that there’s this thing called ‘having a life outside of work’ would be much appreciated.”

“Well, I’m hoping to go skydiving next weekend since I have both days off. Do you think he’d want to tag along? Luca has already said he’d be keen to go for a jump.”

“Now that is *definitely* a Luca kind of thing. Gio? He’s not so much into the ‘adrenalin rush’ side of things. But just ‘cause he won’t jump out of a plane doesn’t mean he might not want to go along and watch.”

“Okay. I’ll ask.”

“Good. Now I think I know the perfect thing for that empty corner in Gio’s living room. You know, the space by the bay window?”

“Yeah. That void has been bugging me but I couldn’t think of anything that isn’t too big or too garish for the space. Your brother seems very set in his ways. I’m a bit worried I’ve overstepped with what I’ve got already,” I add, looking down

at the many and varied bags of all my shopped wares for the day. “But I’m open to ideas. I was thinking a houseplant or potted tree or something. What about you?”

“I’m *thinking* we have one more stop to make before I drop you home and leave you to do some long overdue home decorating. And I’ll tell you what—I’ll even buy it for you. Call it a housewarming gift.”

I frown. “Should I be worried?”

“Probably. But since I’ve already got your roommate shaking in his boots that I’m leading you astray, I figure it’s ‘go big or go home’ time.”

“What are you thinking?”

“Just trust me,” she says with a snicker.

Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about.

Gio

I get home early from my shift, the Captain having told me to sign out since we had a particularly hard call this afternoon that the rookie took hard. Not one to argue, I've already come home to an empty house and gotten dressed into my running gear before heading out again.

I have to keep fit for the job anyway, but with the annual charity baseball game between my precinct and Firehouse 101 coming up in a few months, and knowing that I'll be up against my brothers and Cohen, I'm going to make sure I'm in my best possible physical condition. They beat us last year and this year and, along with my fellow cops Zander and Jeremy, I'm determined to kick their asses. It helps that Zander's best friend, Zach, works at the firehouse too, so between them and the sibling rivalry between me, Marco, and Luca, it's safe to say that I'm motivated to stay in shape. But more than both of those reasons, running is like my own form of meditation. It's a way to clear my mind and shrug off the stress of the job when needed as well. It's also a way to stop thinking about Alex spending time with my sister.

When Skye texted me earlier to tell me she was out with Alex to shop for stuff for the house, she promised to make sure Alex made "good" choices. I was surprised that out of all of the Rossi females, it was *Skye* making the first move to befriend my new roommate. I'm not worried about Alex not being able to hold her own against my baby sister, but more about Skye's definition of "good choices."

After doing my normal five-mile circuit, I unlock the front door to be met by Starship's "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now" playing loudly from the living room. *At least Alex has good taste in music. I'll give her that.*

I walk toward the sound, leaning a shoulder against the living room entryway when I find Alex shaking her ass and holding a candle in her hand, singing along at the top of her lungs as she bends over to place something on the sofa. When she straightens, my eyes almost pop out of my head. My grey three-seater couch has been adorned with a mustard-colored wool blanket over one corner, with matching yellow and pink pillows covering the cushions.

I drag my eyes over to the kitchen island to find a black tray with three different-colored candles placed in a circle and what looks like a glass vase with a hole in the center. There are more mustard and pink kitchen towels hanging from the oven rail.

Then there's a swirling textured rug on the floor under the coffee table, and a canvas print made up of what appears to be paint splashes in a multitude of colors that shouldn't work—but kind of still do—leaning up against my bookcase on the far wall.

"Hey *roomie*," I say. Alex shrieks and spins around, her cheeks blooming bright red.

"Dammit. Are you *trying* to scare the hell out of me?"

"If I wasn't, I achieved that feat anyway, didn't I?" I say with an amused shrug.

She stamps her foot. "You've ruined my surprise too."

"Oh, I'm surprised alright."

Her eyes narrow as she looks me over. "A good surprise or an 'ugh, I hate it' surprise?"

Fuck, she's cute.

It's not what I would've picked, but then again, my interior design prowess is in minimalist bachelor-chic. "It's an Alex surprise," I say, making a note to kill my sister the next time I

see her. “Skye was texting me. She made out like I’d be walking into a hippy haven full of tie-dye and tassels. Her text specifically said, ‘Fair warning: Alex is leaning more toward Woodstock than Martha Stewart.’”

She giggles. “Your sister is one of a kind. Her heart is in the right place though. But she’s definitely a bit of an enabler.”

She’s not wrong about any of that.

“I looked for things that would complement your things rather than completely change everything.” She tilts her head, worrying her lip with her teeth, and I think it might be the first time I’ve seen Alex Maxwell nervous. *Well, this is a first.* “It’s okay if it’s not your thing. I just liked the idea of putting a little bit of *me* around the house. But maybe I got a little carried away?”

I run my eyes over the new additions again, rubbing my chin as I take it all in as a whole before meeting her eager gaze.

“Shit, you hate it, don’t you?”

Damn, I can’t deal with that look of disappointment covering her features. “No. it’s not that. It’s just ... different. That’s all. The singing definitely adds to the whole effect though. Can you sing another song? Maybe it’ll help me *feel* the vibe.” I fight to keep my expression neutral but as soon as my lips start twitching, Alex’s gaze narrows.

“Hey. I’m a firefighter, not a rock star. Even if I did beg my parents to send me to the School of Rock after watching the movie.”

I chuckle and push off the wall, walking into the room and not missing how Alex looks me over. “And how did that work out for you?”

“Well, I became a firefighter, so how do ya think?” she replies with a grin. “I didn’t know you were a runner?”

“You run too?”

“Into and out of burning buildings? Sure. For kicks? Absolutely not,” she says, scrunching up her face. “How anyone can enjoy running for fun is a mystery I, for one, will never solve. Adam runs a lot. Do you do it often?”

“I try to. Call it my own way to de-stress. How about you? What do you do to wind down?”

Alex’s eyes flash and her wicked grin teases me. “Well, now. I’m not exactly sure we’re at *that* level of roomie confessions.” She snickers and I shake my head. I already know from her curves and strength that there’s no way she can look the way she does and work the job she does without working out in *some* sort of way, but I shouldn’t go down the road of thinking about all the *other* ways she might work up a sweat. *Down, boy.* I cough to clear my throat and Alex’s smirk deepens.

“Riding your motorcycle can’t keep you *that* fit?” I try asking again.

She pops a hip out and rests her hand on it. “You calling me fit, mate?” Her attempt at a British accent is on par with her singing ability—definitely nothing to write home about but still kind of cute nonetheless.

“To answer your question, sometimes I muck around in the workout room at the firehouse. Otherwise, I just try to stay active on my days off. Walking places if they’re close enough. Maybe a bit of naked yoga in the backyard ... that sort of thing.”

My eyes widen as hers crinkle. “I don’t know what to believe anymore,” I snort.

“I *was* thinking of trying out pole dancing. I mentioned it to Skye on the way home, and she’s going to talk to Val, and we’re going to catch a class together sometime.”

Operation Befriend Alex is obviously well underway.

“Don’t feel like you have to go along with any of my sisters’ crazy ideas. They’re meddling—that’s what they do. They meddle.”

“I’ve always wanted to have a go at the pole. I’ve been to more than my fair share of strip clubs in my time; some of the dancers are super talented. I’d love to be able to spin around like that, maybe upside down in the air with my legs holding my weight.” She arches a brow in challenge, leaving me speechless with the mental imagery she’s just planted firmly in my head.

“*What?*” With my throat suddenly as dry as the Mojave Desert, I move toward the kitchen, grab a glass from the overhead cabinet and fill it from the water jug in the fridge.

It’s not until I turn back around, my glass already half empty, when I see it. A tall grey pot with what looks like a dead tree stump planted in it. A single leaf sticks out of the top of the stump, like a balding man’s last surviving strand or something now sitting pride of place in the empty corner of the living room.

“What the hell is *that*?”

She looks over her shoulder and then back at me. “That’s our pet house plant.”

“Our what now?” I ask, jerking my head forward with a frown.

“I thought it would be a great bonding experience. And since we’re working different shifts a lot of the time, one of us will always be here to look after Fred.”

“Who’s Fred?” I’m totally confused now.

“The Yucca. That’s Fred.” *Surely she’s fucking with me now.* “He’s our house plant. We’re both responsible for praising him, watering him, and motivating him to grow.”

“Okaaaay ... Wait, was this Skye’s idea?” This has my sister’s crazy sense of humor written all over it.

“Well, she did help me pick out the plant, but I was already thinking we needed some greenery. I also asked you about it when we met, remember?”

She’s got me there. “All right then. So how does this work? Do we take turns watering it? I draw the line at walking a

plant, okay?” I say, completely serious.

Alex looks at me dumbfounded before she throws her head back and laughs. “Gio. I say this with the best of intentions—you need to loosen up and live a little. And I think I’m going to help you with that.”

I laugh. “What?”

“You heard me,” she replies, her eyes alight with determined amusement. “First we’ll co-parent Fred. And then we can move on to skydiving. Maybe I’ll even persuade you to hop on the back of my bike with me sometime too.”

Don’t picture Alex in full-body leather. Don’t do it, Gio.

“So shall I put you down for a tandem dive with the instructor?” Alex asks.

“Yeah, no. Not gonna happen, sunshine.”

“Not *jumping*. I’m not *that* mean. Just come along, watch me throw myself out of a plane. Catch me if I fall—that kind of thing.”

My eyes bug out of my head and roll down onto the floor.

“I’m *joking*, roomie.”

Thank fuck for that!

“But the invitation is legit. Are you working next Sunday?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Three days off, Saturday to Monday.”

“Perfect. So you can come with me and Luca. I’ll even shout you dinner and a drink afterward. Whaddya say?”

“No jumping?”

“Gio Rossi, I solemnly swear that I will *not* kidnap you, strap a parachute to your back, force you into the plane, and then throw you out of it. There, satisfied?” Her brow is arched high but there’s no missing her twitching lips.

I study her, looking for any sign that she’s screwing with me. She’s not, but there’s no denying she’s enjoying keeping

me on my toes. “Oh, all right then. But I’m holding you to the dinner.”

“Pinky promise,” she says, holding her hand my way. A huge radiant smile blooms on her face as I twist my finger around hers. “C’mon, roomie. What’s the worst that could happen?”

But as she walks away, the answer to her question blooms in my mind.

I could forget that you’re supposed to be off-limits.

Alex

Alex: Hey, roomie. Don't forget about Fred.

Gio: Who's Fred again?

Alex: I'm truly hurt, Gio. I thought he meant more to you than that.

Gio: Seriously ... who's Fred?

Alex: I'm thinking your sense of humor is like an acquired taste. It takes a while to work it out.

Gio: You're not the first person to tell me that.

He doesn't say anything more, and as minutes pass, I start to wonder if he's forgotten about our third roommate.

I'm just about to send him another message when my phone pings in my hand. A startled laugh escapes me when I see a photo of Fred with a half-full glass of water sitting on the soil beside him.

Alex: See? You *did* remember to water Fred. There's hope for you as a plant dad yet.

Gio: Shit. Now you've given me parental responsibilities. I'm not sure I'm ready for this step in our roommate-ship

He's a funny guy when he wants to be.

Alex: I have faith in your ability to watch our plant baby.

Gio: Next thing I know, you'll be setting up one of those pet cams to talk to it when we're both at work.

Alex: That's a brilliant idea!! And it's a HIM, Gio. Fred is a living thing.

Gio: I don't even WANT to know how you determined he was a he.

Alex: Well, I didn't have to accost him with a rolling pin to find out.

“Who's got you laughing?” Luca asks as he flops down on the couch next to me.

“Your brother.”

“Did you leave a water mark on the counter or something? Oooh, I know—a kitchen towel out of place?”

I snort and shake my head, scrolling through the message thread to enlarge the photo of Fred. “I told him to water our houseplant.”

Luca's brows jump sky high. “*Our* houseplant? As in, a jointly owned one?”

Shrugging, I scroll back down to see Gio's sent another pic. This time it's a photo of Fred with a dinner plate under the pot, accompanied with the caption: “In case Fred's not potty trained.”

Luca peeks over my shoulder and snorts. “Now *that* is the brother I know and love.”

“He's not *that* bad.”

Luca rolls his eyes. “Last month, he threatened to make me wear a bib next time I came over.”

“Why?” I ask with a frown.

“Cause he's a little ... pedantic, shall we say.”

“About cleaning? Nah. He's not too bad. It's not that hard to tidy up after myself if it means he can relax in his own home.”

“Happy roommate, happy life, huh?”

“Yep. He’s even let me decorate a bit.”

His mouth quirks up. “Skye was texting our group chat with updates from your shopping trip. She kept upping the ante and sending photos of truly hideous things that no one and their mother would *ever* buy for their house. Please tell me you didn’t buy that stuff she showed us.”

I shake my head with a laugh. “I swear you all are as bad as each other. *No*. She did that just to mess with Gio.”

“Hey.” Luca holds his hands in the air. “I’m innocent in all of this. It *was* entertaining though. Skye was teasing Gio about boho versus shabby chic.”

I pin him with a skeptical stare. “Like you know the difference.”

“Hey. I’m a stylish guy. All the ladies seem to think so.”

“Yeah,” Cohen jokes, walking into the room and leaning against the couch. “For the minute they get to *see* your pad before you usher them out the door the next morning.”

“Oh,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’re one of *those* guys, are you? The hit-it-and-quit-it type.” I look him up and down and nod. “I totally see it now.”

Luca frowns, seemingly offended. “See what? I’m a good guy. Respectful, honest—”

The alarm rings for a callout, ending the conversation, which just makes Luca smirk. He’s attractive, all the Rossi brothers are, but there’s just something more ... appealing about the Rossi I live with.

“Saved by the bell. How fortunate,” I say with a wry laugh.

“C’mon, you don’t really wanna hear about Luca’s exploits, do you?” Cohen asks me as he and his partner, Corey, move around the truck toward the ambulance.

“I’m always up for hearing entertaining stories.”

“Let me guess,” Marco says as we suit up in our turnout gear. “Luca’s being loose-lipped again.”

“Hey! What is this, Pick On Luca Day?” the man in question asks.

Scotty snorts. “Better than me.”

I follow Scotty and Rhodes into the back of the truck and close the door behind me, just in time for the garage door to slide to the roof and for Luca to switch on the sirens and pull out of the driveway. “Oh, no. Nothing beats a Scotty story. Skye was saying something about Tiki torches.”

“Yeah, Scotty. Do tell Iowa about how you let a hot party sales clerk talk you into buying out the shop for a phone number you never got?” Luca retorts, earning a middle finger from our colleague.

“Although, something tells me Alex will have some good Rossi stories to tell soon enough.”

Marco turns in his seat and looks back between me and his brother. “Why?”

“Oh, don’t you know, Mar? We’re plant uncles now. Alex and our dear little brother have welcomed a bouncy baby yucca plant called Fred.”

Marco’s surprised expression is comical. “Fred?”

“Yep. Fred. He’s our pet house plant.”

“Wait ... and G’s not having an aneurysm over having dirt in his house?”

“No.” God. I’m starting to wonder just how much shit they shovel Gio’s way. Sure, he’s a bit ... regimented ... but in our line of work, routine makes things easier. And perhaps he’s a little uptight, but he seems to be loosening up a little—perhaps thanks to me. I’m doing it because I genuinely want to see him relax a little and have some fun.

That doesn’t mean I think there’s anything *wrong* with the man. *I certainly wouldn’t be thinking of him as much as I have been if there was.*

“You guys make it sound like he’s obsessed with cleanliness.”

“Made a mess yet?”

“I have. A few times actually,” I say. “Anyway, it’s not like I bought home some random animal or anything.”

“First a yucca, next a ring,” Luca murmurs, earning my elbow in his ribs for his troubles.

I roll my eyes. “It’s just a plant. Not a marriage proposal.”

“I lived with Gio for years, and *we* never had a pet house plant,” Marco adds.

“Maybe he just likes her more than you, Mar,” Luca adds. “Lord knows Iowa is a hell of a lot better-looking than any of us.”

“You guys know I’m still here, right?” I add. “But for your information, Luca, Gio said he’d come skydiving with us on Sunday. I invited him to tag along.”

The brothers look like I’ve slapped them with a wet fish, their mouths agape.

“Not to jump. Just to watch. Why? Is there something wrong with that?”

Marco shares a look with his brother before jerking his head from side to side. “No, not at all. It’s just ...”

“Surprising, that’s all,” Luca finishes for his brother.

“You guys done picking over Gio’s carcass? ’Cause we’re one minute out. You need to gear up,” Rhodes announces, which is exactly what we start doing.

“Hey, Alex. I could give skydiving a go?” Scotty asks, cutting through the noise. Everyone groans.

“No, Scotty,” Luca replies. “We want to actually *enjoy* ourselves, not spend the day saving your ass,” To his credit, Scotty just shrugs and slips his helmet on as Rhodes pulls the truck to a stop outside a two-story family home. Flames leap from the roof, and a blanket of smoke billows in the sky. Time to get to work.

A few hours later, I find another message waiting for me from Gio. Another photo, and this time Fred is joined in his

pot by a mug.

Gio: He tried coffee—was not a fan. Will report back whether he likes beer.

I giggle, my smile so wide it hurts my face.

Alex: Maybe he likes hard liquor.

Gio: *gasp* Not on a school night. What kind of plant mom are you?

Alex: A neglectful one apparently ...

Gio: It's okay. As long as Fred has ONE responsible parent, he might still have a chance.

SUNDAY MORNING COMES AROUND QUICKLY, and despite the fact I set my alarm and get up early—by my standards—Gio is already back from a run and sitting at the kitchen island with a protein shake in hand as he scrolls through the newspaper on his tablet when I enter the room.

This isn't the first time I've seen him in running gear, and every time I do, I thank the heavens for both good genes and compression gear because the man has muscle definition that I'd only ever seen in fitness magazines before. He's fit ... but also *fit*. And the way his a-little-too-long-on-top hair sweeps over his brow when he dips his head down has me thinking non-platonic thoughts about the man I *shouldn't* be having those kinds of thoughts about.

Something that increases tenfold when his eyes meet mine and twinkle in the sunlight, a slow-growing, warm “sex on legs” smile soon following.

I really should stop checking him out.

“Do you ever sleep in?” I ask.

His grin widens. “Not if I can help it. Early bird gets the worm and all that.”

I stumble into the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee from the thankfully full pot before turning around and leaning my hips back against the counter, closing my eyes as I take in that first glorious sip.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“For what?”

My eyes slowly open and focus on my roomie. “I was showing gratitude to the coffee gods. But I probably *should* thank you as well, since you provided the nectar of all that’s good with the world too.

Gio chuckles. “Well, then. You’re welcome.”

I jerk my chin his way. “What time do you think you’ll be ready?”

“For what?”

“Skydiving.”

His face falls but he quickly recovers, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “Oh, you were serious about that?”

“Duh. Of course I was. Can’t let Luca have all the fun.”

Gio’s eyes narrow, and a muscle in his jaw tenses.

Then, as if making his decision, he moves to his feet and downs the rest of his shake, walking around the island and heading for the sink where he rinses his cup out and leaves it drying on the bench. I’m still smirking when he turns his head and catches me.

“Are you all right there?” he asks.

“Yep. Just marveling at a man who cleans up after himself. It’s a total novelty to me, remember?”

“Mama taught us well.”

I shake my head. “No. She taught *you* well. Marco isn’t too bad. Luca, on the other hand . . .” I wince which makes him chuckle. “By the way, nice touch, threatening him with a bib.”

Gio’s eyes flash with surprise. “He told you that?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What else did he tell you?”

“In general or about you specifically?”

He quirks a brow. “How about all of the above?”

“Well, he was shocked that we are co-parenting Fred together. Marco was just worried you might be at risk of a medical event from having dirt in the house.”

Grabbing a kitchen towel, he makes quick work of drying off the plastic shaker he’s just washed, then he puts it away before wiping down the sink as I’ve noticed he likes to do. “I’m not that bad, am I?”

“No. As I said, it’s actually refreshing.” I empty my mug and push off the counter, moving toward the sink just as Gio steps aside. His eyes are on me as I rinse and clean, then hold out my arm sideways, calling out, “Kitchen towel,” like a trauma surgeon.

He hands it to me, and once I’m done drying my mug, I hand it back, holding out an open palm to him again. “Scalpel.”

We both chuckle this time, but I don’t miss the relaxed look in his eyes after I’ve dried the sink just like he did. I suddenly have flashes of lazy Sunday mornings together, sharing breakfast, him getting up at the butt-crack of dawn to run his marathon—in my mind, anything more than a mile is too far—before returning home to find me dozing in bed.

Shit. No Alex, abort mission. Time to execute and escape. “Okay. Time to shower and get ready. You know, airfields to get to, planes to jump out of.”

Gio’s entire body tenses, his shoulders going so tight they almost jump up to his ears.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Is something wrong?”

“No. I’m fine.” Except there’s no missing his curt tone.

“You know I won’t judge you, whatever it is.”

He glances over at me before shaking his head as if shutting down.

“I’d like to think we’re friends as well as roommates. If it’s something I’ve done or—”

A resigned sigh escapes him as he slowly lifts his head and pins me with a stare so intense that it has me feeling tingles in places I shouldn’t be—or *should* be, just not caused by my roomie. “I’m surprised Luc or Skye or anyone else haven’t told you already.”

“Told me what?”

“I’m scared of heights?”

“Yeah, right.” I wait for him to crack a smile. He doesn’t. “You’re joking ... right?”

He jerks his head from side to side. “Nope. Have been since Val pushed me out of our treehouse when I was a kid.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says with a wry smile. “C’mon. Hit me with it. Not sure you can dish me out any jokes I haven’t heard before.”

I study him, my eyes widening. Why would anyone give him shit for something that’s totally beyond his control? “I’m sorry you thought I’d think any less of you. If I’d known, I definitely wouldn’t have pushed so hard for you to come along today. I just wanted to share a bit of my life with you, I guess. That explains why you kept marginally freaking out whenever I mentioned skydiving though.” I pull my arm away but don’t avert my eyes from his now warm ones, the tension he was holding on to vanishing in front of me.

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.” It’s the first time I’ve seen this side of Gio, and fuck, if it’s not endearing.

“But everyone else does?”

He shrugs. “Friends and family, sure. It’s not exactly something I scream from the rooftops.”

I can’t help but giggle.

Gio’s lips twitch, and he rolls his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“I’m glad you told me. It *does* make me want to get back at your sister and Luc though.”

“Skye or Val?”

“Both.” I snicker. “Although, I haven’t met Val yet.”

“You’ll get your chance.”

“Good,” I say definitively. “Can’t say I’m not relieved though.”

He frowns. “God no. But I thought it was fair that you knew.”

“You don’t have to come along if you don’t want to,” I offer.

A small but no-less attractive grin transforms his features. “Hell no. I’m intrigued now. As long as my feet stay firmly on terra firma, I’ll be fine. Thanks, though.”

“I’m scared of thunderstorms,” I blurt it out like I’ve just told him my most embarrassing secret. It’s not, though—mainly because I don’t have any. It’s just a part of me.

“Okay ...” I read the skepticism on his face.

“Since you told me your fear, I felt like I should share mine too.”

A frown pinches his forehead. “You didn’t have to.”

“But I wanted to.”

“So you’re telling me you run into burning buildings and jump out of planes and ride a death machine on two wheels, but you’re scared of thunderstorms?”

I nod. “Yep. When I was little, Adam and I would know a storm was coming so we’d make a pillow fort between our twin beds, using our comforter as the roof. We’d stay there all night, cuddling together until morning. It’s probably when his big protective brother status was cemented for life. He made me feel safe and helped me forget what I was afraid of.”

Gio’s eyes soften as he looks over at me, a small smile appearing on his face. “You think that might help me?”

A snort escapes me and I shake my head. “Probably not something you can set up at a great height. Maybe a worry rock or some sort of affirmation exercise would be better suited.”

Gio bounces a shoulder and the tension he was holding in his features has vanished. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Not being a dick.”

“Scout’s honor. I’ll have times when I *am* a dick, as I’m sure you will. But not about anything important.”

He nods, his expression full of thought.

“In saying that, if you ever want to try something a little closer to the ground, there are indoor skydiving venues around. Same concept, just not fourteen thousand feet in the air,” I say.

He shudders, but he does it with a laugh. “Let’s work up to that.”

“Ha! Don’t worry. If it makes you feel any better, Dad and Adam *hate* the fact I do skydiving too. Anyway, I better go get ready since Luca will be here soon.”

“I figured we’d take my truck” he offers, stopping at the precipice to the kitchen.

“Oh ...”

“Oh? I drive every day for work. Pretty sure I can be trusted to drive you to your death—I mean, skydiving,” he says with a wink.

“I thought we could take my bike and follow behind Luca.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Aww, I promise I won’t tell anyone if you ride in my bitch seat,” I tease.

“Nope. ’Cause I’ve seen more than my fair share of MVAs involving two wheels that weren’t pretty. So sorry, but I’m

definitely vetoing that idea.”

My mouth drops open. “Have you *ever* been on a bike?”

He shakes his head. “Don’t plan to either.”

I dip my chin, biting my lip to hold back my laughter but failing.

“What?” he asks, his brows furrowed.

“You’re either scared or don’t like the idea of *me* driving.”

His eyes widen. “Neither.”

“You totally are.”

“I’ve got plenty of friends who ride. Cohen’s brothers own Harleys.”

“And? That doesn’t mean you’re not scared.” I cross the room and rest my hand on his arm, ignoring the jolt of his muscles under my touch right along with how damn hard and round they feel, or the fact that they’re so big my fingers barely span half the space. *Lord have mercy. I need a cold shower, stat.*

Despite all of that, I can’t stop myself from leaning in closer. “It’s okay. Your secret’s safe with me,” I whisper before I pat his arm and walk down the hall.

“It’s called being sensible,” he calls out behind me. “A responsible plant parent, even!”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, roomie.”

I feel his gaze on my back all the way until I’m safely shut behind the bathroom door.

Leaning my back against it, I look at my reflection in the mirror, a wry smile doing nothing to disguise the tell-tale pink of my cheeks.

This isn’t good. This tit-for-tat, playful banter is pressing all my buttons—ones I was definitely not looking to get pushed. The problem is, the more I get to know Gio Rossi, the more I *want* to know.

And ain’t that a damn complication I never saw coming.

Move to Chicago and prove to Dad and Adam that I can stand on my own two feet in the big city? Check.

Further my career? Check.

Catch feelings for my roommate?

Definitely not part of the plan.

IN THE END, Luca and his friend, London— our fire captain's daughter, no less—drive themselves while Gio and I go in his truck.

And while there's no missing that the closer we get to the airfield, the tenser Gio becomes, now that I know *why*, it doesn't bother me as much as it would have otherwise.

What I *do* make sure to do is explain what's happening through every step of our jump prep, from checking the canopy, the reserve canopy, and the cords to showing him the altimeter on my wrist and explaining the one in my helmet. Finally, I show him the one fail-safe measure I never jump without—the automatic activation device in my pack that releases the reserve canopy by a designated altitude if I haven't done it myself for whatever reason.

Gio finally seems reassured of my safety after that if his slack shoulders and relaxed features are anything to go by, which in turn, settles my own nerves. Just in time, too, because ten minutes later, Luca and I are geared up and waving goodbye to Gio and London before making our way to the small Cessna waiting for us.

“You ready?” I ask Luca as we put on our seatbelts for takeoff. I look out the window to see a rather green-looking Gio and a beaming London watching us.

“I am. My brother looks like he's about to puke though.”

A wry smile tugs at my lips. “He told me, you know.”

“About the heights thing? Good. 'Cause we may rib him, but he's one of the best men I know. He doesn't even like to

talk about it so I'm glad he told you about it before coming out today—otherwise you'd probably think he was just weird.”

I shake my head and turn back, meeting Gio's eyes just as the plane starts to taxi away from the hangar. I don't look away from him until we turn toward the runway.

Once we reach our designated altitude, we carry out the standard safety checks all over again and then the door is opened and we line up, ready to jump.

“After you, Luc,” I say, shouting so he can hear me over the deafening noise of the wind and plane engine. He nods and holds up his fist to bump with mine.

“See you on the flipside, Iowa.”

Luca executes a diving jump out the door, laughing as he throws in a few somersaults and twists for good measure.

When I'm ushered forward, I go through my new pre-jump ritual, closing my eyes and telling Mom I love her before I put my game face on and take a deep breath. I brace myself at the edge of the plane and grip the frame with my hands as the jumpmaster counts down: “Three, two, one, *go*.”

And then I'm throwing myself out the door and doing it with a beaming grin because in this moment, in the ninety seconds I free fall before pulling my parachute cord, I'm free of absolutely everything weighing me down—all thoughts, all feelings. Nothing can touch me when I'm barreling through the air.

One tug of my cord and then I'm floating, my fall now tempered and controlled, and it's like coming down from an enormous high, similar to how I feel at the end of a callout after successfully battling a blaze.

I steer myself toward a giant *X* marked on the ground in the middle of the jump zone. Once my feet are safely back on the ground, I ride the afterglow of one of life's highest adrenaline highs.

Ten minutes later, Luca and I walk back into the hanger after being dropped back there from the jump zone.

Gio's no longer green—in fact, he's grinning wider than I am when we reach them.

“That was ...” He shakes his head. “Fuck. That looked amazing.”

“Why, thank you, brother,” Luca says, taking a bow.

“Does that mean you'll let me take you up with us next time?” I ask with a sly smile.

“Fuck no. These feet are staying earth side. But I've ordered a copy of the helmet-cam footage for you, Alex. That was so surreal to watch.”

Luca hooks an arm around Gio's neck and pulls him in for a sideways hug. “Aww, baby brother. I didn't know you cared so much.”

They both chuckle as Gio wrestles himself free and gives Luca a playful shove.

“C'mon, Lonnie. Let's get out of here,” Luca says to London. “See you at work tomorrow, Iowa. And in case you didn't know it, I'll jump with you anytime, anywhere.” He fist-bumps me again before waving at Gio and hooking elbows with London as they walk toward the parking lot.

“What's going on there?” I ask Gio.

“Something I don't think any of us want to know about,” Gio mutters.

“Did you really order the footage? I've always wondered what it looks like compared to what it's like actually doing it.”

“I did. We can watch it tonight.”

“Sounds like a plan. Skydiving videos, takeout, and a quiet night.”

“Yeah, *some* of us have had enough excitement for one day.”

I poke my tongue out at him, earning a deep, rumbling chuckle from the man as we move in the same direction as Luca and London. “Does that mean you might wanna try those indoor places with me now?”

His lips twitch up into a smile. “Maybe.”

I’ll take that as a win.

It also serves as another untimely “dammit. I think I like this man” moment.

It’s not only that, though. I’m wondering if *maybe* I’m not the only one who’s falling in *like* with their roommate, and if that’s the case, where the hell do we go from here?

Gio

Thursday night after baseball practice, I'm walking into 42nd Street Bar with my teammates and fellow cops, Zander and Jeremy, for a much-needed catch-up.

After grabbing our drinks, we move to a booth at the back of the room where it's both quiet but also lets us survey the bar—cop habits and all that.

“So, how's the roomie? No more naked rolling pin confrontations?” Jeremy asks with a smirk.

I groan and scrub my face with my hand, regretting the day I went to work and told the guys about that particular embarrassing incident.

“We've kind of been like ships in the night this week, with me working nights and her one-on-two-off schedule. But so far, so good. I even tagged along to the airfield with her and Luca on Sunday when they went skydiving.”

Zander's brows jump sky-high. “You hate heights.”

“It wasn't *me* going up and throwing myself out of a plane. I was purely there for moral support, and—you know—to bear witness to my brother's demise.”

He chuckles but still looks skeptical. “But why would you want to watch that? It's the kind of thing that's good to *do*, rather than just watch.”

I shrug. “Alex invited me and I said yes.” My friends exchange a knowing look that doesn't bode well for me.

“What?”

“Do you remember how I met Kate?”

Kate is Zander’s wife of many years, and together, they have a smart-as-all-get-out daughter called Rose, who’s twelve going on thirty.

“She was my roommate too.” Zander waggles his brows, making mine narrow.

“You’d known each other for a while before that though,” I retort.

“Doesn’t matter. What I’m saying is, sometimes when a boy roommate likes his girl roommate, they end up being—”

“Bedmates,” Jeremy finishes.

“She redecorated my house too,” I blurt out of nowhere. “And it’s growing on me.”

“The roomie or the house stuff? Because that’s how they reel you in. They dish out the girlfriend experience. First, it’s cooking and cleaning—although that doesn’t apply to you—then they’re turning the house into a home and making it so you never want to leave. By the time you realize it’s happening, you’re hooked, lined, and sinkered.”

I frown at Jeremy. “Hold up—how do you know this? You’re a gold-star gay.”

“And? That doesn’t mean I don’t know these things. I watch TV shows and movies. Haven’t you seen that one with Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson in it? She totally girlfriends him and makes him fall, and all for a news story.”

“There it is,” I say, lifting my beer bottle to my mouth.

“What?”

“There’s the gay man we know and love.”

“Hey. Let it be known that you straight men could learn a *lot* about women and what *not* to do if you watched rom-coms and read romance novels.”

Zander and I look at each other and exchange matching shrugs.

“But back to the topic at hand—from what I remember of your place, it was well overdue for a bit of feminine charm. It’s been a bachelor pad—albeit a surgically clean one—since Marco was living with you,” Jeremy continues.

“Well, let’s just say that Alex’s charm involves linen, candles, vases with holes in the middle, and a multitude of throw pillows all over my living room. She even got us a pet plant named Fred. But I think a big part of that was Skye screwing with me.”

Both men stare at me, mouths agape, eyes wide.

“A what now?” Zander asks, recovering first.

I chuckle and swallow down the last of my drink. “You heard me. It’s the ugliest living thing I’ve ever seen, but damn, if she hasn’t got me looking after it when she’s on shift. We’ve been sharing photos of Fred’s daily exploits.”

“Aww. Next will be a cat. Then a real-life human pet like Rose.” Zander’s grin grows wider than the Cheshire cat’s.

“It’s not like that.”

“It could be though,” Jeremy—ever the romantic—says. “It’s not like you’re putting yourself out there to meet women and date. Now you’ve found yourself in a situation where you’ve got yourself a new roommate. You get along with her, you’ve let her redecorate, and you’re plant-whipped. You said yourself that you genuinely like Alex. I don’t see a problem here. Stop thinking about why it shouldn’t happen, and just let. It. Happen.”

“We do seem to have hit our stride now despite a few hiccups at the start.”

“More than wielding kitchen utensils?”

“And pulling your gun on her?”

“Well no, but—”

Zander looks straight at me. “I’ll probably never say this again, but Jeremy’s right, and I think you know it too. There’s nothing wrong with at least having an open mind about there being something more between the two of you. *Que sera, sera* and all that.”

I flick the edge of the label on my beer bottle. “You don’t think it’s got *complication* written all over it? She works with three of my family members, and one sister has befriended her. Mama and Val will be next in line, I expect, since Skye’s already passed on an invitation to the next family lunch.”

Zander chokes on his drink and splutters out a cough. “Oh, damn. If that’s the case, you’re screwed either way. You might as well just give in now and propose. Take it from someone who knows—as soon as the family gets involved, it’s a done deal.”

I flip him the bird but do it with a laugh.

“Or maybe, if you play your cards right, it could be *you* getting lucky,” he retorts.

Damn. There he goes again, putting ideas into my head. But this isn’t the first time they’ve surfaced. I know I didn’t mistake her look of interest when I came home from my run the other morning, just like I can’t deny the way her smile hits me right in the chest whenever she shines one my way. Or how her legs looked in the yoga pants she came out of the bedroom wearing on Sunday night.

I shake my head to rid the image from my mind before I embarrass myself in a completely *different* kind of way.

“We’re chalk and cheese,” I argue, not even sure *why* I’m trying to talk myself out of this anymore.

Jeremy smirks. “I happen to know that you’re a *big* fan of cheese, Gio, so try again. I vote you stop thinking and just go with the flow. You might be surprised at what could happen naturally.”

“Or not happen,” I grumble.

Zander shakes his head and pins me with a stare. “Just relax, dude. Besides, from what I’ve heard, she’s a cool girl—

really down to earth, and she's fitted right in at 101. Good at her job, too, by all accounts."

"She is," I reply.

Zander nods. "And it's not like she's just here for a short time, right? The transfer's permanent?"

"It is."

"So where's the harm in just being open to it? If she's not feeling it, or you find you're too different, or even that you just don't wanna mess things up at home, then you're both adult enough to navigate that," he presses.

"I did offer to show her around the city."

Jeremy grins. "There you go. That's your in. You take her out, show her the sights, make sure she has fun, and instead of worrying about all the things that could go wrong, instead focus on what might go right. What have you got to lose?"

"My sanity?" I say, my brain switching into overdrive.

That makes Zander chuckle. "Well, bud. That's not a problem, since I'm not sure you've ever had that anyway."

I flip him the bird and push up to my feet. "Next round is on me."

"Too right. If we're gonna be your 'dating the roommate' wingmen—"

"I didn't say it was a date."

"You didn't need to. *We're* saying it's a date, so you better keep those beers coming. Zan, you should call your wife and tell her you'll be home late. We've got a date to plan and it might take a while," Jeremy says. I shoot him a mock salute and make my way over to the bar to get more drinks just as Zander does as instructed and picks up his phone.

Am I really going to do this? Am I really going to blur the lines and see if there's something between Alex and me?

I guess there's only one way to find out—and that's to actually try.

Alex

I walk out of my room toward the living area where I can hear Gio, Luca, and Marco arguing over sticks and boards and defense strategies. When I left them to have a shower and get dressed, they were all parked out on the couches and chairs getting ready to watch a Blackhawks game.

Since I don't know the first thing about ice hockey, and Gio had asked if it was okay for the guys to watch at our place—yes, he said *ours*—I decided to take Skye up on her offer to check out a pole dancing class near her house.

When I emerge from the hallway, the lively conversation stopping as all three Rossi men stare at me like I've just walked out in a fancy-dress costume or something.

I look down to check that I haven't had an unfortunate wardrobe malfunction during the twenty feet trip down the corridor. *Nope, all good on that front.* And I know I don't look bad. I'm feeling rather cute in my "virgin pole dancer" outfit I bought yesterday afternoon. It's not anything fancy or flashy—just a cropped blue hoodie with a black workout vest, finished off with matching black leggings, and my favorite white Nike sneakers. It's not that different from anything I've worn out of the house before. It's not like I'm showing my boobs and butt for the world to see. Although, if they knew about my short pole shorts underneath, maybe *then* I'd understand Gio's deepening frown, Luca's wicked grin, and Marco's stunned stare.

Suddenly I'm having flashbacks of coming down the stairs at home to the disapproving looks of Dad and Adam when I was allowed to start dating back in high school.

Before I can question why my boss, my workmate, and my roommate are acting like overprotective big brothers all of a sudden, there's a knock at the front door. Rolling my eyes at the judging committee, I don't miss Luca saying, "That should be the female uniform for *everything*" soon followed by a loud whack of skin on skin. "Why'd you hit me? I'm just saying what we're all thinking."

I'm still snickering when I find Skye, another woman who could only be Valentina if her brunette hair and Marco-esque eyes are anything to go by, and Cohen with a squirming Austin in his arms.

"Hey! Oh wow, you look *hot*. Don't you think, Cass?" Skye asks, looking at her husband.

"Cass?" I ask, needing to know *that* story.

"As in, Casanova. My husband was the hit-'em-and-quit-'em type before I tamed him."

The man in question snorts and chuckles at his wife. "Tamed me. I think everyone will agree that it was *me* who tamed *you*."

"Hmm. I'm not sure whether either of you could ever be described as tamed," Gio murmurs.

I look back to Val, who rolls her eyes melodramatically at them before reaching her arm toward me. "Hi. I'm Val. It's nice to finally meet you."

"You too. Gio talks about you a lot."

"Do not!" He calls out as I step back and usher everyone inside.

"It's okay, G. I know I'm your favorite sister. Just don't tell Skye; she'll get jealous."

I giggle as I close the door and follow them to the living room, which is now full of five Rossis, two Cooks, and me.

The only person missing is Renee. We invited her along but she already had plans with her grandmother and sister.

Looking between all of the siblings, there's absolutely no mistaking the family resemblance, or the way Gio's intense gaze seeks me out before ever so slowly roaming down my body and back up again, making me fight back a shudder—a good, sexy, very self-aware kind of shudder. One that heats you from the inside out. Damn.

The spell is broken when Luca clears his throat and Gio's attention snaps to Cohen. He holds out his arms just in time for Austin to launch himself into his uncle's lap with a joyous baby giggle.

“Dammit, G. Why do you always get the cuddles?”

“Because I'm his favorite, aren't I, bud?” he says.

“Gah,” Austin garbles in response.

I'm left standing there, absolutely dumbfounded and wondering when the world had time to shift beneath my feet. Because in one fell swoop, I swear my ovaries are exploding and my before now unheard of biological clock starts clanging like a church bell. And it's all from seeing my sexy, clean freak, sometimes goofy, totally hot alpha cop roommate goosing and gahing over a baby.

Lord almighty. Right now, I'm not sure if I need to fan myself, take a cold shower, or go back to my room for a change of underwear. *Maybe all three.*

“Oh there's my plant nephew,” Skye says, walking in front of the TV just as the players start taking to the ice, ready to start the game.

“Hey! Do you *mind?*” Luca asks, grumbling under his breath when Skye ignores him.

“Hello, Fred. How are you doing?” she asks.

Marco looks from Skye to Cohen. “Co, I think your wife has finally lost it. Is this a continuation of baby brain? Because I thought we'd finally passed that.”

“Hey. That’s my pet plant you’re talking about,” Gio says, shocking the hell out of me—and everyone, if the heads turning his way are anything to go by.

Valentina starts giggling. “Oh, God. This is worse than we thought.”

“What? How could it be worse?” Skye asks.

“Shh,” I whisper. “You’ll hurt his feelings and then he’ll start to droop.”

“You mean his *one* leaf will?”

I sneak a peek at Gio, who’s watching me, his mouth twitching, which has me biting my lip to hold back a giggle. My shoulders shake with my silent laughter.

“It’s okay, Freddy. Aunty Skye still loves you and your little bald head.”

I snort now, and soon, we’re all grinning and snickering. Because really, we’re talking to a plant, and three out of the seven of us are guilty of doing it. It’s kind of ridiculous ... but that’s not to say I don’t care about our plant child’s welfare.

“Well, we’re going to leave you boys to it. And you better look after the kids—plant *and* human,” Skye announces. She walks back over and bends down to nuzzle a kiss against Austin’s pudgy cheeks before standing and landing a big one on her husband’s lips, to the soundtrack of all three Rossi brothers making gagging and puking noises, and Val laughing. “C’mon, girls. Let’s leave the boys to their pointless male figure-skating with pucks. We have poles to become intimately acquainted with.”

“What? I thought you’d just swing around it or something?” Gio asks, his brows sky-high.

“Oh no, little brother,” Val says, her eyes dancing. “We’re going to be stretching, and twirling, and then we’ll straddle those poles like drunk girls on spring break.”

Marco chuckles, Luca snorts, Cohen smirks, and my plant daddy looks ... intrigued. His eyes glide over to me, and when he quirks a brow in silent question, I’m overheating all over

again because if I'm not mistaken, right now Gio is thinking about *me* straddling things, which is making me think about straddling *him*.

I have felt his eyes on me the entire time I've been in the living room. It's like he can't stop looking at me, and I like it ... which makes me feel a lot of things I can't do *anything* about right now. So it's muddling my brain ... a *lot*.

Time to go and work out all this sudden *frustration* . Maybe if I expend all this energy by grinding against a pole for an hour or two, my head will become clear and I won't do something crazy ... like jump my roomie.

"Okay, girls. Let's hit the road. We've got poles to rub up on," Val announces."

A wicked, devious smirk curves Gio's lips, one that does *nothing* to help my current predicament.

"Have fun, ladies," Luca says.

"Oh, we will."

"Look after Fred," I add, locking eyes with Gio as Skye pushes me toward the front door.

"Always."

And on the drive to our class, there's one thought that keeps playing on repeat in my mind. It's time to face facts—I'm well and truly falling for my plant daddy.

"SO ... YOU AND MY BROTHER, HUH?" Val says, shoulder-bumping me as the three of us stand side by side at the back of the pole dancing studio, getting ready to start our teacher-directed warm-up.

"Marco or Luca? They're great to work with."

Val snorts and shakes her head. "Avoidance is more of a confirmation than a denial."

“She’s right you know. Man, if we didn’t already have plans tonight, after all of that sexual tension back at Gio’s, I would’ve stolen my husband away for a few minutes,” Skye says, stretching her hamstring.

I arch a brow. “Only a few minutes? C’mon, give Cohen some credit.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean him. I meant *me*,” she replies with a devilish grin.

“Wish I had *anyone* to spend a couple of minutes with. Hey, Alex, got a brother?” Val asks.

“Mm-hmm,” I hum as I stand with my feet shoulder-width apart, mimicking the instructor’s movements. I squat down almost like I’m sitting on a wall, the burn in my hamstrings a welcome distraction.

“Damn, I see why we’re at an all-female class,” Skye mutters as we lean forward so our palms are flat on the ground and slowly press our tailbones toward the ceiling. Now it’s my quads begging for mercy.

“Go up on your toes like a ballerina, pull your belly into your spine, and hollow out your stomach. Now straighten your back slowly so you’re resting on your fingertips, and carefully take the roundness out of your back and lower your heels back to the floor,” the teacher says.

Holy hell, I’m feeling muscles I didn’t even know I had.

“Now *this* is a position that would only take your husband two minutes,” Val mutters, making us all giggle. *She’s not wrong though.*

A few different stretches later, the instructor leads us into a position that’ll lead into a split if we’re able. Thankfully—although it has been many years since I did it—my muscle memory kicks in and while Val and Skye stop mid-way down, I slowly glide down until my pelvis kisses the floor.

“Damn, girl.” Val grins at me. “Wish I could take a photo. If there was any chance of Gio *not* wanting to jump you already, *that* right there would seal the deal.”

My head snaps to catch her amused expression, Skye looking impressed. “I was a cheerleader.”

“Still got the outfit?” Skye asks.

“No ...”

“Bummer.” She shrugs. “G was a sucker for cheerleaders back at school..”

“I doubt his tastes have changed,” Val adds. “Although he hasn’t brought anyone home to meet the family in years, so who knows what floats his boat now.”

“He strikes me as a man who’d want a doting wife at home with a gaggle of kids running around her feet,” I say.

“Looks can be deceiving. And you know what they say about opinions being like assholes—everyone’s got one,” Val replies, making me snort. “Besides, that’s probably what *Mama* wants the guys to have, and so far, she’s batting zero. Renee—Marco’s fiancée—is definitely not a *yes, ma’am, no, ma’am* type of girl.”

“See, Alex? There’s hope for you yet.”

I shake my head as we finish the warm-up, grab a drink, and get ready for the real deal to begin. “I think you guys are seeing something that’s not there.”

Val stands in front of me and places both hands on my shoulders, staring straight at me. “No need to lie. C’mon. Look me in the eye and tell me you *don’t* have a thing for my brother. And if I believe you, I’ll drop it.”

I swallow my mouthful and look Val square in the eye, switching to Skye before sliding back to Val. “I—dammit.”

“Ha! I knew it.” Val moves to my side and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with us.”

“I wasn’t looking to start anything here. I transferred to focus on work and proving myself.”

“To who?”

“My dad. My brother. *Me.*”

Skye's brows bunch together. "Who says you can't still do that?"

"I told you I had an ex back home, right?"

"Yep. Childhood-sweetheart slash comfort-zone-you-now-regret."

"That's the one. Well, he had our lives all planned out—his family did too. But it became suffocating, and I started losing my identity."

"I understand that," Val says with a nod.

"It took my mom to make me see it was happening. John and I had been together for over a decade, and I was running out of excuses as to why I wasn't ready to settle down and give him a family."

"God, I'm glad I don't know any guys like that. Seriously, I'm a take-me-as-you-get-me kind of girl. If you don't like what you signed up for, don't waste my time trying to change me. End of discussion," Val says.

"Exactly!" I reply. "Mom sat me down and told me that if I still wasn't sure after ten years with John, I never would be."

Val smiles. "Your mama sounds like a wise woman."

"She was. She's my driving force for taking the leap and following my own dreams outside of my small hometown."

"And now that you've been here for, what—a month now?" Val asks.

I nod.

"How does it feel to be living life your way?" she continues.

"Fucking fantastic—excuse my French."

Val's lips twitch and I don't miss the satisfied gleam in her gaze. "Right. So I know he's my brother, but I wouldn't steer you wrong—or *him*, for that matter. You like him, and if what I saw tonight is anything to go by, you've got him intrigued if not a little bit gone for you already."

“But we live together,” I say.

“And?” Val asks.

“I work with Marco and Luca.”

“And?”

“What if it doesn’t work out?”

“Ah yes, that is a possibility,” Skye says, a slow-growing smile transforming her face. “But what if it does?”

The instructor moves back to the front of the room and Val and Skye turn around to watch her.

End of conversation, apparently.

I follow behind them, unable to think about anything but my sexy, clean freak, sometimes goofy, totally hot alpha cop roommate and that heat in his eyes when I walked out tonight.

I guess if I’m going whole hog in living life my way, I need to follow my instincts and hope for the best.

Worst case, we crash and burn and go back to being friends and roommates.

Best case ... well, the sky’s the limit.

All I’ve gotta do now is decide what I’m going to do about it.

Gio

After Skye called Cohen to say they were going out for a drink after their class, the guys and I decided to call it a night. I've been distracted since Alex left, my attention split between watching the Blackhawks kick some butt, and replaying Alex walking out in that hot-as-hell outfit and the undeniable chemistry that was sparking between us when she walked out in what might just be my favorite outfit she's ever worn around me.

I've never really had a 'type' when it came to the women I was attracted to. It's always been a combination of personality, vibe, and *then* confidence. Body size and shape have never mattered to me. I'm much more interested in the way a woman carries herself. It's probably old-fashioned of me, but I'm more about the person than their looks—except in Alex's case, she's been ticking all of my boxes slowly but surely since she moved in.

After hearing a car pull up outside, I look at the time. It must be Skye and Val dropping Alex home. But when nothing happens for a few minutes—more than long enough for any of them to come through the door—I go and investigate.

Opening the door, I find a beaming Alex standing there with her keys in hand and a giggling Skye standing behind her, seemingly holding my roommate steady.

“Roomie!” Alex announces with a giggle.

I meet my sister's gaze over Alex's shoulder with a quirked brow. “Have a good night?”

“It was *so* much fun,” Alex replies on Skye’s behalf before stepping forward and resting both palms flat on my chest. My hands dart out to frame her hips to keep her steady as she flexes her fingertips over the top of my T-shirt. She grins up at me with a glint in her glassy eyes that makes me wonder if she knows just what she’s doing to me right now. “Wow, you could be my stripper pole instead.”

Skye snorts and covers her laughter with her hand. “Val and Alex might’ve ... *bonded* ... over shots at the bar.”

Chuckling, I look over to the passenger seat of the car. Val’s head is lolled to the side, her eyes closed and her mouth open in a seemingly unconscious state. “On a school night too.”

“I wish you’d been at school with me, roomie.” Alex frowns. “Although I was the quiet, meek, nerdy type, so you probably wouldn’t have liked me.”

My head snaps to Skye’s once more as I fight to ignore Alex’s warm hands sliding up and down my chest.

My sister shrugs. “You know how Val gets. She’s chatty.”

“About my *type* at high school?”

Skye’s lips twitch into a knowing smirk. “Amongst other things.”

“God,” I groan.

“Not God. Just Alex,” my tipsy roommate whispers, looking up at me with a playful smile that is borderline irresistible.

“Damn. You better get her to bed,” Skye says with a laugh. “If she’s lucky, she’ll sleep it off and be fine for the morning.”

“Thankfully, Alex’s got the day off.”

“Probably why she let Val lead her astray.”

I arch a brow. “Just Val?”

Skye shrugs. “Hey. It was a female bonding experience between a future workmate and the sisters of the guy she li—”

“I feel like dancing. Let me in, roomie. Wanna show you my *mooves*.”

Staring down at this footloose and fancy-free version of Alex in my arms, I chuckle just as she squirms out of reach and darts past me into the house.

I turn back to Skye. “I’m not sure whether to tell you off or shake your hand.”

“She’s a keeper, G.”

A resigned sigh escapes me. “I’m gonna have my hands full with Mama and her matchmaking. Definitely don’t need my sisters to get in on the act as well.”

“You don’t even realize, do you?”

“Realize what?”

“You don’t need anyone helping you in that regard. All *you* have to do, big brother, is make your move.”

I open my mouth to say something but she keeps going. “Yes, Alex is different to you, but she’s also the breath of fresh air you’ve needed in your life for a long time. She’s fun, outgoing, thoughtful and hardworking.”

“Loyal,” I add.

“Pardon?” Sky asks.

“You forgot that she’s loyal. She’s as loyal as the day is long,” I say, my mouth a little dry.

Skye smiles, smug. “Yet you still haven’t done anything about it.”

“She’s been here a month, Skye.”

“Meh,” she says, waving her hand in the air. “A month, a year, a day—who cares. That halfway drunk woman in there is *exactly* what you need, and something tells me you know that too.”

I nod, not needing to say anything more.

All of a sudden, a loud “yesss” is heard from inside and then “Pony” by Ginuwine starts playing, which sets Skye off

laughing. She gives me a hug before moving back and clapping my shoulder. “Good luck with *that* though.”

Chuckling, I wave her off, then step back inside and lock the door.

When I reach the living area, I stop. Alex stands in the middle of the room, swaying her hips from side to side, stretching her arms high above her head and slowly gyrating her hips in time to the stripper anthem everyone knows and loves.

My body reacts immediately. Then again, I’ve been pent up since before she even left to go out with Skye and Val.

I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips when she starts to sing along to the lyrics, her soft raspy voice both cute *and* comical as my gaze roams over her dancing form.

She does a spin, her whole face coming alight when she spots me watching her.

“You’re *here!*” she says excitedly, then she slowly walks over to me and grabs my arm, pulling me into the center of the room with her. When she moves in close to me so we’re chest to chest, her head tilted up, her half-lidded eyes locked with mine, she grins and loops her arms over my shoulders, her fingers playing with my hair. Everything she’s doing is setting my body on fire, and I know I should stop this since she’s drunk, but I figure one song won’t hurt. Besides, I love the feel of her body against mine, and seeing that smile on her face is muddling the rational side of my brain.

Sliding my hands onto her hips, I hold her steady and also stop her from pressing any closer. She’s not sober and therefore cannot consent, so the very last thing I want her to feel right now is *exactly* what she’s doing to me.

“Did you have fun tonight?” I ask.

“Yes. So much fun.” She beams. “Your sisters are nosey.”

I chuckle. “They are.”

“And they love you.”

“They do.” I have to grit my teeth when she leans her weight against me, her breasts pushing into my chest as I tense my arms to stop her from rocking her pelvis against my erection. *She’s hot, I like her, and she’s cute as hell. There’s no way I can fight my instincts right now.*

“I have a secret,” she whispers.

“You do?”

“I like you too.” I still, my body locked in place.

“You do, huh?”

“Yep-p,” she says with a hiccup. “Wanna see me be a stripper?”

I shake my head at her, biting my lip to hold back my laugh.

“You don’t?” she gasps dramatically, but it’s totally for show. Then I’m back to gently holding her back from rubbing herself all up against me. She glides her hands over my head to cup my face, holding me there and looking me straight in the eye. “You suuure?”

“Not sure Fred’s old enough to see that.”

“But I was thinking ...” She closes her eyes, seemingly losing herself to the music.

I squeeze my hands on her hips and she slowly opens them again. “You were thinking?” I prompt.

She bites her lip and looks up at me with the biggest, most irresistible, lust-filled gaze I’ve ever seen. *Fuck, that’s a damn good look on her too.* “I was thinking I could use *you* as my stripper pole. Maybe show you my moves and see if they work.”

“Oh, they’d work alright, but maybe we should wait until you’re a little less drunk and a lot more cognizant.”

She furrows her brows and I fight back a groan. “Cog-ni-what-now?”

“How about we wait until you’re thinking clearly?”

“You sound like my father. He used to tell me off when I’d come home tipsy.”

“Totally not your father, baby.”

A goofy smile appears, transforming her features. “Baby. I like that.”

“You’re a cute drunk,” I say, unable to wipe the smile from my mouth.

“And you’re a cute everything.” She sags into me, her eyes closing as a sexy sigh escapes her and a rumbling groan vibrates in my chest. Her body is now plastered to mine. “Maybe I can just dance on *your* pole.” She giggles.

I snort and shake my head, lifting a hand up to cup her jaw. “How about I put you to bed and we continue this conversation tomorrow when we *both* have clear heads?”

“Hmmm ... bed. That’s a *brilliant* idea.”

“Nuh-uh. You in your bed and me in mine, baby.”

Alex pouts at that, and fuck, if it’s not making her more irresistible. “Okay. If you insist.”

Chuckling, I nod and gently hold her shoulders steady as I slowly step away. “Time to go to your room.”

“Okay.”

“You’re very agreeable tonight.”

“And you’re very ... I’m tired.”

I bite back a grin as I slide a hand down her arm and lace my fingers with hers. “Sleep time, baby.”

“Okay. Roomie.”

I walk backward, leading her down the hallway.

“Still want to dance for you,” she murmurs quietly.

“You can do that anytime you like.”

“Now?”

“Anytime other than now. Cut me some slack, Alex. I’m trying to be a gentleman, and you’re making it very hard.”

She giggles as I reach her door and swing it open, turning back to look down at her. “Something was anyway.”

“Totally your fault.” I release my grip on her hand as she sways my way again, the smell of her vanilla perfume tempting me even more. “C’mon, baby. Get some sleep.”

She waggles her brows. “You *sure* you don’t wanna come and tuck me in?”

“I’m sure that if I ever get to take you to your bed it will be to do a hell of a lot more than sleep.”

“Promise,” she whispers.

“Guarantee it, baby.”

She shrugs. “Okay. Your loss.” Lifting on her toes, she brushes her lips against my cheek and smiles against my skin before grinning up at me then walking into her bedroom. “Goodnight, roomie.”

I watch as she dives onto her bed, her slack body bouncing on the mattress as she grabs her pillow and hugs it to her head. Moments later, a soft snore fills the air. “Goodnight, Alex.”

And I’m still smiling when I crawl into my own bed.

She’ll have a sore head in the morning; here’s hoping she remembers what happened tonight. It’s sure as hell not an evening I’m going to forget in a hurry.

Alex

I wake feeling a little under the weather...okay, a *lot*. I'm also still fully dressed and lying on top of the covers, hugging my pillow like my hips were hugging the stripper pole last night.

And Gio.

Oh shit.

Rolling over onto my back, I stare at the ceiling and try to engage my fuzzy brain so I can remember how I came to be rubbing up against him.

Dance class? Check. Val buying me drinks? Check. Skye walking me to the door? Check.

Music. Dancing. Gio watching me with that sexy smirk, his gaze roaming over me like he had a sweet tooth and I was a dessert buffet.

Me suggesting I dance on his pole instead.

“Fuuuck,” I mutter to myself, scrubbing my hands over my face. I still and listen for any sounds coming from the house, then I remember that he had an early shift this morning. *Thank heaven for small mercies.*

At least I won't have to face my mortification first thing this morning. Later, there'll be no avoiding it. I don't remember him being unresponsive though. I actually recall him feeling *very* reactive to my drunken advances last night. It's just that he was able to show a hell of a lot more self-

control than I did. *But he did want me. There's no mistaking that.*

My phone vibrates from somewhere on my bed. Gingerly lifting my head, I look around and grab it.

Skye: Hey, dancing queen. How's the head this morning?

Alex: Just how drunk was I? because it feels like the soundcheck at Lollapalooza in my head.

Skye: You were ... happy ...

Alex: So, toasted?

Skye: Not quite, but not far off it. Gio didn't seem to mind though.

Alex: Yeah, about that.

Skye: Oooh, gossip. Tell me.

Alex: I think I might've tried to put on a show for him

Skye: That's always a good way to break the ice.

Alex: You don't want to hear this about your brother

Skye: Au contraire, I TOTALLY want to know. Did you invent your own horizontal pole routine?

Alex: NO! But I may have been hinting that it was an option.

Skye: This is good. No, this is GREAT.

Alex: How?

Skye: Because my brother would've never gone there if you were tipsy. But that doesn't mean he won't want a chance at an encore performance.

Alex: I think I have to quit my job, move out, and run back to be a pig farmer.

Skye: OR ... you own it and see what my brother does with whatever motivation your little performance gave him.

Alex: Not sure I can avoid the elephant in the room when I see him.

Skye: Don't avoid it. Jump on that elephant's back and ride it with pride.

Alex: You DO know you're pretty much telling me to go after your brother.

Skye: Well, DUH. Val is totally on board Team Gale.

I snort out a laugh, my head complaining at the jolting movement.

Skye: Just wait until Mama hears about this.

Alex: OMG no. I haven't even met your mother yet. I don't want to make a bad first impression.

Skye: She just wants to see her kids coupled up and happy.

Alex: Not sure she'll wanna know that I rubbed and writhed against her baby boy like a tomcat in heat.

Skye: Tomcats don't go into heat. You're thinking about alley cats.

I roll my eyes and hug my pillow tighter.

Alex: You know what I mean.

Skye: New plan. Get over your hangover, and be ready for Gio to either a) act as if nothing happened or b) take you up on your offer. I guess you've got until he comes home to decide how YOU are going to handle it.

She's right. I'm not someone to avoid awkward situations or conversations. I'm a face-things-head-on kind of girl. Like that time Mom caught me and John making out in the barn instead of working. *That* was a fun conversation. John was taken for a 'walk' with my dad while Mom sat me down and went through every single type of contraception, STD, and consequence of sex that existed. But that wasn't all—*then* they swapped, and Dad took me out to the pig stalls where they were trying to breed Bertha.

Safe to say, when I asked my father all about positions, cycles, and everything else I could think of to try and weird him out, he went pale and left me standing there while he near-*ran* for the hills. Also, I was seventeen, and I think that's probably about the time Dad's overprotective streak went into overdrive.

Skye: Either way, I demand updates because I'm invested in Team Galex now.

Alex: You're one of a kind, Skye Rossi.

Skye: That's what he said, then he put a ring on it *winking emoji* Take my advice: make sure my brother thinks that about you too. Then it'll be smooth sailing right down the hallway and into his bedroom.

Alex: I can't imagine ever wanting to set my brother up with anyone.

Skye: Wait ... your brother is single? What about him and Val?

Alex: Are you forgetting the fact he lives two states away?

Skye: Val can work anywhere. So can firefighters. That's why you're here, isn't it?

Alex: GoodBYE, Skye. Thanks for a fun night though.

Skye: Well, since I'm guessing my brother was a gentleman, it wasn't a mega-fun night for you. But there's always tonight ... right? BYE!

Skye: P.S. I better get an update from you tomorrow about how riding that elephant goes.

And because it's Skye and I'm *me*, I can't resist one last reply.

Alex: Not sure I'd call your brother an elephant, more of a horse haha. But will do.

Skye: THIS is why we are friends.

I put my phone down and swing my legs off the bed, leaning forward onto my elbows to let my equilibrium recover

from the change in angle before standing up, my cotton mouth and pounding head demanding action immediately.

It's not until I reach the kitchen that I realize *just* how much of a good man my roommate is. There on the kitchen counter is an electrolyte drink and bottle of Tylenol, and a handwritten note saying, "Thought you might need these. Have a good day. G."

That has to be a good sign ... right?

I send him a quick text.

Alex: Thank you for the hangover wares in the kitchen. They're very much appreciated.

Gio: YW

Wait ... what? That's all I get?

When he doesn't message again, I figure he must be busy patrolling the streets and crime-fighting, so I leave it be. Unfortunately for me, that doesn't mean my brain drops the subject. I look at the clock and groan, deciding avoidance is my path of choice right now.

More sleep first, then—once I'm feeling human again—I'll tackle the boring 'last day off' tasks of laundry, cleaning, and shopping.

Maybe I can make Gio dinner.

But will he think I'm trying to seduce him? Or that I'm apologizing for propositioning him? Should I do either of those things? *Ugh.*

With a big sigh, I resign myself to a day of overthinking and indecision—because it's not like I've *ever* been lusting after my roommate before. I head toward my room to crawl back into bed for a few hours.

My only hope is that by the time Gio gets home from work tonight, I'll have some sort of clue about what I should do next.

“HEY, TWINKLE TOES.” Gio’s smile is huge when he gets home, and just seeing it has all the tension I’d been holding leach out of my body.

“Hey.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Better now.”

He nods and walks over to the island, stopping on the opposite side to me before he drops his keys and wallet onto the counter.

It’s not the first time I’ve seen him in uniform, but somehow, it’s hitting differently today. More specifically, it’s ticking all the cop fantasies I never knew I had.

And of course, he glances up and catches me out, arching a brow. “See something you like, baby?”

Oh damn, he called me baby last night. And double damn, it’s like a magic switch that makes my knees weak. *Is it hot in here?*

His deepening grin seals it for me. This man has worked me out, and he’s obviously not afraid to use that fact to his advantage.

“You okay? You’re looking a little ... flushed ...” he says.

All right. Who is this man and what’s happened to my roommate?

He moves toward the refrigerator, opens the door and leans against his arm, his shirtsleeve stretching against his flexed bicep. “How was your day?” he asks, as if he’s *not* muddling my brain with all his *Gio*-ness.

I narrow my eyes, deciding to go on the offensive. “You totally know what you’re doing to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just getting a drink. I’m feeling rather thirsty today. How about you, Alex?”

Feeling *hot*?” He looks over his shoulder just as my gaze is eating its way up the delectable rear view of his body. “Are you thirsty?”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” I reply roughly, the flash of Gio’s eyes snapping me out of my daze. He straightens and pulls out two bottles of water, placing one on the countertop before unscrewing the lid and handing it over to me, making a point of brushing his fingers against mine.

So this is the game he wants to play. Bring it on.

I clear my throat and square my shoulders. “Thank you. And for the drink and Tylenol you left out this morning.”

His eyes crinkle as he smiles, flashing me his pearly whites, something that makes him look like a squeaky clean Captain America who you just know is dirty in all the right ways behind closed doors. *Absolutely not helping my current predicament.* All I can think about right now is jumping into his arms and helping him out of that uniform.

“Yeah. It’s always good to have something nice and *wet* after a hard night.”

“Absolutely. It definitely hit the spot.”

His gaze darkens and there’s no mistaking where his mind is going now. He leans a hip against the wall and grabs his water, slowly lifting the bottle to his lips as he takes a long sip. I just stand there, unable to look away. And as silence stretches between us, uncharacteristic nerves bubble up inside of me.

“I’m sorry for last night,” I say.

Gio’s brows lift. “You are?”

I frown. “You’re not?”

“Fuck no.” He screws the lid back on his water bottle, gripping it loosely by his side.

“I was drunk.”

“Yep,” he says with a smirk. “And you’re a cute drunk. Which means I’m *really* looking forward to the next time you go out with my sisters.”

My nose scrunches up. “Why?”

“Cause then I get to see more of drunk ...” He pushes off the wall. “Cute ...” He takes slow, measured strides toward me. “... hilarious Alex.” He comes to a stop mere inches away from me, my chin lifting up as I look at him, his face all I can see. “And I liked seeing that version of you. You’re a flirty drunk.”

“You’re a flirty *everything* right now,” I retort, a smile playing on my lips.

“I’m a guy who’s seen something—someone—he’s interested in, and now that I know you’re into me too, I’m not holding back anymore. This is just ... *me*.”

“I’m screwed,” I mutter under my breath, averting my eyes.

“Not yet you’re not, but hopefully, if I play my cards right, that’ll definitely be back on the table.”

My breath catches. I tilt my head to the side and jut out a hip. “You think you’ve got a chance?”

He leans in a little more, so achingly close that I can feel the warmth radiating off his body yet he’s still not touching me. “You tell me, baby.”

I dig my teeth into my bottom lip to stifle a moan, not missing the flash of need in his gaze. Instead of saying anything, I just nod. I don’t trust myself not to blurt out something we’re *so* not in the place to go yet like ‘take me now’ or ‘do you have your handcuffs?’

He steps back and winks at me, the balance between us shifting again. “Well, now that that’s sorted. I’m just going to get changed and go for a run. Then we can order in and maybe just have a quiet night on the couch, since we’ve both got work tomorrow and you’re probably still feeling a little under the weather?” Miraculously he says that last bit without smirking ... it’s close, though. His lips twitch just slightly.

“Yeah ...” I clear my throat again. “Yeah. I mean, that sounds perfect.”

“Good,” he says. “And this weekend, if you don’t have any other plans, I’d like to take you out on a date. Maybe we could do that tour of the city we’d talked about?”

I’ve lost the ability to speak, so instead, I just nod, earning a deep, honest-to-God grin from the man who’s got my heart running laps in my chest.

He lifts his hand and ever-so-softly drags the tip of his index finger along my hairline, down to my cheek before stepping back and walking toward his bedroom, leaving me forgetting how to breathe. He grips the doorframe just as he’s about to disappear from sight and looks back to where I’m still standing, my body unmoving, my skin tingling—along with other parts of me.

“Oh, and just so you know. What you offered me last night? I *will* be taking you up on that, baby. And soon.” Then, with a wink that is far too hot to be legal, he’s gone, leaving me to melt into a puddle on the kitchen floor.

Well, I *was* wondering how it would go with him when he got home ... I guess I just got my answer.

But one thing is for sure. The second he’s out that front door for his run, I’m taking a shower—a *long* one.

Alex

Since the last two days off work have kind of turned my home life upside down—in a good, slightly confusing, yet still exciting way—I’m actually glad I’m back at the firehouse today, if only to give me something else to focus on rather than Gio muddling my brain.

Last night, after getting back from his run, Gio ordered Thai takeout, and we sat on the couch and watched my favorite Chicago cop, firefighting, and medical TV shows back to back. The whole time, Gio was a complete gentleman. Gone was the blatant flirting that had left me hot and bothered, but the energy sparking between us remained just as palpable. It wasn’t until he looked over to the opposite end of the couch where I was sitting, lifted his arm up, and crooked a finger with a tempting smirk that I finally relaxed, snuggling into his side as we continued to watch my programs.

I was *so* relaxed and comfortable that I fell asleep with my head on his chest. Unfortunately, all that happened after that was Gio walking me to my bedroom door again, kissing me on the cheek, and telling me to have a good shift at work.

That meant I went to bed and dreamt of him and his hooded gaze and quirking lips I want to ravage, and his body that I’m ready to climb like a tree.

Now, I’m eight hours into my twenty-four-hour shift, and as hard as I try, while I’m at the firehouse, whether it’s doing maintenance on the equipment or making lunch, my roomie keeps creeping into the forefront of my mind.

“You’re thinking awfully hard over there, Alex,” the Captain says, walking into the workout room where I’m reading my book on the treadmill.

“Hey, Cap. I’m always thinking. It’s a women’s prerogative, don’t you know?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “I’m the father to three daughters. Believe me, I know.”

“Wow. And you’re still not completely gray on top. That’s a miracle.”

“You’re right there. Speaking of turning gray, your father called this morning to ask me how you were going.”

“Ugh,” I groan. “Sorry. I’ll have a word.”

Cap puts his hand up. “It’s okay. I can empathize with him. My eldest daughter is at art school in New York, and even though I know she can take care of herself, it’s a father’s job to worry.”

“I suppose it is,” I say, stopping the treadmill and stepping off, wiping my forehead with my gym towel. “Although I bet you don’t call the dean to ask how her grades are.”

“Not so much. But it’s not like you’re in college. You work in a dangerous job—one that your father knows all too well can go pear-shaped in the blink of an eye and the flash of a flame.”

My lips curl up. “That’s rather poetic, Cap.”

“I have my moments,” he says with a smirk.

I grab my water bottle and take a sip. “So, what did you say to my dear old dad?”

The captain arches a brow. “Never thought you’d be one searching for compliments.”

“Ah. You’ve caught on to my dastardly plan. Dammit.”

“Now I see why your dad calls to check on you.”

“Because he’s far too overprotective of his thirty-year-old daughter?”

“Well, there’s *that*. But wouldn’t you rather he cares than not?” he retorts, pinning me in place with the dad stare to end all dad stares.

I quirk a brow. “That work on your daughters, Cap?”

“You better believe it. Anyway, I told your dad what you already know. You’ve fitted into 101 like you’ve been here for years rather than a month, and your lieutenant and crew all have nothing but good things to say about you. And from what I’ve witnessed on the job, you’re astute, you obey and respect the chain of command, and you toe the line, and only overstep where and when necessary.”

Wow. I didn’t realize how good it would feel to hear that from someone other than my dad and brother.

“Thanks, Cap. I really do feel at home here at 101.”

“Good, because I *may* have told your father to not expect you back at his station any time soon—or ever.”

I bite my lip to stop myself from laughing. “Bet that went down well.”

“He pretty much admitted that he knew that already.”

That does surprise me. “Really?”

“That’s one proud father you’ve got there, Alex. I’m sure you know that.”

“Yeah, but he wasn’t exactly thrilled with me taking the leap and accepting this transfer.”

Captain nods and rubs his chin. “And yet you’re still here.”

“I’m my mother’s daughter—that’s why.”

“Which means?”

“I’m stubborn and strong-willed.”

“Now that I *do* know.” He tilts his head, and I know he’s about to impart some fatherly wisdom on me. “Maybe he is the way he is *because* he sees so much of your mom in you.”

“Times that by two because my brother Adam is just as bad as I am—he’s just more stubborn about it.”

He grins. “Well, take it from a dad who’s the first to admit he’s far too protective of his girls but even still, won’t ever stop.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I’ve met his daughter, London, but then I realize that she was with Luca and Gio had mentioned whatever it was that was going on between the two of them wasn’t a good idea. So I make a snap decision to keep my mouth shut when it comes to *that* particularly complicated friendship.

“I’ll call Dad and ask that he refrains from calling my Captain again,” I say, changing the subject instead.

Cap’s hearty chuckle fills the air, and his eyes crinkle at the sides as he shakes his head. “It’s okay, Iowa.” He winks at me. “Maybe knowing I can tell your dad if you get yourself into trouble is a good way to keep you in line, huh?”

“Oh, God. I’ll be sure to tell him he’s created a monster.”

“You do that. Anyway. Keep up the good work, Alex, and keep your crew in line.”

Now it’s my time to throw my head back and laugh, because the way his eyes are dancing suggests he’s heard about the chore chart I put in place for our crew, something I can thank Skye for telling me about. It seems that as soon as Skye went on maternity leave to have Austin, Scotty tried to wind back all the house rules she’d put in place. Fast forward to now, and Scotty isn’t exactly my biggest fan since I put those rules back in place.

Once the Captain leaves the room, I quickly grab a shower and get dressed into a clean uniform. Then, knowing the bells could go off again any time, I sit on the bench in the locker room and bring up Dad’s name on my phone.

Alex: Hey, old man. I hear you’ve been checking up on me.

Dad: Who, me? I wouldn’t do that. How are things? Is your roommate looking out for you?

I roll my eyes, although that gets me thinking about the ways I *want* Gio to look out for me ... intimately.

Jeez, Alex. Cool your jets. He wants a date first, remember?

Alex: How are you? Ready to retire and spend your days watching the grass grow from your porch swing?

Dad: You make it sound like so much fun. I can't wait.

That's my dad—a sense of humor as dry as the day is long.

Alex: You know I'm doing well here, Dad. I told you last week.

Dad: I've known Ron for over twenty years. You can't blame me for giving him a call to hear how good my girl is doing in the big smoke.

Alex: Chasing the smoke in the big smoke, huh?

Dad: I wish I knew how to work this phone so I could do one of those emotion-ji things.

I giggle, my smile stretching from ear to ear.

Alex: Emojis?

Dad: *poop emoji* *puke emoji* *heart emoji*

Alex: Aww, I shit, vomit, love you too, Dad *wink emoji*

When the bells echo around the locker room, I'm straight out cackling at my phone. I stand up and move quickly to the door, typing out a reply.

Alex: Gotta go out now. Behave, Dad. And make sure you make Adam clean out the toilets. You know he LOVES to do that.

Before I slide my phone into my cubby hole, I catch his reply.

Dad: I only called so I could be a proud dad. I'll try to rein in my instinct to drive over there and bring you back home. Stay safe, sweetheart. I love you.

And with that, I ditch the cell and focus on getting geared up and into the truck.

Time to get back to doing the job I love—the one I was born to do.

ONE OF THE key things that has always stuck with me since my early years in the force has been that you must stay in the right mindset while en route to a fire. No matter what is relayed to us by the first responding units arriving on the scene, we've gotta keep thinking that we're going to an active fire, and that yes, there will be victims needing to be rescued. It keeps the mind sharp and the objective clear, and—touch wood—it hasn't steered me wrong so far.

It doesn't take us long to reach the scene, and straight away, we all jump out of the truck to size up the scene while Marco and Rhodes head straight for the Incident Commander to get instructions.

Minutes later, the lieutenants return, Marco holding a tablet with the building's blueprint on the screen. "Luca and Alex, and Scotty and Zach, you're going in to search the first and second floors. Start on opposite sides and work your way to the middle stairway, then advance up them. The building was abandoned but since it was boarded up ahead of planned demo next week, there are unconfirmed reports that there could be squatters around. So stay alert, vent wherever you can while Engines Fifty-Six and Ninety-Eight hose down from each side. Squad Seventy-Eight are going up the ladder to the roof to vent, so keep your ears out because if anything looks dicey, we yank you out. Okay?"

"Yes, Lieutenant," we all reply, and with our instructions clear and our orders given, we move out, already geared up with masks, helmets, SCBA, and PASS devices all on.

"Iowa. Let's get in there," Luca says, bumping my shoulder before meeting my eyes. "You ready?"

I offer him a thumbs up. "Yep. Let's do this."

Scotty barges the front door open for us. Him and Zach go ahead of us and signal that they're going right. Luca leads us

left, and methodically, we check each room on the first floor, yelling “clear” when we find nothing but trash scattered everywhere and smoke filling the air. Room by room, we search until the first floor is clear. I call it in over the radio. The Cap replies with an update to say the fire is getting out of control and ordering us to stay alert and pull out if anything changes.

“We’ll go the second floor. You guys take the third, yeah?” Zach announces over the radio before the four of us advance up the stairs. Zach and Scotty disappear through the swirling smoke that’s closing in on us thicker and faster than before.

My pulse is racing, but this is not the good kind of adrenaline that courses through my veins like when I’m skydiving. This is an alert, *very* self-aware kind of energy that has kicked in because I’m inside a burning building in a blaze that’s bigger than any I’ve ever been in before.

Luca and I resume our search, calling out and searching room after room until I hear something. I grab Luca’s shoulder. Both of us stop, then he turns to look at me.

I jerk my head to the side. “Did you hear that?”

My partner shakes his head. “Nope but we’ll look anyway.”

We start moving to the left. “Anyone here? Call out!” I yell, but I can barely hear myself over the fire’s deafening roar and the creaking frames and cracking windows.

“Rossi. Maxwell. Check in?”

“Thought we heard someone. Currently searching,” I say into the handset.

“Do it quick, because we’re losing the fight here. We’re trying to get up to vent the roof but we’ve likely only got a couple more minutes,” Cap replies.”

“Roger that. One last look and we’ll come out.”

“Copy that. Over.”

Luca locks his gaze with mine. “You lead, Iowa. Go in the direction of the sound you heard. Trust your instincts.”

I nod, but inside, I'm shaking. This isn't like me. I'm usually cool as a cucumber and right now, I'm doubting myself and what I've heard. What if it's nothing and I'm risking our lives unnecessarily? "You good?"

"Yep. Let's go."

We move along another corridor, finding nothing but stacks of furniture and boxes stacked up high. This building is a fucking disaster waiting to happen—one that could cost lives if we're not thorough. *C'mon, Alex. Get your game face on.*

"Fire department. Is anyone here?" I yell out again and I swear, a whimper comes from the end of the corridor. My legs have renewed purpose. The heavy gear on my back loses its weight as I press forward, continually calling out.

Cap's voice comes over the radio just as we get halfway there. "The roof is gonna go. Engine 101. Fall back. Everyone get out of there *now*," he yells, with absolutely no space for argument in his tone.

But I can't get that sound out of my head. One minute and we'll be where the person is—if there is someone there. One minute from making sure we save their life.

"Alex, no. We gotta go," Luca yells, gripping my jacket and pulling me back.

I turn on him. "There's someone there—I'm sure of it. We can't just *leave* them, Luc!"

He shakes his head sharply, visibility nearly zero as the smoke grows thicker, deadlier, the sounds of the building losing the battle to the flames deafening. "Orders are orders. Can't help anyone if you're the one who needs saving, Iowa. Let's. Fucking. Go."

I give a last-ditch try. "Call out. Where are you?" but there's no reply this time. No response. Just ... nothing, except heat and smoke and the groaning foundations struggling against the fire.

Before I can turn to follow Luca, he's pushing me back down the corridor, the heat bearing down on me even through my turnout.

We reach the stairs and are almost at the ground floor when there's a loud explosion overhead. "Get the hell out of there!" Cap yells over the radio.

Luca and I break out into a sprint, the roof collapsing right where we just stood. I drop to my knees on the road staring at the blazing building, all of the crews falling back.

My muscles start to tense and then shake. Realization washes over me that there's no way anyone in there could've survived the blast. We left someone in there. Someone we could've saved.

Despite my body's protests, I jump to my feet and throw off my mask and helmet as I advance on Luca, who's standing beside Marco. I shove my hands into his chest and push him back. "We could've saved them!"

Luca straightens but doesn't react, standing firm, his eyes searching mine.

"We were right there!" I shout, punctuating my words with a jab of my finger against his chest. "Someone was *trapped*, and we just left them to *die*."

"Alex ..." Luca says as Marco and the Captain step closer, but I shift back out of reach of all of them.

"Alex. Calm down," the Captain says.

But I'm too far gone. I swing my arm toward the smoldering building. "There was someone up there. I'm sure of it."

"It was too dangerous, Alex, and I stand beside my call. I make orders; you follow them. Anything that comes from that is on me, not you or Luca. So stand down." There's absolutely no mistaking his tone, but I'm so far gone that I still open my mouth to argue.

I'm cut off as another loud, roaring explosion ricochets through the air, more of the burning room crashing to the ground.

And just like that, the fight I had left in me disappears. My shoulders slump and my head droops knowing that all hope is

now lost.

“Go back to the truck,” Marco says, his voice firm but gentle. “We’ll take it from here.”

My eyes jerk to his as his dismissal sinks in. I turn on my boots and walk back to grab my helmet and mask before making my way over to the engine, depleted and defeated in equal measure.

Perched on the back of the truck, I succumb to the tears stinging my eyes, letting them fall as realization washes over me at what might’ve been if I’d stood my ground just that little bit longer. Not only would I have been trapped, injured, or worse still, killed, Luca could’ve been too. I start to shake, and all the hot air and bluster vanishes into thin air, exhaustion and despair taking its place.

A few hours later, just as the sun is starting to crest over the horizon, Marco leans an arm against the firetruck door, peering into the cab where I’m now stationed.

“You okay, Iowa?”

I lift my head and stare into his concerned eyes. “No.”

He nods, and I can see the understanding in his expression. “First loss?”

“Is it a loss? Do we know?”

Marco shakes his head. “Can’t get in there till it cools down. Probably a few more hours.”

“Okay,” I say with a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

“Alex, we’ve all been there, and it isn’t the first time someone’s had a go at Luca, me, *or* the Captain.”

“But I—”

“But nothing. You’re passionate, and you’re good at your job. Any one of us would’ve been the same way in the same position. Hell, we *have* all been there at one time or another.”

“Not me.”

His gaze roams over my face. “I get that now.”

I nod, my throat too tight to say anything more.

“We’re almost finished up here,” he says.

“I’m good now. I can come and he—”

He shakes his head. “Nope. You’re right where I need you to be, Alex. We’ll debrief when we get back, or maybe next shift. But whatever happens, whatever we find whenever we get back in there, that’s not on you. You’ve gotta work through that. You followed orders and you got out safely. That’s all there is to it.”

“They were right there, Marco. I know it.”

“We may never know. Okay? But take it from me—you’ll be fine. You just need time, and luckily, you’ve got two days off ahead of you to do that.”

He’s right. Never have I been more thankful to have two days away from the firehouse. I can only hope that rest and taking some time for myself will do the trick.

Alongside that, there’s only one person I want and need to see right now. *Gio*.

Gio

“Hello,” I answer groggily.

“G. Sorry to call so early, and everything’s okay—just need you to come to the firehouse and drive Alex home,” Marco says in my ear.

“Is she all right?” I growl, my sleepiness instantly gone, my mind alert.

“She’s rattled, and I don’t want her riding her bike home when she’s not fully focused.”

I’m already out of bed and getting dressed as he talks. I heard Alex needed me and nothing else mattered; my body is operating on autopilot.

“What happened, Mar?”

“Her and Luc were searching an upper floor and things went downhill with the fire, so we called them out. She tried to stay because she swears she heard someone call for help. But had we waited any longer, we would’ve been the ones going in to get *them*. She had a go at Luc and the Captain, and she’s still a bit out of it.”

I’m slipping on my sneakers and halfway down the hallway when he speaks again. “G, I called you ’cause I know you know what it’s like as much as I do.”

He’s right. I’ve been on scenes where you could have saved someone, and that guilt gnaws at you along with all the what-ifs and maybes. They plague you, and it takes time to get

past it. I had my family to help me. Alex has her crew, but more importantly, she has *me*, and I'm going to be there for her however she needs me to be.

"Leaving now," I say as I grab my keys and head to the door.

"Okay, brother. Drive safe, and see you soon. She should be finished her report by the time you get here."

"Is she in trouble?" I ask, trying to get a better idea of what we're dealing with.

"Fuck no. The one thing you want in your crew is passion and drive. She has that in spades and just proved it to all of us. But she's got heart, too, and that's what needs protecting right now:"

"I'll take care of her, Mar."

"I know you will. I think you're the best man for the job right now. You're who she needs."

I slip behind the steering wheel and turn the key, connecting my phone to the Bluetooth as his words register. "What do you mean?" I ask

"I thought Luc and Skye were full of it until I saw it with my own eyes the other night. There's something between the two of you, isn't there?"

"Yes, but it's still developing, Mar. So the last thing I need is any of you interfering and meddling—well, more than you have already."

"Understood. I'll deal with the others. You look after your girl."

"Like I was born to do it. You have my word. Hitting the road now. See you soon, brother."

Then I'm a man on a mission, driving toward the firehouse while also calling my captain. I've got more than enough personal time banked up thanks to all the OT I've worked lately. I figure that Alex has forty-eight hours before she's due back on shift and if she wants me—maybe even if she doesn't—I'm going to be there for her.

Whatever she needs, however long it takes, I'll have her back.

I WALK into the living area of the firehouse to find Alex sitting on the couch, a mug cradled in her hands, her legs curled underneath her as she stares blankly at the TV. Luc is by her side, his chin jerking up when he spots me. He nudges Alex with his elbow and nods my way. Her eyes widen when she turns her head and sees me.

Then I see it—that tell-tale, haunted look in her eye. It's something I wouldn't wish on anyone, but especially not her.

“Hey baby,” I murmur softly before she hands her cup to my brother and launches herself up off the couch, running straight into my arms and burrowing deep against my chest. I meet Luca's gaze, his eyes full of understanding and approval.

“You're here,” she whispers, her voice muffled against my chest.

“Always.” I don't know why, but it feels right to hold her like this. As she squeezes me tight and moves impossibly close, I let out a sigh of relief. *She's okay. She's physically unharmed.*

Her emotional wounds will take time. But feeling her, holding her close, and knowing that I'm giving her the comfort she needs? That fuels me in a way I've never experienced with a woman before. And as much as that should rock me, it just feels *right*.

Alex pulls back and looks up at me. “All I wanted was to see you.”

Despite being in the middle of the firehouse with my brothers and crew all around, it's like we're the only people in the room. I lift my hand to cup her cheek. “I'm here to take you home.”

She frowns. “Don't you have work?”

“Called off. Someone more important needs me today.”

Her eyes widen before they glisten with tears again.

I swipe them away with my thumb. “You ready to go home, baby?”

“Yeah.”

“Then let’s go.”

I lace my hand with hers just as Marco walks over with Alex’s work bag in his hand. I take it off him, and we exchange a silent convo of “You’ve got this?” and “You know I do” looks before he lifts his chin and claps my shoulder. He gives Alex a hug, too, and whispers something in her ear before stepping back. She nods and then I’m leading her outside to where my car is waiting.

Opening the passenger door, I let go of her hand. I press my hand to the small of her back, but she stops and looks over beside the garage.

“My bike ...”

“Marco will take care of it. All you’ve gotta do is let me take care of you.”

“Thank you for coming to get me.”

“Always, Alex. I mean it.”

She nods, relaxing in the seat, letting me close the car door behind her.

It’s not until we’re on the freeway heading for home that I reach over and hold her hand, giving it a squeeze. “Wanna talk about it?”

“I think I’m still in the deep thinking and processing stage of things.”

“Completely understandable. Just know I’m here whenever you’re ready.”

She turns my way, resting her cheek against the seat. “All I could think about afterward was wanting to see you.”

“I like that, baby,” I say, lifting her hand up to brush my lips over her knuckles.

“Marco said he’d call you, and I felt bad but couldn’t tell him not to.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, but—”

“But what?”

“But we’re not ...”

“Not together?” I ask, finishing her sentence, earning a nod. “I want to be, and we’ve got a date planned, do we not? And whatever we are or aren’t, you needed me, so I’m here.”

“I ... shit,” she breathes, “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Well, you’ve got about fifteen minutes till we get home, and then however long you need after that. You take as long as you need, Alex. We’ve got time, and I’m here for you all the way—if you want me to be, of course.”

“You’re the only person I want to be around right now.”

“Good.” Hearing her say it makes me feel bulletproof.

She’s right that we’re not officially *anything* at the moment, but that does not negate my growing feelings for her, or my desire to explore them.

“Back home, I’d have Dad or Adam,” she says.

“Do you want to call them?”

She shakes her head.

“What do you need?”

She squeezes my hand as we come to a stop at a red light a few blocks from our house. “Just you, Gio.”

I turn my head and meet her eyes, and as if we’re magnets being drawn together, we lean toward one another, meeting in the middle. Her eyes flutter shut as I touch my lips to her forehead in a soft, barely there, meaningful kiss.

When I pull back, that haunted look has dimmed somewhat, and just seeing that convinces me that what I'm doing is helping.

“Take me home, Gio.”

Whatever my girl wants, my girl will get.

AS SOON AS we walk through the door, I suggest to Alex that she takes a shower and changes into something comfy.

While she's doing that, an idea takes form, and I set out to make it a reality.

By the time she emerges from her bedroom dressed in a loose-fitting jumper and leggings, she looks a little bit more like herself. When she reaches the living room, she stops dead in her tracks.

“Uh, Gio. There seems to be pillows and cushions and blankets all over the floor.”

“Is *that* what this is? Huh. That's strange,” I say, pulling back the covers and patting the makeshift bed I've created for us.

She scrunches her nose up. “Are *you* feeling okay? Because this is totally not a Gio thing to do.”

“Come and lie down and get comfortable with me. I've decided this morning definitely calls for a pillow fort.”

Her eyes soften as she moves closer, and for the first time since she's been home, she gifts me a small smile.

Pulling her in close, I tangle our legs together, loving the feel of her body against mine again. We both turn onto our sides, lying face-to-face, my hand moving around her to stroke up and down her back.

“I can't believe you made me a pillow fort,” she says, shaking her head against the pillow.

“Technically, I’m not sure it can be called a fort, per se, as it doesn’t have a roof.”

“A roof-less pillow fort?”

“A makeshift pillow bed?”

“Whatever it is, I can’t believe you—Mr. Clean and Tidy—messed up the floor.”

“You said it used to make you feel safe and protected when you were scared of the storms. I figured that this might not be thunder and lightning, but you’ve still had a scare nonetheless.”

“You’re very thoughtful, roomie.”

I shrug. “I just want to help you in any way I can.”

She snuggles deeper. “You are, more than you could ever know.”

“Good, baby. That’s real good.”

“You make a good fort,” she whispers.

“Well, I’ve never made one for a woman before. So that’s a first for me.”

“You seem to know just what I need.”

My lips curve up. “I’m totally winging this, baby. But I’m happy that I’m succeeding.”

“If this was a date, I’d be a sure thing.”

“It’s a nap date. It’s totally a thing.”

A coy smile grows on her face as she presses her body closer into mine.

“*But* I’m *not* a sure thing when I have my girl to look after. I have to make sure she gets all the rest and comfort she needs after a bad night.”

“What did I do to deserve you?”

“You were just you, and I was powerless to resist.”

Her eyes slowly roam over my face. “I just ... I don’t even know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything. Just *be*. Relax and try to switch your brain off.”

“That’s the hard part,” she sighs.

“I know, baby. But until you’re rested and in a place to unload and unpack everything going on up here, you won’t be able to process it. When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

She nods and leans into my touch, warming me even more.

“You tired?”

She shakes her head but her yawn tells me otherwise. “Just be, Alex. I’m not going anywhere.” I roll onto my back and pull her into my side, my chest acting as her pillow as I start my slow and steady strokes over her sweater again.

I stay with her as she dozes in bouts of fitful sleep, her body jerks and twitches letting me know she’s resting but not well. I’ll get her there though. When she’s ready, I’ll help her get to the place she needs to be in order to sleep peacefully again.

Whatever happened in that building—whether there was actually someone trapped in there or not—I’m going to be there for her. Marco texted me when she was in the shower and said they’d know by the end of today either way.

Until then, I’m going to lie here and hold her. I’ll stroke her head and be her comfort—whatever she needs.

I wasn’t lying when I told my brother that I’d look after her like I was born to do it, because holding her in my arms right now, her heat, her smell, her body against mine, and knowing I’ve made her safe enough to sleep after a horrific night—I truly believe it’s exactly what I’m meant to do.

Alex

If I wasn't sure before, it's an absolute certainty now—I'm not falling for my roommate.

It's already a done deal.

It has the potential to be super-complicated and messy, and it's the last thing I was expecting when I decided to uproot my life and follow my dreams, but I'm beginning to believe that sometimes you're supposed to cross paths with certain people at certain times in your life—when you need them the most.

A month ago, anything resembling a romantic entanglement was the absolute last thing I wanted.

But then, little by little, the stick-up-his-mighty-fine-ass po-po has worked his way into my psyche and my heart. Yesterday just sealed the deal, because he intuitively knew what I needed and gave it to me without hesitation. He called off work, came to the station at the butt-crack of dawn, and then took care of me. I feel that much closer to him now. The physical attraction I've felt for him since the day we met has morphed into something unexpected. It's deeper, richer, and I shouldn't want to explore this situation but I can't imagine not pursuing him either.

Because when I was overwhelmed with emotion and just wanted to curl up and hide away, Gio offered care and understanding—a safe harbor to hide away in. There was no awkwardness or strange energy between us—he just seemed to know exactly what I didn't even know I needed and wanted.

Even now, lying in his arms after sleeping for a few hours, there's nowhere else in the world I want to be.

And waking up all warm and cozy and cuddling against his broad chest, one of his arms resting on my hip, the other under the pillow we're sharing, I wish we could stay here just like this all day.

Despite the logical part of my brain telling me that this could have disaster written all over it, it feels ... right. And if I've learned anything in my thirty years so far, it's that life is too damn short to waste time with what-ifs and maybes.

Which is why I ignore the angel on my shoulder telling me not to and slowly shift forward, pressing deeper into Gio's strong sleeping form. I rest my hand against his stubbled jaw. Watching him closely, I gently brush my lips against his—a silent thank you, a muted moment where I feel the warmth of his breath against my skin and the quiet, resilient, and cocooning strength of his body wrapped around mine.

Being careful not to move too much, I reach behind me and grab my phone. A text from Marco waits for me. I take a deep breath and open the message, my eyes filling with tears as I read that a search of the building found no victims.

“Oh my god,” I whisper to myself, relief the likes of which I've never felt coursing through me. I lie there, staring up at the living room ceiling, my brain stuck on what could've been. I was so rattled yesterday, so torn up inside at the thought that we'd left someone inside that burning building. Thank God Luca had the wherewithal to follow orders and pull me out of there, because another minute later and we'd have surely been injured—or worse.

The fingers on my hip flex then ever so slowly release, making my breath catch, and my eyes jerk open, his hazel ones soft, sleepy, and oh so sexy.

“Thought I was dreaming,” he rasps, his lips curving up. “Could've sworn you kissed me.”

I can't help my seductive smirk. “Maybe you should go back to sleep so I can do it again then. It might just be the best

dream you've ever had."

He frowns and tightens his arms around me. Rolling me onto my back, he pulls himself over me. My heart flips, my stomach fluttering as all of Gio Rossi's goodness presses against me.

"You sure I'm not dreaming? 'Cause waking up with you here in my arms feels damn good."

I roll my hips up against his out of instinct and dig my teeth into my bottom lip to hold back a whimper when *all* of him presses against me.

His gaze flashes with heat and locks with mine as he braces his forearms on either side of me. He slides his sweat-covered length up and then down, his accuracy not at all unappreciated.

Then he stops, giving me his delicious weight as he lowers his forehead to mine. "How are you feeling?"

"Right now?" I reply roughly, my voice thick.

A slow-growing grin curves his lips as he chuckles, the vibrations it causes making me want to squirm against him. "I meant emotionally."

"I feel safe ..." I tilt my chin and kiss his chin. "Looked after ..." I touch my lips to the corner of his mouth. "Wondering what a real Gio Rossi kiss is like ..."

"I'm trying to be considerate and mindful here." His voice is rough and raspy, and I can tell he's trying to hold back. That's another reason I'm sure about this—about him.

"And I'm telling you I'm good. Great even ..." I whisper against his lips. "Got a text from Marco. No victims found."

He lifts his head back, surprise and relief written all over his face as he gives me a squeeze. "That's good news, baby," he replies, making me melt beneath him.

"So ...?"

His lips tip. "So?"

"I'm wondering what a girl has to do to get kis—"

Gio crushes his mouth to mine. He takes advantage of my parted lips and dives his tongue inside, stroking and rolling, tasting, claiming. It's the best kiss I've ever had with my clothes on—or off, for that matter.

The feel of him overwhelms me, and I give everything I've got back to him, loving his guttural groans and gruff grunts, his hands framing my head as he leans up on his elbows and looks down at me. I squirm under his heated gaze, rubbing my hips against his, seeking friction as if it's going to quell the burning ache he's building inside of me.

“Fuck, you're beautiful. All flushed and breathless for me.” He drags the pad of his thumb down over my bottom lip. I touch my tongue to the tip of his finger, earning a deep rumble from his chest.

“Gonna do something about it?” I rasp.

He slowly shakes his head from side to side then lowers his mouth to mine for a gentle, barely there kiss. “When we go there, it's not going to be on a pillow bed on the living room floor, and if I recall, I did ask you out on a date this weekend. I wanna do this right, baby.”

I arch a brow and wriggle underneath him. “I happen to like this pillow bed.”

“Me too. But you've also been through the wringer today, and I'm being mindful of that.”

Oh, no. He can't possibly think this is me needing a connection after trauma. This moment, lying in Gio's arms, has been building since I moved in.

I lick my lips, my heart jumping as his eyes drop to my mouth again. “Roomie, this isn't me just needing a warm body to hold onto. I need to know you get that.”

He rolls onto his back and pulls me over with him so now it's me looking down at him. His hands wrap around my back and hold every part of him to every part of me. He stares up at me, his gaze roaming my face as if searching for any kind of uncertainty and hopefully finding none.

“I know, baby. But this is too important to rush. I want to take my time with you, explore the new *us*, yeah?”

Fuck, can this man get any better?

I nod and bite my lip, getting myself a growl for my troubles. “You’re a sweet man, you know?”

He shoots me a wicked grin. “When I’ve got a gorgeous woman plastered all over me with the most kissable lips I want to taste a *lot* more in future? You bet I’m gonna be sweet.”

Giggling, I bury my face in his neck, loving the way his arms flex around me before starting those long, soothing strokes up and down my back again.

“So, how about we have a quiet, lazy day watching movies and staying exactly how we are right now?” he asks.

I can’t help it. I lift my head and smirk as I press my hips down against his still hard length. “*Exactly* like this?”

A groan escapes him. “That can ... be arranged ...”

“How about we call this a nap date then,” I murmur against his lips.

He presses his head back into the cushion to meet my eyes. “A nap date?”

“Yep. We stay here, we watch movies, we eat bad food, and we nap. It’s like a stay-at-home date with naps and a hot man to cuddle up to.”

Chuckling, he cups my cheek. “Sounds like just what the doctor ordered. Except for the bad food bit ...”

“What?”

“Part of my look-after-Alex plan may have involved texting Mama and asking her to make her *spaghetti aglio e olio* for us.”

If I wasn’t still horny already, hearing Italian roll off Gio’s tongue would’ve gotten me there.

“She’s bringing it over in about—”

The sound of a car door closing outside the house catches both of our attention. My entire body tenses as I glare down at the man who's just informed me—a little too late—that his beloved mother is coming over.

“Gio!” I whisper-yell as I scramble to get up and to my feet. I get one step in before he's standing behind me, his arm wrapped around my waist.

“Breathe, baby,” he croons in my ear. “It's just Mama.” He sucks the lobe between his lips. “She's gonna love you.”

I wiggle out of his hold and whirl to face him, waving a hand up and down my body. “Like *this*? I'm in my ‘at home’ clothes. My ‘I was too emotionally spent to dress up’ clothes, Gio. This isn't a ‘meet the Mama’ outfit. Men! Ugh!” I take a step to escape down the hallway but he grabs my shoulders to stop me.

“Baby,” he muses. “She won't care what you're wearing—which I'm sure as hell not complaining about. And if you need proof, this”—he grabs my hand and presses it against his semi-hard cock—“should prove it to you.”

You're gorgeous, and all Mama wants to do is see that we're both okay.”

My head jerks. “I'm fine. Just a little—”

“Raw? Tired? Wrung out?”

My shoulders slump, and I sigh. “Yeah.”

“And I was worried about you too, so Mama, being Mama, is personally delivering my favorite meal, and it's not just to feed us. It's to *see* us.”

“Can I at least go tidy myself up a *bit*?”

He leans back and rubs his chin as he looks me up and down, his lips twitching. “Nope. You're adorable.” Smacking a kiss against my lips again, he lets me go and moves down the hallway, leaving me standing there, stunned into silence.

I guess I'm about to meet Mama Rossi. *Fingers crossed she doesn't mind hot messes.*

Gio

“Gio!” a woman cries.

“Mama.” Gio’s warm voice filters down the corridor from where I’m still standing, then their voices drop to a low murmur and I cannot make out what’s being said.

That snaps me out of my daze and I jerk my eyes down, checking that all of my clothing is straight and I’m looking the best I possibly can before meeting the mother of five of the best people I’ve met since moving to Chicago.

Baggy sweater? Check. Leggings? Check. Sports bra? Thank God! Hair ... *oh, shit!* I quickly pull out my ponytail holder and brush out the knots with my fingers before tying my locks up in a best-I-can-do messy knot on the top of my head.

I look up and meet the older, but no-less-recognizable hazel eyes of Mama Rossi, who’s soft, gentle features and curved lips are taking me in like I’m a rare sight—likely, the Loch Ness monster.

“Oh, *mia cara*. You’re beautiful.” She steps closer and rests her hands on my biceps, leaning in to kiss one cheek and then the other. She shifts back but doesn’t let me go. “Hi. I’m Maria, but you can call me Mama like everyone else does.”

“Thank you?” I say warily.

Her eyes crinkle even more, her smile deepening, a dimple matching her son’s popping out before she looks over her shoulder where Gio leans against the wall, a covered casserole

dish in his arms. He's watching me, though, with a far-too-pleased-with-himself grin on his face. It's infuriating and irresistible at the same time. "She's perfect, Gio," she murmurs before returning her attention to me. "You're perfect."

I snicker and shake my head. "You'll have to excuse my appearance. I'm a hot mess today and had *no* idea you were visiting, otherwise I would've gotten changed."

She wraps an arm around my shoulders and then I'm being led over to the kitchen counter as Gio walks past us and puts the dish in the refrigerator. "Oh no, Alexandra. I'm just Mama." She takes a seat then waves her hand for me to do the same. "There's no need to go out of your way for me. I'm family, as are you."

My gaze widens and jerks to Gio's back. His shaking shoulders totally give him away. *Bastard*. Maybe *I* should make *him* wait for all the good things that come after a nap date.

"Thank you. Would you like a drink or to have a late lunch with us? You're more than welcome," I say. *That* earns a choked cough from my roommate, who shuts the fridge a little bit harder than necessary. I fight back a satisfied smirk of my own.

"No, no. I can't stay long. I just wanted to meet the woman who has my son rushing out at dawn to drive her home."

I tilt my head. "I'm thinking it was Luca who told you? He seems like the biggest gossip out of all your children."

Maria's eyes twinkle with amusement. "Ah, you obviously know all my children well then. It was Skye, actually. She learned from Cohen, and then she called me. And then when Gio messaged me this morning, he explained that you might need a Mama meal to help you feel better." She rests a hand on my arm. "Are you ...? Feeling better, that is?"

Tears sting my eyes and I quickly blink them away. Mama Rossi is *just* like my mom was, and if she were alive, she'd be

doing the exact same thing right now—checking in on me and making sure I was being looked after.

Back home, I had Mom, Dad, and Adam to lean on, and when Mom passed, then it was just the three of us. Here, Gio and his family have made sure—in their own way—that I’m taken care of. Like I *am* just another member of the family.

“I’m much better now than I was this morning. You have some fine sons. Luca made sure I got out of the building on time, and Marco made sure I was okay afterward, then called Gio to pick me up from the station.”

Mama’s eyes drift over to the pillow bed still covering the floor in front of the sofa, her lips curving up as her gaze slides back to meet mine. “He’s a good man, my Gio. A lot like his Papa.”

“Did Papa make you a pillow fort, Mama? I don’t think so. I’d remember *that* story.”

My eyes shoot daggers Gio’s way. We’re supposed to be *just* roommates. No one knows otherwise yet ... Well, except for Skye and Val, who told me to make a move, which means Cohen knows too. And I guess Marco knows, since he called Gio to come and get me ... which means Luca knows too. I huff out a silent sigh. *Definitely not a secret to anyone I guess.*

“Nooo, my Carlo never did. That’s your move, Gio. He *did* bring me a peony—my favorite flower— every day, rain, hail or shine, for a whole month until I gave in and accepted his invitation for dinner.”

I side-glance at my roomie. “A whole month, huh? That’s a *lot* of dedication right there.”

“*Don’t even think about it,*” Gio mouths as he shakes his head at me.

“If you want to know how to handle the Rossi men—at home or at work—you come see me, *mia cara*, and I’ll tell you all you need to know.”

Damn, I love Mama Rossi now. I should’ve known she’d be awesome.

“I might just do that, especially since I’ve got them at work *and* home,” I reply.

“I’m still here, you know,” Gio grumbles.

Mama’s Tinkerbell laugh and the wink she throws my way are just as cute as she is. “Hush now, son. The women are talking.”

Mama bursts out laughing. I can’t help it—I join her. Something I didn’t think was possible after the night I had.

“Anyway. I must be off. Carlo and I have plans.”

“Marcy and Rick dragging you out again?” Gio muses.

“Oh no, never again. Marcy is entertaining but she’s far too energetic for me. I’d much rather sit at home with a glass of red wine.”

I press my hand to my chest. “A woman after my own heart.”

“You, Alexandra, are welcome to come and drink my wine any time, *mia cara*.”

I smile back at her and nod. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Now that I have seen for myself that my son is being a good man and taking good care of you”—she stands and glances over at the living room again, her smirk widening and making my cheeks heat—“I can rest easy and leave you two to your day.”

I move to walk her to the door, but she puts her hand out to stop me. “No, Alexandra, you stay. Gio can see me out. How else can I tell him not to mess you around if you come see me out too?” she says, with a conspiratorial wink. “Now, you must come to the family lunch in a few weeks.”

“I’d love to. Thank you, Maria. And for the spaghetti. I can’t wait to try it,” I say. Her smile is so big it’s blinding, and it’s exactly the same one Gio and Skye have too.

She bends over and kisses my cheeks, her voice dropping to a soft whisper for my ear’s only. “You’re exactly who I’d want for my boy. But stay strong; don’t let him dazzle you

with that smile of his or let him think you can't take care of him too. I have faith, *mia cara*."

I nod as Gio wraps an arm around his mother's waist and sends me a curious look. "C'mon, Mama. I'll walk you to your car."

"Thank you, Gio."

"Be back in a minute, baby."

"I'll be here."

He glances over at me and there's a definite promise in his eyes—one that makes me tremble in all the right ways in all the right places.

"Next time, Gio, you'll have to introduce me to Fred. Skye was telling me all about my plant grandbaby. I can't wait to meet him."

A giggle bubbles out of me as I look over at our houseplant and realize his soil is looking a little dry.

"It's okay, Fred. I've got you," I say as I water him. "And between you and me, I think I'm in trouble—but the good kind."

GIO PLACES his fork down on his plate after we've finished eating the best spaghetti I've ever had, bar none. We're sitting at the kitchen island, side by side, and I'm so full that I think the 'nap' part of our nap date might actually become more of a reality than I'd planned.

"Are you going to tell me what advice my mama gave you before she left?" Gio asks.

I place my fork down too, so satisfied. "Now why would I betray Mama's confidence when I've only just met her? I'd hate to get in her bad books."

He chuckles. "Something tells me there ain't much you could ever do that my mother would hold against you. She told

me, and I quote, ‘You be good to that girl. She’s perfect for you.’”

My eyes jump out. “Um ... does she *know* I almost got one of her sons injured today? That if I’d stood my ground a minute longer, we both might not have made it out of there?”

All amusement leaves his expression, a concerned frown taking its place. Gio turns on his stool and leans in, grabbing my hips and moving me around so I’m facing him. Shifting closer, he spreads his legs so they bracket mine, his hands resting on my shoulders and sliding up to wrap around the back of my neck. One thing is for sure, he’s got my complete attention now.

“Now, if nothing else comes from this day, I need you to believe this. You were doing your job—a job that every one of the men and women who stand by your side *also* signed up for. You thought there was someone trapped up there. No one—not me, my brothers, Mama, *anyone*—is going to hold that against you. You were willing to put your life on the line for a complete stranger. It’s brave; it’s courageous.” He leans forward, resting his forehead on mine so he’s all I can see. “And baby, I fucking *love* that you’re that kind of person, that kind of woman. Because in the same situation, I’m always gonna be that same kind of man.”

I bite my lip to stop it from quivering, everything Gio just said was exactly what I needed to hear. I’ve never doubted my abilities as a firefighter—I know I’m good at that—but in the early hours of this morning, I was worried about whether I should’ve run down that corridor and left Luca, or if my stubborn streak almost caused both of us to be injured or worse.

Knowing neither one of us are ready for me to turn into a blubbering mess on what is technically our first date—nap or otherwise—I decide to deflect, and I playfully whack him on the arm.

He jerks back with a confused frown. “Ouch. Assaulting an officer now. What was that for?”

“For being too damn charming and sweet and honest and good and, and—”

“Sexy?” He leans back in, his eyes dark and blazing now. “Hot?” He moves closer still, this time stopping when his lips brush against mine. “Irresistible?”

I loop my arms around his neck and close the remaining distance between us, garlic breath be damned and crush my lips to his. Gio growls into my mouth, one of his hands delving into my hair as he deepens the kiss, claiming me thoroughly as he takes control, making me melt against him and take everything he’s giving me—and by *god*, is he giving me greatness. Top notch, A-grade kissing right here. *It’s always the quiet ones.*

When the need for oxygen takes over, we slowly ease back, his eyes just as heated as mine. It takes everything I’ve got not to jump in his lap and kiss him again as his hungry gaze roams over my face, fixating on my lips.

“Want me to do the dishes?” I ask teasingly.

“Nope,” he bites out roughly before he dives in again, his grip in my hair tightening as he plunges into my mouth, pillaging me like a pirate searching for gold. It’s sublime.

I decide to play dirty—with the dishes this time. “You’ll be okay letting them sit here with all that food drying on them?” I push against his shoulders, sucking in a much-needed breath but already missing the feel of his lips on mine and his tongue in my mouth. *If I’m addicted to his kisses. What’s going to happen when I finally see his—*

“Yep.” He drags his hands down, watching their journey over my collarbone, skimming my breasts and waist until they settle on my hips.

“You *suuure*?”

His fingers flex and then I’m being lifted over and pulled onto his lap. I wrap my legs around his back, bringing my pelvis flush with his and his hard-on. My hands grab hold of his shoulders as a whimper escapes my lips.

“Now *this* is much better,” he rumbles as he buries his face in my neck, kissing his way across my throat.

I drop my head back to give him more access, my fingers roaming over the tight firm muscles of his back.

He bucks his hips up, eliciting a moan from me. “Like that, baby?”

“God, you’re *such* a tease.” His lips curve against my skin.

“Want me to go do the dishes now?” he asks, his voice laced with humor.

“Maybe ... later,” I grab his face and pull his mouth back to mine, looking deep into his smiling eyes as our lips rest against each other.

“Wanna make out on the pillow bed? We were supposed to have a nap date after all,” he says.

“I’m not sure I want to move right now.” I drag the tip of my tongue along his bottom lip, loving the way his eyes have gone all warm and melty.

“Me either.” Then he kisses me again, and we don’t move ... not until much, *much* later.

Gio

Three days after making out and miraculously *not* taking things further than that, I'm taking Alex out for our rescheduled tour of the city sights.

That's if I can stop thinking of all the reasons why I shouldn't get out of my bed where she's currently plastered to my side, having crawled in next to me after finishing work and falling asleep in my arms.

I love how she's so giving and open with her affection. It shouldn't surprise me because that's just who she is—an honest, what-you-see-is-what-you-get woman who wears her heart on her sleeve. She cares fiercely, she feels deeply, and she's given me the jolt I needed to see that sometimes the thing you want—the *one* you want—can come into your life when you're not looking.

And since we now clearly know that we're interested in each other, what I want more than anything is to explore this undeniable chemistry between us in my bed, but I've promised my girl a date today, and if she's up to it, that's what we're going to do.

Afterward, though? *That's* when we'll have time for more. But I'm a man of my word, even if I have to keep repeating that like a mantra so that I can get the strength to extricate myself from her warm embrace.

"Mmm, this is so much better than sleeping alone in a firehouse bunk," she murmurs, shifting her hand up to rub against my bare chest. *So not helping.*

“It’s definitely nice to have my sexy roommate crawl into my bed with me.”

She lifts her head and licks her lips as her eyes roam over my face before she rolls over, laying her body flat out in front of me. *Never have I been both grateful and resentful of the fact she’s wearing a T-shirt and underwear.* “You know what else would be *nice ...*”

I reach up and run my fingers through her hair, framing her face in my hands and bringing her down for a quick touch of a kiss. “Don’t tempt me, because I’m determined, but I’m not strong enough to resist the charms of my—” I stop midsentence.

“Roommate, girl, girl ... *friend?*” Alex’s eyes flash with amusement, her lips tipping up into a knowing smirk. “Plant mom?” she suggests, not even trying to hide the fact she’s enjoying my unease.

I narrow my eyes at her. “Doesn’t seem like enough, does it?” I flex my grip and kiss her again, a little harder and for a little longer this time, just enough for her to melt into me before I gently pull her back.

“Brothers’ workmate,” she says, pretending that she’s thinking hard about it. *Two can play that game, baby.*

“My woman.”

“Me, woman. You, man.” She arches a brow, the look far too sexy for her own good. Shaking her head, she dips down to rub her nose along mine before bringing our lips back together and resting them there. “The word I think you’re looking for, Gio Rossi, is girl ... friend ... unless that’s not what this is. Then we’ll have to seriously discuss a co-plant-parenting agreement.”

I drag my arms down over her shoulders and under the covers, coming to rest when I cup her ass cheeks and hold her hard against me and my morning wood. “Girlfriend then?” I stare deep into her eyes, loving the way they soften and warm.

“You *sure* about that? I mean ... we haven’t even had *sex* yet,” she says, her body shaking as a giggle bubbles

out of her. *God, that feels damn good.* I shake my head. *Never a dull moment with this one.*

Sliding my hands across her skin, I bring them back to frame her face. “Baby, are you my girlfriend?”

“If I’m gonna be your *girlfriend* then you’d better kiss me to seal the deal. *Especially* since you won’t fu—”

I shut her up with a kiss, feeling her smile against my lips. Planting a foot on the mattress, I push up and flip her over, covering her body with mine and kissing her deeper, pouring everything into it until I have to pull away because I know I won’t be able to stop if I keep going.

Lifting my head, I take in her dazed, blissed-out expression, her lips swollen and pink, her eyes closed, her breathing labored. Her lids flutter open, and she glances up at me with a lazy grin.

“Will you let me take you on our date now, girlfriend?” I ask, quirking a brow.

She nods then laces her hands behind my head and pulls me back down. “After you kiss me again.”

“SO,” Alex says around her last mouthful of her Portillo’s Italian beef sandwich with extra gravy. “Whttz nuxt?”

I side-eye her. “I’m sorry, I missed that. Where’re my nuts?”

She snorts, food flying out of her mouth as she splutters and starts to choke and cough.

“Shit,” I mutter, moving us out of the pedestrian traffic to the edge of the sidewalk and rubbing her back. “Sorry.”

“Why? That was *actually* quite a good comeback for you. I’m impressed.”

My mouth drops open, and she pokes her tongue out.

“Serves ya right for making me choke.”

I waggle my brows, which just makes her laugh again.

“And I was told you were the straight-laced, only-sees-black-and-white Rossi. I’m starting to think there’s this naughty ...” She hooks a finger in my belt loop and starts reeling me in. “... cheeky ...” She leans back on the stone wall behind her, still pulling me closer. “... dirty, *dirty* man hidden under all that rule-following exterior.”

When my front meets hers, she whimpers, and I feel it all the way down to my dick. *Totally not the time or place to sport a boner.*

“You’re distracting me from my tour ...” she says.

“Tour?” I murmur, peppering her jaw with kisses. “What tour?”

She laughs and shakes her head, gently pressing me away from her. “Nope. Damn. That teasing totally backfired on me, didn’t it?”

“Yep.” It’s two in the afternoon and we’ve been to the Art Institute, then to take the obligatory selfie at The Bean before another selfie outside the Chicago Theater sign—Alex told me it was her Mom’s favorite place in Chicago—then to Portillo’s for lunch, and now we’re heading toward Michigan Ave and the Magnificent Mile.

“You ready to go window shop at all the highbrow stores?” I ask her.

“Yep,” she says, beaming as she looks up at me.

“Want to give your boyfriend a kiss before you do that?”

She pretends to think about it so I kiss her anyway, only stopping when she’s gripping my shirt and sagging against me. “You know too many tricks that work on me, plant daddy.”

“And hopefully, by the end of the day, I’ll have a few more to add to my plant momma arsenal.” I step back and wink at her, taking her rubbish out of her hands and dropping it in the nearby trash bin. I chuckle under my breath at her narrowed eyes before I grab her hand. “C’mon, we have a date with

stores we cannot afford to shop at on our civil servant salaries.”

“There is one place I really want to go, but I think I’ll have to come back one day and do it myself.”

I frown. “What? Why? We can go there today.”

She looks away, her teeth digging into her lip.

“C’mon, tell me.”

“Skydeck in Willis.”

“Tower?”

“Yeah. But it’s okay. I know you don’t like heights and—”

“Okay.”

Her whole body jerks. “*Really?*”

“Sure,” I say with a shrug. “Why not?”

“Um ... ’cause you don’t like heights.”

“Not sure I can fall out of an enclosed building, baby.”

“But—”

I cup her shoulders and dip my head so I’m looking her straight in the eye. “You want to go up there, Alex?”

“I do.”

“Then we will. Just hold my hand and don’t let me freak out.”

“Gio, we don’t have to.”

“I know. But my girlfriend’s a firefighter. And I’m not sure if you know this, but she’s a badass. She wouldn’t let anything happen to me.”

Her blue eyes soften. “Nope. ’Cause a little birdie told me she has plans for her boyfriend when they get home.”

I give her a quick kiss. “I have plans for her too. Lots and *lots* of plans that require a *lot* of energy ...”

“Well,” she replies, her voice a little breathy, “we better get up that building then so we can get onto these *plans*.” She

kisses me this time, and it's not a quick touch of the lips. It's a hard, deep, definitely PG plunder that is over far too soon for my body's liking.

When she pulls away and loops an arm in mine, she grins up at me, looking proud as punch. "Lead the way, boyfriend. Buildings to scale, views to see." She looks me up and down. "And *plans* to carry out."

Oh, yeah. I'd do pretty much anything to get on to those plans.

Even go 1353 feet in the air to see Lake Michigan and the city I was born and raised in.

Alex

As soon as Gio closes the front door behind him, my arm is grabbed, my body spun around, and in the blink of an eye, my back is to the wall. His hands cradle my head and his lips crash down on mine.

I moan into his mouth, knowing I'll never get enough of this man kissing me and the raw lust he leads with. The way he pours all of himself into every touch has me melting as his tongue delves deep.

Gripping his shoulders, I hold on for dear life, giving in to the promise of pleasure that has been building all day—heck, for the past week. I suck on the tip of his tongue, earning a growl that vibrates right through me as my body sags into the wall. At the same time, I drag my hands down his back to grip his ass and pull him flush against me.

He tears his lips away, gliding his mouth along my jaw and down to my throat, nipping and kissing, ever so gently raking his teeth against my sensitized skin, and rumbling a deep, guttural approval when I thrust my hips forward, rolling the seam of my jeans against his rock-hard length.

“Fuck, baby. You may unman me, but don't stop.”

“Maybe ...” I breathe, struggling to form a single coherent thought when he presses his lips to the apex of my neck and sucks, surely leaving a mark.

Oh, so it's like that, is it?

I snake a hand between us, rubbing my palm up and down his still-covered cock. “Please,” I moan, letting my head fall forward, my back arching, my breasts pushing into his roaming hands. “Let’s ... *oh God.*” I lose the ability to speak as Gio’s mouth drags back up to the corner of mine.

“Need ... to ... move ...”

He chuckles and runs the tip of his tongue along the seam of my lips, entering my mouth again as soon as I open for him. Then it’s like the fire already burning gets a dose of gasoline. Something snaps in me at the same time as him, and it’s now hands and nails and growls and groans, moans and whimpers. From the feel of his thumb and forefinger rolling over my nipples, and my hips thrusting back and forth against his, my underwear no longer just soaked through—I think it’s damn near combusted.

“We should—ah, *fuck*— do that again,” he rasps against my lips. My breathing is limited to sharp panting. I smile and loop my leg over his thigh, bringing my core into closer, firmer, and oh-so-much-better contact with his straining erection.

His hand grabs hold of my other leg, his biceps flexing as he lifts me and pins me to the wall, everything in the perfect position to go at it. Needing his mouth on mine more than my next breath, I cling to him and thrust my tongue into his mouth, the kiss somehow hungrier, needier, more ... *everything*.

Gio’s forehead rests on mine, his chest heaving, warm air fanning over my wet, burning lips as we suck in much-needed air. Oxygen needs notwithstanding, I worried I might go up in flames right here and now if I don’t get naked with this man in the next zero-point-one seconds.

“Bedroom,” he grunts,

I smile and press a kiss to the edge of his mouth. “Couch is closer.”

His head slowly shifts back, his dark, melty eyes locking with mine as his brow slowly arches up. “In front of *Fred?*” he

gasps in mock surprise. “Hell no. Hold on, baby. There’s only one place we’re going, and I hope I haven’t worn you out today, ’cause we’re just getting started, you and me.”

I can’t help but giggle, loving the answering smile he gives me. “Take me to bed, roomie.”

The next thing I know, Gio’s arms are around my ass, and he’s carrying me past the living room and down the hall to his room with ease.

Then I’m ceremonially dropped onto my back on his bed, and before I can even finish my gasp of delighted surprise, he’s on me again, his body covering mine, his mouth devouring my lips.

“Too many clothes,” I pant, grabbing hold of his hair in my fingers and gripping tight, holding him to me, never wanting to let go. He tears his mouth from mine and pushes himself up onto his hands, a look of absolute lust and want shining in his eyes as he looks down at me.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmurs, lifting one hand and ever-so-gently dragging his knuckles ever-so-gently down my cheek.

I tighten my grip in his hair and tear his mouth from mine, pulling him back, then tilt my head and smirk up at him. “You’re not too bad yourself, roomie.”

His gaze roams over me, looking down my body then back up again. “Wanna see all of you.”

Arching my brow, I buck my hips up. “What are you waiting for?”

Then he’s no longer over me as he stands next to the bed, his gaze still locked with mine while he makes quick work of his T-shirt and then his jeans and boxers in one fell swoop until he’s standing there in all his mouthwatering naked glory. I bite my lip, dragging my gaze slowly—thoroughly—down his form. My body moves as if on autopilot, and I push myself up so I’m sitting in front of him. His hands come to rest on my shoulders as I lean in and touch my lips to his flat stomach, his muscles quivering and making me smile.

The salty taste of his skin snaps any control I still had—not that there was much left—and then I’m grabbing at my clothes. I’ve just pulled my top over my head when Gio wraps his fingers around my ankles and lifts my legs, his hands making quick work of my jeans and underwear so that I’m lying there in just a black lace bra and a smile.

His eyes turn predatory in the best possible way, and I crab-crawl backward on the mattress. He clicks his tongue, shakes his head, and shoots me a wicked smile.

“Nuh-uh, baby.” He licks his lips as he puts a knee to the bed between my parted calves and smooths his hands up my legs, pushing them wider and wider as he goes.

“Please,” I pant, my fingers fisting the covers beneath me.

“With fucking pleasure, baby.” He watches me while bending down and hovering his face over my sex. My heart races and my eyes flutter shut as he blows a slow, hot breath over my soaked seam, so agonizingly close to where I desperately want him to be.

Then I can do nothing more than cry out as he grabs my hips and dives in tongue first, swiping over my clit, hard then softly sucking the swollen bundle of nerves between his lips and making my back bow as a loud cry escapes me. My hand rests on the top of his head, my fingers rubbing the soft strands of his hair as he devours me, licking and tasting, sliding the tip of his tongue back and forth slowly, thoroughly. He returns his attention to my clit, which he draws deep into his mouth before flicking the nub over and over again.

I clench my thighs against his shoulders, fearing I’ll explode into a million pieces and welcoming the pleasure this amazing man is drawing out of me. My hips start to move of their own volition, riding his mouth, his lips, his tongue as I chase the tingling climax threatening to end me. Gio moves a hand between us, gliding his fingers lower until they’re stroking my entrance before slowly easing them into me. I clench around him and with one more almighty thrust up as he rakes his teeth over my clit, I cry out his name.

“Gio! Yes, please!” I gasp, never more grateful for having an empty house as waves of pleasure roll over me.

He slowly brings me back down to earth, his fingers continuing to stroke in and out in time with the lashings of his tongue.

“Fucking beautiful when you scream my name, baby,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to the top of my pubic bone before lifting up on an arm and looking down at me, his hand still between my legs as if he’s never letting go. *Fine by me if that’s the result.*

“Do I get a turn?” I ask huskily, still squirming as his fingers glide in and out, filling me, keeping me primed and ready for him.

“If you can get my cock in your mouth without losing my fingers, then have at it.” His voice is dripping with lust and need, his eyes blazing, all telling me he *wants* me to try just as much as I want to succeed.

Bonus—never would’ve guessed Gio Rossi had a dirty mouth. *This man just keeps getting better.*

“You gonna give me some room to move?” I ask, lifting on my elbows and hooking a hand behind his neck. I bring his lips down onto mine and taste my release on his tongue.

He groans into my mouth. “Fuck, not sure I can hold back if you keep doing things like that.”

My lips twist into a lascivious smile against his. “Don’t hold back then,” I whisper. “Take what you want ... Give us what we *both* need, Gio.”

He straightens, his head dropping as he slowly drags his hand away from my core, a whimper escaping my lips at the loss of him. I slide my hand down between my legs and stroke my fingers through my arousal, licking my lips up at the man whose eyes are so full of heat and need they could spark a wildfire.

“Fuck,” he curses. “Just wait, baby.”

He reaches over toward the nightstand beside the bed, opening the drawer and making quick work of ripping the foil packet and rolling a condom down his length. He grips the base of his dick and squeezes it as he moves back to the bed and surges over me. One hand comes to the side of my head, the other reaching down between us as he circles his cock around my clit, then shifts lower until he's right where we both want him to be.

Bringing his face down until he's all I can see, he kisses me soft and slow, our eyes locked together, the intensity of the moment seemingly not lost on either one of us.

Then he pushes inside of me, claiming me inch by perfect inch, our lips still joined, our tongues tangled as we breathe one another in and succumb to the feeling of being as intimately close as we can be.

This isn't just sex. And as he rocks into me and I roll my hips up against him, meeting him thrust for thrust, kissing and touching every single part of him I can reach, I realize this is the start of something I didn't see coming.

But one thing is for sure—there's no way I'm not seeing it, and welcoming it, now.

“Yes,” I moan, arching against his chest, begging for more, wanting it, *needing* it.

Without warning, Gio rolls over onto his back, taking me with him, our bodies staying connected. “Ride me, baby,” he murmurs, reaching his hand to grip my chin and dragging my bottom lip down with his thumb. I kiss his finger and rock my hips, gliding up and down his slick length.

I can feel my body, my soul, every part of me spiraling tighter and tighter as another mind-bending and overwhelming climax barrels down on me.

“I feel it, baby. Ride me. Take what you need. I wanna see you shatter,” he says, thrusting up as I grind down. Our movements become erratic and messy and oh so fucking right. Gio's hands grab my ass, pushing and pulling me harder and faster until I can no longer hold myself up. I drop down onto

his chest, digging my fingernails into his shoulders and making him groan low and rough into my mouth as I crush my lips to his.

His cock swells inside of me just as my vision goes white, my muscles spasm, and I cry out as I convulse with pleasure. “Holy shit. *Yes!*”

Before I’ve recovered, Gio’s flipping us again and lifting my hips off the bed, pounding into me with two more out-of-control jerks before burying his face in my neck. He growls a guttural “baby” then plants himself deep inside of me and groans his release with his teeth digging into my collarbone.

“I can’t move,” he murmurs, laving at what will undoubtedly be a hickey on my neck in a few hours.

“Don’t then. I’m totally A-OK, one hundred percent on board with the decision to never get out of this bed again.”

His rumbling chuckle makes me shudder with another mini wave of delicious pleasure, my sex clenching around his shaft which is still buried inside of me.

“Not even for food?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“What about ice cream?”

That gets my attention. Mind-blowing sex *and* ice cream. How is this man single—well, *formerly* single.

A lazy smile curves my lips. My eyes are so heavy I can barely keep them open. “I think I could be persuaded with ice cream.”

“Not round two?” he whispers, brushing his lips against mine.

“Ice cream *and* round two. You, Gio Rossi, are damn near perfect.”

He chuckles and kisses me again, giving me a teasing but no less satisfying sweep of his tongue against mine before pulling back. “No, baby. That’s you.”

Gio

“You seem rather chipper tonight, Rossi. Care to share?” Jeremy says, throwing the baseball my way. We’ve just finished practice for our cops versus firefighters game coming up next month, but Jeremy and I decided to stay behind and shoot the shit for a while.

“Fuck no,” I say with a laugh, catching it and repositioning it in my glove before chucking it back to him.

“C’mon.” He waggles his brows. “I may be gay but that doesn’t mean I’m anti-vagina. How are things with the roommate? You’ve been very tight-lipped since drinks a few weeks ago.”

“She’s good.” I can’t help but smile as I remember how I left a dozing Alex in my bed this morning after wringing two orgasms out of her before finally claiming my own.

“Oh yeah, that’s totally a ‘you getting yourself some’ grin. Good for you, G. Lord knows you’re a hell of a lot nicer to be around when you’re getting laid.”

Unfortunately for Jez, he’s just thrown me the ball, which means I let my arm rip and throw a fastball straight at him.

“Fuck, give a guy a heads up,” he says with a laugh. “Okay, okay. Does this mean discussing your love life is now off-limits?”

“Nah, it’s not like that. It’s just that she works with Luc and Mar, and you may come across her at a scene one day.”

Jeremy's head jerks back like I've slapped him. "I don't see why *that* would ever be a problem. It's not like this is a hit-it-and-quit-it type arrangement and it's just casual between you two."

"Not on your life," I growl, earning wide eyes from my friend.

"Hey, I'm happy for you. And I only brought it up because you look happy, G, which makes *me* happy. So, I take it things are going well?"

"Yeah. She's ..." *Amazing. Giving. Absolutely fucking made for me.*

"Say no more. It's written all over your face."

I shrug. "I know I should be horrified that I'm turning into this grinning fool just from talking about her. But I can't believe that out of all the people my brothers could've told about my spare room, and *especially* after the way we first met, and even considering how *different* we are on paper, she's just ..."

"Perfect?"

"Yeah."

"You're a lucky man, Gio Rossi."

"You haven't even met her yet."

"I will, and I bet my opinion won't change when I do, because I know you, and there's no way just any ol' woman would have you looking like you're walking on air. It's kinda sickening, you know? I'm starting to think you should hand in your man card and just slip your balls into Alex's purse right now. Save her the trouble of claiming them herself."

I throw my head back and burst out laughing, choking out a "fuck you, man" while I do it.

He rubs his chin and studies me. "There is one more question though. What happens with the baseball game?"

I frown. "What's that?"

“Are you going to go easy on 101 now just because your girlfriend is on the other team?”

“She’s not,” I say, shaking my head, because I’m pretty sure their team was full before she came to town.

A motorcycle rumbles into the parking lot and pulls up right beside the spot where Marco, Luca, Scotty, and the other members of the Firehouse 101 baseball team are gathered, ready to hold their own practice.

When she pulls off her helmet and shakes out her long hair, I know that my brothers have secured themselves a new secret weapon.

“Oh, shit,” I mutter, my head dropping in defeat.

“What, man?”

“That’s Alex who just arrived. Dammit, we’re screwed.”

“Firstly, is this like some *secret* rendezvous between you and me that the girlfriend doesn’t know about? And two, that is one hot leather get-up. Damn, G. I never knew you had it in ya. I should shake your hand,” he says, coming up beside me and nudging my shoulder.

I chuckle and bump him back. “Fuck off, Jez.”

He quirks a perfectly arched brow. “Look me in the eye and tell me the leather *doesn’t* do it for you, and if I believe you, I’ll buy *all* the drinks tonight.”

I don’t even bother to argue because I still remember all the air being sucked out of me when I saw her standing on my doorstep the day we met.

As we lay on the couch the other night, Alex on top of me and my hands fanning through her silky, soft hair, we played a game of Twenty Questions—the ‘get to know everything we don’t already know’ edition.

She learned about my *Star Wars* adoration—after which she demonstrated hilarious Yoda and Jabba the Hutt impressions—and how I use exercise to clear my mind. I also told her I have no clue why I like having everything clean, clear, and ordered when I’m at home.

When it came around to her turn, I learned that aside from skydiving, rock climbing, and snowboarding in winter, my girlfriend is a sports legend and was in the Varsity softball team in high school and continued playing throughout college too.

And yes, it was probably selfish of me, but I kept that little nugget of information to myself and *hoped* that nobody at 101 would find out. I also didn't think I had anything to worry about because as far as I knew, the firehouse team was full.

"Jez," I say, my eyes glued to my girlfriend on the other side of the baseball field. "We're gonna have a team meeting to come up with a new game plan, because we've now got a *big* problem and her name is Alex Maxwell."

"Huh?"

I turn and meet his confused face. "Because, my friend, Alex—*my* Alex—holds the batting records at her college and that's after finishing there eight years ago."

His eyes widen. "Oh, fuck."

"Oh yes," I say with a resigned sigh. "So it's pretty safe to say that Firehouse 101 and my brothers just found themselves a secret weapon who's going to annihilate us come game day."

I glance back over to Alex as she waves my way, a knowing smirk curving those perfect pink pouty lips of hers that I love to feel on mine. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Gonna go spank her ass for not telling you? 'Cause I'm coming along to watch *that*," Jeremy muses.

"She'd probably like that too much," I say with a smirk. His idea has a hell of a lot of merit

"The spanking or me watching?" Jeremy asks, curiously.

"Honestly, probably both."

"Lucky bastard," he mutters, making me chuckle as we walk over to the group from Firehouse 101.

"Hey, G. Fancy seeing you here," Marco says, his arrogant grin wide.

“Yeah, sure. Like you *didn't* just blindside us with my own girlfriend.”

He feigns shock. “Who, *me*? Would I do that to you, brother?”

“Of course you fucking would. Anything to score a win over the precinct.”

His knowing grin widens. “Shame she’s a firey then, isn’t it?”

“I can see you’re *really* disappointed about that. Who’s the schmuck you ditched to slot her in?”

“The Cap was more than willing to step aside if it guaranteed us the win.”

I snort and slap his shoulder as I move past him and the equally cocky Luc to go greet my girl.

“Hey, baby ...” I murmur quietly when I’m close to her.

“Oooh, he calls her *bay-bee*,” Luc teases behind my back. “Isn’t that cuuute? I bet Val and Skye would *love* this.”

I turn and flip him the bird. “For the record, Luc, Val and Skye saw us together last night and were *more* than happy for us.” I tap my chin. “Actually, you know what this means?”

What?” he asks with a frown.

“You’re the only brother who’s single now. Which means Mama is going to be ramping up her matchmaking for you.”

My olive-skinned brother turns a few shades of pale. “Oh, shit.”

My lips tug up into a smirk. “*Exactly*,” I say, turning back to see my girl.

“Hey, plant daddy. Fancy seeing you here.” Her wide grin and dancing eyes give her away. She reaches out as if to touch me, but I put my hand up to stop her for a moment, making her brows furrow and her nose scrunch up. “Um ... what’s wrong?”

“We’ll get to what’s wrong in a minute, baby,” I say, dropping my voice low for her ears only. “First things first: Do you have anything against spanking? Because not telling me you were recruited by my brothers to play against me is definitely a spankable offense.”

Her eyes spark with surprise. “Me spanking you? Not my jam. Your big hands leaving a red imprint across my ass while you’re buried deep inside me? Sign me up.”

I have to bite back a groan, because now *all* I can think about is doing that exact thing. *Fuck*. This conversation is backfiring on me. My stiffening cock is proof of that.

She tilts her head, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip. “Doesn’t explain why you’re standing in front of me and haven’t kissed me hello yet, *boyfriend*.”

I still can’t decide whether I love her calling me roomie, plant daddy, or by my full name more. But top of the list is boyfriend. Juvenile as it may be, it’s ours, and *that* gets me every time.

Moving so we’re less than an inch away from each other, I run my eyes over her face, unable to stop my gaze from fixing on her lips. *Focus, G*. “And now I can’t remember the second question because all I can think about is spanking your ass.”

She flattens her palm against my chest and slowly glides it up to curl around my neck. “Do you want to do it right here? Right now? Never been much of an exhibitionist, but I’ll give anything a go once.”

“Jesus Christ. No. I mean ...” I have to shake my head to try and clear it of *that* particular train of thought. Alex giggles and grins at me, tipping her face up so close to mine that all I’d need to do is dart my tongue out and I could kiss her.

“Kiss me, boyfriend. I don’t care who we’re in front of. I like you, and the crew knew you and I had crossed the just roommates line the morning you came and picked me up from the station. I have absolutely no issue with anyone knowing that I scored me a hot cop.”

I growl and crush my lips to hers, giving her a hard and fast, but nonetheless, meaningful kiss before lifting my head and smiling down at her.

“Is anyone else feeling a little hot now?” Jez asks from where he’s standing between my brothers. “No?” He looks around the group. “Just me?”

“It is a bit sticky,” Scotty says. “I might check the weather app.”

Everyone groans. Scotty looks around, as if he’s wondering what he missed. I wrap an arm around Alex’s waist and pull her close. She rests her head on my shoulder like we’ve been together for years, not a few weeks, and I don’t miss the way Marco, Luc, *and* Jeremy all grin at us—not in a smart-ass, rag-on-me-later kind of way—but in a happy-for-us one.

“Jeremy, this is Alex. Alex, that man being sandwiched between my brothers is my friend and fellow cop, Jeremy.”

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself lady,” he says with a grin. “Dig the leather, by the way.”

“Why, thank you,” she says with a laugh.

“Right,” Marco says, clapping his hands. “Time for you two spies to leave us to our practice. And you two,” Marco says, pointing between Alex and me, “no baseball-related pillow talk. Okay?”

“Wait, they’re together?” Scotty asks, earning a chorus of groans from all of us.

Luca rolls his eyes. “Nah, they were just sucking face so Gio could inspect Iowa’s tonsils, Scotty. Jeez, man. Get with the program, otherwise you’ll be relegated to ball boy.”

“You wouldn’t!” Scotty protests.

Marco winks at me, and I know he totally would. “Right. Firehouse 101, get on the field. And *you*.” He points my way. “Stop distracting my best player. You can go home and wait for her like every other significant other.”

“All right. All right.” I lean down and press my lips to Alex’s. “See you at home, baby. I need to take Fred to the groomer.”

She snorts out a laugh and eyes me skeptically. “You wouldn’t ...”

“Oh, just you wait, plant momma. I’ll even send you photographic proof if you need it.”

“You’re on,” she says, her eyes alight with humor. “And Gio?”

“Yeah?”

“If you do, I’ll let you do what you asked me about when I get home.”

“Fuck!” I utter, staring at her. *What did I do in a past life to be such a lucky S.O.B.* “You’re on.”

“I damn well hope so. Because I’m not sure you’re gonna be happy in a month’s time when 101 beats your ass.”

“We’ll see, baby. We’ll see.”

Alex

We're currently between callouts at the firehouse, so I'm walking on the stair climber in the workout room, getting a head start for my next physical performance test but also testing out the theory that exercise can help one's mental health.

Ever since that near-miss in the abandoned building, I've been feeling off-kilter at work. It's something I've been trying to fix myself—something I'm not succeeding at yet. It's like I have the firefighter equivalent of the yips. Like a golfer hitting the green then screwing up the putts, or a gymnast knowing their routine like the back of their hand but when it comes to competing, they lose their nerve.

That's me. And I never saw it coming. It crept up on me that first shift back after my bad callout, the one that rattled something loose inside of me. We were suited up and arrived on scene for a basic kitchen fire, and I froze when Marco instructed me to go inside with Luca and Scotty.

Like *literally* froze. *Miraculously*, when I suggested I take the hoses and attach them to the hydrant instead, Marco waved me off and let me go.

Now, it's becoming a struggle to hide it from everyone because it's been three weeks since I've faced flames and nothing I've tried has made it easier to face the fire. Just the idea of the smoke, the heat... it *terrifies* me.

I think Marco and Rhodes are suspicious, but neither one has called me into their office and asked me flat out if there's a

problem—and for that, I am grateful.

Maybe I've been too wrapped up in Gio and the whole honeymoon phase of our relationship, or maybe I have been fooling myself into thinking I could get past it all by myself.

But I haven't yet, and I'm kind of lost as to what to try next. I've exhausted all the tried and true methods I've seen on the internet and in firefighter forums, and I'm starting to run out of ideas. Meditation, affirmation, visualization—I've tried all the -ations. None of it is working.

I'm still able to carry out my responsibilities as per usual... well, until I'm faced with the reality of being in the field and in a situation where I have to rely on my instincts and my decision-making ability under pressure. Just the prospect of having lives in my hands gets my heart pounding, my body breaking out in a cold sweat, and my chest tightening like a vise.

I've simply lost faith in myself, and while I can still work and do it without jeopardizing the safety of my crew, I feel guilty, and that guilt has been steadily compounding, which just means I'm putting more pressure on myself to get better.

I *am* determined to work through this little wobble of mine though. Which means I haven't told anyone about it... so far, anyway.

The man I share a bed with is *also* in the dark about all of this. I lied to him on that tour date of ours when he asked how my first shift back felt. I *lied*. I know Marco, Luc, and Rhodes won't say anything to him. Firehouse business gets handled in the firehouse. But that is adding a whole other layer of guilt on top of my other conflicting emotions.

It was our first 'proper' date, one where I was feeling happy and free from anything work-related, and I didn't want bring the mood down. Every other aspect of my life is going swimmingly and I still love my job. I just wish I could do it without the yips.

This is just a battle of wills between the emotional side of my brain and the rational, logical one. A battle within myself.

One I'm determined to win.

I'm sure it'll resolve itself soon, and until then, no one will be any wiser. Because I can't and *won't* have my crew questioning whether they can count on me or not.

My phone beeps with a text message. Bringing up the app, I see it's Adam.

Adam: You okay, A2?

Alex: Yeah. Whyyy?

Adam: Weird twin-sense feeling going on.

Alex: You sure it's not just indigestion?

Adam: Ha fucking ha. Nope. How're things, anyway? You've been a bit quiet.

Probably because I'm messed up in the head and trying to hide it.

Alex: Just busy.

Adam: That's all I get?

Alex: Yep. How's life back home? Missing me yet?

Adam: Everything's fine. It always is, isn't it? Old Man Harris's barn caught fire yesterday. We had Dad holding him back because his precious toy train collection was stored in there.

My chest clenches and out of instinct, my hand lifts to rub my sternum.

Alex: Oh no. Did you manage to save it?

Adam: Of course we did. This isn't amateur hour.

Alex: Good.

Adam: You sure you're okay, A2? I feel like I'm missing something. You know it doesn't matter how far away from me you are, I can still kick your ass somehow.

I laugh at that, a wave of homesickness washing over me.

Alex: Yeah. I think I'm still just settling in, finding my feet.

Adam: And the roommate situation? How's that going?

Oh, shit. Well I guess there's no time like the present, right?

Alex: So about that ...

Adam: Oh, God. What did you do?

Alex: Gio and I are kind of ... dating ...

The three dots in the messaging app move and then stop. Move and then stop. Then they don't start up again.

The phone in my hand starts ringing, with Adam's name flashing on the screen. With a loud sigh, I step off the stair climber and wipe my face dry with my workout towel before leaning a hip against the window and answering the call.

"Hello," I answer with a laugh.

"Don't you *hello* me. You can't drop a bomb like that in a text message and expect us *not* to call you."

Us? *Us*?

"Um ..."

"Hey, Alex," my dad's husky deep voice says.

"Hey, Dad," I squeak, earning a chuckle from both men.

"No need to be worried," he replies.

I take a deep breath. "I'm not worried."

"You sound just like you did when you got caught skipping school with John to go to the lake. Remember that?"

I roll my eyes. One of my father's most annoying traits is his ability to remember anything and everything like it was yesterday. "I do not."

But there's no missing the petulant teenage tone in my words. Now both Dad *and* Adam are laughing.

"I'm not sure the fact that I've met someone requires a conference call," I say.

"Oh, but it does, little sis. Because this is you, the woman who hasn't dated anyone since John and who's just uprooted

her entire life to move two states away from her hometown. And *now* you're telling us you're not only dating, but your boyfriend is your roommate."

I smile because there isn't any concern in Adam's observation, only interest. "You two are nosey nellies."

"I take offense to that," Adam retorts with a snicker.

"I don't. I'm totally nosey, especially when it comes to you, dear daughter. Now, tell me all about this man."

Shaking my head, I look to the ceiling and offer up a silent prayer for the bells to start ringing. Surely, of all the times for a callout, *now* would be damn near perfect.

Unfortunately, I'm not that lucky.

"Why? So you can get your chief of police there to run a check on the man?" I ask.

"Maybe," Dad replies, not even hesitating for a second. Then again, this is the same guy who's been checking in with my Captain to "see how I'm going" on a regular basis. Nothing surprises me when it comes to my father making sure I'm okay.

I let out a resigned sigh down the phone line. "All right then. Gio Rossi, age thirty-three, born and bred in Chicago, Illinois. One of five children. He's fourth in the birth order, if you need to know that. He's also a cop. His two older brothers work here at Firehouse 101, and it was them that suggested I move into Gio's spare room when I first arrived—*before* my first shift, if you may remember. Um ... anything else?"

"Is he a good man?" Dad asks gently.

"Yes." *One of the best.*

"And what does he think about you riding that damn motorcycle of yours?"

"Says he'll never ride it."

"I like him already. What about the whole 'throwing yourself out of airplanes' business?"

“He came and watched me and his brother do it a few weeks ago.”

“He didn’t wanna do it himself?”

“Nope. Not his thing.”

“Two ticks in his favor,” Adam says

“Does he treat you right?” Dad asks at the same time.

“Dad! You’re totally interrogating me right now.” I giggle.

“Well, I can’t very well interrogate the man himself until we come to visit for your birthday, so this is the best I can do.”

“Wait ... what?” I squeak. There’s no other word to describe my tight, high-pitched voice.

“Oh yeah, *surprise*,” Adam says with a laugh, sounding like he’s enjoying this conversation *far* too much. “We’re coming to visit. Can’t have my birthday without my A2, can I?”

I gulp. “I’d love that. But if it’s just to come check on me, I’m okay, I swear.” *Great, now I’m lying to everyone important in my life.*

“You saying you don’t *want* to see us? A2, I’m heartbroken,” Adam says.

“No. *No*. It’s not that.” *It’s that I don’t want them to know that I’m not at the top of my game right now.*

“Then it’s settled. We’ve booked a hotel and flights and a rental car, since we know there’s not enough room on that motorcycle for three of us,” Dad says, making me grin. As much as he ribs me for my bike and high-risk hobbies, he knows they make me happy and are as much a part of me as my family and the job that I love. “And it means we can meet this new man of yours. Size him up and make sure he’s good enough for my girl.”

“Dad ...” My voice cracks a little.

“I miss you, Alex,” he says gruffly. “It’s not the same, not seeing you around the firehouse or at home every day.”

I snort, then swallow down hard on the growing lump in my throat. “Probably because there’s no one there to make you tidy up after yourself and keep you eating right.”

“Hey, I take offense to that,” Adam interjects. “I can be *just* as annoying as you are.”

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Dad murmurs, making me giggle. “Besides, we always spend yours and Adam’s birthday together, and as this is the first one since ...”

Yeah, *now* I get it. It’s my first birthday since Mom passed away.

“I’d love for you to come to visit. *And* to meet Gio. Maybe I can even arrange for you to meet the Captain, since you two are *such* good phone buddies now.”

“He’s a good man. A man with daughters who understands my need to check in.”

“Yes, he is.”

“All right then. Looks like Adam and I are coming to your new neck of the woods in a few weeks.”

The bells ring out throughout the station, and the intercom crackles to life with details of an MVA needing the ambulance and engine assistance.

“Sounds like you’ve gotta go.”

“Yep.” I push off the wall and grab my T-shirt, which is still hanging off the rail of the stair climb machine. I make my way out of the workout room and down the hall toward the garage.

“Let me know your flight details. Talk soon.”

“Make sure that man of yours knows we’re coming. We want him shaking in his cop shoes before we get there.”

I giggle at the thought that anything—other than heights, obviously—could make Gio nervous. “Will do. Bye, Dad. Bye, Adam. Love you both.”

“Love you too. Stay safe.”

“Always,” I say before ending the call and dropping my phone in my pocket.

“C’mon, Iowa. Time to break out the jaws of life,” Luca says, walking past me at pace.

“Bring it on, Luc.”

And thankfully, this is a job I *know* I won’t have any issues with. *That’s one less thing to worry about.*

Gio

Ever since Alex moved in, I've found myself looking forward to coming home from work, especially on the days when I know she'll be there when I walk through the door.

It's not that I expect my girlfriend to wait at home for me. I never have been and never will be one of those men. It's just not my style. But it's like there's a peace that I feel when I step into my house and can sense her presence

God, my brothers would kick my ass if they heard me being sappy like this.

"Honey, I'm home," I say with a grin as I drop my keys and wallet on the hall table and make my way toward the living room to find Alex stretched out on the couch with a book in her hand.

"Hey, *boyfriend*." She goes to sit and I shake my head, loving the way her eyes are unapologetically eating up the sight of me.

I kick off my shoes, drawing raised brows from Alex, her lips twitching up as I come to a stop in front of her and look down with a smirk. "You look quite comfy there."

"I am," she says with a grin, rolling onto her back and holding her arms out. "How about you come and find out just *how* comfy I am?"

"You read my mind, baby." I ease myself down onto the couch, covering her body with mine and bracing myself on my elbows by her head.

“Hey.”

“You already said that.” I press more of my weight down onto her, shift my hands to frame her face.

“Not like this I didn’t.” She opens her mouth to say something but I swallow up her undoubtedly smartass response with a kiss that I’ve been dying to give her for the last day and a half since we saw each other.

I nip at her bottom lip, quickly soothing it afterward with my tongue until she releases a breathy moan and her arms wrap around my shoulders, her nails biting in like they do when she *really* likes what I’m doing. Then I crush my mouth to hers, stroking and licking inside it, my hips thrusting against hers as she loops her feet behind my thighs and brings our bodies even closer together.

But I need to stop this before we end up *not* leaving the couch for the rest of the night. I push myself up and look down at her glazed, hooded eyes and parted lips. “See what happens when I don’t see you for so long?” I ask.

A small, knowing grin appears on her face. “I may have *some* idea. But it’s good to know I was missed.”

I dip my head and steal another soft and gentle kiss. “My bed is just far too big without my own stage-five clinger beside me.”

She gasps, her gaze narrowing. “I am *not* a clinger.”

I scrunch my nose up and pinch my fingers in the air. “A little bit. But it’s adorable, I swear.”

Lifting her nose, she turns away, pulling her arms back and crossing them over her chest. “I’m not sure I like being called adorable.”

“How about beautiful?” I kiss that spot below her ear that makes her quiver. “Sexy.” I drag my lips up to nip the hinge of her jaw. “Irresistible.” I touch my tongue to the corner of her mouth. “Mine ...” I growl in a tone that is far rougher and caveman-like than I’ve ever used before.

Her answering whimper is all the confirmation I need that she *really* likes that idea. Her hands grip my face and hold me in place so she can thrust her tongue between my lips and claim my mouth like a woman possessed.

By the time we tear apart to suck in some much-needed air, I'm all aboard my dick's idea to stand up, throw Alex over my shoulder, and stalk to my bedroom.

"We ... should ... stop," she says, her hungry eyes roaming over my face. "Otherwise we'll never come up for air."

"Mm-hmm."

I grunt disgruntledly. She laughs and gently shoves me away. I shift back and sit at the other end of the couch, pulling her feet into my lap and kneading my thumbs into her arches, earning a muted moan and an appreciative smile.

"How was work?"

"Good. Closed a case of petty thefts that had been frustrating Jeremy and me for a few months now."

"That's ... good. God, you have talented hands," she says, dropping her head back against the arm of the couch and closing her eyes.

I chuckle. "Not sure if I should be offended that you've only just discovered this, or whether it's you telling me I need to up my game in *all* areas of being your boyfriend—not just in the foot rub department."

She knives up, her gaze wide. "No. Oh, God no."

I frown because her reactions are usually playful—the way my comment was intended—not so ... literal.

"Hey, baby. It's okay." I let go of her feet and cup her shoulders. "Is everything okay? You just seem a bit tightly wound."

Her expression morphs from worried to relaxed in the blink of an eye. "Yeah. I'm good. You're good at that though. You're always good."

I snicker and wrap my arms around her, urging her to climb into my lap and straddle me, a hint she takes more than willingly. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Just tired. It was a busy shift. You know how it is.”

“I get that. Means we should have a quiet night. I was thinking we could go out to a Thai restaurant I like, but would you rather stay home instead? I can cook us dinner and you can just keep reading and take it easy.”

She frowns. “But I’m the one who’s been home all day. I should be the one cooking for *you*.” I fail to hide my wry smirk and she narrows her eyes. “Wait ... you’re offering because you don’t want me to mess up the kitchen, do you?”

“Guilty as charged.”

Burying her face in my neck, she giggles and touches her lips to my throat. “And here I was, thinking that you dumping your shoes over there was a sign that you were relaxing your clean-freak rules a bit.”

“Yeah ... I’ve been trying *not* to think about how I’d just left them lying there, messing up the floor.”

She smiles against my skin. “And you say *I’m* adorable.”

“You are.” I rub my hands up and down her back, discovering that she’s not wearing anything under her T-shirt. “Hmm. I’m thinking *someone* was planning on seducing me when I came home.”

Alex runs her tongue up my neck before sucking my earlobe between her lips. “Damn. You figured me out. Why else would I not wear a bra when I’m at home, not working, and waiting for my boyfriend to finish work? Whatever is a girl to do when she’s home all alone ...?”

Well, okay. She has a point there.

I snort and flex my arms around her. “Just say yes so that it makes me feel like yes, my fantasy of you lying on the couch, wet and wanting and waiting for me is real?”

She slowly straightens, her teeth digging into her lip as she drags her eyes from my mouth back to lock with mine. “Well,

that part is always going to be true. It *has* been a day and a half, after all ...”

Now I *know* she’s not fucking with me. I plant my feet and stand, gripping her ass and taking her with me.

“I’m guessing our dinner plans are being delayed,” she says.

“You bet your ass they are,” I say, squeezing the round globes that fill my hands as I do. “Afternoon delight, *then* I’ll cook you dinner. Because if me and my talented hands, mouth, and *other* parts don’t have you unable to move by the time I’m finished, you’ll be needing sustenance for round two.”

“Promises, promises, roomie.”

“Let’s see if I can follow through on them, baby.” Then there’s no more talking for a good long while.

And I leave Alex sated, limp, and unable to move in my bed while I get up and order dinner.

AFTER THE THAI TAKEOUT, we head to the couch to watch the Cubs play the Giants. Alex’s head is in my lap, and I’m fanning my fingers through her soft locks. It’s my addiction, mainly because she makes this cute little murmur in her throat when I do it.

When the commercial break comes on, she turns her head from the game and looks up at me.

“So ... I talked to my dad and Adam today.”

“Oh, yeah? And how are they doing?”

“Good. I was texting Adam, and he asked how my roommate was.”

My lips twitch. “Mm-hmm.”

“Yeah.” She smiles up at me. “And when I said we were kinda, you know, *dating*, he—”

“Hold on. Kinda dating?”

“Maybe.”

“I don’t think there’s anything kinda or *maybe* about our relationship, baby. I definitely wasn’t feeling *any* uncertainty when I was buried deep in your—”

Alex’s hand shoots up and slaps over my mouth as she rolls her eyes at me, making me grin. “Okay. I said we were dating. *That* warranted a family conference call.”

I chuckle, grabbing her palm and kissing it before lacing my fingers in hers and lowering it back down to rest on her stomach. “And how did *that* go?”

“They were interrogating me.”

“Sounds like something my sisters would do.”

“Right? So I gave him the briefest, most basic Gio biography.” She hesitates, her muscles tensing, like she’s about to lay some bad news on me. Like maybe she has to go back home and move out. I fucking hope not, considering I more than like having her around—in my house, my bed, *and* my life.

“You can’t leave,” I blurt, my chest tightening. “And if you *do*, I’m applying for sole custody of Fred. Just so you know. He needs a stable environment and a responsible plant parent, and this is the only home he’s ever known. I won’t play a part in uprooting his life.” Then I wince and look over at Fred, who of course is just sitting there, living his best plant life in a big pot and perfectly hydrated soil. “Sorry, Freddy. I didn’t mean to say a bad word.”

Alex sits up and stares at me, her expression morphing into one of amused confusion. “Hold up, because there’s a *lot* to unpack from that statement.”

I quirk a brow. “Like what? I thought I communicated quite clearly.”

“Okay, well firstly”—she holds one finger in the air—“I’m not going anywhere. Not by choice, so if *you* want a new roommate, too bad. Because I ain’t leaving.”

My shoulders slump with relief. I didn't even realize I was wound so tight.

“Secondly, *if* I ever move out, there *will* be a plant custody agreement because Fred is mine as much as he is yours, and ___”

I push her onto her back and launch myself at her, covering her body with mine.

“Continue ...” I say with a smirk, loving the way her pupils are blown and her breathing quickens. My girl is so responsive, it's like a damn ego boost every time I touch her.

“How can I get my point across when you're lying on top of me, making *your* point obvious?”

“Try hard, baby,” I murmur, dipping my chin and kissing her soft and slow until she's clawing at my back. Then I push up and return to my seat, holding out my arms and tugging hers up so we're back in our original positions.

“You play dirty, roomie.”

“Only with you,” I retort, shooting her a wicked grin, earning the same in return.

“*Anyway*. Where was I?” she says, failing to regain her sexy sass from before I kissed her quiet.

“I think it was thirdly, baby.”

Her eyes warm just as I knew they would. “Thirdly,” she says, leaning into me and resting her chin on my shoulder, “Dad and Adam told me they're coming to visit in a few weeks for my birthday and to see me.”

Now I feel like a bit of a dick.

“That's awesome. It's also good to know I get a few weeks' notice, 'cause I *totally* would've not known that otherwise.”

“Well, then. I guess you've got no excuses now.”

“Nope.”

“Do you ... I mean, would you *want* to meet them? No pressure or anything. I know we’re only new and all.”

“Of course I want to meet your dad and brother. How else will I get ammunition to use against you for whenever we have our first argument?”

“Is that how it is?”

“Yep.” I can’t help but laugh at her narrowed glare—her twitching lips spoil the effect. I reach out, cup her jaw, and urge her closer. She kneels up so she’s looking down at me. “You want me to meet your family?”

“I do. They won’t be any trouble. They’re getting a rental car and have booked a hotel.”

“They’re family, Alex. They’d never be trouble—no more than you are anyway.”

She feigns offense.

“I’ll call in some favors and switch my shifts. You do the same if need be, and we’ll make a whole thing of it.”

“Are you sure?”

I chuckle. “Yes. And if that’s the same weekend I’m thinking, it’s around about when we should hold the next firehouse BBQ. It was supposed to be at Marco and Renee’s, but I’m thinking we shift it to my parents’, combine it with a birthday party for you, and show your dad and brother that you’re in real good hands.”

Tears glisten in her eyes. “You’d do all that?”

“Of course. You’re my girl, aren’t you?”

“I really wanna kiss you right now.”

“Newsflash, baby. I’m never gonna stop you from kissing me—or, you know, going down on me to show your appreciation.”

She barks out a laugh, throwing her head back with it. “I *am* suddenly feeling rather tired. I think you need to take me to bed.”

Then there's no more talking because for the second time tonight, I'm leading my girlfriend to the bedroom.

And three, then four times later, she screams out my name.

All in all, it's a good—not so quiet after all—night at home.

Alex

It's another shift, and we're pulling up to another structure fire. This time, it's a two-alarm fully involved two-story residential property, and our main focus is to protect the neighboring houses since the building is beyond saving, as proven by the flames licking up through the roof into the air and the black smoke billowing around it.

"Iowa, you and Rhodes mask up and get around into the backyard, size up the perimeter, and make sure there's no risk from the rear. Scotty and Luc, you guys go see the IC and find out if he wants our aerial truck nozzles in operation. Zach and I will get on the hand lines and try to get in through the first-floor windows. Any questions?" Marco asks, briefing everyone.

"No, Lieutenant," we answer before we're all on the move.

Rhodes and I mask up and pull our helmets down, and despite my swirling emotions and the anxiety threatening to pull me under, I fight through the fear that's like a fist gripping my throat and follow Rhodes's lead as we move to the far right-side boundary and follow the fence line down alongside the house. My gaze constantly searches ahead and above for falling debris and embers.

Rhodes holds out his fist over his shoulder, signaling we're okay to move forward, but with every step farther we take, the invisible fingers on my neck squeeze just that little bit tighter, my heart pounding harder against my chest, my senses

jumping into hyperdrive as everything around us seems amplified.

The ladder rattles as it's lifted in the air from our truck. The whooshing water is directed at the burning house. The building creaks and groans under pressure, at risk of collapsing under the stress of heat and water at any moment.

My vision narrows. Imaginary walls close in on me. The heat radiating off the blazing structure contributes my claustrophobia.

We pass the house and reach the backyard just as Rhodes turns back to look at me. "You all good, Iowa?"

"Yes, Lieutenant." Then I start my search, looking for any signs that the fire has jumped into the trees lining the yard or that the rear three-floor apartment building is at risk.

"101, report in. How's it looking?" Marco asks over the radio.

"Copy. Send a unit to the street behind, maybe an aerial unit to soak the roof of the building behind the fire. It's not too close but definitely close enough to be at high risk of a jump," Rhodes relays.

"On it," Marco replies. "Come back and help with the ladders and hand lines."

"Copy that. On our way."

But as Rhodes and I approach the side of the house again, embers rain down on us and those proverbial walls close in on me again. My breathing suddenly becomes hard to regulate. My vision blurs. I'm shaking like a leaf in a hurricane. It's a struggle just to put one foot in front of the other, and I've never been more grateful for Rhodes being ahead of me. He becomes my focal point, my anchor holding me to reality and making sure I don't lose my way.

I suck in deep breaths, hoping that I'll relax and push down this growing panic that's eating away at me. It's like I'm suffocating and aware of it happening but unable to stop it. And in this moment, nothing I try to calm myself down is working.

When we're almost past the building, a loud crash ricochets through the air, the sound as loud as a bomb going off. I jerk just as the roof gives an almighty crack before collapsing. Smoke and sparks shoot around us. A bang on my head makes me cry out in shock and surprise as Rhodes and I launch into a sprint to the road.

When we're back in the staging zone and far away from danger, it's like my muscles freeze and I can't move. All of a sudden, my equipment feels like it weighs a ton, and I can't strip it off fast enough. I stand there, bending at the waist, my hands on my thighs, sucking in deep breaths. I try to focus on what I can see, touch, hear, smell, and taste.

What I can see: the road, the blue sky in the distance, fire trucks, firefighters, a blurry Rhodes standing in front of me, a frown on his face.

What I can touch: my toes flexing in my boots, my hands rubbing against my turnout pants, my fingers lifting up to scrub over my face.

What I can hear: Rhodes's voice is like a jumbled hum, incoherent and unclear. The sirens, the whoosh of the water coming out of the hoses, the snap, crackle, and pop of the flames as fire wins the war against what was once a family home.

What I can smell: smoke, clinging to me like another layer of skin.

And taste: every breath I suck in is laced with the bitter taste of burning wood, smoldering metal, and loss.

So much loss.

My muscles start to twitch again, my trembling turning to shakes.

"Alex? Alex, are you okay?" Rhodes's voice slowly becomes clearer, crisper, snapping me out of my panic-fueled haze.

"Alex, c'mon. Deep breaths," he says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leading me around the back of the

truck to where there's clearer air. We're farther away from the visual of the structure that's now lost to the fire.

This can't be happening to me. Not now. Not again. And definitely not in front of one of my lieutenants.

"Rhodes. Copy?"

"Yeah, Rossi. Copy."

"Need your help up on the aerial."

"Copy that. Iowa is out." He sits me on the step of the truck by the back door and bends down, bringing his eyes in line with mine. "She'll stay with the truck. I'm coming now."

"She okay?"

Rhodes searches my face, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "She will be. Count her out of this one though. Some debris came down on us so I want to get her checked out in case something hit her. She's done for the night."

"Roger that. Out."

"Did you get hit on the head?" Rhodes asks. I open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out. His brows narrow, concern written all over his face. "Come see me when we're back at the firehouse. But until then, go get checked out by Cohen and Corey. That's an order."

I nod, knowing full well that I have no intention of telling my lieutenant that I'm consumed by a fear of fire that I've never once, not in all my years of firefighting, experienced before.

He's talking into the radio on his chest as he walks away to rejoin the fight, his voice clear and commanding as he calls the EMTs over to come and check me out for possible smoke inhalation.

Panic fills me because it's not any physical injuries I may have suffered that worries me, it's the emotional, psychological trauma I can't seem to move past.

Because if that was to come out, it would surely be career suicide. That could get me sent back to Iowa. And that is the

very *last* thing I want to happen.

I'm making a life here. I have a job I love—despite my current ... struggles—and I have Gio and Fred. I have no plans to leave Firehouse 101 or Chicago, for that matter.

This is just a little wobble. I need to get my firefighter wits about me again and I'll be right as rain.

Moments later, Cohen and Corey are walking up to me, crouching down before they start to check my vitals.

"I'm okay, guys. Seriously," I mutter.

"Rhodes wanted you checked out, Iowa. That's what we're going to do. Lieutenant's orders. So, do you want to tell us what happened?" Cohen asks, looking me over.

"Must've just sucked in some smoke or something. I dunno. I feel fine." *Now that I'm not near a burning house that could fall down on me, anyway.*

"Did you hit your head or anything? Did anything fall on you?" Corey asks.

"Maybe. I don't know. But I've got a pretty hard head, and I had my helmet on."

Cohen nods, but his expression is all business. "You okay to walk? I'd like to take you over to the bus and check you out there. Won't take long, but your heart rate is up and you're looking pale. I'd rather be thorough and make sure we don't miss something.

I shrug and push to my feet. "Let's go. The sooner you clear me, the sooner I can get back to help the crew."

"Ain't gonna happen. Rhodes sounded pretty clear about that."

I scrub my hands over my face with a muttered, "Dammit."

"C'mon, Iowa. Come hang out with us cool kids in the bus. You'll find we're a hell of a lot more fun than the hose jockeys," Corey says with a chuckle.

“I should have a smartass comeback to that, considering I’m one of those ‘hose jockeys,’” I retort.

Corey hooks an arm around my waist, and together, we walk behind Cohen, who’s left carrying the paramedic bag back to the ambulance.

“I promise you, we’ll sort you out and you’ll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed by the time your shift ends,” Corey says.

“Oh alright then,” I say with an exaggerated sigh. I feel better already. I might be a little rattled and uneasy, but I know I’m in good hands, and maybe I just need a few days off work to get my head back in order.

Dad and Adam arrive next weekend too. Seeing them will fill my cup back up as well.

I just have to remember this is just a little roadblock, like a detour on the long, sweeping highway of my career. All I need to do is keep doing my exercises and I’ll be back on my well-traveled, could-ride-it-with-my-eyes-closed path soon enough.

Well, I can only hope I will, anyway.

Because something tells me I’ve started to raise suspicions, and if I haven’t before this fire, I will soon.

That’s not something I want to happen.

WHEN WE GET BACK to the firehouse, there’s only an hour to go on my shift. I got the all-clear from Cohen and Corey, and now I need to fill out an incident report so there’s a documented record of what happened to me since it required medical involvement.

I’m sitting at the dining table, just concentrating on getting this paperwork done when Rhodes takes a seat kitty corner to me, tapping his knuckles on the wood. “How you feeling, Iowa?”

I look up and smile. “I’m good. Just got a bit rattled. You know how it is.”

He nods, his concerned expression not wavering despite my cheerfulness. “I *do* know how it is. And I know how sometimes, being rattled and not dealing with it can turn into a snowball. It becomes an issue and keeps getting bigger and bigger until you snap, and then it *really* becomes a problem. You know what I’m saying?”

“Yeah. But that’s not what happened, Lieutenant. You were there. I thought something landed on me and I ran. Got out of breath.” I shoot him a grin. “Maybe I need to hit the gym a bit more. Build up my stamina and upgrade from small-town Iowa fitness level to big-city Chicago standards.”

He quirks a brow. “Maybe. But just know that I’m always here if you need to talk about anything. Marco too. You’ve got our numbers; you can call or text us any time, off-shift if you like, away from the firehouse. If you need to unload whatever is on your mind, we’re here. We’ve all been there, and it’s better to deal with it now before it turns into a—”

“Snowball. Got it.” I look him dead in the eye and wait while he studies me. I see the skepticism in his gaze too. It’s like he knows I’m not going to be pouring my heart out to my Lieutenant. I’m still making my mark here, trying to prove myself. The last thing I want to do—that I’m going to do—is make problems for myself where there aren’t any. Not big ones I can’t handle solo, anyway.

“I promise, Rhodes. I’m good. A few days off and I’ll be back to my cocky, confident self, minus the freak-out over embers raining down on us and the roof threatening to fall on our heads.”

“Okay.” He reaches out and cups my shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze before standing and moving toward the kitchen just as Scotty, Luca, Zach, and the rest of the crew come sit down around me. Suddenly I feel like I’m being thrown *back* into the fire—just a metaphorical one this time.

“Hey, Iowa. Get a bit close to the fire back there?” Scotty asks, nudging my elbow.

“Leave it alone, Scotty,” I snap, jerking my chair back and standing up, swiping the paperwork from the table. I storm out of the room, ignoring the murmuring behind my back.

“Chicks, man,” Scotty jokes. “Must be her time of the month. I was only *joking*, Iowa.”

My step falters for barely a second before I keep going. Normally, I’d have some quick-witted retort to throw back at him, but today, I’m just tapped out.

Then there’s what sounds like a whack of hand on skin and an, “Ow, man. What the fuck?” from Scotty.

“Not another word, Scotty. Or you’ll find your ass doing an intensive sexual harassment and workplace relations course *without* pay,” Marco announces.

Luc gets the last word in. “Jeez, Scotty. No wonder Hayley went for the physio.”

And for the first time in a few hours, I smile, and this time it’s genuine, because the guys here have my back, and that just makes me *more* determined to get past this wobble so that I can be guaranteed to have theirs when they need me to.

Because that’s my job, and until I can rely on myself, then how can I expect them to rely on me?

Gio

I adjust my grip on the handle on the baseball bat, shifting my feet a little farther forward so I'm far enough back from the plate but well within slugging distance.

"C'mon, G. What are you waiting for? Christmas?" Luc taunts me at my back.

"Just get the damn machine to pitch the ball already, brother."

"*Now* he's getting cranky. If I didn't like Iowa, I'd make a joke about someone needing to get—"

The ball machine whirs to life and throws a fastball at me, but my timing's off, and it's a clear strike.

"Damn!" Rhodes says with a chuckle.

"That almost took your head off," Cohen says. "Who turned the machine up?"

I glance over my shoulder and glare. "Yeah, Luc. Who turned it up?"

To his credit, he holds his hands up in the air in fake innocence. "Would I do that to you?"

"Fuck yeah, you would. You owe me a damn beer if I get hit."

His lips kick up into a devilish smirk. "Better turn around then."

Thankful for the warning, I do just in time to swing. I at least get bat to ball this time but because of my lack of prep, it's nothing to write home about.

“Go again, Luc. See if you catch me by surprise *this* time.”

“Ooh, the cop is talking big tonight. Okay, then, G. Let's see how you handle *this*.”

Watching the machine, I will it to throw me something good, and it doesn't disappoint. It's a breaking ball traveling left to right before I swing the bat and whack it out of the video-generated park on the screen in front of me.

“Damn, G. We should challenge you more in future.”

Walking back out of the cage's gate, I grin at the guys while flicking the brim of my hat and spinning it backward on my head. “Just giving you all fair warning for the baseball game. Don't count out the precinct just because you *think* you've got a secret weapon.”

“Oh, but we do. Have you *seen* your girlfriend hit? God, if I didn't work with her and you weren't already all over that, I might consider settling down.”

A growl rumbles in my throat, which just makes everyone laugh.

“Calm, brother. I'm just messing with you,” Luc says.

Marco and Rhodes's son, Jake, are next up. Jake goes to the control panel while Marco gears up and steps into the cage.

“How're things? Dee and the boys keeping you on your toes?” I ask Rhodes as I take a seat and grab my beer.

He chuckles, a grin transforming his face. “Yep. But she keeps all the men in her life well fed to keep us happy.”

Rhodes lives with his partner, Dee, her son, Harvey, and the almost-adult Jake. She's a celebrity chef with her own restaurant, Delish, and her food is always out of this world. It's on par with my mother's cooking, and for a mama's boy like me, that's saying something.

“How’s work going anyway?” Rhodes asks.

“Good. Busy, but good. You know how it is—it’s the same old thing every shift, just in varying degrees.”

“I hear ya. And Alex—things going well? Never picked you for the guy who’d hook up with your roommate, huh?”

“It’s a bit more than that.”

“No doubt it would be. I can see how you two would balance each other out.”

I snort. “You mean, her crazy to my laid-back and mellow?”

“Something like that, yeah. How has she been lately?” he asks curiously.

I study him, finding that his body language is relaxed like he’s just shooting the shit with me. *Okay then. Perhaps it’s just an innocent question?*

“Good. Things are good.”

He nods and lifts his beer to his lips, watching as Jake and Marco switch places. “You better not knock my kid’s head off, Mar.”

“Who, me? Would I do that? I’m the responsible Rossi, remember?”

I bark out a laugh. “Responsible is a very subjective term.”

“Ha! Says the dude who’s dating his roomie,” Marco says over his shoulder, joining the conversation.

I quirk a brow. “And I’ve never been happier. *You* dated your realtor. Are you really giving me shit about sticking close to home?”

“And now she’s got my ring on her finger, and you’re all going to be dressing up in monkey suits to stand by my side at our wedding. So who’s laughing now?”

“Us, when we see you tugging at the tie around your neck,” Luca says with a laugh. “Remember when you went to

prom? Mama made you wear a bow tie, and you could barely breathe.”

Marco laughs while flipping me the bird. “Yeah. Little does she know I ripped that fucker off as soon as we were in the limo.”

“Can’t do that on your wedding day. You’ve gotta wait for your *wife* to strip it off you later that night,” Rhodes says, wagging his brows.

“Two things.” Jake spins around, narrowing his eyes at the four of us. “Eww. I don’t want to hear about Uncle Marco and his wedding night—*anything* about it. And two, are you ever gonna pitch me a ball or—”

“Watch out then,” Marco says, chuckling under his breath as he sends a filthy slider flying out of the machine straight into the strike zone. Jake jumps out of the way to stop from getting hit.

“Hey! Don’t hit the kid,” Rhodes calls out.

“Not a kid,” Jake grumbles, but he does it with a smile.

Rhodes turns back to me. “So, I hear we’re meeting Iowa’s father and brother on Saturday. You nervous? Meeting the family is a big deal.”

I shrug. “She’s met all you guys and hasn’t run back to the farm yet. What makes you think meeting her dad and Adam would rattle me?”

“Because you’ve never gotten as far as meeting the parents before?” Marco adds as he and Jake take a break and join us.

“I like her. She likes me. Things are going well—*really* well. I want to meet them. And it’s her first birthday for all of them without her mom around. I’m glad they’re coming to visit.” I take a swig of my drink and rest it on my leg.

“Hmm,” Rhodes says, and I catch him and Marco exchanging a quizzical look. Marco nods, seeming to agree with whatever those two are silently communicating.

“Are you going to share with the group?” I switch my gaze between the two of them. “Or are you just going to hum and

grunt and communicate like cavemen?”

“Jake, you’re coming with me to go order some food,” Marco says, playfully tapping the teen’s helmet.

Jake scoffs. “Ha! You think you’re clever, but I can see through you. Okay, okay. Let’s go so the adults can talk about something they don’t want this *love guru’s* advice about.”

Love guru, *Jesus*.

I’ll give the kid props—he does give some worthwhile advice when it comes to dating and women. He’s definitely wise beyond his years. But I’m getting the impression that whatever Rhodes wants to say is nothing his son needs to know about.

When they’re gone and it’s just Luc, Rhodes, and myself left in our booth, I turn to my brother. “Is this about you and London?”

Rhodes’s eyes jump wide as his head snaps my brother’s way. “Say what now? The Cap’s *daughter*? Luca, no...”

Luca gawks at me. “There *is* no me and London.”

“Care to tell me what the hell is going on with you two then? Because I didn’t realize you were close enough for her to just tag along skydiving with us.”

“Whoa. You’re seeing London, Luc? Man, you’ve got a death wish. Cap will not be—”

“We’re only friends. I swear. Cross my heart. She’s just a bit lost at the moment. You know, finishing college, coming home, living with her dad again, etcetera. So when I mentioned Alex and I were going for a jump, she asked if she could come along.”

“And what about the Captain, Luc? It’s an unspoken rule that you do *not* mess with daughters or sisters,” Rhodes says.

“Or wives,” Luc says with a smirk.

Rhodes and I both look at each other and shudder. “Then again, Cohen broke the sister rule with Skye, didn’t he?” Rhodes replies.

“Yeah, but he manned up—eventually—and faced us all down to tell us himself,” Luc says.

I still remember the look on Cohen’s face that day, when he turned up at the station with his brothers and waited for Skye to arrive, then proceeded to confess he was in love with our baby sister. He definitely earned a lot of cred with me for doing that.

“So, what *is* going on with London then?” I press.

“She’s twenty-five. She doesn’t need her daddy’s permission to hang out with friends.”

“Probably needs her Daddy’s permission to hang out with firefighters under his command though,” I mutter, earning a grunt of agreement from Rhodes. “As long as that’s all it is, Luc. There are a lot of single, available, and *not* off-limits women in this city. All of them come with a hell of a lot less trouble for *both* of you, yeah?”

“Yes, *Dad*. But feel free to drop the lecture. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t go there. You have my word and so does the Captain. And, in the name of complete transparency, she *did* ask me out a few months ago and I let her down gently.”

“Good, Luc. That’s good,” I reply. “Just looking out for you.”

“We’re friends though. She’s a great girl, and maybe if she was someone else’s daughter I’d take my shot. But not with Lonnie. She’s my best friend who just happens to be a girl.” He looks like he wants to say something else but doesn’t.

Staring into his eyes, I see that he’s one hundred percent sincere. If there’s one thing my brother cannot do, it’s lie to me. Having a highly attuned and well-trained bullshit meter in my arsenal helps with that too. “A girl you can’t sleep with—got it. Maybe that’s exactly what you need in your life—an unobtainable woman who’ll also call you on your shit,” I say with a smirk.

Rhodes clears his throat. “Well, now that *that* is all cleared up, I wanted to talk to you about something, G”

My brows jump up. “What’s up?”

He shares a look with Luc, and there’s no way I’m letting another silent convo slide right by me. “C’mon, you two. Spill it.”

“I’ll preface this by saying this conversation is completely off the record and is me talking to you as one of your closest friends—yours *and* Alex’s.”

“Rhodes, spit it out. You’re starting to worry me.”

“Do you and Alex talk about work?” Rhodes asks curiously.

I tilt my head his way. “Of course. She just tells me how much of a pain in the ass Luc is.”

Luc snorts. “Ha fucking ha.”

“Nothing about the callouts we have or anything that happens on them?”

Leaning forward, I rest my arms on my legs and give him my full attention. “No. Why? Did something happen?”

“Remember that bad call she had with Luc where she almost broke rank and ignored the evacuation order?”

“Yeah ... and no remains were found, so she simply misheard. Has something *else* happened since then?” I say, frowning.

Rhodes shakes his head and looks at Luc. “G, Alex has not been inside a burning *anything* since that call.”

My entire body jolts, my brows bunching tightly. “How’s that possible? She hasn’t missed a single shift and that was ... what? Four weeks ago?”

“Exactly.”

My gaze jumps back to Rhodes. “How can she be working full duties and *not* go into the fire ground?”

“She’s been offering to help operations outside. Kinda flew under the radar for a while until last week. Her and I went to size up the back of a property with an intensive and well-

underway house fire, and I could sense she was uneasy as we made our way into the yard. On the way back, it's like she was struggling to breathe, and then debris came down on us and she was white as a ghost, G."

Shit. *Shit.*

"Have you asked her about it?" I ask.

"I did and she brushed it off, said we were just getting too close to the fire and she got winded. But G, it's *more* than that, and we know that because we've all been there at one time or another. And the thing with Alex is—"

"She's too proud and determined to prove herself to admit that she's rattled and might need some time, help, or both?" I offer up. Both men nod. "So, what do you suggest I do?"

"Well, first things first: Do *not* go in all guns blazing and confront her about it. That's not going to help anyone," Luc replies.

"Wasn't my first thought, but thanks for that, Luc."

"It's not like you haven't pulled a firearm on her before. Just saying," he replies helpfully.

"Not the time, Luc," I rumble.

Luc reaches out and claps my shoulder. "I know, G. I'm just trying to get you to relax a bit so you can think this through clearly."

Rhodes looks over his shoulder. My eyes follow him, and I see Jake and Marco heading back our way.

"I'll talk to her. Make her see that she's not alone in this. At the very least, she's got me and her crew."

"Plus your parents, Skye, Val, Dee, and Renee. She needs to realize that she's been adopted into a big crazy family that cares about her," Rhodes continues. "But we need to stop this before something happens that *cannot* be managed or swept under the rug. The last thing we want is for her or anyone else to get hurt or doubt themselves on-scene in a situation where there is no room for it. You get me?"

I nod, leaning back, my brain working overtime as I think about all the times I've asked her about work and how not once was there any sign that things were not going well for her at the firehouse.

Jake and Marco reach us, Marco carrying a bucket of Coronas and Jake dumping enough pizza and fries on the table to feed us all twice over. "Eat up, guys. Then I'm gonna kick every one of your asses with fastballs. I'm manning the control panel, and whoever gets the most hits out of ten pitches each will get bragging rights over me for life. How's *that*?"

Of course, Jake's challenge sets off a heckling match amongst everyone, which is exactly what I need to take my mind off things I cannot deal with and/or fix right now. Because there's a niggling thought gnawing away at me that maybe Alex hasn't told me about this because she a) doesn't want to, or b) isn't at the same place as I am when it comes to our relationship. Both of those thoughts need time and consideration.

So now, I'm going to distract myself with winning me and my girl a free dinner. Then I'll watch and observe my girl a little more closely over the next few days. If there's any truth to what Rhodes and Luc are saying—and obviously, Marco is involved too—then I'll see it. If my girl needs to talk it out or get some help for whatever is troubling her, I'll do whatever it takes.

Alex loves her job, so if she's trying to stay strong in front of her crew *and* me, it means that she's trying to work through it herself.

We need to get past her family visiting and her birthday this weekend. I'm not going to ruin that for anything. After that, though, all bets are off. I care too much about my girl to let her struggle through this alone.

Alex

Is chore-play a thing? I mean, domestic labor has never really done it for me before, but as I sit here at the kitchen island, watching Gio clean the counters to within an inch of their lives, I can't tear my eyes off him.

That adorable, anal-retentive man of mine is going to meet my dad and brother today, and he's cleaning the kitchen—that's after spending most of his downtime this week doing the same to the rest of the house, all so it'll be perfect for my family.

Not only has it made me realize I've fallen hard for Gio, but this cleaning malarkey has made me realize that this whole scene is kind of doing it for me ... in a *big* way.

Is it the way the sleeves of his T-shirt cling to his biceps, or the tense and release of his more-than-abundant shoulder muscles as he wipes the counter back and forth? Or could it be his tight ass when he bends over to put the dishes away, wearing those grey sweats he knows I like?

Whatever this sorcery is, I'm totally buying it. Sign me up—I'm a fan for life if it means I don't have to do chores *and* I get to jump the cleaner and thank him in a multitude of pleasurable ways afterward.

It's a win-win. Gio gets his sterile kitchen, I get free live porn to prime me for a pre-lunch snack—*him*.

Unfortunately, we don't really have time to do anything about my lust today. Well, not the way *I* want to work it out of

my system. That's not to say I can't show him any appreciation though.

I slide off my seat and slowly move toward my clean-freak plant daddy. Reaching out, I glide my hands over his hips and around to rest on his stomach, rubbing them over his Chicago PD T-shirt.

"What are you doing, baby?" His low, husky voice just adds to my already turned-on state as he drops the cloth into the sink and turns in my arms. One look at my face and his eyes drop low, his gaze flashing with heat.

"Baby," he rumbles, his hands moving around to my back and stroking down to my ass. "We don't have time to deal with that look you're giving me."

I press my hips firmly against his and quirk a brow. "Oh, *we* don't, but *I* do." Then, with my gaze locked with his, I slowly drop my knees down onto the tiles, my fingers wrapping around his hard length through those God's-gift-to-women sweats.

"That's a nice fucking view, baby," he groans, pushing firmly into my grip, his hand raking through my hair to rest on the back of my head.

I wink up at him. "And it's about to get a hell of a lot better."

Reaching out, I delve my fingers under the waistband at his hips and slowly pull it down, not breaking eye contact until his pants are hanging mid-thigh. Licking my lips, I run my hands in until I'm gripping his shaft at the base, loving the way his eyes flutter closed and his breath hitches when I stroke him to the tip and back again.

Then I focus on the job at hand, sticking out my tongue and dipping my mouth to run the point around his crown, earning a low growl that I feel right down between my legs.

Gio's fingers flex against my scalp as I wrap my lips around him and take him deep, swallowing before lifting my head and doing it again and again, bobbing up and down, pursing my lips to add more friction as I slide his hard length

in and out, resisting the overwhelming urge to delve my fingers between my legs to ease the growing ache.

“Fuck, baby. No better view than you. Your mouth on me, your hands. Your *everything*.” The rasp in his voice turns me on even more.

“So beautiful,” he groans before throwing his head back and growling when his hard length hits the back of my mouth again. I rake my nails gently across the sensitive skin of his inner thigh, making his muscles tense and shake, and I know he’s getting close. *Time to turn this party into a blowout—literally.*

I hum against his cock, the vibrations coursing through both of us, making me squirm and getting me so close to getting off without either one of us touching me. I’m on such a knife’s edge, I swear that even a small amount of friction would have me screaming out.

Reaching one hand around to grip his butt and moving the other to roll over his balls, I push him deeper and faster into my mouth. His grunts and groans get louder and more out of control until his thrusts start to stutter, and I lift my gaze to watch him watching me, making me moan against the head of his cock.

“Fuck, baby. I’m there. Jesus. That mouth,” he grinds out as he thrusts twice more, then stops, shouting out as he climaxes into my mouth.

After swallowing him down—because who would ever waste any part of Gio Rossi?—I let him fall from my mouth and lean back on my calves, sucking in desperate breaths and willing my heart and my libido to settle.

Gio hooks his arms under mine, lifting me to my feet before gripping my face and crushing his lips to mine, licking and tasting and almost sending me right up into the stratosphere.

“Your turn,” he rasps, dragging his lips to my neck and moving to undo my jeans.

I break our kiss and slowly step back, shaking my head with a grin. “Nuh-uh, roomie. We don’t have time.” I lean in and touch my mouth to his jaw. “And we both know how much I *love* it when you take your time with me.”

“Fuuuck. You’re gonna have me ready to go again if you keep talking like that.”

I straighten and shoot him a smirk. “But it must be said, I seem to *really* get off on watching you do housework in grey sweatpants. Maybe you should use that to your advantage sometime.”

Then I’m skipping off down the hall toward my bedroom to get ready for Dad and Adam to arrive so we can all go out to dinner leaving Gio standing in the kitchen with his pants around his knees.

Best. Morning. Ever.

“WELL,” I hear my dad say as soon as Gio opens the door. “Good to know you don’t pull a gun on *everyone* who comes knocking.”

Gio insisted that he be the one to greet Dad and Adam when they arrived. Now, I’m thinking that *might* not have been a good idea.

A startled giggle escapes me,

“Now that’s a laugh I’d know in a crowded room,” Dad says, and I step out to stand next to my boyfriend, grinning at my family.

Tears sting my eyes, and before I know it, Dad’s reaching out and pulling me in for a big bear hug right there on the front steps. As much as Gio, this house, and the firehouse crew are all home to me now, my dad’s arms are definitely something I hadn’t realized I’d missed.

“C’mon, chief. Let me get some A2 love too,” Adam teases, playfully stealing me from our father and hugging me

tightly. “Hey, sis.”

“Hey, big bro.”

When I step back, and Gio wraps his arms around my waist in a claiming gesture that *no one* misses, I realize we should really get this first meeting underway.

“Do you want to come in?” I ask.

“Well, I didn’t come all this way to stand on the street and freeze my balls off, sweetheart.”

An unexpected snort of laughter sounds from beside me. I glance up and meet Gio’s crinkled eyes, all his nerves seemingly gone.

Moving back, I swing my arm out and usher Dad and Adam inside, starting the quickest house tour in history.

“Nice to see you’re keeping the house clean, kiddo,” Dad says, looking impressed as he peers into the kitchen.

Gio, earning a definite thank you from me later, doesn’t dispute him, but I do. “Yeah, Dad. That’s all my roomie here. Moving states has done nothing to help my housekeeping skills.”

He chuckles, his whole body shaking with it as he looks over to where Gio and Adam are chatting in the living room. If I’m not mistaken, there’s a look of surprised pride in his gaze. “Well, then. He’s not earning any black marks against his name so far. But the night is still young,” he adds with a wink.

“Be *nice*, Dad. I really like him.” I drop my voice so that it’s for our ears only.

“Why are we whispering?”

“Because I don’t want to make Gio any more nervous.”

Dad scoffs and looks over my shoulder to my boyfriend. “He sure doesn’t look nervous.”

“He cleaned this house from top to bottom at least *twice*.”

“Ah, so he’s one of those anally retentive, stick-up-his-ass coppers then?” he asks with a laugh as we move down the hall

to see the rest of the house, starting with my bedroom.

“No. Well ...” I make a show of thinking about it. I shake my head. “No, definitely not. He just likes a clean house and looking after his belongings.”

Dad arches a brow. “Does that include you?”

“Yep.”

He nods and looks around my bedroom, seeming happy with my living situation. But something in me feels like I need to qualify just *how* Gio takes care of me—the PG version, anyway. Because, like every child, I’ll never stop wanting to prove to my parents that I’m one hundred percent okay, and that means starting with the truth about that callout. Here’s hoping this is the first step towards getting my head into a better place.

I take a deep breath, steel my shoulders. *I can do this.* “Full disclosure,” I blurt. “I had a bad call a while ago, and it rattled me because I thought we’d left someone in there when we were pulled out.”

Dad reaches out and holds my hand, concern written all over his face. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“Well, honestly. I figured Cap would’ve told you during one of your many *chats*. But I think its more to do with me struggling to get past it.”

Dad shrugs. “I’m your father. I’m not going to apologize for worrying about you and making sure you’re going okay.”

I squeeze his fingers. “And I love you for it, I do. But it all worked out in the end. Gio’s brothers both looked out for me until we could get back to the firehouse, and then they called him to pick me up so I didn’t have to drive home. Gio helped me hold it together then let me fall apart when I needed to as well.”

Dad strokes my arm, his gaze softening. “That’s good, sweetheart. Not easy to go through though, is it?”

“Nope. And in the end, I was hearing things because there was no one stuck inside. So it was a whole lot of stress for

nothing.”

“No. It’s never for nothing. But you’re okay now? On the job, I mean?”

I try hard to school my features, and I know Dad’s watching me closely. Somehow I manage to pull it off. “Yeah. I mean... I’m getting there. I’m good... well, better, put it that way.”

“Good,” he says. “You’ve got one of the biggest hearts I’ve ever known, sweetheart, and that’s something you got from your mother. I fell in love with her for it, so it makes sense that she gave it to you too.”

“Dad ...”

His eyes glisten but he waves me off, pulling me in for another hug before stepping back. “So Gio, he’s a good man? He makes you happy?”

“Absolutely, Dad. I know he has my back even when I don’t want to admit I need him to. The whole Rossi family have been super welcoming. They’ve kind of all adopted me.”

“Good. That’s really good.” He huffs out a sigh that’s part relief, part resigned. I take it as a win though, because it means he can see that I’m happy and settled, and he hasn’t read me deep enough to sense that despite what I’m telling him, something is still wrong at work.’

Because everything else is absolutely perfect, and as soon as I can get myself over these yips, I’ll be even better.

We start to walk back down the hall. “So, you’re dating but still have separate rooms. Interesting ...”

“Dad!” I splutter, getting me a hearty chuckle and a wink.

“Knew I’d get ya with that one. You’re thirty-one tomorrow, sweetheart. I’m not naïve, even if I can categorically say I do *not* want to know about it.”

“Thank God for *that*,” I mutter.

“But if I know my daughter, you’re probably determined to keep the guy on his toes.”

We reach the living room where I find Gio and Adam sitting in front of the TV, watching a Cubs game replay.

“Jesus, roomie. You’re a fast worker. You’ve charmed my brother already?” I ask.

“To be fair,” Adam says with a toast of his beer bottle, “he won me over talking about my plant nephew over there.”

My eyes jump wide as my head snaps first to Fred, then Gio, my heart melting and other parts of my body making promises to him that I plan on keeping later tonight. “Yeah. Uncle Adam, meet Fred.”

“Hold up. You have a *plant* together? This is more serious than I thought,” Dad says with a surprisingly straight face. “Good going there, Gio. It shows my daughter you’re responsible and will be a good father.”

“A *plant* father, Dad. Jeez, it’s not like Fred is a child,” I say.

Gio arches his brows sky-high before looking back at Fred. “It’s okay, Fred. She doesn’t mean that.”

Dad grins then crosses the room, holding out his arm to my boyfriend. “Thanks for looking after our girl. I might be able to stop my weekly calls to the Captain now, since Alex tells me you and your brothers have been watching out for her. It’s good to see my daughter being treated well.”

Gio shakes his hand. “It’s my honor, Mr. Maxwell. She’s a wonderful woman.”

“Pfft. Call me Jeff or Chief—that’s what everyone does.”

“Okay, Jeff.”

“And how are you holding up against my daughter’s stubborn streak?” Dad asks, taking a seat in the empty armchair, his eyes moving to the game as well. I sigh and shake my head. Gio chuckles, and Adam just straight-out laughs.

“You know Alex better than me, Jeff. Each day promises a new adventure.” Gio glances over at me, locking eyes with

mine. “And I make sure I enjoy and appreciate every single one.”

Woman down. Somebody save me. I'm a goner.

Because all I can think about for the rest of the night—throughout dinner, dessert, and saying goodbye to Dad and Adam, who make it clear to both Gio and myself that they more than approve—is that I haven't just fallen for Gio. I'm totally in love with the man.

I guess now all that's left to do is tell him.

Gio

“Happy birthday to you,” we finish singing. All of the Firehouse 101 crew, the Rossi family, and Alex’s dad stand around Alex and Adam as Mama urges them to make a wish and blow out the thirty-one candles Mama miraculously squeezed onto the three-layer chocolate mud cake she made for the occasion.

“C’mon, Iowa and Iowa version two. Put out that fire before we have to grab a hose and do it ourselves,” Scotty calls out.

“Shh, Scott,” Mama warns.

“Yes, Mama Rossi,” the chastised man replies to a chorus of laughter.

My girl grins and turns to her brother. Both of them face the cake again before Alex closes her eyes, and together, they blow out the candles, earning a round of applause for her efforts.

Alex has been introducing her family to everyone here throughout the afternoon. It’s ended up with Adam congregating with the firefighters while Jeff and my dad seem to have become fast friends. My father even cracked out the good whiskey for the occasion.

London is here with Cap, and I haven’t missed the fact that Luca has been keeping his distance from her, probably so as to not arouse suspicion. Rhodes and I have definitely shared a few looks between us about it, and I’ve noticed Jake “the Love

Guru” Anderson has been sticking close to Luc. Knowing Jake, he’s probably passing on his sage dating advice. But that’s Jake for you—forever the optimist. Nothing gets past that kid, and he desires to see everyone coupled up and happy, which is ironic, considering he’s single and has sworn off women until after he’s done at college. Although who knows if he’ll change his mind once he goes to college.

What’s giving me the most pride, though, is the gold tree-of-life pendant hanging around Alex’s neck, the birthday present I gave her in bed this morning. She then proceeded to show me just how much she liked it, which meant we didn’t get out of bed until lunchtime and were cutting it close to meet Jeff and Adam at their hotel in time to get to my parents’ house for the celebrations.

Watching her smiling and laughing with our families, friends, and workmates, you wouldn’t think she had a care in the world. That is how it should be, but I can’t get what Rhodes and Luca told me the other night out of my mind. Every time I ask her about work, she tells me it’s good, or fine, or she regales me with another story about her getting one up on Scotty—which, admittedly, happens a lot.

Part of me has been hoping she’d talk to me about it herself, or open up to her family, but as far as I know, she’s keeping whatever she’s going through locked up tight. But the more I watch her, the more that niggle that’s been eating at me since I discovered she was keeping secrets has grown more insistent. My girl is as honest as the day is long, so her keeping something important to herself has me worried.

Because if she can’t trust me enough to share the deepest parts of her—her fears, her worries, or something that’s still affecting her weeks after that bad call—then we have bigger problems than she might realize, ones that could eventually cause issues between the two of us. That’s something I’m not willing to let happen.

“You okay there, roomie?” Alex says, coming over to where I’m standing and wrapping her arms around my waist. “You’ve been kinda quiet since we got here.”

She tilts her face to mine. I lift my hands to frame her jaw, my eyes dropping to the necklace resting over her heart before I look up and brush my lips against hers. I smile against her mouth. “Better now that you’re here.”

“You sure know the right things to say to make a girl feel wanted.”

I pull back slightly, my gaze roaming her face. “Are you happy, baby?”

Her brows furrow, and she scrunches her nose. “I have my family here, your family who treat me like I’m one of their own, and my crew who are like family anyway. We’ve got good food, good company, and that birthday cake has five extra pounds I’m looking forward to adding to my ass. I can’t *not* be happy right now.”

I chuckle and shake my head, dragging a hand down her body to give said ass a squeeze. “I happen to like your ass, cake or no cake.”

“Well, damn. You must be trying to sweet talk me into bed later.” She leans in close and shoots me a wicked grin. “Newsflash, roomie: I’m a sure thing.”

“Good to know,” I say, but I can’t shake the elephant in the room. She’s hiding something and I can’t ignore it. I run my knuckles over the soft skin of her cheek. “You sure you’re doing okay?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?” Her features fall ever so slightly. “Are you not good? Is something wrong? Is that why you’re quiet?”

I shake my head. Now is not the time. “I just want you to know that if you’re ever *not* okay, you can always talk to me. I’m not going to judge you or give you a hard time. I want to be that person for you.”

She frowns, her cheerful expression faltering for a brief moment before she seems to catch herself. That’s when I see that mask slip back into place, the one she wears to prove to everyone—including me—that everything is perfectly fine. “Well, good. I *do* think I need another drink though. And since

Scotty's present to me was to be my slave for the day, I think I might go steal his seat and make *him* go get me another beer. You want to come join me?" she asks, waggling her brows. "I'm sure I can extend his slave duties to bringing you drinks too."

Now I'm the one plastering on a smile. "You go ahead. I'll come and find you soon."

"Okay, roomie." She lifts on her toes and gives me a hard and fast kiss with just a touch of tongue before skipping away across the yard to call in her birthday slave benefits.

Ever since she moved in, she's been like the brightest star in my sky. My life had turned into one big mundane routine until she turned up on my doorstep. Then she teased, ribbed, challenged, and pushed me to see past all of that—to see *her*.

And there's no way I'm going to let anything risk that. Not when I feel more for her than I've ever felt for anyone else in my whole life. Not when I lo—

The thought hits me like a freight train. I'm in love with that woman—my roommate, my plant momma, my girl. Head over heels.

Which means I'll do anything to help her, even something that will be difficult and hard. But I need to do it before her next shift. I told myself I'd wait till after her dad and brother's visit, and they leave tomorrow morning, first thing.

Part of me wonders if I should tell her dad about it, but he's just given me his blessing. I don't want to give him anything to worry about since he's the protective sort. Adam, too.

Adam. He'll be able to help. Or at the very least, tell me how I should approach the problem anyway.

I decide to follow Adam as he walks toward the kitchen, hoping we can talk in private.

When I get there, Adam's just reaching the refrigerator door. He peers in and pulls out a bottle of beer.

“Hey,” I say as I walk over to the counter and lean my hip against it. “Got a minute?”

His eyes widen a fraction before he pulls out another beer and offers it my way. “Sure. You want one?”

I shake my head and he puts it back and walks over to stand opposite me. “What’s up?”

“I was hoping you could give me some advice about something.”

Adam’s brows go up but he nods. “God, you’re not going to propose to her or anything, are you? ’Cause I like you and all, but it’s been like three months or something, right? You need to put in a hell of a lot more time before you get to *that* stage. You probably haven’t even lived through one of her really bad PMS bouts yet. Survive a few of those and *then* think about the future.”

I snort and shake my head. “I have, and don’t worry, I quickly learned that chocolate, carbs, and a foot rub work wonders to alleviate her mood.”

“Wow. I think I need to shake your hand. That’s epic,” he says, seeming genuinely impressed. “Okay then. What do you need help with?”

Checking over my shoulder to make sure no one is coming in, I turn back to him. “You know the bad call that Alex had a while ago where she thought they’d left someone behind?”

He nods, his expression completely serious now. “I called her a week or so after that because I had this feeling I couldn’t shake that something wasn’t quite right. It’s a twin thing we sense now and then.”

“Well, I went out with the guys the other night and they told me she hasn’t been into an active fire since then.”

Adam’s eyes grow wide, his mouth doing the same. “She *what*? That can’t be right. She’s unflappable on scene. I’ve seen her face horrific fires with known loss of life, and she’s not once been so affected by it that it stopped her from doing her job.” He takes a swig of his beer and looks out the

window to where Alex is sitting at the table before turning back to me. “So is she off work now or what?”

“Nope. I only found out about it recently, and nothing has happened to put anyone on the crew or Alex at risk, but I know from personal experience that you can’t bottle these kinds of things up.”

“‘Cause they eat away at you? Yeah, I know how that is.” He rubs his chin. “So, you want me to talk to her?”

I shake my head. “I need to know whether I should let her work through it herself like she’s obviously trying to do, or whether I should bring it up and make her talk it out.”

He seems to mull on that for a moment. “There is absolutely nothing I would not do for my family—for Alex—but if she’s doubting herself and her instincts when it comes to being in a fire or around it, you can’t let that shit fester. It’s going to eat her up and keep affecting her confidence until she loses that fearless awareness every firey needs to have to put on their turnouts and do their job.”

“That’s part of what worries me about this.”

“And the other part?”

“She didn’t tell *me* about it. We’re close, Adam. This is the best relationship I’ve ever had, and she has become one of the most important people in my life. I don’t want *this* to come between us.”

“This?”

“Where she’s struggling with something and can’t share it with me and let me try and help her through it.”

“Ah ... now *that* I can help you with. That is just Alex. You have to remember that she is the daughter of a fire chief, brother of a lieutenant—and that’s not because she couldn’t have become a lieutenant herself; she just never wanted to. She’s always been the type of person to want to prove herself to everyone—including herself. Mom used to say that whenever I hit a milestone before my sister, she’d race to do it too. First to roll over, me. First to walk, me. One place above her in our academy class? That was me. But it’s not that she’s

ever been resentful—it’s just made her work harder.” He takes another drink of his beer and swallows down the mouthful hard. “When Mom passed away, Alex took over her role. Dad was a mess, understandably, and I kind of did what Alex is doing now. I bottled my emotions up inside me. I was determined to deal with my grief in my own way and in my own time. Alex was our rock through all of that, and we made sure she knew just how much we valued her for doing that, *being* that.”

I nod, and he continues.

“So when she applied for the transfer, she had our full support. As much as Dad was worried about her being in the big city with bigger fires, bigger *everything*, we both thought it was the best thing she could have done for herself. She told us that it was time to spread her wings and prove to herself that she could make it on her own in a new city, a new firehouse, and do it her way.”

Realization dawns, and I’m surprised I didn’t figure it out sooner. “She isn’t avoiding telling me because she doesn’t *want* to tell me. She just doesn’t want to seem weak or needy because of it.”

“Bingo.”

Now it all makes sense, and it also makes me feel at least a little bit better about it. Although I still hate that she’s been struggling and I haven’t been able to help. “So, what do you suggest?”

“As a lieutenant, I’m not sure I’d be wanting her on my truck knowing she has lost confidence within herself to fulfill her duties.”

“And as her brother?”

“As her brother, I’m going to tell you that she needs to come to you about it. The absolute worst thing for her will be if she knows people are talking about her and are worried about whether she has their back on scene. My sister may like to showboat when it comes to her motorcycle and the skydiving and all of that, but the thing she is most proud of is

her career. If her ability to do her job is being questioned, that will halt any progress she has made or *will* make. Alex is one of the most intelligent people I know. If she ever thought she was putting lives at risk, she'd put herself on leave until she sorted her head out."

I mull his advice over in my head, trying to work out exactly how I'm going to broach the subject with her.

"I was going to talk to her about it tomorrow after your flight leaves."

"Good plan." He holds out his arm. The moment I slide my palm against his, he grips my fingers and pins me with an intense stare.

"You had my blessing already, Gio. But after this, you've got my gratitude too. It makes us feel better knowing that although my sister can look after herself, she has a good man at her back, side, and front ready to be there whenever she needs you to be."

"*Now*, I think I need that beer you offered."

Adam grins and quickly grabs a bottle from the fridge and hands it to me before tapping his drink against mine.

"To stubborn, strong-willed, and lovable women," I say.

He chuckles. "And to the men who survive them. Let's hope you're one of them."

Gio

We get home after seeing Jeff and Adam off at the airport. Alex has been quiet ever since we left O'Hare but that's to be expected.

"You doing okay?" I ask her as we walk into the house. Neither of us have a shift until tomorrow morning, so today is ours to do whatever we want with. After a busy past two days, I figure we'd just spend the day together.

"Yeah. I was thinking I might go for a ride. You know, blow out the brain cells and just be for a while." She looks over at me and there's conflict in her gaze, as if she wants to say something else. She quickly shuts her expression. "Sometimes I just need to get outside and clear my head, you know? Is that okay?"

I nod. "I might go for a run then. Gotta keep my fitness up for our baseball game."

Her lips quirk up. "Like your precinct has a chance against the might of Firehouse 101."

I let out a sigh of relief at seeing that flash of humor I love so much from her.

I cross the living room and grab her hips, pulling her into my arms. "We'll see, won't we?"

She loops her hands around my neck and meets me halfway for a long, teasing, far-from-innocent kiss. "We will," she says when we finally pull apart. "Care to make it interesting?"

My lips curl up into a smirk. “What did you have in mind, baby?”

Her lids flutter shut and her body trembles against mine. “You don’t play fair.”

“I play to win, *baby*.”

“Except at baseball.”

“That’s yet to be seen.” I snort and shake my head. “So, about this wager ...”

“I think that whoever loses ... has to buy the next plant child.”

My brows arch. “You ready for another Fred?”

“No one could ever replace Fred. He’s our first. But yeah ... I think that we can handle having *two* plant babies.”

I don’t even know why but the thought that she wants another houseplant—of all things—fills me with a certainty I didn’t know I needed. “Okay, then. We should shake on it then, shouldn’t we?” I lean my lips down close to hers.

“A kiss is just as good as a handshake, don’t you think, roomie?” she says in that low, sultry tone I like.

I don’t verbalize my answer. I slam my mouth to hers and seal the bet with a kiss full of promise. I take my time to enjoy it because there’s a small part of me that is still worried about the talk we need to have when she gets back home.

By the time we pull apart, my girl is looking suitably wrecked, her lips swollen, her eyes glazed and hooded, and her body melting into mine.

“How am I supposed to go on a ride now, roomie?” she asks with a breathless smile.

“Well, I could suggest another type of ride—”

She covers my mouth with her hand and giggles. “Later, soon-to-be plant daddy of two.” Stepping back, she shoots me a wide grin before moving down the hallway.

“What happens when *I* win?”

She stops at the door to her bedroom, turning around and shooting me a wink as she rakes hungry eyes down my body and back up again. “I’m sure you can come up with something, *officer*.”

A FEW HOURS LATER, I’m sitting on the couch surfing the news sites on my tablet when Alex’s motorcycle pulls into the garage. Soon enough, she’s walking through the front door, giving me another good look at the tight leather pants clinging to her legs—legs I’m going to enjoy having wrapped around my back later.

“Hey,” she says, resting her helmet on her hip. “I’ll just grab a shower and then I’ll join you.”

“Sounds good, baby.”

She smiles, but there’s a new tension in her smile that wasn’t there before she left. She may have been quiet after the airport, but she didn’t seem to be worried about anything. But now, it’s a different story—unless she’s somehow picked up on my own simmering nerves.

Fifteen minutes later, she comes back into the living room wearing what I like to think of as her ‘hanging out at home’ clothes—yoga pants and a baggy sweater that falls at mid-thigh. I put my tablet on the coffee table and hold my arm out, an invitation she accepts as she sits down next to me and cuddles into my side.

“This is nice,” she says, rubbing her hand over my chest.

“Mm-hmm,” I hum, pressing my lips to her temple. “Did you have a good ride?”

“Yeah. I just needed to clear my head a bit. I’m feeling a lot better now.”

Silence falls between us as I try to work out how to start this important conversation.

Alex sits up and stares at me. “Are *you* okay? You’re kinda tense for a man who’s relaxing with his girlfriend in his arms.”

I turn in my seat, leaning my back against the arm of the couch as I take her hand in mine. “I think there’s something we need to talk about—” I say at the same time as she blurts out, “You know, don’t you?”

Her wide, worried eyes lock with mine and I nod, urging her to continue. A huge part of me is relieved she’s telling me herself.

She lets out a sigh of relief, although her body remains tense.

“Hey.” I reach for her hips, straightening my legs beneath her before placing her in my lap. “Baby, there’s absolutely no judgment between us. This is just you and me now. If you don’t feel comfortable talking to me about it, I want to help you find someone you *can* talk to. But I’ve been there; I’ve had some tough calls where I’ve had to choose between saving myself or saving someone else, and it’s never easy. That’s something that comes with the jobs we’ve chosen to do, and it is something that will *never* not affect you. Because if the day comes and that choice is easy, then you’ve gotta start wondering if it’s time for a change.”

She seems to think about that for a while as neither one of us speaks.

“Who told you?” she asks quietly, her gaze fixed on my chest where she rests her hands.

“Rhodes and Luca had concerns and wanted to see if I knew anything about whatever it is that you’re going through.”

“Which means Marco knows too? Cap as well?”

I shift my hands down then back up so my thumbs can rub back and forth against the smooth skin of her hips. “Marco, yeah. Not sure about the Captain, but if he doesn’t already, he’ll have to know soon.”

“Yeah ...” She takes a deep breath as if steeling herself before lifting her chin and finally looking at me again. “Are you mad?”

I jerk, moving my hands to cup her face. “Baby, why would I be mad? If anything, I’m kicking myself for not realizing that this could happen. That you could have lingering feelings about that call and that they’d continue to stick in your mind.”

Her gorgeous blue eyes glisten with unshed tears. “I-I thought I could push through it. At first, it was just a little bit of panic. But then it felt like there was this wall standing between me and doing my job. I’m paid to fight fires, to get in there, work with my crew, and save lives. When I thought ...” Her breath catches, and she swallows down hard before continuing. “That day with Luca, when I thought someone was trapped—that was the most horrible decision I’d ever had to make. Saving myself when I couldn’t save them? It was like the most selfish thing I could ever do. Then when we only just got out on time before that roof collapsed, I felt guilty. Because if anything had happened to Luca, it would’ve been on me.”

“Baby, that’s not—”

She shakes her head. “Gio, you must know that sometimes, the mind is not the most rational or logical organ in the body.”

I nod. There’s absolutely no disputing what she’s said.

I pull her in closer, loving the way her body relaxes into mine as if my touch is soothing her as much as touching her is soothing me.

“So, I thought I could just push through it, you know? I’m strong. I’ve faced many fires and I’ve even been there through tragic losses because we couldn’t save people. But last week, Rhodes and I had to size up the rear of the property and just getting close to the fire, then having something hit my helmet completely freaked me out. I went from rattled and wary to absolutely terrified. I think I might have even had a panic attack because of it.” She rests her head against my shoulder, and I tighten my arms, holding her to me, breathing steadily as her heartbeat vibrates against mine.

“I’m guessing that was when Rhodes decided to talk to you. He tried bringing it up at the firehouse after we got back

from that call, but I told him I was fine. And I was—*then*—because I was away from the fire and safe.” Another deep breath, this time in time with mine, her hand lying between us. I lace my fingers with hers and just let her talk.

“I think it’s just when I’m confronted with the possibility of being put in the same situation again, and having to make a life-or-death choice—*that’s* when I’m not sure I can trust myself.”

“Fuck, baby.” I cradle the back of her head with my hand and pull her into my neck. “I hate that you’ve been going through this all by yourself. I could’ve helped. I *would’ve* tried to help.”

“I know. But I didn’t want to—didn’t want to be a—”

I pull back, resting my hand on the side of her neck and looking her dead in the eye. “You didn’t want to seem to be a burden? Right?”

She nods, the tears finally falling down her face. “And now ... now I’ll be stood down and probably sent back home, and I don’t want to leave. I love my life here. I love my job and—”

I kiss her because I don’t want her to say it right now. I don’t want our memory of the first time we say *I love you* to be connected with Alex’s mistrust of her own judgment.

I know I love her. I know that I’m going to tell her that. But right now, I need to help my girl get past this fear of hers so that she doesn’t have to worry about not being able to do the job that she loves, the job she’s always wanted to do. Some might say it’s the one she was *born* to do.

“I also spoke to Adam last night.”

Alex tenses, and she eases herself out of arms, moving to her feet and walking to the kitchen then back again, eventually stopping her pacing to look down at me. “That’d be why he whispered in my ear at the airport. He told me to talk to you and said that you were a good man who would be everything I needed, whenever I needed it.”

“Good to know I’ve got your brother’s blessing.”

“Dad and Adam liked you from the moment they met you, Gio. You know that.”

I shrug. “Still nice to hear it.”

She sighs and sits down next to me again. “I’m sorry for keeping it to myself.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t see that something was going on with you. I want you to know you can always talk to me. I don’t care if it’s work, family, *us*, or anything, baby. I need you trust me to share your burdens and worries, because if we don’t have that, we’ve got some work to do.”

She gasps, and without warning, she’s straddling my hips and framing my face with her hands, making sure she has my full attention. “I do! I promise, Gio. I *do* trust you. Maybe it’s more that I don’t trust *me* right now. But what we have is so good, and I’ve never been happier and as comfortable as I am with you, so I didn’t want to ruin that. And I didn’t want to put you in a tough position with your brothers either.”

“They’re my family, Alex. They’ll always be important to me, but *you*, baby”—I give her a squeeze—“*you* are everything to me. You’ve turned my life on its head and given me what I’ve always wanted.”

“What’s that?”

“*You*. Just you, Alex. Your sass, your wit, your brain—even you being so dedicated to your job that you worry yourself sick because you’re scared you can’t be everything to everyone like you think you have to be. You don’t. All you have to do is be *you*.” I rest my forehead to hers, sweeping my thumbs out to wipe away the tears falling down her cheeks. “We’re going to get you through this, baby. You’ve got a whole firehouse, my family, and me at your back. There are people you can talk to, and now that it’s out in the open, Marco, Rhodes, and the Captain can help you manage it without you having to *avoid* doing things.”

“Yeah. I think that’s what I need to do.”

“Good. Because don’t ever forget who you are. You’re Alex Maxwell, and you’re so damn strong, and resilient, and

stubborn that you go after everything you want in life without apology. No one else has gotten you to where you are today. It's all been you and your determination and grit. Not your Dad being fire chief or Adam being your lieutenant. *You* got yourself here to the CFD, where you wanted to be, and no one has had a single bad thing to say about you—not at work, not anywhere. *That's* what you've gotta hold on to.” She nods, but I'm not finished. My voice drops to a soft and gentle tone. “But when you're with me, you don't have to be any of that. You just have to be *you*. That's the woman I fell for. That's the woman who makes me smile, in her leather pants and motorcycle helmet. That's my plant momma who bought home the ugliest yucca in the nursery.”

“Hey! Don't you talk about Fred like that! You love him.”

“I do,” I say with a slow-growing smile. “And I'll love the next one even more. And then, when I make an honest woman out of you and we have our own babies, I'll love them too.”

“Well *they* won't be ugly, that's for sure,” she mutters, almost sounding a little put out. “They'll have all your Italian-American super genes that make them gorgeous.”

I chuckle, because she didn't even balk at me telling her I plan to marry her and knock her up. *Because that's just how my girl is. Strong. Sassy. Still sexy, even when she's opening up to me.* “Well, who am I to object to my girl thinking I'm gorgeous?”

She snorts, and for the first time today, her eyes are open. There's absolutely nothing hidden in her soft, warm gaze. *That's* what makes me finally let out a deep breath and relax.

“Thank you,” she whispers, tipping her chin and pressing her lips gently to mine.

“Whatever you need from me, whenever you need it, baby. We're going to get you through this.”

“For the first time in weeks, I think I believe it.”

“Good. Now kiss me like you mean it so I can carry you to bed and *show* you exactly what it means to give you

anything.” I kiss her quickly. “And everything.” I kiss her again, sweeping my tongue between her parted lips. “You need.” One more kiss and I stand, her body wrapped around mine as I carry her down the hall toward my bed.

“I think I’ve thought of a bet for if I lose the baseball game,” I say.

She lifts her head and frowns. “If you lose?”

“Yeah.”

“Not if you win?”

“Nope. If I lose, you get to have my bedroom. If I win, I get to have you *in* my bedroom.”

Her brows furrow deeper. “O-kaaay ... something doesn’t sound quite right about that?”

“Too bad. That’s the deal. Now kiss me like you mean it, baby.”

And, since neither of us are ones to ignore an order like that, we don’t come up for air for a good long while.

Alex

I'm manning the truck, directing the aerial hose towards a blown-out window on the second floor. It was Marco's order, so I wasn't about to question it—I just said “yes, Lieutenant,” and got to work.

Now that my fear, my panic, my ‘wobble’ is no longer a secret—well not to Gio, Marco, Rhodes, the Captain, and Luca—I'm thankful I still have a job to do. They could've easily stood me down while I got counseling at Gio's urging and my agreement. Administrative leave *is* still on the table if I have another freak-out on scene, but I'm feeling a hell of a lot better about things now that I've been talking through them with Wendy, my therapist.

I'm still being watched closely on callouts, but I like knowing that everyone cares enough to help me through them. I'm not sure why I ever doubted that would be the case because not once since I joined 101 has anyone made me feel like I'm not supported by a solid team.

Today, I have Cap sticking close to the truck and keeping a watchful eye on me.

I'm feeling quite good, even being this close to the fire. Confident, even. My breathing is steady, my heart is elevated but not from panic. I'm super vigilant, making sure I'm being observant and having the crew's back.

We've been at this five-alarm fire for hours. The northern side of the building was assigned to 101, the active burn turning everything it touches to char and ash. The smell of

burnt plastic, wood, insulation, drywall—all of it clings to everything it touches. And still, despite hours of fighting, the blaze continues to push back on us. We've already had several firefighters on other trucks injured and carted off to the ER with first-degree burns and smoke inhalation. One got knocked against a wall in an explosion and was whisked away for urgent medical attention. It means we're *all* on edge, but also all focused on the job. Nobody wants to be beaten by any fire. We don't want property loss, injuries, or for the blaze to spread out and swallow up *more* real estate.

This fire, though? She's a blasty bitch who's on a tear and won't stop coming back at us over and over again.

The airwaves of the radio suddenly fill with the sound of a PASS device ringing on and off. On and off. Like a siren blaring in my head.

"Mayday. Mayday. Can't move. Blocked in and my foot went through the floor," Scotty calls out, his voice strained with obvious pain. My heart lodges itself in my throat. "Smoke too thick. Got turned around and couldn't find my way back."

"Firefighter down. In need of assistance," I call out, signaling to the Captain.

"Rossi, do you copy?"

"We're boxed in. It'll take too long," Marco calls back.

"101, anyone copy?" the Captain shouts again.

Nothing but static fills the airwaves and suddenly, I know what I have to do.

I fight back against the panic threatening to immobilize me. Scotty's PASS device continues to chime. On and off. On and off. *That* is the sound that spurs me and drives me forward. I lock the hose in place, quickly climbing down off the truck and grabbing my mask and helmet, my vision laser-focused as I ignore my heart pounding in my chest.

"Where is he?" I ask the Captain as I rush to his side.

“Bottom floor, far left corridor, right at the end. That’s his last recorded location. From there, you’ll have to call out for him.”

“Roger that.” I take a deep breath. Not even a sliver of doubt creeps in, which is surprising all in itself.

“You got this, Iowa?” he asks, his tone steady, straight to the point, and I can tell this might just be the most important question he’s ever asked me. “You go and I’ll get any available crew to come in after you. I’ve got your back. I need to know that I can trust you’ve got Scotty’s.”

“I’ve got this, Cap. Never leave a man behind. *Especially* Scotty.” Then I’m running ahead, leaving him in my dust. My sole focus is to get into the building and save my fallen crew member. “Call out, Scotty. Where are you?” I yell, only to be met with all the groans and growls of a building fighting a war with the fire and *not* from the man himself.

Far-left corridor, check. “C’mon, Alex. You’ve got this,” I tell myself, focusing on my senses, this time using them to orient myself in my environment. Smoke? Check. Stifling heat? Double-check. I focus on the floor, watching my step as I constantly look ahead, making sure I know exactly where I’m going and what’s beside, in front, and all around me.

“Alex? Firefighter Maxwell, check the hell in, goddammit,” Captain shouts down the radio, making me wince. He sounds worried and mad, and I know there’d be hell to pay when I get out of this if I don’t reply back to him.

My step stutters at that thought. Not *if* I get out of this fire, but *when*.

And then my wobble is a wobble no more.

“Still searching. Almost there. Do you copy?”

“Copy that, Alex. Stay alert,” Cap replies.

I come to a wall straight ahead, signaling the end of the corridor. I listen out for Scotty’s PASS device, straining to hear over the rumbling sounds around me.

“Scotty? Scotty, call out if you can hear me.”

There’s a cough, faint and so quiet, I almost miss it.

“He-here!” Scotty rasps somewhere to my right. It’s a large room, but it’s dark and filled with thick black smoke that would be deadly if someone was stuck in here without oxygen.

I scour the area, turning my head to use the headlamp’s light to cut through the hazy cloud blanketing the space. Then I see the faint flashing light of the PASS device and I have my destination, running toward the man who may drive everyone crazy, but he’d be the first to run into a burning building to save any one of us.

Skidding to a stop on my knees, I look down at the soot-covered face of my firehouse brother.

I push the button on my radio. “Cap, I’ve got him. Just let me check I can move him then we’re coming out.”

“Dammit, Maxwell. How the hell are you gonna do that? You’re 150 to his 220. Give us your location. We’re coming in to make sure you both get out.”

Meeting Scotty’s pained but grateful eyes, I quirk a brow. “You think we need help?”

“How are those biceps of yours, Iowa? Bet you can drag me out easily, especially if you’re used to wrangling hogs back home.”

I chuckle, for once appreciative of Scotty’s knack for making light of a bad situation. He’s like a ray of sunshine in this smoke-filled, suffocating room.

But right now, I need to get *both* of us out of here.

“Okay. So I’m thinking your ankle’s fucked,” I say, matter-of-factly.

“Can’t move it. Can’t put weight on it. Don’t wanna take my boot off to find out either.”

“Right. So let’s assume the foot is fucked. Can you use me to help get to your feet?”

“Yep. Your two legs and my one good leg should be enough.”

“Right. And by the way, you owe me breakfast, lunch, *and* dinner after this,” I say, bending down, grabbing Scotty’s arm, and urging him to hook it around my neck. Obviously not his first rodeo, he reaches around and grips my other arm, enabling me to dig my shoulder into his side. “Okay. Let’s do this. One ... two ... *three*.”

I plant my feet and push up, pretty much deadlifting him and using sheer will and determination to get us to our feet, albeit with a howled groan from Scotty when he knocks his foot.

“Check. In. Maxwell,” Cap bellows over the radio channel. I wince, but all Scotty does is chuckle.

“I’ve got him, Cap. We’re coming out. Over.”

“He’s all bark and no bite, Iowa. At worst, you’ll be scrubbing toilets for a few days, nothing more.”

“Maybe I should leave you here,” I mutter under my breath, making him laugh harder, then he stops with a huffed-out groan.

“Foot’s *definitely* fucked. You’re right.”

“When are you gonna learn, Scotty? I’m a woman; we’re *always* right.”

“Enough jokes, Iowa. Let’s get the hell out of this joint.”

So that’s what we do, slowly but surely, with me carrying most of his weight, and Scotty gritting his teeth and helping as much as he can. Both of us breathe a huge sigh of relief when Rhodes and Luc barge down the corridor, meeting us halfway. The guys take Scotty from me, grabbing him around the shoulders and feet and carrying him out of there. The red flashing night sky is a welcome sight when we all get safely outside where Cohen and Corey are waiting with a gurney.

It’s then that the realization of what happened crashes down on me, and just when I think my knees might buckle, I hear it.

“Alex!” Gio shouts. I spin around and lock eyes with the man that I love and straight away, I know it’s all going to be okay.

Gio

“Alex!” I yell from where I’m standing beside Cap.

I’d heard over the radio about a five-alarm fire with multiple appliances in attendance and that there had already been a number of injuries. When my squad car was a few blocks away, I heard a firefighter was stuck inside and I was filled with a blind panic, knowing that Marco, Luc, and Alex would be there. I needed to see for myself that they were all okay, that the woman I love knows I have her back, whatever happens.

Alex’s eyes widen and she staggers toward me, exhaustion and relief written all over her face as I wrap my arms around her, not giving a flying fuck that we’re at a scene and in uniform, and probably breaking numerous rules and protocol.

“Baby,” I murmur into her ear with a huge sigh. *I have her in my arms, safe and well.*

She pulls back and looks up at me. “When did you get here? *Why* are you here?”

I stroke her hair, reassuring myself that she’s not injured, my heart still racing from my fear. “Heard there were casualties and that someone was stuck inside. Kinda acted on instinct and drove straight here. Needed to see for myself that you were okay.”

“No,” she says, shaking her head, her eyes soft. “I was on the aerial when Scotty hurt himself and I ran in there. Didn’t

even think about anything but getting to him and pulling him out.”

“Shit, Alex. You did it,” I say, my chest swelling with pride as I hug her tight again. “You saved Scotty by running into the fire?”

“Yep.” Her grin is gorgeous, even on a face blackened with soot, her eyes red and bloodshot, and the unmistakable smell of stale smoke clinging to her. “I did it. I really did it,” she whispers, as she starts to shake.

I pull her in close and gently swipe my thumbs over her cheeks. “You’re amazing.”

Tilting her head, she shoots me a smirk, one that’s totally her but also totally unexpected considering she just faced her biggest fear right now and conquered it like a badass. “You’re only *just* figuring that out now, plant daddy?”

Chuckling, I hold her jaw in my hands. “I’ve known that since the day I first laid eyes on you. But I think *you* were the one who forget for a little while just how amazing you are.”

“Ahh. So *that’s* why you pointed a gun at me. ’Cause I was so awesome?”

A grin tugs at my lips. “Yep. You accosted me with so much amazingness that I needed a weapon to protect myself.”

“Liar,” she whispers. “So are you going to get in trouble for coming here to check on me, sirens blazing?”

“I don’t care what shit I get shoveled at me. I’d do it again in a heartbeat to make sure you came home to me in one piece.”

Her eyes soften. “I’m okay, Gio. I knew the guys would have my back, and I knew that Scotty needed me. I didn’t even question Cap’s order to get in there. I just did it. Didn’t need my cop boyfriend to come and save me.”

“So proud of you, baby, and I didn’t come to save you. I came to *see* you. This is all for me and my frazzled nerves,” I murmur. I kiss her, needing the reassurance of her lips on mine

again. “They would’ve had to handcuff me and stuff me in the back of my squad car to keep me from you.”

She looks deep into my eyes, hers wide and full of wonder. “This is my job, Gio. If you want me to have a normal, safe, boring job where you don’t ever have to worry about me, I think we’ll have some things to sort out.”

I snort and shake my head, not missing how she’s turned this whole scenario back around on me. “Fuck no. I’ve accepted skydiving and pole dancing and the death mobile on two wheels. You pulling on your gear and doing the job you love every day? I’d never want to change that—or change *you*.”

“You’ll still worry though?”

My head jerks back. “Of course. Just like I worry about Marco and Luca and Rhodes—hell, even Scotty. They’re all family to me and to you.”

“And me? What am I?”

I dip my head and rest it against her forehead. The flashing lights coloring the night sky, the stale smoke swirling in the air around us—even the shouting of orders and groans from Scotty as he’s wheeled into the back of the ambulance can’t pull me from her. The entire world ceases to exist as I stare into her eyes. “Unless I can see you, touch you, *feel* you, I’ll always worry about you, and that’s something that’ll never change. Because I couldn’t bear to lose the woman I love when I’ve only just found her.”

“I love you too,” she says straight back, her voice rough and shaking.

There’s absolutely nothing that could wipe the huge, shit-eating grin from my face. “I know.”

“How?” She scrunches up her nose as she pulls back.

“Because you told me.”

“I did not. Well, I did—but just *now*.”

“You did. You *do*. Every time you kiss me, and clean the kitchen after you cook and mess it all up. How you water Fred

and send me photos of him when I'm at work. How you let Mama coddle and take care of you. How you take my brothers' shit and shovel it straight back at them. It's in every single thing you do and say. You may be a badass, Alex Maxwell, but you're also a hopeless romantic who wears her heart on her sleeve. I hope that's something that never changes."

"I like making you happy," she whispers.

"You do. And I want to spend the rest of my life making sure I make you happy too."

"Even when I'm covered in soot and dirt and smelling like a chimney?" she asks with a laugh.

I press my lips to hers, resting them there. "Especially then. Because it's *you*."

"And because you lurvvve me," she croons, smiling against my lips, teasing the seam of mine with the tip of her tongue.

"And because you love me too. And I'm never gonna let you forget it." Then I kiss her, not giving one single fuck that it's in front of everyone in the middle of a scene. We could be on the top of the Hancock Building right now and I *still* wouldn't care. The only thing that matters is the woman in my arms and kissing her like she's my entire world.

Because she is.

And that's something that I know, down to the very depths of my soul, will never ever change.

Alex

In the past three weeks, life has been anything but boring.

The first thing that happened was that I *didn't* have to clean any toilets. Cap, Marco, and Rhodes all thanked me for putting my fear aside and stepping up when it was most needed. I could tell by the looks on all of their faces that there was a lot of relief—not just that I got Scotty out, but that I'd overcome my yips and was back running at one hundred percent again.

There was also a hell of a lot of ribbing about my cop boyfriend storming on scene like a superhero, ready to cross department lines to save me. The guys even got a photo of Gio and pinned it to the noticeboard with a “Have you seen this superhero?” wanted poster around it.

I don't care about that and neither does the man in question. He's just happy that *I'm* happy and he makes sure I know that every single day we're together.

I even got him to sit on the back of my motorcycle in the garage last weekend. We didn't *go* anywhere, and we may have had to shut the door, but it's still progress as far as I'm concerned. So what if I had to wear my riding gear and straddle the bike facing him, and then fulfill a fantasy he told me he'd never had until he met me? If I have to suffer orgasms to get my plant daddy to sit on my bike, well, that's just a sacrifice I'm willing to make.

This past week though, tensions have been running high in the Maxwell/Rossi household, and I'm sure Fred is feeling the effects. Gio's been coddling him; I've even walked into the

living room to find my roomie sitting on the ground, talking to our plant. It has me wondering about the effects living in such a competitive environment may have on a growing young plant like him.

Our Fred's strong though. He's probably faced adversity ever since the day he was a young baby seedling, sitting in a pot somewhere, getting overlooked by all the other prospective plant moms and dads.

Now we're here, the big day—baseball day—and I can't wait for this afternoon when we'll all finally know who the reigning champion between Firehouse 101 and Gio's precinct will be. Then, finally, my life might be able to get back to normal without the inherent distrust and suspicious looks both at home and at work.

Marco and Rhodes cornered me in the workout room yesterday and grilled me to make sure I *wasn't* a double agent for Chicago PD. As much as I love baseball, I'm totally over the boys in blue versus hose jockeys rivalry that's about to reach boiling point.

Opening my eyes, I roll over in bed, looking forward to enjoying my boyfriend for a good long while before we have to get up. Except I find his side of the bed empty, and worse still—it's cold—which means that he's not just gotten up. He's been awake for a while. *And* he didn't wake me in that way I like with his hands, lips, and tongue.

That just will not do.

I take care of my morning business and walk down the hallway with an unmissable stomp in my step, my mood not getting any better when I spot my running-gear-clad, sweaty, hot, *fucking sexy* boyfriend sitting at the kitchen island with a smoothie in his hand.

“Morning,” he says in a *far* too cheerful tone.

“Morning? *Morning?* Why are you not in bed with me?”

He stills, slowly lowers his cup to the counter, and turns my way, giving me his full attention. “Something wrong, baby?”

I look around the room as if to check I'm not being punk'd or something.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize that waking your girlfriend up in the same way you do *every* morning we're home together wasn't an option this morning."

Gio rubs his chin, his lips looking decidedly twitchy. "Huh?" *Oh, no he didn't.*

Slowly, I advance on him. "You know ... how you wake up in bed and find your *irresistible* lover sleeping peacefully next to you." I come to a stop between his spread thighs and rest my hands on his shoulders. "And how you can't help but *glide* your fingers down her arms." I run my palms over his chest, loving the way his breathing labors. "And then you lean in and press your lips to the back of my neck, kissing me there, so softly at first ..." I drop my voice to a whisper as my hands continue their downward exploration over his torso. "Then you *delve* between her legs, finding her wet and wanting ..." I'm panting now and this time, it's not an act as the picture I'm painting for him starts to affect me as much as it's apparently affecting him.

"Mm-hmm," he hums roughly.

My hands itch to go lower, but instead, I bring them to a stop on his thighs, my nails biting into his shorts.

Now I'm getting turned on. "And how she moans ..." Dammit.

Gio leans forward, bringing his face closer to mine. "I do like it when she moans."

"And whimpers ..."

His voice is rough and husky, and I know I've got him hooked now. "I *love* the whimpers."

"Hmm," I whisper, clenching my legs together, something my man does *not* miss going by the 'I'm gonna get me some' grin on his face.

"So, *roomie* ... why are you out here, dressed, and having seemingly been on a run, huh?" I tilt my head down.

“Well, *now* I realize that I definitely made an error in judgment.”

“Uh-huh.” I smooth my hands back up his body, his muscles hard and flexing under my touch. “And what does *that* mean now?”

He swallows, his eyes flashing with heat and need and hunger. “I think that means I have some making up to do to my girl.”

“Mmmm. And how might you go about doing that?” I melt into him, his hands reaching out to wrap around my back and hold me to him, his impressive arousal pressing enticingly into my sex.

He touches his mouth ever so gently to mine, his tongue darting out to trail the seam of my lips. “I’m thinking I *do* need a shower, and my girl *loves* to have her back washed ...”

“She does ...” I breathe, losing the advantage now.

“So I think I should take her to the bathroom and spend a *lot* of time apologizing to her ...”

“You do?”

“With my mouth ...” He nips my bottom lip before sweeping his tongue alongside mine. “My hands ...” He drags his hands up over my shoulders to frame my face, holding me there while he kisses me hard and deep and *very* apologetically—*well, I like to think so anyway.*

“And?” I rasp.

“And then ...” He stops kissing me and pulls his head back, shooting me a shit-eating grin. “Then we’ll need to get ready to leave.

My back goes ramrod straight as I jerk out of his hold and glare at him. I’m talking a sharp stare, with my hands on hips and pursed lips, that should have him shaking in his running shoes. “You, Gio Rossi, are a clit-teasing jerk who’s going to rue the day you *ever* faced me on the baseball field.”

His eyes jump wide before I stomp off. His chuckles fill the air as I slam the door to the bathroom.

But not a minute later, he's walking into the steam-filled room, naked as the day he was born, and stepping into the shower with me, making good on everything he said he would do and then some.

So by the time we *do* finally get out and get ready to leave, both of us are much more relaxed and ready to tackle what might just be the biggest challenge of our relationship so far—the great battle of firefighters versus cops. The winner takes all. Well, in our case, the winner—which, of course, will be me—will be getting a new bedroom *and* a new sibling for Fred.

Because after he's suffered a week of cross-department rivalry in the Maxwell/Rossi household, that's the *least* we can do for our first plant baby.

Gio

IT'S the bottom of the seventh and final inning, and it's all tied up with two runs apiece. Zander went ahead of me and had the joy of being struck out by Marco, and then Jeremy hit a high fly ball to center field where a beaming Alex just happened to be standing.

Now it's my turn. Whether our precinct is a laughingstock for the next year or not all lies on my shoulders. *No pressure or anything.*

Then Cap walks out toward the mound, and Marco shoots me a knowing smirk, which I can tell straight away means they're up to something.

Then Alex comes walking in from the outfield and I *know* this is not just tactical warfare—this is a mind game.

And I'm totally here for it.

She shoots me a grin over Marco's shoulder as he hands her the ball and leans in, likely giving her his insider knowledge about how to strike me out.

Turning toward Luca, who's manning first base, she throws a couple of practice pitches. They're nothing too fast or technical, but something I've learned about my girl is she's never one to be underestimated—in life or on the baseball field. She's the one who's scored one of 101's runs, our two coming courtesy of me and Zander.

"C'mon, Gio. Don't let us down now. They're trying to get in your head," Jeremy yells.

"One of them, anyway," Zander adds, making me laugh.

After throwing one more pitch to my grinning brother, Alex nods to Marco and Cap and then returns to the pitcher's mound, rolling her shoulders and watching me, a playful smile curving her lips. "You ready for me, roomie?"

"Always, baby," I retort, loving the way her eyes flash.

She laughs. "So your bedroom and a new plant sibling are on the line."

"Yep. That's the deal."

"Are we finished with the bedroom talk or is this some weird kind of foreplay?" Scotty yells from the bottom row of the bleachers. His broken ankle is encased in a brace and resting up on the seat, his new orthopedic nurse girlfriend sitting close beside him. It seems that something good came out of Scotty's injury—he somehow charmed one of his nurses to go out on a date with him and, as he explains it, it was love at first sight.

"Scott, a mother doesn't want to *know* about those things," Mama says, scolding him. Scotty's expression falls—Mama's scolding does that to people.

"Thanks, Mama," I say, blowing her a kiss. She grins at me, sitting there wearing her half CPD/half CFD-colored shirt with pride.

“Are we doing this or what, G?” Marco calls out from shortstop.

I arch a brow. “So keen to be beaten, Mar?”

“Let’s see, shall we? Have you *seen* your girlfriend pitch? I think you’ve underestimated Iowa’s arm,” he says, cockily.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to say I know *just* how talented Alex is at *all* things, but I’ve never been one to kiss and tell, and I’m not about to start now.

I take one last glance at the bleachers. Skye returns to her seat next to Mama. *It’s go time.*

I step up to the plate, taking time to get my feet into the right stance before lifting my bat over my shoulder in preparation for Alex’s first pitch.

She rotates her arm and throws a slider straight at me. I swing and miss, something confirmed by the loud *smack* of the ball into Rhodes’s mitt behind me

“Strike one,” Papa calls out as home plate umpire.

Alex blows *me* a kiss this time. “Two more to go, roomie.”

“That means two more chances to knock it out of the park.”

“We’ll see.” She smirks before getting ready to throw again.

I go through the motions, getting in position for the second pitch. This time, she throws the ball straight across the middle of home plate, and when I swing, I just graze it with my bat, shooting it off to the side for a foul.

“Two strikes. One more, G, and we’ll be riding your ass for the next year,” Rhodes says from behind me.

“We’ll see.”

This time, there’s no smiling or playfulness in my girl’s gaze as she looks straight at me. She’s all business, as am I, and I

don’t think either one of us would have it any other way.

“This is it, baby,” I say as I lift my bat up for the last time, a huge grin on my face because whatever happens after this, I know I get my girl moving into my room—amongst other things. It’s a win-win for me regardless of the outcome.

Although you better believe I’m swinging at whatever my girl throws at me because our precinct team has been working hard for months to win this game, and after years of being the bridesmaid to 101 on the baseball field, it finally feels like our time to shine.

I step over the plate and ready myself, blocking out all the heckling that’s going on around me. My sole focus is Alex and the baseball in her hand.

Then she’s pitching, and I’m swinging, and an almighty cheer goes up as I hit the ball with an almighty *whack*. It flies up in the air, going back and back until it just clears the chain-link boundary fence, securing us the win.

I round first base, grinning at Luca. At second base, I pass a smirking Cohen. Third? Well, Cap doesn’t look overly happy, but he’s still clapping, and then waiting for me and surrounding the home plate are Zander, Jeremy, and the rest of our team, jumping up and down and cheering as I touch the bag to confirm the home run.

After a few minutes of celebrating there’s only one person I want to see, and looking around, I find her standing on top of the pitcher’s mound, her smile wide and bright as I come to a stop in front of her. I scoop her up in my arms and twirl her around, both of us laughing as I slowly lower her feet back onto the ground.

Holding her close, I kiss her, her lips parting for me as she meets my tongue stroke for stroke, her fingers biting into my back while she moans into my mouth.

“Now *that* is how I really wanted to celebrate our win,” I say.

“Hrmm. Somehow I think we’re all winning today. I’m moving in.”

“You are.” I kiss the corner of her mouth before dragging my lips down over her jaw and burying my face in her neck.

Suddenly she goes still, as if frozen in place. “Gio ...”

I kiss that spot just below her ear before straightening and meeting her amused gaze. “Yeah, baby?”

“Why is our plant son sitting with your sister?”

I shrug, acting like it’s the most normal thing in the world to see an ugly yucca plant sitting in a red pull-along wagon at a suburban baseball game. “He wanted to see his plant parents play each other.”

Alex snorts and shakes her head before a gasp escapes her. “Oh my god, is that ...?”

“That’s our new plant child, Ginger.”

She bursts out laughing and face-plants into my chest before lifting her head. “I hope you know just how much I love you.”

Fuck, it still feels good every time she says it. “Yeah, baby. I love you too. Now let’s go see our babies so we can go home and get you moved into *our* bedroom.”

“Sounds perfect, roomie.”

“That’s because it is, baby.” I kiss her again, and this time, we don’t come up for air for a good long while.

Next up is the final book in the Chicago First Responders Series, Rule Bender. Now it’s Luca Rossi’s turn to have his life turned upside down as he bends the rules with the Captain’s daughter, London.

Rule Bender

A FALLING FOR THE BOSS'S
DAUGHTER ROMANCE

Prologue

SIX MONTHS AGO

London

I am going to do it. I am going to kiss my best friend.

For years I've imagined what it would be like to touch my lips to his, to lick my tongue into his mouth, and to hear him groan—no, not just hear it ... *feel* it.

At first, I was happy to be in the friend zone. I'd expected it.

Seventeen-year-old me crushed on Luca Rossi the day I first met him. Twenty-five year old me had that crush reignited one night two years ago at a charity ball when I was left alone with him after two lieutenants had a very public fight and Dad went to do damage control.

But where I saw a sexy, charismatic, funny, and flirty man who made me feel like I was the only woman in the room, Luca just saw the Cap's youngest daughter.

It was the start of *something*. It's just that that *something* was friendship, and friendship only.

But after two years of being friends and of being—for all intents and purposes—a girlfriend without *any* of the sexy benefits I've fantasized about, I know I need to do something to make my feelings known. Because Luca Rossi may be sharp as a tack on the job and a loyal son, brother, and my best

friend, but when it comes to reading the room—aka seeing that I am head over heels in love with him—he is a bit ... clueless.

So I've decided tonight is the night when I'm going to throw caution to the wind and throw myself at him. I'm praying to all the gods I can remember that he'll catch me, and if I am really lucky, he'll be blinded by a flash of realization that he is in fact in love with me too.

Luca pulls his car up to the curb outside my house, turning his head my way as I undo my seatbelt. "It was a good night," he says, shooting me that devilishly handsome grin of his.

"Wings, beer, and pool. Can't go wrong," I reply.

He places a hand on his chest and sighs. "A woman after my own heart."

God, if only he realized how true that was.

"You know me. I aim to please." *If only ...*

His eyes soften and his smile widens. "Yeah. Who'd have thought a woman ten years younger than me would want to put up with *me* as her best friend."

I roll my eyes and bump his elbow with mine. "Well, someone's got to do it," I reply, making him chuckle, and I beam at the sound. *Look at me. I'm like a goddamn people-pleasing puppy now ...*

"Well, I better get going. Can't have the Cap giving me shit for turning up late to shift in the morning."

I beckon him in with a crooked finger, leaning closer. "The Cap's a bit of a pushover when it comes to his daughter. Just tell him you were acting as bodyguard against all those unruly randy men at the bar, and he'll name a truck in your honor."

Luca snorts and shakes his head. "Doubt that, Lonnie. But I'll keep it in mind."

My chest tightens. It's now or never. This is it—the moment I've been waiting for all damn night ... OK, maybe longer than a night.

I reach over and rest my hand on his leg. Luca's gaze drops down before slowly lifting to meet mine again. His brows furrow but I don't move back. Then again, neither does he. Taking this as a good sign I close the distance between us and touch my lips to his. My whole body stills at the contact while my heart is beating a stampede against my ribs. It's as if time stands still and the world stops spinning on its axis. The whole of the universe is waiting with bated breath to see what the great Luca Rossi will do when kissed by his best friend.

When his hand gently slides up my arm to curl around my bicep, I feel emboldened and push out the tip of my tongue to touch the seam of his lips, silently begging ... hoping ... *praying* ... for him to open up and take control. To kiss me back and profess that he, too, has been pining after me like I have him.

Except that doesn't happen.

Much to my mortification, Luca slowly pulls back at the same time as he gently pushes me away, putting distance between us. Conflict and confusion are written all over his beautiful, flawless face.

"London," he breathes, and that one word tells me everything I need to know.

I shut down and go into self-preservation mode, which for me means plastering a smile on my face, brushing it off as nothing.

"Hey. A girl's gotta shoot her shot once? I thought for sure you knew how I felt about you," I say with a shrug, jerking away from him and reaching down to grab my purse by my feet.

"London ..." Luca's soft, smooth voice is *not* helping me hold back the whirling emotions threatening to bubble over.

I clench my eyes shut and take a deep breath before straightening and looking back at him. "It was worth a try, right?"

"It's just—"

I shake my head. “It’s OK, Luc. I get it. You’re not interested in me in that way. It’s OK. I’m OK. I ...” *have to get out of here before I lose it.*

“Lonnie, we’ve got a good thing going between us. You’re one of my best friends, and the only woman in my life I’m not related to who I care about. I don’t want to lose what we have, and with your dad and family, and the firehouse, it’s just—”

“It’s OK, Luc. Honestly. Let’s just put this down to a dumb moment on my part and move on.” Well, hopefully *you* can, ’cause I’m not sure I ever will.

He nods, but the sympathy written all over his face almost does me in.

“Catch up soon, yeah?” I say, opening the door and stepping out, not trusting myself to hold it together for another minute. “London, look at me, beautiful. Please.”

Standing in the open car door, I brace myself and bend down to meet his gentle gaze.

“Are you going to be OK? I don’t want to leave if you’re not.”

That’s when I lie to Luca Rossi for the first time in my life, knowing that it’ll be the way things have to be between us. “I’m good, Luc. Drive safe.”

“Breakfast after my shift?” he asks, and there’s no missing the hope in his voice.

“Always, Luc. Good night,” I say before I shoot him a barely convincing smile and close the door. I wave before I turn my back and do the slow walk of shame to my front door.

Lying in bed a while later, unable to sleep as I run the most embarrassing moment of my recent life over and over in my head, I decide that I’m glad I did it. I took a shot and failed. And at least Luc, being the good guy that he is, was gentle in his rejection. I can’t be sad about *that* at least.

But I’ll get past it eventually. I have to. Because if I can’t have Luc in the way I want to have him, I can still have him as my best friend, my wingman, my platonic boyfriend...

Doesn't mean it doesn't hurt like a bitch though.

Luca

“Luca, Cap wants to see you in his office before you leave,” my brother—and the engine lieutenant—Marco announces as we step out of the truck after a long night of back-to-back callouts. So many fires in one shift means I’ll still be smelling smoke while on my forty-eight hours of R and R. Being a firefighter for almost half my life means I’m used to it by now—but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Damn, what did you do, Luc?” Scotty, a fellow firefighter, smacks his hand on my shoulder as he walks past. “Can’t be good if you’re being summoned to the boss’s office.”

“Maybe he’s commending me for being the best damn firefighter at 101. Ever think of that?” I counter.

“Hey guys, look at that flock of pigs flying past the station.” Marco points out the open garage doors with a laugh that spreads around the crew.

“Nice to know I’m appreciated around here,” I mutter with a shake of my head.

Our friend Rhodes wraps his arm around my neck and pulls me toward the door leading inside. “Oh cheer up, buttercup. You know we love you.”

“Not as much as the Captain’s daughter, mind you,” Scotty *unwisely* jests, causing me to whirl around and point my hand in his face.

“That, right there, makes you uncool, dude. London and I are *friends*,” I reply. “Newsflash, Jones. It *is* actually possible to be friends with a woman and *not* be sleeping with her.”

Scotty holds his hands in the air in surrender. “OK, OK. I was just messing with you, Luc. Jeez.”

“You think the Captain would like to hear his crew talking about his daughter like that? She’s my friend. Just a friend. Nothing more. I wouldn’t do Cap wrong like that.”

“Hey, Luc. He’s kidding. Aren’t you, Scotty?” Rhodes adds, pinning the man with a stare. “Cause the *last* thing you want is to be on cleaning duty for a week or two until he pulls his head out of his ass, right, Jones?”

Damn, Rhodes has the whole *menacing father figure* role down to a fine art. Then again, with a seventeen-year-old son and an eleven-year-old stepson living under his roof, he’s had a lot of practice perfecting it.

Scotty huffs out a grumbled breath and stomps off into the station, muttering under his breath about being the butt of all jokes.

“So, any idea what it’s about then?” I ask Marco as we walk through the doors side by side.

“Beats me. But it can’t be a bad thing. It’s at the end of our shift. Unless he’s asking you to stay on for a double, I think you’re golden.”

I snort and plaster a shit-eating grin on my face. “Of course I’m golden. I’m the *best* Rossi at 101.”

Marco chuckles. “That’s a big call, brother. Don’t let Skye hear you say that.” Skye is our youngest sister and a paramedic at the station, along with her husband, Cohen.

“Technically, she’s a Cook now, therefore my statement stands,” I say with a smirk, earning a shoulder bump from my brother.

“You won’t be so cocky when I tell *her* you said that.”

“I’m not worried about our bratty sister. Anyway, I better go see what Cap wants before hauling ass to breakfast.”

A curious smile quirks my oldest brother's lips. "Don't let him give you the intentions talk."

"What?" I ask with a frown.

"Nothing. It's just funny that for someone so anti-relationship, you seem to be oblivious to the fact you're kind of in one."

I stop dead mid-step down the corridor, my brows so narrowed I'm surprised my face doesn't implode. "What are you talking about?"

"You and London. Best friends my ass."

"We *are*."

"And I'm a monkey's uncle."

I gasp in mock surprise. "Don't you talk about our nephew like that. I think it'll be *me* talking to Skye about what you just called her son."

Marco rolls his eyes. "Nice deflection but I'm not buying it. Tell me this then, little brother. When was the last time you went out on a date?"

"I'm not interested in dating at the moment," I shoot back.

He crosses his arms over his chest and quirks a brow. "OK. So why haven't you dated *anyone* since London moved back to Chicago?"

"Because I've been busy, and *again*, refer to my first answer."

"Riiight ..."

Now I'm getting annoyed. "Look, I'm not *anti*-relationship. I just don't see the appeal right now—not with our job, the schedule, all of it. I can't give one hundred percent to someone if I'm married to my work."

"Bullshit," he coughs, not hiding it. "I call bullshit because I work the same hours as you and have the same shitty schedule, and I'm three months away from marrying my own showstopper." We walk through the kitchen, giving chin lifts

and waves to the oncoming crew before making our way into the corridor leading to the locker rooms.

“It’s not like that with London. We’re friends. She gets me and I get her. It’s good and there’s no pressure, no drama, no feels.” *Because I won’t let there be. I won’t do that to myself, her, or the Captain.*

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Luc,” he says, grabbing my shoulder and giving it a hearty shake. “Just be aware that although you won’t admit what the rest of us can see as clear as day, London has had a crush on you for years, and that kind of history doesn’t just vanish because you turned her down.”

My heart stops in my chest, and I nearly trip over myself as my feet stop moving of their own volition. I jerk my eyes to his. “How the hell do you—” I groan and shake my head. “Fucking Gio. I swear our brother is more of a gossip queen than our Mom and sisters combined,” I say with a growl.

“It’s not exactly hard to see, Luc. I think you’re the *only* one with their head in the sand.”

“There’s nothing *to* see. We’re friends, best friends, and I’m not about to do anything or have Lonnie do anything to mess that up. What we have is good—better than anything I’ve had with a woman before. And that’s because we’re *not* fucking. There’s no pressure—no expectations. We can just *be*. And yeah, I know she caught feelings, but we’re past that now. She told me she understood and agreed with my reasons why we’re better off as friends.”

“Age gap, different stages of your life, work, Cap, and the no exes, wives, or daughters rule? Does that about cover it?”

I nod, my chest easing a bit at the look of understanding in my brother’s eyes. “The last thing I’d ever do—ever *want* to do—is hurt her, Marco.”

“Hey. You know I’m just looking out for you. And if you can’t trust your big brother to level with you, then who can you trust?”

“I hear you. I’m just tired, and after getting shit from the guys and you about London, I guess I’m sick of my friendship with her being questioned all the time.”

“OK, Luc. I get it. I’m heading out now anyway. I have a warm bed and an even warmer body to go home to, and she’s a hell of a lot better-looking than you,” he says with a laugh.

“Say hi to Renee for me. And tell her there’s still one single Rossi brother waiting for her to change her mind about you.”

He smirks and shakes his head. “Fuck off and go see Cap.”

“Run tomorrow morning?” I ask just as we reach the doorway leading to the locker room.

“Yep. Gio, Rhodes, and Jake are coming too.”

“Sounds good. See you then.” I walk toward the admin offices at the end of the firehouse when Marco stops me.

“Oh, and message from my lovely wife-to-be—keep Friday free because she’s booked us in for our suit fitting.”

I turn around, still moving backward. “Ah, yes. Finally, it’s my time to outshine the groom. It’s called being the best man for a reason you know ...”

Marco chuckles and flips me off. “If you’re the best man on the day, then we’re all fucked, little brother.” Then, with a smirk and a mock salute, he disappears from sight.

A few moments later, I knock on the Cap’s open door. He glances up and ushers me in, leaning back in his chair.

He looks as tired as I feel, but after a busy twenty-four-hour shift, we’re all ready to call it a day and head home..

I walk in and take a seat opposite him, happy to get off my feet. “Marco said you wanted to see me?”

“I won’t keep you long, but there’s something I wanted to talk to you about—this firehouse and your future plans”

I still, every muscle in my body tensing because the one thing I’ve never focused on is that. *The future*. It’s always seemed too *big*, too *much* to think about, so I don’t. I live

every day to the fullest and take life as it comes—I always have. So having my boss, my mentor, and one of the most trusted men in my life tell me he wants to talk about it has me on edge and ready to bolt at the first opportunity.

Cap's eyes widen before he chuckles. "Jesus, Luc. You've gone as white as a ghost."

I rub my hand over the back of my neck, an awkward snicker escaping me. "Well, you kinda just launched right in with the whole 'let's talk about the future' grenade."

His eyes dance with amusement. "Well, *usually* when I call any of my senior crew members into my office, they're a hell of a lot more relaxed about it."

"I'm relaxed," I say, feeling a little affronted.

"Right. And the Pope's not Catholic."

I open my mouth to shoot back a smart-ass retort, but the narrowed glare my church-going Cap levels at me has me clamping my lips shut.

"Shit, Luc. Just chill. I'm not talking about giving me your first born, I'm talking about the lieutenant's exam. A huge sigh of relief escapes me. "I had this big speech prepared about you being a highly regarded member of the department and this firehouse, and then you sit there like a stunned rabbit and ruin all of that."

I crack a smile, which earns a deeper frown from my Captain.

"Look, I know you've been happy to come to work and do your job, and you're one of the best 101 has."

Relaxing a bit into my chair, I puff my chest out at his praise. "I sense a *but*."

"It's coming. But I'm going to be frank with you."

I snort. "You're Peter, Cap. Not Frank.," I say.

He shakes his head, and presses on. "You'd be an even bigger asset to the department if you'd stop sitting on your

laurels and put yourself forward for a promotion you're pretty much guaranteed to get."

I quirk a brow. "You gonna sit the tests for me too?"

"Fuck no," Cap says with a laugh. "But I'll back you any way I can. And you have the support of the other lieutenants here at the station."

Well, shit. Knowing I have not just Marco but Rhodes behind this suggestion has me actually considering it.

The Cap goes quiet, his gaze roaming my face. "You're thinking about it, aren't you?"

"Yeah, OK. I'm thinking about it. Probably because I know you, Marco, and Rhodes won't quit until I agree."

Cap smirks and I let out an exasperated sigh.

"When's the next test?"

"A couple of months."

I stare straight at him, rubbing the coarse stubble covering my jaw as I contemplate what this could mean. Usually, it would mean being reassigned to another firehouse, which is *not* something I ever want to happen to me. 101 is my home.

I push up to my feet.

Cap mirrors the action. "Is that a yes then?"

"It's a maybe," I reply.

He jerks his chin. "That's good enough for me, Luc," he says, his lips twitching as he reaches out his hand to shake mine. I do it and then shift back, checking my watch. "Somewhere to be?"

"Breakfast."

"Ah yes, with Lonnie." There's no missing the warmth in his voice.

"Yeah."

"Good."

Now I'm the one jerking my head. I arch a brow. "Good?"

“Yes, Luc. I like that she’s got a friend like you. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders, and if there’s anyone I can trust to look after my baby girl, it’s you.”

“It’s not like that,” I blurt out, still defensive after copping it from the guys earlier. “It’s not,” I repeat, more emphatically this time.

“Okay ... I wasn’t insinuating that it was, Luc. I was simply stating facts. I know you two are just friends.”

I huff out a sigh. “Good. I wouldn’t do that to you, Cap.”

He nods but doesn’t elaborate, which is almost as frustrating as him *not* insinuating anything and me having to yet again defend my strictly platonic friendship with London. What’s with people thinking men and women can’t just be friends anymore?

“Luca, I wouldn’t have you on my crew and want to promote you if I didn’t think you were one of the best men I know. Maybe you’ll rub off on my daughter.”

A spluttered disbelieving laugh escapes me. My eyes feel like they’ve jumped out of my head and rolled down onto the floor.

Then his words sink in, and Cap’s mouth drops open before slamming shut again. “Fuck. Not like *that*. For God’s sake, she’s my daughter, Luc.”

I snort, fighting and failing to keep it together at the horrified look on my boss’s face.

“Go,” he says, shaking his head at me. “And say hello to my daughter for me. We’re like passing ships in the night most of the time.”

“Yes, sir,” I say as I move toward the office door.

“And do think about the lieutenant’s test. Talk it over with your brothers, your parents, Rhodes ... Just at least give yourself and me the respect of considering it, OK?”

I look back over my shoulder and shoot him a salute. “Sure thing, Cap.”

And I do think about it. At least until I take the ten-minute drive to my favorite breakfast spot and spot my best girl sitting in our corner booth, waiting for me.

London

With my phone in my hand, I busy myself with my morning's schedule while I wait for Luca to show up for our regular after-shift breakfast.

When I moved back home from college, I had a business degree and disillusion that I wore like a warm fuzzy blanket. I was suddenly single, living with my parents again after years of freedom, and at a loose end.

Thankfully for me, Valentina Rossi, Luca's sister and a part of the extended Firehouse 101 family, was looking for a receptionist for her boutique, high-caliber day spa. That was three years ago and since then, I've worked during the day and taken MBA classes at night. Now I'm her business manager, taking a lot of weight off her shoulders so she can focus on her work and expanding her empire, as she puts it. We have four other staff members I oversee, which allows me to have these morning meetings with my best friend when he finishes his shifts.

Violet: How's it hanging, Bridge?

An instant message pops up on screen. The sight of my older sister's pet name for me—the only person who'd ever get away with it—makes me smile. We've been as thick as thieves since the day I was born, and even though she lives in New York now, we talk so much that it's almost like she's here with me.

London: I'm good. Just waiting for breakfast. How are you, city slicker?

Violet: Breakfast with your non-boyfriend best friend again? *sigh* Whatever am I going to do with you, sister dearest?

London: *shrugs* Love me and tell me I'm pretty?

Violet: You know you're pretty and I'll love you till I die, but how can you meet your soul mate and future destroyer of your vagina if you keep being a non-girlfriend to the most clueless, ignorant man in the CFD?

I snort and shake my head.

London: Aww, come on. That's a bit harsh.

Violet: Bridge, don't get me wrong. I like the guy. He's awesome. He's just dumb when it comes to you.

Violet: Then again, you're dumb when it comes to him too. So maybe you DO deserve each other ...

I frown. Vi's on fire this morning.

London: What's crawled up your butt and made you cranky?

Violet: Nothing that I don't want there ...

London: TMI, Vi.

Violet: Nothing's TMI between us two. So, sister dearest, when's the date?

Another thing about my sister is that she's like a dog with a bone. Case in point: a client at work wants to set me up with her rather attractive brother, and gave me his card the other day. A card I have done nothing with.

London: I don't know. I'm not sure if I should call him back or not.

Violet: How about you trust your big sister's judgement on this and just call the man? What's the worst that could happen? You get a free drink or two, and sit across the table from a handsome man—your words not mine ... No harm, no foul.

Violet: And if it makes you feel better, Luca doesn't even need to know

Oh he'd know, because I'd have to tell him. I couldn't not tell him. Luca knows me far too well not to realize when I'm keeping something from him. He hounds me every Christmas and birthday until I give in and tell him what his present is.

London: Of course I'd tell him.

Violet: *sigh* I know. I was kinda betting on that. Maybe it'll prompt him to pull his head out of his ass and see everything he could ever want in a woman is right in front of him.

I take another long drink from my cup and set it back down on the table with a resigned sigh.

London: Vi ...

Violet: What? Am I wrong? No, I'm not. You know it and I know it. The only one who DOESN'T know anything, it seems, is the man himself.

I go to type yet another defense but hesitate, because I know Vi is just looking out for me. But it's not Luca's fault that I caught feelings, just like it's not his fault he doesn't feel the same way. It's just the way it is.

Violet: I can hear you thinking from Manhattan, you know ...

London: He's my best friend.

Violet: Yep. And he's also a boyfriend with no benefits that's stopping you from getting one with ALL the good benefits. That's all I'm saying.

London: Message received.

I spot Luca crossing the street and walking towards the coffee shop. My heart skips a beat at the sun glistening off the light flecks in his raven hair. *No, don't even go there, London.*

Violet: Please just call the sexy brother guy. Go during the day for a coffee if that's easier. Just take that toe and

dip it in the pool of single Chicago hotties. What's the worst that could happen?

London: I could like him.

Violet: And that's exactly why you NEED to do it, Bridge.

London: My breakfast date is here. Talk later.

Violet: Say hi to Luca for me and give him a punch in the nuts for being an idiot.

I snort and shake my head just as Luca walks through the front door, making a beeline for our booth. The smile on his face grows the closer he gets.

“Sorry, I’m late. But look at you, looking all ‘boss lady beautiful’ today. I approve,” he says before planting a hand on the table and bending down to kiss my cheek.

He shifts back and slides onto the seat opposite me. My cheeks heat a little but I distract myself with watching the way his biceps flex against the flimsy cotton sleeves of his tee as he sits.

“What were you grinning about anyway?” he asks.

I wave my phone in the air. “Just texting with my sister. She says hi, by the way.”

“Well, say hi back.” He reaches over the table and nabs my cup, lifting it to his lips and closing his eyes with a guttural moan as he takes a healthy gulp.

I narrow my gaze at him, grabbing my cup back and shooting him a mock scowl. “My coffee. Get your own.”

Luca clutches at his chest like he’s wounded. “That hurts, Lonnie. God, it’s hard to find a good best friend these days.”

I gasp and chuck a napkin at him. “Take that back. You know you’d be lost without me.”

He just winks at me with a chuckle before waving a hand in the air to call the waitress over.

“I would,” he says, his expression turning serious before the moment is gone and a smirk appears. “But I guess I *could* order my own.”

“You do that then.” I cradle the cup in my hands, unable to wipe the smile off my face. “And while you’re at it, you’re buying me breakfast.”

His green eyes warm as he looks over at me again. “Was planning on it anyway. You know I’ll always look after my best girl.”

I fan myself and flutter my lashes his way. “Oh God, please buy me breakfast, Luc. I’d be *so* honored.”

“Kids these days. So disrespectful,” he retorts, his lips twitching. Thankfully, that’s when Molly, the same waitress who serves us often, stops in front of us.

“Hey, you two. Just the usual today?” she says, tablet in hand and stylus poised to enter our order.

“Absolutely. And better add another white chocolate soy latte for Lonnie, too, since *apparently* I still don’t have sharing rights after almost three years of friendship.” Luc rolls his eyes before a wicked grin curves his lips, and I can almost hear Molly’s inner fan girl swoon from here. Then again, who can blame her? Luc has this charm about him that wins over anyone and everyone he comes in contact with. He’s just that kind of guy. It’s kind of annoying in an ‘I wish I was the only woman in the room he did it to’ way. *I wonder if there’ll ever be a day that he doesn’t affect me like this ...*

“So what’s new?” I ask.

“Well apparently I’m being summoned for a suit fitting on Friday.”

I clap excitedly. “For the wedding? That’s exciting. How long to go now? Three months?”

“Yep. Best man duties will be kicking off soon.” He rubs his hands together with a smirk. “I can’t wait for the bachelor party. Gonna have Marco saying goodbye to his single life in style.”

A snicker escapes me. “Does *Marco* know anything about this?”

“Nope.” He accentuates the *P*. “But the pressure’s on me now. He’s the first of us brothers to get married so I have to set the standard for which everyone else must follow.”

My brow lifts. “Planning on getting married soon, Luc?” My pulse kicks up a notch at the thought of my best friend committing his life to another woman—someone who’s *not* me.

“Nah,” he replies with a shake of his head. “You know that’s not on the cards. But Gio and Alex will surely be heading down that road soon, and knowing G, he’ll probably have safe-and-sensible Marco as his best man. So if this is the only chance I get to be in charge of festivities, I’m going to make sure it’s memorable.”

I nod and lift my mug, taking a long, slow sip to wet my dry, tight throat, my mind still stuck on the prospect of a future where I might have to watch Luca meet a woman and fall head over heels in love with her when it’s my fantasy he’ll suddenly wake up one day and realize the woman of his dreams has been by his side all along. *Dreams are free, London*, I hear Violet say in my head.

Luc taps my ankle with his under the table. “You’re going to be my date, right? ’Cause you know there’s no one else I’d want on my arm.”

“What?” I splutter, the word coming out as a croak.

“For the wedding. You’ll be my plus one, yeah?”

I’m already nodding, still in a bit of a daze. “Definitely.” *Of course it’s as his best friend—not a date, date.*

Luc knocks his knuckles on the table and I jerk my gaze to his. “What?”

“You went quiet and your lips went all tight. Everything okay?” Concern is written all over his expression.

I wave my hand in the air. “Oh, don’t mind me. My brain just short-circuited. Must be from the lack of coffee since

someone stole some of mine.”

He studies me, as if he doesn't quite believe me. “So, how is your sister?”

My smile is genuine. “She's good. Just checking in with me as per usual.”

“That's what family does. And it must be the day for it since I had a meet with Cap at the end of my shift.”

“Oh, really? What for?”

He sighs and slouches down in the seat, his legs pushing out and tangling with mine like they torturously always do. I love it and hate it in equal measure. “He wants me to take the lieutenant's test.”

I gasp and jump in my seat. “Luc, that's amazing. Congratulations.”

His lips curl into a half smile. “Yeah. I haven't said yes yet.”

My head jerks back just as my brows go sky high. “Why the hell not?” My voice is a touch on the loud side, which earns a single quirked yet rather amused eyebrow arch from Luca.

It's then that Molly slides our coffees onto the table and takes my empty mug away.

“Calm down, beautiful. I haven't said no either,” he says a beat later once we're alone again.

I slowly exhale. “OK. Good. That's good, Luc.”

“Is it?” he asks, lifting his cup to his perfectly curved lips, his gaze locked with mine.

“Yes. Of course it is. You'd make a great lieutenant. My father doesn't suffer fools.”

The corner of Luc's mouth tugs up. “Well, Scotty maybe,” he says, making me giggle.

“Too true. But seriously. Are you going to do it?”

“I think so?”

I reach over and grab his hand, making sure I have his complete attention before I speak again. “Luca Luigi Rossi, I will not have you doubting yourself.”

“I’m not. I’m—”

“You are, and that’s OK. All of us do. It’s part of being human, being real. But if there’s anyone at the firehouse who is deserving and worthy of becoming a lieutenant, of being a leader in name when they’re already a leader in nature, it’s *you*, Luc. And if Dad is pushing you to do this, then you need to believe in yourself as much he does, as your family does ...” I squeeze his fist. “And I do.”

He turns his hand over and laces his fingers with mine. “Fuck you’re good for my ego, Lonnie. Whatever would I do without you?”

“You can start by feeding me dinner tonight. That’s what you can do.”

His lips curl up into a smirk. “Whatever my girl wants.”

God, why can't he see it ... see me?

Thankfully, that’s when Molly returns with our meals, and Luca entertains me with stories of his shift and the adventures of Scotty and a faulty hydrant that saw him giving most of the crew *and* my dad a much unexpected shower at midnight. And I, for one, welcome the change of subject.

LUCA: Are you almost here?

London: That depends ...

Luca: I ordered Mexican from Salsa Street Grill

London: Did you get my Beef Barbacoa Tlayuda?

Luca: Do you think I had a frontal lobotomy and forgot to look after my girl?

Luca: Also got Baja Chicken sandwiches, chips and guac, and of course, Polvoron

London: Well then, I'll bring the beer.

Luca: I've got that too. What I don't have is my girl here.

London: Anyone would think you were missing me? You only saw me eight hours ago, Luc.

Luca: Maybe I'm just hungry and I'm worried I won't be able to stop myself from starting without you.

Well, that certainly has my mind jumping to other conclusions . .

London: Keep your pants on, Luc. I'm five mins away.

Luca: And Ben, our friendly delivery driver, is apparently seven minutes away so the race is on.

True to my word, five minutes later, I'm pulling into Luc's guest parking spot for his condo and getting out of the car just as a grinning Luc is at my door like an eager puppy, dressed in a tee and black sweats and bare feet.

"Finally. Jeez, I thought you'd never get here," he says, sliding my purse off my arm as he leads me toward the stairs to his place.

I wonder why he's so eager. "Where's the fire, Luc?"

"Ben was more eager than you and made it in three minutes. He won the race today."

"And you're *that* hungry you had to come help me from my car? Don't let anyone ever say you're not a gentleman."

He puffs his chest out with pride. "Mama wouldn't let me be any other way."

"But really, you're just starving and had to get away from the food so you wouldn't start without me," I say, stating facts.

Luca chuckles and wraps his arm around my shoulders. "You've got me there, babe. But hey, at least I waited. Right?"

"Yes, Luc." I can't help but laugh at him. He really is a loveable goof. He's not on the same level as Scotty from the firehouse. That guy is clueless as well as a goof. It's actually

no surprise that before Scotty got himself hooked up with his orthopedic nurse girlfriend, him and Luc were each other's trusty wingmen. Especially when Marco, Rhodes, and Gio found themselves living in domesticated bliss with their women.

A minute later, Luc's opening his front door and letting me go ahead, the familiar bachelor-pad décor of dark and wooden tones wrapping around me like a warm fluffy blanket. It makes sense, considering I spend half of my non-working time here.

"Are we eating at the island or the coffee table?" I ask, waiting by the long black leather sectional that breaks up the living and kitchen space.

Luc closes the fridge, two beers in hand, before he makes quick work of the bottle caps then grabs the two red paper bags from the counter and walks toward me with a smile. "If you want to grab the utensils and some napkins, I'll get us set up in front of the TV, ready to watch whatever rom-com you're going to torture me with tonight."

"You know you don't *have* to be tortured right? You could just *admit* you enjoy them," I say with an exaggerated sigh, earning a sexy smirk from the man who tortures me without even knowing he's doing it.

Why is it that every damn time I think I can live with just being friends with him, he acts like the most perfect boyfriend in the world?

"Thanks, beautiful," he says, shooting me a grin when I return to the couch and take a seat at the other end.

"Why you all the way over there?"

I tilt my head and smirk. "Just making sure you can't steal anything off my plate."

He gasps, feigning offence with a flat hand over his grey CPD tee. "Would I do that?"

I snort as I sit on the edge of the couch, holding my plate out while Luc dishes the food between us. "You forget I know you, Luc. You're always stealing my food."

“Maybe it’s all mine and I’m just sharing it with *you*??” He snickers before stuffing a guac-stacked corn chip into his mouth.

I roll my eyes and lean back into my seat, wrapping an arm around my plate like I’m guarding it. “Okay, Luc. Whatever you say.”

“Good. Now, you ready to watch another lovey-dovey movie? Can you at least pick one with a tortured vampire or something manly?”

“A vampire?” I say, arching a brow. “That’s your definition of manly?”

“Because he’s immortal, he doesn’t get the random grey hairs or these little wrinkles around his face like us *normal* men do.” He squints, making his eyes crinkle. “Gives a mortal man like me something to dream about.”

Without thinking, I lean over and gently pat his cheek, biting my lip to stop myself from laughing at his disgruntled expression as I shift back. “Don’t worry, Luc. You’d be just as handsome as you are now if you were a vampire.”

He grunts around his mouthful of a crispy bean tostada. “Bet you say that to everyone.”

“Yeah, Luc. Because *everyone* needs reassurance from their *much* younger best friend about not getting old and wrinkly.”

“That’s why you’re my girl. You’ll always make me look younger than I am.”

“True! Good to see I have a purpose in life.”

“You’re not just here to make me look good. You know that, right?”

I roll my eyes—again—but this time it’s to hide the nervous spike in my pulse as to what’s going to come out of his mouth next. When he’s all mushy like this—one of my favorite sides of the man—it’s hard to know what he might say. “Yes, Luc. I’m here to keep the *hordes* of women from beating down your door.”

He lightly taps my ankle with his. “Exactly! And you’re my best friend. I can’t imagine watching these lovey-dovey movies with anyone else but you. You’re my girl. It’s what we do.” Then he lifts the remote and pushes play.

As the movie starts, and we eat our dinner in comfortable silence, I can’t help but wonder how long it will be before he *can* imagine being just like this with another woman—one that’s *not* me. Or maybe it’s time I start looking for someone else to watch lovey-dovey movies with that I can actually cuddle with while doing it, like I really wish I could do with Luc right now.

All I know is, something has to change, and maybe if Luca won’t see what’s right in front of him, then it’s time I keep my eyes open for someone who can.

Luca

Friday morning, I swing by Gio's place to pick him up. I watch as he makes out with Alex on the front doorstep. When they finally stop mauling each other, he moves toward my car and hops in.

"Good *morning*, brother," I say.

"It is, isn't it?" he replies, looking like a Cheshire cat who got the sexy cream.

I throw my elbow into his ribs, muttering "bragger" under my breath and earning a laugh for my troubles as I pull out into his street and start driving.

"Hey, there's nothing stopping you from finding what we've all got. I guess you've just got to be open to it." He shrugs. "You never know. Maybe there's some amazing miracle of a woman out there who'd be willing to put up with your shit."

"Yeah, right. Anyway, enough about my lack of a love life. How was work?" I ask.

Gio is a cop. He didn't follow Marco and me into the fire department like Skye did. So, as you can imagine, there's always a lot of brothers-in-blue-versus-hose-monkeys ribbing that goes on between us.

"Good. Busy as always, and there are always those funny drunk call-outs, and they always make for an entertaining night," he says with a chuckle. "How about you?"

“Just a quiet one. We stayed home, had dinner, watched another one of London’s rom-coms. Nothing exciting.” I flick the indicator and drive onto the freeway.

Gio eyes me suspiciously.

“What?” I ask.

“That sounds very ... *domestic*.”

I sigh and roll my eyes so hard I almost pull a muscle. “G ...” I growl, trying to ward off yet another talk about me and London. “Are you about to hop back on the ‘there’s more going on there’ bandwagon like almost everyone else?”

“Nope. My girlfriend keeps me up to date with the Firehouse 101 gossip, and you’ve told me more times than necessary that you’re just friends. I think it’s cool. Probably smart too. Especially if you’re going for lieutenant.”

I glance his way. “News travels fast.”

“It’s been four days, Luc. You didn’t think one of our two siblings you work with *or* our brother-in-law, who you also work with, wouldn’t tell me? Are you going for it?”

“I don’t know. It would mean a lot of changes.”

“And?”

My head jerks. “And? And it would mean moving stations to wherever I’m needed. They don’t just let you take the test, get the stripes, and say, ‘Off you go back to work.’ It doesn’t go like that.”

“Ahh,” Gio replies, as if that one word explains everything.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?”

“What did that ‘ahh’ mean?”

“It meant ‘ahh.’ Nothing more, nothing less,” he states matter-of-factly.

“No, no. That ‘ahh’ meant something. Just spit it out.”

“You really want to hear this?”

I roll my eyes as I watch the road. “When have you ever held back when it came to me, G? You may be the younger brother but you’ve always been the one who acts older and wiser.”

His chest puffs up. “Okay, then. I think you’re scared of change. You’re stuck in a rut.”

“I’m not stuck in a rut.”

“You are, but that’s okay because you love your rut. It’s what you know. You’re comfortable there. It’s easy and predictable, which is funny, since you’re more of an adrenalin junkie than any of us.”

“Except Alex of course,” I say, shooting him a smirk.

“I’m not sure *any* of us are as wild as she is.” He chuckles. “But that doesn’t make what I’m saying any less true.”

“I like my life—”

“—exactly like it is. Yeah, I know. We *all* know. What I can’t work out is why you’ve resigned yourself to it.”

“What do you mean?”

Gio turns in his seat to face me. “Okay, then. Answer me this, big brother. When was the last time you went out on a date?”

Damn. He’s got me there.

“And when I say a date, I mean actually out of the house. Not to a club where you pick a willing bed buddy up and take them home for a once-and-done. I mean an actual *date*.”

I open my mouth but words fails me, because I can’t actually remember—date or otherwise.

“It’s been a while on both fronts actually,” I murmur.

“Ahh.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Stop with the ‘ahhs’ already. Spit it out, G.”

“Alrighty then,” he says in a really bad Jim Carrey impersonation. “And just remember, you asked for it.”

I glance at my GPS, grateful that we're only a few minutes away from the suit shop where Marco and all of the males in the wedding party are meeting. "Do your worst, brother dearest."

"I think you don't want to grow up." I go to argue but he doesn't give me the chance. "I think *you* think you're happy with being the fun uncle, the single brother, the one who'll always swap shifts for others or be up for a night out—you're *that* guy. Not going to be tied down, no responsibilities, no drama. You like things how they are, and you don't ever want them to change."

"Yep. And what—pray tell—is wrong with that?" I pull into an underground parking garage and come to a stop.

"Luc, go for the damn promotion, for God's sake."

"Don't let Mama hear you take the Lord's name in vain," I say with a smirk. "But I'm thinking about it. Okay?"

"Nope. You don't have to think about it. You've gotta just say yes and *do* it."

"I've worked at 101 my whole career," I reply.

"Yep. And you might keep working there. You might not. You might cover Marco when he and Renee go away on their honeymoon, or when they have kids and he takes some long-service leave. There are a lot of scenarios here where you won't or *don't* have to move stations. But if you do, the only thing that changes is the firehouse and the crew you're working with. You're not automatically forgotten just because you're not there anymore. Is that the only thing holding you back?"

"I like my life, my friends, my family, *London* ... I like everything the way it is. Why rock the boat when the water is calm?"

He arches a brow as if he can read my mind and *knows* there's more.

"And I guess I don't want to let anyone down. That's dumb though."

“You’re right—it’s dumb that you think you could ever do that. Although there was that one time when you were twelve and I was nine, and you told me it would be cool to use up all of Val’s makeup because she didn’t want it anymore, and *I* was the one who had to do everyone’s chores for a month to pay it back. Now *that* was dumb.”

“You never snitched though, G. Not once. Not under Val or Mom or even Dad’s interrogation.”

Gio reaches out and wraps his hand around my head, giving it a gentle jerk and flexing his fingers against my scalp. “Because I’ve got your back. Marco has your back. We’re all just waiting for you to believe in yourself enough to try.”

“I’m happy with how things are, G. I’m *happy*. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

My brother nods. “That’s all any of us want, Luc.”

“Good. I am. Big brother TED talk done and dusted. Now it’s time for us to try on monkey suits and laugh at Marco settling down.”

“Now *that* I can do.”

WHEN WE REACH the street level and stop outside the suit shop, Gio’s words are still running rings in my head. Walking ahead of me, he leads me through the door, where we see that not only are Marco, Rhodes, his son Jake, and my dad there, but also Val and London.

“Finally!” Val says, coming up and hugging us both. “It’s like you shift workers forget the rest of us have *actual* jobs.”

All of us men groan, including Jake, who knows Valentina and her dramatics all too well by now. London just giggles and shakes her head, the sound making me smile as I walk over to her and wrap my arm around her. I pull her into my side, right where she belongs.

“What are you two doing here anyway? I thought this would be just us guys today,” I say.

London snorts and shakes her head. “Skye was coming but Austin had her up all night teething, so she called Val up to duty, and since we have nothing on until lunchtime, Val invited me along.” Her brows scrunch together. “That’s okay, isn’t it?”

“Sure it is. You know you’re as much a part of this crazy family as I am,” I say, leaning down to kiss her forehead. I don’t even know why she still questions her place in my life anymore. Where she goes, I go, and vice versa. Nothing is ever going to change that if I have any say in the matter.

“Did you really think Renee would trust you guys to not go all ‘Elvis suit onesie’ on her for the wedding?” Val pipes up.

Marco scoffs, looking slightly affronted. “My future wife gave me very clear guidance on what we should be all looking at today.”

“Whipped,” I cough into my fist.

“Well, since you’re determined to be single and living the lonely life, let me educate you. When the woman you love has had her dream wedding planned for years, you make sure that she gets everything her heart desires ...”

“Within reason,” Rhodes says with a smirk. “I’d draw the line at Hawaiian shirts.”

“I rock anything I wear, so I’m not worried,” Jake says, sounding every inch the confident teen he is.

Dad looks my way and arches his brow, a soft, weird look in his eyes I cannot explain. “Hey, Pops. What do you think? Should we go a bit crazy for the wedding? You only get your first wedding once, right?”

A startled snort escapes my father as Marco’s eyes nearly jump out of his skull.

“*Only* wedding, Luc. One and done. You don’t let the ‘one’ go once you’ve got her.”

“Or she’s got you,” I reply.

“Exactly, and I wouldn’t want it to be any other way. And for the record, the instructions were nothing Elvis, nothing Hawaiian—*especially* not Tiki torch-related, like Scotty would suggest. White shirts, black tailored suit jacket, matching slacks, and black dress shoes.” Marco looks me up and down. “I bet even *you* can’t look bad in that.”

“Fuck you very much. I look good in everything, don’t I, Lonnie?” I ask, looking down at her.

She grins and pats my chest. “Of course, Luc. Whatever you say, Luc.” Then she ducks out from under my arm and goes to stand by a laughing Val.

I narrow my eyes at both of them. “You’ll keep. What’s this world coming to when a man’s sister and his girl can’t have his back?”

Groans fill the room just as a wiry old man who looks like Gomez Adams comes through red velvet curtains at the back of the room.

“Are we all here now?” he asks with a thick Italian accent.

“Yes, sir,” Marco says, stepping forward. “Let’s get this party started.”

“You ready to get pinned and measured for your first father-of-the-groom assignment, old man?” I ask Dad as he walks toward me.

“About time I started to get rid of you boys.”

“Hey!” Marco, Gio, and I all protest in unison.

“Don’t worry, Papa. You’re stuck with me,” Val says all sickly sweet to our father, who totally eats it up. *Always the suck-up, that one.*

“Good, *cara.*”

“Don’t miss me too much,” I say to both Val and London, blowing them a kiss and not missing Val’s mock gag.

“Yeah, we’re gonna sit here and talk about you and *only* you, Luc. Not my business, or our work—you know, that thing that puts food on my table,” my sister throws back at me.

“Suuure.” I wink and give them a wave before following Rhodes and Jake behind the red curtain.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m wearing a white button-down and tuxedo pants that are long enough for my six-foot-two height, but that could definitely do with a bit of a nip and tuck in all the right places.

London and Val’s eyes scan over us as we step out one by one.

“God, it’s like we’ve been transported to a Vegas strip revue,” Val says. “Not that I *ever* want to see my brothers naked, but all of you standing there like that? I’m just waiting for ‘Leave Your Hat On’ to start blaring from the speakers.” My sister’s eyes light up as she turns to Lonnie. “Actually, we should totally do that?”

London frowns, as if she’s struggling to keep up with Val’s train of thought. “Do what?”

“The next girls’ night. We should all go to a strip club. There’s that cool one downtown ... I’ve forgotten the name.”

“The Pink Monkey?” Gio says.

Val’s eyes light up. “Yes! That’s the one. What do you say, Lonnie? Tomorrow night. You keen?”

“I can’t make tomorrow but next time, definitely.” London’s gaze slides to me before cutting back to my sister when I catch her looking.

“Got a hot date, London?” Rhodes asks.

Val’s eyes widen as she and Lonnie exchange some weird unspoken conversation. *What the fuck is going on?*

“Nah,” my best friend replies. “I’ve just got plans. You know, to catch up on stuff since *that* one is working and won’t need me.”

I chuckle when she jerks her head my way. “Hey, you’re my girl. I can’t help that I’m *so* much fun to be around.”

“Are we just going to stand here in monkey suits all day?” Jake asks, changing the subject.

I chuckle and look to London, who's laughing along with my sister. For some reason, I watch her, waiting for her to look my way again. I want to see what she really thinks of my suit—well, in its current form, anyway.

What we have is good—really good. She just gets me, and I'd like to think I get her, and I'm grateful that nothing changed between us after that unexpected kiss six months ago.

“So, what do you think? Am I going to outshine the bride?” I ask, stepping forward and giving a slow twirl as a slow-growing smile transforms her lips.

“Hmm.” She rubs her chin and looks me up and down. “I think you'll definitely be the best-dressed best man ...”

I throw one arm out in front of me and fold the other over my waist before performing a bow. “That's why they say I'm the best-looking Rossi brother.”

“Since when?” Marco says.

“Yeah, right!” Gio scoffs.

“Age before beauty, son,” my *dad* replies. My head snaps his way.

“Dad, you're supposed to have my back here.”

His wise hazel eyes crinkle at the sides. “I have five children, *caro*. I'm also married to your mama. So I know what side my bread is buttered on, and I know that *all* of my children are good-looking, and I love you all equally.”

“Forever the democrat, Mr. Rossi. I approve,” Rhodes says with amusement.

“Well, I for one don't care what any of you say. I'm *rocking* this suit,” Jake announces, plucking at the lapels of his jacket. “I'll be king of the dance floor and surrounded by all the women in this get-up.”

“Jake ...” Rhodes warns, his lips twitching.

“What? Where's the lie, Dad?”

“At least I'm not related to *any* of the bridesmaids. Maybe they'll take pity on me,” the far too confident teen adds.

I snort and pull Jake into a headlock, mussing his hair before letting him go. “Yeah, you’re right. Chicks dig the underdog. You know, the quiet loner left sitting at the table, waiting for his turn. If Scotty can get himself a nice girl, there’s hope for you yet.”

I smirk as Jake’s eyes narrow at me, and I know I’m gonna pay for that jibe later. He’s a good kid though. He fancies himself as a bit of a dating guru, even though he’s told all of us he’s waiting for his one and only, and he won’t settle for anything less. If I was ever to have a kid, I’d want one just like him.

“Okay, getting back on track. Renee and I decided to go with this, which will match the bridesmaids’ dresses.” Marco holds up a blue-green—maybe it’s a *peacock*-colored tie.

“Do you know how you sound right now?” Gio teases.

Rhodes shoulder-bumps him. “Just you wait, G. Iowa and you will have to do all of this one day. *Then* you’ll know just how important *tie* color is.”

“Notice how the only ones caring about matching colors and keeping the women happy are the *nearly married* ones?” I ask, shooting a wink to London who just shakes her head at me.

“Your turn will come, Luc. Just you wait,” Marco says. “*Until* then, how about you wow us with your tie tying technique?”

I puff my chest out and step forward, reaching for the tie hanging from my brother’s fingers, running through the steps of tying a Windsor knot in my head.

Then, in what must look hilarious to anyone looking in, four grown men and a teenager, try—and fail—to get the ties to look right. Of course, Val, London, and my dad just sit back and laugh at us until I shoot desperate puppy-dog eyes to my best friend.

“Please, Lonnie. Help a bestie out? My ties are usually the already tied type,” I explain, not missing the snorts from the guys and Dad’s disappointed groan. I bat my lashes at London

in one final plea. She sighs, then seems to take pity on me. She crosses the room, her eyes dancing with humor as she bats my uncoordinated hands out of the way and gets to work. I smile at the deep concentration on her face, and my chest warms when the tip of her tongue darts out to touch the corner of her mouth as she twists and folds and threads the material through the loop.

The problem is, when she lifts her eyes to mine just as she slides the knot up to my neck, there's this moment where the whole world stands still, and it's like we're the only two people left moving. I notice gold flecks in her deep blue eyes that I've never seen before. My gaze drops to the perfectly curved Cupid's bow on her top lip.

My head goes a little fuzzy, and I have what I can only think of as an out-of-body experience because it feels right *far* too right. Like it's not just my best friend smoothing her palm down my chest making sure the tie is perfect.

As if sensing my confusion, Lonnie jerks her chin up. Her eyes lock with mine before she quickly steps away, and the moment is gone as she slowly makes her way down the line of groomsmen, helping them, one by one, too.

But I'm frozen in my spot, my heart racing as I try to comprehend what the *hell* just happened.

My eyes drift over to Val, who's studying me closely. Then a slow-growing, all-knowing smile appears on her face, and she lifts a single brow my way.

"*What?*" I mouth, not trusting myself to speak.

She shrugs ... suddenly looking like a cat that's got the cream.

But whatever Val is grinning about, she's wrong. London is my girl, my best friend, ten years my junior, *and* the Cap's daughter. That means hands off, no touching, and no *thinking* about anything even remotely inappropriate. No wives, exes, sisters, or daughters—that's our rule.

Whatever that *thing* was between Lonnie and me just now was nothing?

It has to be.

Right?

London

I've felt uneasy all day, and I can't pinpoint exactly why. It's not that I'm going out on a date; I've done that before. I've been on lots of first dates and a few second ones. Very rarely will any dalliance go past that. But I haven't had one since I tried shooting my shot with Luca six months ago.

It must just be nerves, since this is supposed to represent me initiating a firm step forward and away from my unreturned feelings for Luca. Actually, calling them feelings is too small, too inconsequential. *Get it together, London.*

Maybe it's that for the first time, I haven't told Luca what I'm doing tonight. He doesn't know that I'm going on a blind date with a man I've spoken to once but have never met before. I'm broadening my horizons and doing it without my best friend's knowledge.

He knows I've dated before. Heck, he's even *encouraged* me to do it. Of course in his mind, nobody has ever been good enough for me. And his opinion as my best friend has always mattered.

That could be why I *haven't* told him about my blind date tonight with the client's brother, Brock. Because I don't want Luca's opinion about me dating clouding my judgment.

I spoke to Brock on the phone on Wednesday night and it went well enough. He was funny, laid-back, and interested in getting to know me. Tonight, we're meeting at a steak house for dinner and drinks. It will be low-key and casual, something

non-intrusive for what is, for all intents and purposes, a blind date.

We did send each other photos so that we'd at least know who we were looking for when we arrived, and he's definitely handsome. An orthopedic resident at Northwestern Memorial Hospital too. So he's got a worthwhile career and a bright future ahead of him. The rest of the things we need to know about each other we'll learn in about ten minutes when I get the courage to get out of my car and step into the restaurant.

It's just ... *he's not Luca*

London: Why am I doing this again?

Violet: Because you've gotta stop pining after your best friend who has you so deep in the friend zone, he'll be naming his future illegitimate children after you.

London: Vi!

Violet: Sister dear, Luca Rossi is not the settle-down-and-commit type. The closest he'll get to a white picket fence is visiting his brothers and their tribes of kids.

She's not wrong. Before I can reply, another message pops up.

Violet: But I also want to see my sister be happy and loved and getting the D on the regular. How long has it been now?

London: I'm totally not answering that.

Violet: And that says it all. Take my advice: switch the Luca-loving brain off for a few hours and go meet Dr Brock.

London: God, now it sounds like I'm having dinner with Dr Nick from *The Simpsons*.

Violet: LOL no. Well, for your sake, I hope not. All you've got to do is have a few drinks, show him a bit of leg, flirt, laugh, and most importantly, have FUN.

Violet: Also, send me a pic of what you're wearing. I want to see if you're showing enough of the ladies our

mother blessed us with. Got to make a good impression after all.

I roll my eyes but having guessed she'd want to know what I'm wearing—she is working in fashion now, after all—I took a photo at home before I left, anticipating this question and also sending it to Val since she helped choose it. I exit the messaging app and scroll through my photo gallery, bringing up the best of the bunch that show my navy-blue Broderie dress with its dipping V-neckline and mid-length skirt with a subtle yet teasing thigh split. I quickly reopen my texts and shoot it off without looking.

Unfortunately for *me*, it's not Violet who receives the photo ... it's the last person to message me, which just happened to be Luca with a 'What are you doing?' text. *Shit. Fuck. Damn.*

Luca: Whoa. Looking good, beautiful. What's the occasion? Is this for Marco and Renee's wedding? Because if so, I approve. You'll be stealing the attention away from the bride in that.

Just as I go to reply, Violet texts again.

Violet: I'm waiting here ...

Instead of messaging her, and hoping it'll slow my spiking pulse, I call her.

"You know this isn't picture-vision, right?" my sister says by way of an answer.

I groan, banging my head against the steering wheel. "I just sent the pic to Luca instead of you."

Vi bursts out laughing, and I can just imagine her sitting in her tiny shoebox of an apartment, glass of wine in hand, loving this development. "That's awesome."

"No, it's not!" I snap.

"Bridge, it *is*. Because knowing you, you didn't *tell* him you were going on a blind date tonight."

"I told him I had plans ..."

“But not *what* those plans were. Bridge, what am I gonna do with you?”

“Tell me how to make this right.”

“There’s no need. Let him ponder. Let him wonder why you’re undoubtedly looking hot in that dress I told you to buy. The navy one?”

“He thinks it’s for the wedding.”

“Then correct him,” she replies without any hesitation.

“What?”

She sighs. “London, you forget that I know you as well as I know myself, and that I’ve been by your side or in your ear throughout this whole ‘Luca crush’ phase of your life. And I may not agree with the way you handle it, but this is the time you have to listen to me as your big sister. Tell him you’re on a date. Tell him you accidentally sent him the photo instead of me and say sorry. That’s it. Nothing more, nothing less. Then you turn your phone off, put Luca Rossi out of your mind for the next few hours, and you give this hot doctor-in-training a chance to get into your pants.”

“Vi! I’m not sleeping with the guy. Just having dinner.”

“Well, right now, you’re not doing anything because you’re sitting in your car outside the restaurant being a chicken.” She follows that up with a loud chicken squawk.

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Vi ...”

“Bridge ...” she replies, mimicking me.

I huff out a resigned sigh. “I’m not going to win this one, am I?”

“Do you ever? C’mon, think about it. You’ve got a gorgeous *willing* man who wants to buy you a steak dinner and you’re sitting there putting it off because you’re worried about what your beloved *Luca* might be thinking about. He’s probably not even thinking anything about it; he’ll just be

thinking you're seeing if he'll like the dress. Nothing more, nothing less. Because he's made it *abundantly* clear that he doesn't want to risk your friendship by exploring these feelings of yours."

I open my mouth to argue but slam it shut again. "You're right."

"I usually am," she replies, sounding pleased with herself.

"OK. I'm going to ignore the message, turn my phone off, and go inside. I've already kept him waiting for five minutes."

"London Lee Kelly," she says like a scolding parent. "You get your ass in there and dazzle that doctor."

"Yes, ma'am."

"See? I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking."

"Thanks, Vi."

"For what this time?"

"For talking me off the ledge."

"It's not a ledge, Bridge. It's a precipice, one that you've been inching toward for a while. I know you love the idea of Luca, but there comes a point when you've got to see the writing on the wall and focus on *you*. You're beautiful, funny, smart, and a total catch for the right man. If Luca isn't willing to step up to the plate and see what's been in front of him for a while now, then it's his loss. Your job is to turn it into a win and move forward."

"I'm getting there ..." *I think*.

"I know you are, honey. And I'm right here to hold your hand while you do it."

"I love you. You're a pain in my butt, but I love you."

"And I'm going to be that ache in your rear for the rest of your life, so you should really be used to it by now. Now, go and dazzle the doctor."

"OK."

“And I expect a full debriefing afterward ... or tomorrow morning, when you do the walk of shame.”

I gasp. “Vi, I’m not going home with the guy. I don’t know him.”

“I know. But a sister can hope. Talk soon.”

“Bye, Vi,” I say softly before ending the call and staring through the window toward the restaurant. I look back down at my phone, my thumb hovering over Luca’s message as I fight the temptation to reply.

And knowing it’ll help me focus on my date, I type out a quick message to Luc.

London: Sorry, that was meant for Vi. It’s what I’m wearing tonight. Gotta go now. See you for lunch tomorrow.

Then, before he can reply, I turn my phone off like Vi suggested and stare at myself in the mirror, taking one last big breath before getting out of my car and crossing the road.

DON’T GET ME WRONG—BROCK is perfect. Like P.E.R.F.E.C.T. But I just can’t get out of my head. Ever since I walked in and the hostess showed me to the table where the tailored-shirt wearing, definitely hot, and ever-the-gentleman doctor stood to greet me, it’s like I’ve been here but also *not*. Maybe I’m having one of those out-of-body experiences.

“How’s your meal?” his smooth-as-molasses low voice asks as he nods to my plate where I’ve been toying with my food for the past ten minutes. His eyes lift from my cutlery to mine, a frown marring his handsome face. “Do you not like it?”

My head jerks up and I move it from side to side. “No, not at all.” I place my knife and fork together on the side of my plate and grab my napkin from the table, lifting it up to dab my mouth.

As if he's so perfect he can also read my mind, he reaches over and lifts my wineglass, offering it to me with a gentle smile that has me releasing a silent sigh when I take it from him.

"Now, doctor's orders. Take a sip and a deep breath, and tell me why you're as tense as a convict on death row."

My eyes bug out at him before his twitching lips make me splutter out a startled laugh. "Oh my God, that's a terrible simile."

His mouth moves up into a sexy smirk that would dazzle anyone. *He's got his bedside manner sorted already.* "It worked, didn't it?" He nods to my drink. "Just a sip. Look, I'll even have one with you."

He reaches across the table and grasps my hand, leaning forward to brush his lips over my knuckles, sending goose bumps scattering over my skin. "It's such a sacrifice to have to drink this Cab Sav with a gorgeous girl making me look good to everyone in the restaurant."

If any other man said that to me, I'd be scoffing and rolling my eyes. But Brock—Perfect Brock, as he'll now forever be known—has just enough charm and swagger to pull it off and be impressive, not sleazy. *As I said ... perfect ... for anyone except Luca-focused me ...*

"Hey. In all seriousness, are you okay?" The genuine concern written on his face hits me right in the feels because I'm totally guilty of not being completely present and engaged on this date so far. It's not fair to the man. *Perfect Brock deserves better, London.*

I smile and drop my gaze to my fingers as they toy with the stem of the crystal glass in my hand. "I guess I'm just nervous," I say, peeking up at him across the table. "You *do* know that you're kind of intimidating with all that hair, those eyes, that smile and ..." I gesture to his broad, muscular chest.

His dark blue eyes sparkle with mirth, his lips curving against the glass. "Oh, do go on. You're very good for my ego, London."

I giggle, my cheeks heating.

“Now *that* is the girl I wanted to see. You’re not overthinking anymore. Be in the moment, London. Life’s too short to worry about things you can’t control.” He could never know just how poignant his words are.

“Tell that to my brain, who can’t get over her stupid crush on her best friend,” I blurt out. I slap my hand over my mouth. My brows hit my hairline as mortification washes over me.

To his credit, Perfect Brock doesn’t say anything. Then again, maybe it’s because he’s staring at me like I’m a puzzle he’s yet to solve. His gaze turns gentle, and I can’t work out if it’s out of pity or sympathy—maybe both.

Brock doesn’t close down as such ... but his demeanor changes. Like he goes from flirty and charming to *not*, yet again proving that he’s just a good guy who can sense the writing is on the wall.

“Shit! I’m so sorry, Brock. Honestly. I didn’t agree to come out planning on thinking about *him* all night. Actually, that’s the very *last* thing I wanted to do.” I down the last of my wine, reaching for the bottle just as my date proves he’s perfect yet again by beating me to it and refilling my glass, a knowing grin playing on his lips.

He nods. “Continue, London. Get it all out.”

I stop, a little startled by how relaxed he is with all of this. “You’re not ending the date and calling for the check early?”

His head jerks. “Why? Never believe anyone that says they don’t have a little baggage hidden away somewhere. If they say they don’t, they’re lying. But you know what *does* help someone process a feeling they’re stuck on? Talking about it.”

Tilting my head to the side, I study him and wonder how this twenty-eight-year-old gorgeous specimen of a man, and a *doctor* to boot, is still single.

“Are you studying psychology?” I ask, rubbing my chin, still trying to work him out.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Nope. I’m an ortho-addict. Bones and tendons and ligaments are where it’s at for me.”

“Hmm ... OK then, Perfect Brock,” I start, and his brow lifts but he doesn’t interrupt me. “How about we split the bill and order another bottle of *that* and we can talk. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ve got a shift starting tomorrow but I’m more than happy to be your sounding board, advice-giver, and conscience all in one, *and* I’ll even make sure you get home safely. How about that?”

“Deal!” I say, shaking his hand and feeling a little sad that this date couldn’t have gone in a different direction—one where I didn’t think about all the ways Luca was not like him, or compile a pros and cons list between the two men in my head for most of the night. I mean, I didn’t even finish my bone-in filet mignon with Hasselback potatoes and steamed greens, for God’s sake.

I definitely lucked out with my very first blind date. Because Brock was never going to be a dick about this. He’s being the consummate gentleman and even offering me a shoulder to moan into. Because he’s Perfect Brock.

An hour, two glasses of wine, and one snifter of cognac later—at Brock’s insistence when I told him I’d never tried it—I’m rather tipsy and giggly, and Brock and I can’t stop laughing as we swap stories from college despite the man having stopped drinking after one glass during dinner.

A loud shout from behind the kitchen door grabs our attention just moments before the fire alarm wails and the whole restaurant is shocked into action. Waiters abandon their tasks, and there’s a rush for the front doors. Brock stands and presses his hand to the small of my back, guiding me in the same direction.

“Everything’s under control,” a suited man I assume is the restaurant manager calls out, addressing the patrons as the stench of smoke starts to seep in to the room. “If you could all just make your way outside in a calm manner.” He moves

toward the doors, holding them open and ushering people through.

A woman in chef whites comes running into the room. “Is there a doctor in the house tonight?”

Brock stops and looks down at me. “Duty calls,” he says just as we reach the manager’s side. “Let me go see what they need me for, and I’ll come find you as soon as I can, okay?”

“Of course. Go.”

He looks to the manager. “Can you please see my date out? I’m a resident at Chicago General so I can administer first aid until the first responders arrive.”

The manager looks relieved and nods. “Absolutely, doctor. There’s a first-aid kit in the kitchen.”

With a terse chin lift my way, Brock turns and strides toward the chef before disappearing through the swinging kitchen doors.

I join the crowd waiting anxiously on the opposite side of the street to the restaurant, watching the doors and looking out for Perfect Brock to emerge. When he does, he’s side by side with a chef, holding a bandaged wrist in his hand and guiding him my way.

Why can’t Perfect Brock be perfect enough for me? I chastise my stupid, love-dumb heart just as the telltale wail of sirens hits my ears.

And while we all wait for the fire department to arrive, I close my eyes and cross my fingers that Engine 101 is busy tonight and *not* heading our way right now.

A girl can hope ... that’s until I see the familiar firehouse number on the truck door as it comes to a stop.

Luca

I pull the truck to a stop outside the address dispatch gave us—a popular stretch of restaurants on the northwest side of the city. Already geared up, the crew and I hop out onto the street with Marco leading the way as he stops to talk to a suited man I assume is the manager while the rest of us quickly do a visual assessment of the situation.

While helping Alex and Scotty with the hoses, I glance around the scene, spotting a couple of cops trying to keep the crowd back, but then I catch sight of dark wavy hair and a dress I've been fixated on since I received a photo of it on my phone a few hours ago. The long legs and kickass black heels on her feet confirm that I am indeed looking at my best friend ... outside a restaurant we've just been called to for a kitchen fire. What are the odds?

“What the hell? London's here,” I say.

“What?” Scotty asks.

“Over there.” I point across to where London stands, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes glued to a man kneeling on the sidewalk who's providing first aid to a chef.

“Where?” he asks, searching the crowd.

“Navy dress, three o'clock.”

He turns in that direction. “Nice,” he says a few beats later.

“Quit it. Cap's daughter, remember?” He's not wrong though. She looks incredible. It's almost like she's on a date

and is dressed to impress. Wouldn't she tell me if she was on a date?

Marco walks up to us, his expression all business.

“Grease fire in the kitchen; sous chef has possible third-degree burn to his forearm so the ambulance has been called for now too. Flames spread up the walls but the manager thinks it's been contained to just the kitchen thanks to the fire doors. He's also confirmed that everyone has been evacuated so as far as he knows, the building is empty.” He turns my way. “I need you and Rhodes to go assess from inside. Scotty and Alex will follow after when you tell us what's needed.”

“What am I, a lieutenant now?”

“Think of it as early on-the-job training,” Rhodes says, bumping my shoulder as he moves to the storage compartment on the side of the truck.

“I haven't made my mind up whether I'm going for it yet,” I mutter as I follow him.

“Then this can be a test. Now stop bitching and follow me.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, earning rolled eyes from Marco.

“Smart-ass,” he says with a smirk.

“Yes, sir,” I repeat. We may be brothers, but on scene, he's my superior, and as such, he gets the respect that role calls for. When both Rhodes and I are ready, we pull our masks down and walk toward the middle of the street where Marco has moved to talk to the manager.

“Where are we going?” Rhodes asks, his voice muffled.

The manager points toward the restaurant. “Straight through the doors to the bar, then at the start of the corridor at the end is the swinging kitchen doors.”

We both nod in understanding.

I meet my brother's eyes. “Lonnie's here. With the guy who's with the chef with the burn. Keep an eye on her.”

He frowns but jerks his chin. “I’ve got her. You’ve got to focus, Luc.”

“Always.” Then I let Rhodes lead the way as we breach the building and follow the instructions we were given. Feeling that the door isn’t hot, Rhodes signals over his shoulder that we will press forward. He slowly pushes it open, but instead of a full-blown inferno, there’s a lot of smoke, the acrid smell of incinerated meat, and a massive industrial oven with two pans full of something smoldering.

Knowing it’ll be quicker just to put it out than get Iowa and Scotty to pull in the hose—as well as minimizing any further damage—I search the walls, looking for the one thing every commercial kitchen needs.

“Bingo!” I shout, running toward the dry chemical fire extinguisher hanging on the far wall. In two strides, I’m tearing it from its holder and disabling the safety mechanism. I point the nozzle at the crackling cooktop. Bracing my legs and locking my arms, I pull the trigger and move the spray from side to side until everything is white and whatever was still burning in a ten-foot radius is put out.

I look over my shoulder at a chuckling Rhodes, who’s holding his handheld radio to his mouth.

“Command, copy?”

“Go ahead, Rhodes.” Marco’s staticky voice fills the room.

“All clear in here. Rossi made sure that whatever was burning is burning no more,” he says, his amusement obvious.

“Lieutenant, is that appropriate radio conduct to demonstrate to our future lieutenant? Copy?” *My brother thinks he’s funny tonight.*

Rhodes shoots me a wink before replying to Marco. “More showing the lieutenant *candidate* what *not* to do. Learn from my mistakes, kind of thing. Copy.”

“Ten two. See you soon.”

“Roger that, Lieutenant.”

“You think we’ll get the smell of incinerated *whatever* that is out of our noses by morning?” I ask Rhodes as he holds the swinging door open for me and ushers me to go ahead of him.

“Probably as much chance as you *not* interrupting the Kelly kid’s date,” he replies with a laugh.

“Radio protocol, Anderson,” Marco’s voice fills the air. I drop my head and groan, knowing there’s no way in hell I’ll hear the end of this now, whatever I do when I get outside.

Rhodes feigns innocence as he looks my way and grins. “Bet this call is about to get a hell of a lot more interesting.”

I step outside into the fresh air and rip my helmet and mask off, enjoying the cleanliness and lack of burning smell around me.

But it doesn’t stop my eyes from going straight to where London is now standing next to the first-aid dude, giggling and holding onto his arm, looking up at him like he’s just hung the moon while Cohen and our other EMT, Corey, attend to the injured chef. *Who the hell is that guy?*

More than that ... why the hell didn’t she *tell* me she was going out tonight? She told Val she had other plans, but not once has she mentioned she was going on a *date*. I thought best friends told each other everything.

After making my way to the truck, I get rid of my gear and pack it away, my mind full of questions I know I won’t get answers to right now.

“All clear inside?” Marco asks from beside me.

I turn to my brother. “Fire’s out. Damage will be mostly smoke-related.”

“Good.”

“Anything *else* happen while I was doing my job?” My gaze slides back toward the ambulance where I see London stumble and her companion catch her by the arm with a grin so bright you could spot it a mile away.

“Nope. She’s fine. Looks like she’s been enjoying the restaurant bar a little bit, but she doesn’t look like she needs

saving. In fact”—he glances over and smirks—”it looks like she’s already found someone to save her.”

“Gimme a minute, Mar.” I step off the curb and move toward the ambulance.

My brother’s hand stops me with a firm bicep grip. “Luc ...” His voice is low and slow, his warning clear as day. “You’re in uniform with a lot of eyes on you.”

“Hey. Give me some credit. I’m not going to make a scene. All I’m going to do is make sure she’s okay ...”

He eyes me skeptically before giving me a curt nod. “Five minutes, then we’re rolling out. Check in with her then leave her be.”

I jerk my chin up before striding across the street, the pressure in my head building with every step. Without thinking, I reach out and pull her toward me and out of the stranger’s hold.

London lets out a squeak as her hands land on my chest and her gorgeous wide blue eyes stare up at me. “Luc ...” she breathes, a huge smile curving her lips. “Hey!”

“Hey, beautiful. How’s your night going?” I ask, my hands resting on her hips. *Damn, is she even wearing underwear?*

“Good! Well, except for the fire. That’s a bit of a bummer. But Perfect Brock here has been taking care of me.”

My lips twitch as I fight a grin. Drunk Lonnie is always very talkative and giggly. It’s fucking cute—when she’s not overindulging while on a *date* with someone.

Perfect Brock—whoever the fuck he is—chuckles as he eyes me up. “Hey. You must be Luca. London has told me a lot about you.”

I narrow my eyes at the man. “Your name is Perfect Brock?”

Cohen and Corey snort as London’s date shakes his head and holds out his hand to me. “Dr. Brock Bateman.” His gaze softens when he looks over at London, who’s still holding on to me. Then again, I haven’t exactly let her go either—

probably because part of me is worried she might crumple into a giggling heap on the floor. “London’s the one who called me perfect.”

I drop my gaze back to London’s glazed eyes. *She’s toasted.* Lifting my hand, I sweep a loose strand of hair back behind her ear, her body melting into mine with a sigh as my skin skims across hers. *God, I like that.*

“Did you drive your car here, beautiful?”

“Mm-hmm ...” she says, resting her cheek against my chest as her fingers toy with my jacket. I grin down at her before glancing over to gauge Perfect Brock’s reaction to his date—*my* girl—being all over me. Instead of annoyance though, I see amusement written all over his face. *What the hell?*

Confused more than I was before, and ignoring the weird relief I’m feeling inside my chest as my blood pressure regulates itself, I focus back on Lonnie. “Why don’t you let me call you a taxi to take you home and I’ll take care of getting your car to you in the morning?”

Her body stiffens and she straightens, stepping away from me like she’s suddenly come back into herself. “Nope. Perfect Brock can drive me home.” She staggers backward until the man of the hour steadies her with his hands on her hips, right where mine used to be. That pressure valve in my head chimes wildly.

“Lonnie,” I say softly despite my body being wound tighter than a well-coiled water hose.

“It’s all right, Luca. I’m not in the business of taking advantage of intoxicated women,” Brock replies, a new edge to his voice as his eyes sharpen on mine. “And considering *you’re* the reason she started drinking after we’d finished dinner, I think you might give me this courtesy. I *am* her date, after all ...”

Motherfucker’s got balls on him. That’s for sure. *Wait ... she got drunk because of me?*

My confusion must be written all over my face but before I can say anything else, London spins on her heels and gazes up at Brock, looking at him like he's her savior. *Looking at him the same way she usually looks at you*, a little voice whispers in my head.

"Perfect Brock, can you please take me home now? I'm not feeling well."

I close the distance between us, not even thinking about the fact that London is now wedged between me and the other man. "Beautiful, you gonna be sick?"

She turns her head my way, her eyes widening just seconds before she opens her mouth and spews all down the front of me with a startled cry.

"Holy shit!" I say, jumping back far too late. "Jesus."

Cohen, who has been standing there watching the whole scene go down while Corey treats the patient, barks out a laugh but soon clamps his mouth shut when my head snaps his way. He grabs a towel from the back of the bus and holds it out to me. "You might want this," he says, his lips twitching.

"Oh my God, Luc," London gasps, but as I look back, her horrified expression morphs into one of amusement. She starts with a snicker, then giggles before she just straight-out cackles raucously. Even *Perfect Brock* joins in. *Fuck my life*.

After wiping as much of the sickeningly strong-smelling puke from my gear as I can, I strip off my jacket, leaving me in my blue CFD T-shirt and my turnouts. I survey my boots and screw up my nose. They're definitely going to need a good hose out when we get back to the firehouse. The guys are gonna *love* driving back with me in the truck.

As if reading my mind, Marco's sharp whistle cuts through the air, letting me know we're rolling out.

With London *still* hanging off her damn doctor date, I close my eyes and resign myself to the fact that I can't make sure she gets home safely myself. That means I'm gonna have to trust this damn perfect doctor of hers to look after her. *Why does that irk me?*

Letting out a frustrated sigh, I reach out to cup her shoulder and get her attention.

“I’m sorry, Luc,” she whispers, sobering slightly. “I didn’t mean to do ... *that*.” She scrunches her nose up in that cute way of hers that always—usually—makes me smile, waving her hand in the direction of my thighs.

“Bet you didn’t, beautiful.” I shoot her a smirk because damn, that puppy-dog expression of hers does me in every single time. “It’s only my gear. It’s used to getting dirty.”

Her eyes flash with *heat*, but that’s just the flirty drunk coming out in her. She’s a happy, giggly flirty drinker—usually very touchy-feely too. Just thinking about her being like that with a *date* doesn’t sit well with me. Maybe the date was horrible and she had to drink to make the night bearable ...

I look her date up and down. He’s like an Abercrombie & Fitch model with a definite Ivy League frat boy feel about him. Why would she wanna date someone like *that*? My London deserves a good, hard-working man who’ll give her the world and treat her like a queen. And definitely a man who’d need the approval of me and the rest of the crew at Firehouse 101.

“Where do you work?” I growl, ignoring London’s giggle and Cohen’s smothered laugh.

“Northwestern.”

“What are you? An intern?”

“Ortho resident, if you must know,” he replies defensively. I study him, sizing him up and trying to get a good read on the guy as I decide whether he’s trustworthy enough to take care of my girl.

“And you’re sure you can get her home safely?”

His expression turns serious. “Abso-fucking-lutely. Look, I get you’re protective of your friend—”

“My *best* friend.”

He rolls his goddamn eyes at me. “Yes, Luca. Your best friend. The girl you take for granted and treat like a girlfriend without any of the good parts. Or so I’m told.”

How dare he say I take her for granted. Is this guy an ortho resident or a wannabe therapist-in-training? “Maybe keep your focus on bones and not on relationships you know nothing about, *Brock*.”

“Luc ...” Cohen warns. “Take it down a notch, brother. He’s all good. You can trust him.”

Brock nods at Co before facing me. “You about done with this macho crap? I’d like to get London home so she can hydrate and rest. Something tells me she’s going to need it.”

I lean forward. Not one part of me likes what he’s hinting at. “Just to the door. She can *hydrate* and *rest* without help. You get me?”

Brock nods but the twitching muscle in his jaw tells me he’s biting his tongue.

“Good. So how about you go do that?” I know I’m being a dick, but I can’t seem to help it. The idea of this guy being anywhere alone with London annoys me. I’ve got half a mind to tell Marco I need an hour so I can drive London’s car home then catch a ride back to the station.

“I’m not a child, Luc,” London pipes up. I look down at her mascara-smudged glare, my annoyance level dropping at the sight that’s more hilarious and adorable than menacing.

“Never said you were, Lonnie.”

“I prefer being called beautiful,” she grumbles.

I take a step forward and lift the clean corner of the towel and gently wipe around her mouth, my lips twitching as I look down at her gorgeous face. “Beautiful, you’re a cute drunk but you’re also a messy one, especially when you share your liquor with my turnouts and boots.” She giggles and my anger disappears completely. “I’m trusting Brock to—”

“*Perfect Brock*.”

The corner of my mouth tips up. “I ain’t calling him that, beautiful. You know there isn’t a man on earth that’ll ever be good enough for my girl.”

Her breath catches, a soft moan vibrating in her chest as her eyes flutter closed before slowly opening again.

“But I want you to go home, grab some water and some Tylenol, and go to bed. I’ll take care of your car and will come get you tomorrow on the way to lunch at my parents’, yeah?”

She stares at me for a good long while, but when the truck’s horn sounds, I know I’ve got to get a move on. “Can you do that for me, Lonnie?”

“Yes, Luc,” she nods, slowly at first then more enthusiastically.

“Good girl,” I say, earning a beaming, blinding smile this time. “And make sure you text me when you get home. Can you do that for me, beautiful?”

After she nods again, I lean in and touch my lips to her temple, ignoring how right it feels.

Before leaving her, I pin *Perfect Brock* with a knowing glare. “Straight home, man. I’m trusting you with something precious to me here.”

He tilts his head, rubbing his chin and studying me. ”I can’t work out if you’re an idiot or you just don’t see it,” he says, pulling London snugly into his side. He looks to Cohen. “C’mon. You see it too, right?”

Cohen purses his lips and shrugs, not exactly denying it.

“What the fuck?” I ask.

He leans in and lowers his voice. “One date with this woman and I already know she’s someone special.”

I grind my teeth together so hard my jaw aches.

“And I don’t owe you anything, especially not after your friendly disposition tonight. But just so we’re crystal clear, this *date* stopped being a date when she told me she can’t get over her stupid crush on her best friend, and because I’m a

nice guy, a good guy, and not the asshole you seem to think I am, I'll give you some free advice. You've got a choice to make, and you're gonna have to make it sooner rather than later."

"Oh yeah? Enlighten me, wise one, who seems to know everything about my girl here."

His eyes flash. "You can either open your eyes to what's right in front of you and how good it could be, or you can let her go so she can get over you and find a man who'll give her the world she desperately wants from you."

Then, like he hasn't just laid me out where I stand, he carefully turns London around and walks her down the sidewalk away from us, leaving me standing there wondering what the hell just happened.

London

My phone buzzes in my purse just as Brock pulls into my parents' driveway.

"You going to check that?" he asks as he turns off the engine.

I roll the back of my head against the headrest to look at him. "Huh?"

His lips quirk up as he nods to my lap. "Your purse. It's been making noises for the past ten minutes."

I shrug as a huge yawn escapes me. "I don't wanna."

Brock snorts. "You don't wanna?"

"We both know who it will be."

"You sure this crush of yours is one-sided?"

"Yep," I say, dragging out the *P* with a pop.

"Hmm."

My brows furrow. "Hmm?"

"Yep. Hmm." God, Perfect Brock has a perfect smile.

"What does *hmm* mean?" I ask.

"It means *hmm*. Besides," he says, turning in his seat, "I don't think you're in any state of mind to know what my *hmm* means right now anyway."

I giggle. "You're probably right."

“You need me to walk you to your door, London?”

“Nah. I’m all good.” I reach down and fumble with my heels before whispering, “Yes” when I finally succeed with the clasp and get them off, picking them up and dangling them from my fingers in front of him. “Especially without these on,” I say as another yawn takes hold, making him chuckle.

“Ah, not your first drunken rodeo?”

“I’m not *drunk* drunk. Just comfortably intoxicated. I’m free and easy, baby.”

Brock’s perfect brow arches, making him impossibly hotter as what I just said registers and my own eyes jump wide.

“Shit. I mean—um ...”

He reaches over and tucks my hair behind my ear in the same way Luca did back at the restaurant, but unlike when he did it, my skin doesn’t tingle and my body doesn’t threaten to melt into a puddle of goo in the leather passenger seat. As if reading my mind, a rueful smile appears on Brock’s face when he pulls away.

“You’re not going to remember this tomorrow. But just so we’re clear, you’re a catch, London Kelly. And as much as you don’t want to hear this, Luca knows it too. Hell,” he says with a dry laugh. “Every damn man you meet probably knows it. What you don’t get—but you will—is that *you* need to believe it.”

I sigh. “I’m far too comfortably intoxicated to process this.”

His smile deepens. My eyes slide to the gorgeous solo dimple on his cheek. “I know,” he says. “What I’m trying to say is that you’re the only one who can work out whether putting your life on hold for Luca is worth it or not.”

“You sound like my sister,” I huff.

“Your sister must be a smart woman.”

“She is!” *God, I’m tired.* “You offering to be my rebound, Brock?” I ask, tilting my head and sending what I hope is a

flirty smile his way.

He chuckles and shakes his head. “I think we’re best leaving things as friends.”

A wave of resignation washes over me. “Yeah. Always the friend, never anything else.” Great, now I’m reaching the sad level of drunk. This sucks.

“Babe. None of that. But it is time for you to get inside, grab some water and some painkillers, and get yourself to bed before ...” He doesn’t say anything else but what he doesn’t say is clear as day.

Before something happens I’ll regret.

I nod and let my lazy gaze roam over his perfect handsome face, a big part of me wishing that this was how Luca could be with me. Not all overprotective and growly like he was at the restaurant. *Like he has any say over who I can date. Sheesh.* “Thank you for an eventful night, Perfect Brock,” I whisper.

Then he does the sweetest, most Perfect Brock thing he’s done all night. He leans forward, wraps his hand around the back of my head, and ever so gently presses his lips between my brows. “It’s my pleasure, lovely London.”

After walking to the front door, I stop and watch as he reverses his car out into the street and waves before driving away. Somehow I know that it’ll be the last I see of Dr. Brock Bateman, but that’s not to say he hasn’t left a lasting impression on me. Or more so ... given me a hell of a lot of food for thought.

I just hope I remember everything he said in the morning.

After having a shower and washing the night away, I take some Tylenol and hop into bed, grabbing my phone off my nightstand where I’d left it and bringing up my messages. There are *five* from Luca and one from my sister.

Violet: You better call me in the morning with a report, Bridge. I want to know how your date with the doc went.

Then Luca

Luca: Are you home yet?

Luca: Beautiful, I just want to know you're home safe

Luca: Swear to God, if that asshole is taking advantage, I'll hunt his doctor ass down myself.

Luca: London ... please just let me know you're OK?

I roll my eyes as I read them, trying to ignore the flippity-flip rhythm of my heart. He's still playing the big brother role, the whole 'London needs protecting because she can't look after herself.' I've been overprotected by Dad, Violet, the crew at the firehouse, and yeah, Luca, for my whole adult life. And I've always loved knowing that I had everyone looking out for me.

But maybe I'm over people thinking I can't look after myself. I'm a twenty-seven-year-old *adult* woman. If I want to go out on a date, I can. If I want to get a little tipsy at the bar and laugh my ass off with that date after catapulting any romantic chance I had with him out the damn window by confessing a crush on Luca, then I should be able to do that.

I need to start worrying more about living my life and less what other people will think of how I do it.

I put my life on hold back in college for a man, and without realizing it, I've started falling back into old habits with Luca—and I'm not even sleeping with *him*. I need some independence. I need to grow up and stand on my own two feet again. That can be a problem for tomorrow's London though.

And as my eyelids grow heavy and I feel myself getting ready to fall asleep, I quickly type out a text to Luca to—at the very least—stop him from blowing up my phone.

London: Home safe. You can relax now, big brother. Good night.

Then I turn my phone to silent, roll over, and proceed to black out.

“YOU LOOK like you had a fight with a bottle of tequila and lost,” Dad says from his perch at the end of the breakfast table.

“Peter ...” Mom warns from where she’s cooking in front of the oven.

I move straight for the coffee-maker and grab the biggest mug I can find before filling it up and walking to the fridge to top it off with my favorite cinnamon-bun-flavored creamer. I don’t sit down before I take a big gulp of it.

“Damn, that’s good,” I groan, relishing the feel of the caffeine coursing through my veins.

I move toward the table and take a seat opposite Dad, leaning my head back against the chair and letting my lids fall closed.

“Hard night, sweetheart?” Dad’s amusement is evident in his tone.

I crack one eye open and glare at him. “I take it I’m the subject of firehouse gossip now?”

“Why would the Captain’s daughter be what everyone’s talking about?”

I narrow my gaze. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“Behave, you two,” Mom says with a snicker.

“Why don’t you tell your *husband* to be nice to me?” I counter.

“Want to talk about why your best friend’s gear was covered in puke after a call-out? We had back-to-back fires after that restaurant call so the truck was smelling *mighty* nice by the time they got back to the station.” *God, kill me now.*

“I may have *indulged* myself in a few alcoholic beverages last night ...” I can’t help but grin a little at the fact not just Luca but the whole crew had to put up with him stinking to high hell. It’s embarrassing, obviously. But also kind of funny.

“Good for you, honey,” Mom says, dishing up a plate of scrambled eggs, hash browns, and crispy bacon, and walking it

over to me. *This* is why I still live at home. My mother is a mind reader.

“Damn, why does she get the good stuff yet your hardworking husband of thirty years gets muesli?” Dad asks, hungrily eyeing up my plate.

“Because you, Daddy-o, have to go to sleep and *this*”—I point down at my plate—”is to make your darling baby girl feel better before she has to go to the Rossi family’s home for lunch.”

“Oh, that’ll be lovely for you,” Mom says with a smile on her face. “Is Luca picking you up?”

Shit. Luca said he’d take care of my car for me. But right now, I’m in two minds about seeing Luca alone because—*reasons*.

As if my Dad is now the psychic, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out my keys. “Rhodes and I went and got it this morning. Luca was exhausted so we said we’d do it for you.”

Oh ...

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, spearing a piece of bacon with my fork and getting out of my seat. I walk toward him and bend down to kiss his cheek before holding out my greasy gift of gratitude for him.

“You’re my favorite Kelly girl, but don’t tell the others, OK?” Dad says—the same thing he often says to Violet, me, *and* Mom. It’s like his own dad joke but we love it all the same.

“Pfft, you’re just saying that ’cause I’m sneaking you the good stuff,” I stage whisper, grinning when Mom tut-tuts me as she makes her way to the table and sits next to Dad.

“So,” she starts, and I know just from her tone that I’m not getting out of this. “About last night ... how did it go?” Mom’s voice is all casual and nonchalant but I know she’s wanting details. She was as excited as Violet was when I said I’d called Brock to arrange dinner.

“He will now and forever be known as ‘Perfect Brock,’ something I blurted out to his face, and he *still* wanted to stay for the date after that.”

“Well *that’s* always good I suppose,” Dad says with a frown. “So how do you go from that to getting trashed and puking over Luca?”

“What? You didn’t listen to your gossiping fire crew to get the details, Captain?” I tilt my head but a slice of pain behind my eyes reminds me that maybe sudden movements are still not a good idea in my somewhat fragile state.

Dad pins me with a stare. “No sisters, daughters, wives, or exes, remember? That includes spreading gossip about them. Especially when it’s *my* baby girl.”

I snort and roll my eyes. “Brock was wonderful. The perfect gentleman. But I realized that I’m not in the right ...” I pause to try and think of an easy way to explain it. “Head space? To date, I guess.”

“I hope he didn’t pressure you to drink or anything.” Good ol’ Dad, always giving me the benefit of the doubt.

“No, he didn’t. We just had dinner then moved to the bar for a few drinks. We were laughing and swapping stories when the fire alarm went off and we were rushed outside.”

Dad leans back in his chair as if settling in for the story. “So you’re drinking, you get evacuated, and then what? Why didn’t you just call a cab and come home?”

“Because Brock is a doctor, and he was helping administer first aid until Cohen and Corey arrived to take over.”

“And Luca?”

“Dad ...” I warn. “Don’t use me to check on the conduct of your firehouse. I’m no snitch.”

“But you did manage to soil his uniform ...”

“He came over to see if I was OK. I was. Then, maybe it was the adrenalin drop or I drank *far* more than I’d thought, but it made me sick, and Luc just happened to be in the firing line for it. That’s it. The end.”

“Sounds like your doctor was being a very Good Samaritan.” Great. Now Mom’s getting on board the Perfect Brock bandwagon. I’m glad she was asleep when I came home last night. Otherwise she’d probably have tried setting me up with him all over again. If only they knew that he never had a chance because I’m still hung up on an imperfectly perfect-for-me firefighter who only sees me as his girl and not his woman—and likely never will.

“What hospital does he work at, Lonnie?” Mom asks.

“Northwestern. He’s an orthopedics resident.”

Dad lets out a relieved sigh. “Ah. So he’s a baby doc then. Good call on not dating him again. Baby docs are full of hot air and bluster, all ego and about working long hours and playing on their off days.”

Mom side-eyes my husband skeptically. “Sounds like a lot of firefighters I know too. Especially a certain husband of mine, back in the day.”

I burst out laughing, hurting my head again, but I still manage to hold out my hand to her for a high five.

“Far too much estrogen in this house for my liking. Why can’t you and Vi hurry up and get yourselves married already? At least *then* I’d have some son-in-law allies to have my back.”

My mouth drops open. Mom’s does the same, and both of us stare at Dad with dumbfounded looks on our faces.

“What? I’m not wrong.” He slides his chair back and stands, then moves to Mom and bends down for a kiss. “I’m off to bed.” He rounds the table to brush his lips over my temple. “And maybe you should try and rest some more before you leave for lunch, too, sweetheart. Sorry to say, but you’re looking a bit peaky.”

I look over to Mom who just shrugs with a ‘he’s not wrong’ expression on her face.

I guess that means I’m needing more sleep. At least that’ll give me time to try and remember what Brock and Luca said

to each other, and what Luca said to me ... and what Brock said to me ...

In fact, I'd be happy with at least *some* recollection of last night. Then I'd know what I will be up against when I face the Rossi clan this afternoon.

Luca

Val: Don't worry about picking London up. I'll grab her on my way.

I groan as I drop my phone onto the mattress and stare at my bedroom ceiling. A big part of me wants to reply and tell her I'll do it because I want to see for myself that my girl is okay. But another part of me wonders how that would actually go since London hasn't replied to any of my texts other than her 'big brother' dismissal when she got home.

Cohen made it clear once we'd caught up back at the firehouse that he thought I'd overreacted at the restaurant. And I know I did, but there was something about the way she looked at him—she's looked at me that way before, and it usually makes me feel ten-foot tall and bulletproof. It made my chest burn with an unknown feeling I couldn't process on the fly.

I can even admit that I was a bit shocked and put off by the fact that she hadn't told me she had a date too. I'm not her keeper, I know that, but we've never *not* told each other important things. Right from the start, we've been completely honest with each other—like two open books. So maybe it was more of a wake-up call of sorts for me.

Perfect Brock's verbal smackdown was definitely unappreciated though. What kind of name is *Brock*, anyway? And why is he so *perfect*? He can't be if their date was a non-starter, like he said. But is that the kind of man London wants to be with? And what did he say about her having a 'stupid

crush' on her best friend? I thought we'd moved past that unexpected kiss months ago. London and I are good—*great* in fact. Well, I thought we were.

“Fuuuck,” I groan, scrubbing my face with my hands. I’m too tired to think about this shit.

I’m definitely an idiot if I think London might forget about last night. Where do we go from here though? Unlike London, I was stone-cold sober and Brock’s words have been imprinted on my brain for hours now.

I just don’t know what to do. There’s no way in hell I’m risking my friendship with Lonnie for something more, not if it means I could lose her from my life. She’s my girl. The only woman who has ever just ‘got’ me. She’s so kind and loyal and giving to a fault. She’s the first person outside of my family who I go to if I need to talk, or vent, or just chill out and relax. When we’re together, I can just be me and she can just be herself.

I don’t know why Brock thought I’d ever hold her back. And why he thinks I don’t appreciate my friendship with London. She’s the best woman I know and if I have my way, she’ll be by my side until I’m old and gray and falling apart. She’ll still be hot—a sexy geriatric charming all the staff at the old folks’ home we’ll live in.

Why would I ever complicate any of that with feelings? Work relationships rarely worked out—even if it had with Cohen, as he reminded me earlier that morning.

“You’re an idiot,” Cohen said.

“What?”

“Why did you come over and check on Lonnie?”

“Because I could tell she had been drinking, and I wanted to make sure she was okay.”

“No. You didn’t like seeing her on a date with another man,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“London and I are not—”

“Bullshit. Fuck, Luc. Stop deluding yourself. There’s something there; you know there is. You’re just ignoring it out of fear you’ll screw it up or because of the dumb-ass ‘rule’ that makes firehouse women off-limits. Guess what? I broke the rule and you guys didn’t throw me in the lake, and it would be the same for you if you were serious about her.”

“I don’t—I mean. I’ve gotta go,” I said before leaving the garage.

After that, I made a point to avoid him for the rest of the shift.

That doesn’t help me now though.

A quick look at the clock tells me I don’t have any more time to think about last night, or London, or what the hell any of this means.

You know what it means—you’re just a coward.

“Fuck off,” I mutter to myself as I swing my legs over the side of the bed and get up.

One thing is for sure: lunch today with my family will definitely be interesting.

“HEY, MAMA,” I say, wrapping her in a big hug when she opens the front door to my childhood home.

She pulls back and reaches up to cradle my jaw in her hands, tilting my face from side to side as she looks me over. “Luca, are you okay? You look tired. You work too much.”

I smile and lean in to kiss her forehead. “You always say that to me. Never to the others.”

Her eyes crinkle at the sides. “I do. I worry about all of you. Too much work and no play does you no good.”

I wrap my arm around her waist as we walk into the house, trying to push down the weird unease and nervousness churning inside me. I shut the door and walk Mama toward the

kitchen. If any of the family realize I'm off my game, there's no telling how lunch will go. We're all close, but we also don't hold back when it comes to giving advice, calling each other out, or laying a truth bomb when it's needed. We've all done it and had it done to us over the years, but I have too much going on in my head to deflect anything being lobbed at me today.

I'm going to blame tiredness from a long, busy shift, but considering Cohen and Marco were working alongside me, there's no way that excuse will fly for too long. And if I know my sister Skye, if Cohen shared with her what happened last night, this meal could soon turn into a Luca and London friendship intervention.

Jesus, I'm actually nervous to be around my own *family*. That damn Perfect Brock has infected my brain with his insinuation, and now I can't stop thinking about it. Over and over again. Why did I hate seeing my best friend on a date with him? Maybe it was him in particular—not the fact she was on a date ... Yes, that must be it. And then Cohen laying it on me, too. Of course my mind can't forget about it.

Liar.

I can't think about it now though because as soon as we enter the kitchen, I see I'm the last to arrive. My eyes go straight to London, who's at the dinner table with Renee, Skye, and Val. They're all sitting around her, leaving no room for me to take my normal place next to her. It's like they're closing ranks and protecting their own.

Never one to be afraid to run the gauntlet of Rossi and soon-to-be Rossi women, I move toward them, greeting Renee, Alex, and Skye, then stopping to blow a raspberry on Austin's chunky baby cheek before moving onto London.

She looks up and meets my eyes, but instead of that mood-lifting, breathtaking smile she usually greets me with, her gaze is shuttered, and I hate it.

"Hey, beautiful," I murmur, leaning down to kiss her temple, remembering her words from last night.

"I'm not a child, Luc."

“Never said you were, Lonnie.”

“I prefer being called beautiful,” she grumbled.

Her breath catches as my lips brush against her skin. My mouth still tingles as I move away. *Weird*. A sigh that’s not necessarily good escapes her and when I straighten, a quick nod is all I get. Her big blue eyes seem cautious, unsure, and not at all happy with me. I’m craving that sunshine smile of hers and the warmth it gives me. I can have a horrible, gut-wrenching shift and just seeing her smile on our breakfast dates at the diner can make it all fade away. And right now, I want *that* London back again.

Maybe she’s hungover, I tell myself, but there’s no way that’s the only reason. The sinking feeling in my gut tells me that I not only fucked up last night, but that something has changed between us, and that something isn’t good because her body language is all wrong.

I’m compelled to pull her out of the room and give her a hug, make her yell at me, *anything*. But now is not the time. Maybe tonight I’ll order takeout and we’ll watch a movie—one of her favorite go-to ones—and then we can chat about what went down and I can apologize.

Val is next. Her gaze is the complete opposite of London’s, and because I’ve had years of experience, I can read her like a book. “Hello, my favorite sister,” I say, smirking at Skye’s disgruntled huff behind me.

“Hey, Luc. How are you?” Val asks, her tone even but her eyes skeptical. She definitely knows what happened then.

I sigh. “Good. Tired. It was a busy shift.”

“I bet it was,” she replies coolly. The temperature in the room definitely drops a few degrees.

I plaster on a huge grin that I’m not even close to feeling and look around the table. “Well then, I might go out and commune with the men of the family,” I say, expecting a few laughs, but instead I get a glare from Val, a curious look from Renee, an arched brow from Skye, a clap from Austin, and a frown from London. *Tough crowd*.

When I get outside into the backyard, I find Cohen, Marco, and Gio standing near the grill where my dad is cooking some steaks for lunch. They all turn to watch me, Marco humming a death march under his breath and earning a chuckle from the rest of them.

“You survived,” he says.

“And in one piece too,” Cohen adds with a snicker.

“Knew I should’ve blown this off and stayed in bed,” I mutter.

Dad looks over his shoulder, his brows lifted high. “You’d risk the wrath of Mama?”

“To avoid the glacial atmosphere inside and the ribbing out here? I’d definitely consider it.”

Gio bumps me with his shoulder. “Hey. From what I hear, last night you stormed over to London like a caveman. All you needed to do was beat your chest and grunt a little more.”

“He grunted. Believe me,” Cohen says, crossing his arms over his chest and smirking. “You’d think the women would think it was chivalrous. You were simply wanting to protect London’s virtue like a good, caring *friend*. Am I right?”

“Yes! I was just looking out for her. Was I an asshole to her date? Probably—”

“Mm-hmm ...” Cohen nods.

“Could I have handled myself a little better? Maybe.”

Marco shakes his head. “As your lieutenant, I should probably say hell yes.”

“Okay, big brother. What would you have done if you’d seen Renee out on a date with another man that you had no idea about, *and* she looked a little worse for wear? Oh, and she’d been at a restaurant that had caught on *fire*?” I ask Marco.

“Yeah. Renee. My *fiancée*. You and London are supposed to be ‘just friends’,” he says with a shit-eating grin.

“I was just checking on her.”

“Did she need checking on? Because from where I was standing, you just didn’t like her being out without you—”

“It wasn’t that,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“Okay then.” He sighs. “You didn’t like seeing her on a date with someone who *wasn’t* you.”

I jerk back like he’s slapped me. “No. Absolutely not. London and I are *friends*. I wanted to make sure she was doing okay.”

“She was with a *doctor* who not only helped her out of the building but was administering first aid to a burn victim while *still* watching out for her. I think she was pretty safe.”

“She’s my girl. I’ll always check on her,” I reply.

“And that, my boy, is how you’ll explain it to London,” Dad says. “I think your sisters are more angry at you than she is. If anything, London is embarrassed and maybe still a bit worse for wear. And how you act today will determine whether this is a little blip in the road or it becomes a bigger issue.”

“At least Mama seems none the wiser.”

Dad turns around, a meat-laden plate in his arms, and pins me with a stare that tells me I’d better listen because he’s about to impart some wisdom. “Your mother is a romantic and always likes to hear about her sons being the men we raised them to be: honorable, caring, *respectful* ...”

I really did fuck up last night. I embarrassed London, and probably came on a *bit* too strong with the whole protective friend role. I probably ruined her date too ... although I’m not sure that’s a *complete* tragedy. No one, not even Perfect Brock could *ever* be good enough for my Lonnie.

For the first time since I left her last night, a weight is lifted off my shoulders. I know I can make this right and get one of London’s honest-to-goodness smiles again. Because it may have only been a few hours without one, but I’m already missing the way she looks at me.

The way she was looking at Brock last night, the voice in my head snarks before I flip it the bird and quash it down.

“You can either open your eyes to what’s right in front of you and how good it could be, or you can let her go so she can get over you and find a man who’ll give her the world she desperately wants from you.”

No way am I letting Lonnie stay pissed at me. She’s too damn important. I just need to remind her of that. Oh, and maybe *not* act like a dick in public again. That might help too.

London

Despite Val, Skye, and Alex's advice to let Luca stew for a while, I just can't do it. Renee stayed quiet on the matter, but all throughout lunch, I'd catch her studying me, her gaze soft, almost sympathetic.

So when Luca offers me a ride home once lunch and wedding discussions are over and done with, I wordlessly accept and let him lead me out the front of the house.

But before we can leave, Mama Rossi pulls me in for a big hug, bringing her mouth to my ear. "Don't make it too easy for him, *tesoro*."

Luca's mom calling me sweetheart is enough to bring my fragile emotions to the surface, but thankfully, I am able to swallow them down and nod.

"But don't make it hard either. Love is never straightforward. But it is always worth it. Yeah?" she asks.

I nod and wonder how long Luc's *mom* has known about my feelings for her son.

Luc's dad just winks at me, making me smile.

Then I experience the most awkward car ride ever where both Luc and I don't speak. The awkward silence stretches between us until the air is so thick with tension that when we stop at a red light ten minutes from my house, I can't take it anymore.

"I was a dick," he says.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out at the same time.

His head snaps my way. I snap my head to his before his lips quirk up into a smirk he must know is far too sexy for his own good, and I snort with laughter.

He nods my way. “Don’t think you’ve got anything to say sorry for, Lonnie. So how about you let me have it before I drop you home then?”

“I don’t even know why I’m apologizing,” I say with a resigned sigh.

“‘Cause you’re you and you don’t like conflict?”

I shake my head as the light changes color, and he turns his attention back to the road. “It’s that, but I keep thinking I should’ve told you I had a date.”

Luc’s brows furrow. “Why? I’m not your keeper.”

That dismissal is another nail in the coffin containing hope that this friendship will ever be anything more. I shrug. “I know that,” I say, a bit sharper than necessary. “But maybe then, having seen me on scene, you wouldn’t have felt the need to beat your chest and stake your best friend, protective claim on me in front of my date. It was embarrassing—what I remember of it anyway.”

“Where’d you meet him?” he asks, a weird edge to his tone.

“It was a blind date of sorts.”

“What?” he splutters.

“Yeah.” I bite back a smile as his surprise. “Brock is the brother of a client. She set us up, we chatted on the phone, then met up for dinner last night.”

“*Brock*. What kind of name is that anyway?” he says with a cocky grin. I gently nudge his arm but can’t stop the smile forming on my lips.

“Stop,” I say, fighting a grin. “I’ll have you know he was the perfect gentleman.”

“Yeah. That’s his play to get gorgeous women into his bed. That’s *after* he throws out the ‘I’m a doctor’ card.”

I arch a brow. “Like you probably throw out the ‘I’m a firefighter and I’ve got a big hose’ line to score?”

He chuckles. “Haven’t had the opportunity to use any lines lately.”

His confession catches me by surprise. “What?” I splutter.

“If I’m not working, I’m at home, or with one of the crew, or with you.”

“Aww, missing having Scotty as your trusty wingman?” I tease.

“Nah, just finding I’m over that whole scene.”

I gasp melodramatically. “No, not *you*. God, whatever will the women of Chicago do now?”

Luc snorts. “Yeah, I’m sure they’ll cope.”

We fall quiet, the mood a lot less tense now. But I still don’t know what to think about Luc’s reaction last night.

As he turns into my parents’ street it hits me that time is running out to get answers while the events are still fresh.

“Luc, you know I *am* allowed to date, right? I’m not the same teenager you met all those years ago. I *have* gone on dates during the past three years I’ve been back.”

“I haven’t exactly been living the life of a monk either, right? Well, lately, sure ...”

I roll my eyes but can’t say I don’t like the fact he’s not sleeping his way around town.

“I don’t *know* why I acted like a dick, okay? I saw you were drunk and maybe I was hyped up from the fire and surprised that you were looking like—” He clamps his mouth shut but there’s no way I’m letting him get away with not finishing his sentence.

“Looking like what, Luc?”

“Just leave it. It doesn’t matter anyway.” He pulls into a parking spot outside my house and switches the engine off. I turn and lean my back against the passenger door, not missing his tight jaw and conflicted expression.

I reach over and rest my hand on his forearm. His muscles jump under my palm. “Luc ...” I warn him. *Don’t censor yourself around me now.* “Just tell me.”

He spins in his seat to face me, his gaze meeting mine. “You looked gorgeous, okay? Like, fucking stunning. You didn’t mean to show *me* thought, did you? Was that meant for *him*?”

I look down at my lap. “Kinda sent that photo to you instead of Vi.”

“You couldn’t just say, ‘Sorry, wrong number?’”

“Well I *could’ve*. Might’ve avoided *this* awkward conversation I guess.”

He nods, his brows scrunching together in an expression that I’ve come to know is his thinking face. “I think it was a combination of seeing you at a scene and being worried about you, then seeing you looking like *that* and realizing that you were on a date, then seeing you watch Perfect Brock like he’d hung the moon when I’m so used to being the one you look at like that.” His words rush out of him in a deluge, and they shock me so much that all I can do is sit there and let them hang between us.

He knows I have feelings for him. He knows, and he likes it.

But he doesn’t see me in any way other than as his doting best friend, Lonnie.

His girl ... Never to be his girlfriend ...

I didn’t think things could get worse, but his inadvertent truth has just slapped me in the face.

“Oh,” I whisper, pulling my hand back into my lap. His eyes go wide as if he’s just realized what he’s said.

“Fuck! I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, you did. And that’s okay, Luc. I’m a big girl, I can take the truth, and we always said we’d be honest with each other.”

He huffs out a huge sigh and leans his arms onto the steering wheel, resting his forehead down. We sit there in silence. I don’t know what—if anything—there is left to say. I’m in love with my best friend, he knows it, and he’s happy living with that knowledge.

Luc turns his head, resting his cheek on his arm, and stares over at me. “It’s not ... I mean, I just don’t ...”

“I *know*, Luc.”

“I don’t think you do. It’s like we were fine and then last night happened, and seeing you on a date, it just hit me in the face that there’s this other side of you that you’ve kind of lost lately, and I got to thinking that maybe that’s because of me.”

My breath catches as he continues.

“Like, you’re twenty-seven; you’ve got over ten years of life experience to catch up on until you catch up to me. And I *know*, okay. I shouldn’t expect you to *not* date because you’re best friends with a geriatric.” He sighs. “You’re my best friend, and I don’t think I’ll ever accept that there’s a man out there that’s good enough for you. So yeah, I acted like a dick, and I regret it. But I also can’t promise I won’t do it again. You’re my girl, beautiful, and I’m always going to look out for you. I promised Cap I would too.”

What the hell am I supposed to say to that?

“So, where do we go from here?” I say with a resigned sigh, my tiredness and lingering effects of the hangover, paired with the Rossi food coma that’s inevitable when Luc’s mom is cooking, taking a toll on me.

“Well, I guess if you’re going to be seeing him again, I’ll learn to like the guy and not be a dick to him. He *did* get you home safe after all.”

I shake my head. “That ship has sailed, Luc.”

“What do you mean? I *can* be nice to people, you know. I was voted most personable at high school.”

“Most personable? Or most friendly with the female species?” I say as a snicker escapes me. “What I *meant* was, Brock and I aren’t and will not be happening again.”

“Well, huh,” he says, looking out the windscreen and giving me his gorgeous side profile. “maybe he’s not such a bad guy after all.”

“Luc!” I say, shoving his shoulder with my hands because he’s making me laugh. I can’t stop myself from smiling. “You’re such a dick sometimes.”

“I did say that at the start of this talk,” he says in a *duh* voice. “Are we okay? I know I made a dumb scene last night and acted like an overprotective idiot, but I did it from a good place.” The sincerity in his soulful green eyes are and always will be my undoing. When he bats his lashes with a knowing smirk, I’m powerless to his charms. Damn the man.

“Yeah.”

“Good, ’cause now I have a big favor to ask.”

My head jerks back at his conversation whiplash. “What?”

“I’ve been thinking about it and I’m going to accept Cap’s offer to sit the lieutenant’s exam. And, since you’re the nerdier one of us in this friendship, I was going to ask if you’d be my study buddy.”

“Oh Luc, that’s awesome,” I say before launching myself across the car and hugging him. For a moment, I wonder if this is crossing the line again, but when he wraps his arms around me and holds me close ... maybe even a touch too long, I close my eyes and breathe him in, relishing the closeness. When we pull apart and I sit back in my seat, he watches me with a weird expression on his face. Too soon for friendly congratulatory hugs, I guess. *Hello, awkward. My name is London.*

Time to get out of the car.

“Okay. Well, I’m going inside to crawl into bed and sleep until the next millennium.” I open the door and turn to get out.

“Lonnie?”

I turn back to face him. “Yeah?”

“Thanks for not holding a grudge. I don’t think I could handle not having you in my life, even though it can’t be easy for you sometimes.”

God, he’s killing me.

“Aww, Luc.” I shoot him a dazzling grin, loving the way his whole face softens as I do. “There are few women in this world who could put up with you and all your idiosyncrasies.”

He frowns. “All the times I’m an idiot, you mean?”

I giggle and shake my head. “Lucky for you, I’m one of them,” I say before giving him a wave and stepping onto the pavement.

As I walk up to the front door as he drives away I know now more than ever. It’s time to start getting on with my life, and that means growing up and standing on my own two feet.

First step? Sticking to the promise I made in my drunken state last night about getting some of my independence back. Maybe *then* I’ll be ready to open my eyes to the non Lucs of the world and steeling myself for the day the perpetual bachelor finds the woman of his dreams—one who isn’t me.

That’s the hope anyway.

Luca

I've just turned the engine off after backing into the garage when Scotty's shout echoes through the air. "VIP in the building!"

Hopping down, I slam the door shut and follow the noise, my day suddenly looking up when I see that the guest in question is Lonnie.

"Hey, beautiful," I say, walking straight up to her and pulling her in for a hug. I don't miss the way she stiffens for a second before melting into me like she normally does. *What's that about?* Figuring it's just because we're in front of the crew, I let it and her go and step back, but still stay close, resting my ass against the edge of the dining table. "No work today?"

She shakes her head and smiles. "I've got a half-day. We were quiet this afternoon and I've got a few errands to run, so Val told me to go do them."

"My sister's good like that."

"She is ..."

We stand there grinning at each other. It's like we're just hanging out like normal—well, *before* that awkwardness of her interrupted date and the talk the next day. I've only seen her a couple of times in the past week and a half, which is definitely not our norm, and I want to get things back to the way they used to be.

I look down at the delicious-smelling brown paper bag on the table next to me. "So you thought you'd come and see your

most favorite firefighter? Aww, I'm touched, Lonnie."

She snorts and shakes her head. "I actually bought in some lunch for Dad but he had to take a phone call, so I thought I'd hang out here until he's free."

"Hold up ..." I say, feigning offense. "I thought *I* was your number one. Where's *my* lunch?" I pout, seeking and getting an amused smirk from my best friend. Her body language relaxes, which was my mission all along. I would never want her to be all tense and uncomfortable around me. because that's not the way we are around each other.

"Hold up, Rossi. You thought *you* were number one? I swear you're delusional," Scotty says, sidling up to Lonnie and hooking his arm over her shoulders.

"Shh, baby. Don't tell everyone. That's our little secret," she stage whispers in his ear.

The cocky grin he shoots me is so big it damn near lights up the entire firehouse. And even though I know he's winding me up, I still feel that same weird pang of possessiveness grow inside of me, like I did when I saw her with *Perfect Brock*.

"Want to get your hands off her, Scotty, or do I need to call your *girlfriend* and let her know you're hanging off another woman?" I say, my brow arched as I take a step toward them. London's expression is almost comical, whereas Scotty can't seem to move away fast enough, his hands jumping up in the air.

"Look, nothing happened. Nothing's going to happen. It's just a friend greeting a friend, that's all. No need to report back to anyone, yeah?" He's rambling now, his words tripping over each other as he backs away.

Damn, the guy must *really* love his woman ... Doesn't mean I'm not going to screw with him for a little bit longer.

I turn to Marco and Rhodes who are both leaning back against the couch, arms crossed in front of their chests while they sit back and watch the show. "Do you think the man protests too much?" I ask.

Marco smirks, Rhodes snickers, and unfortunately for me, Cap walks into the room which means fun time is over.

“Sorry about that, sweetheart,” Cap says.

“It’s okay, Dad. You weren’t expecting me. I just felt like surprising you with lunch and maybe running something by you,” London says, her eyes sliding my way quickly before she looks back to Cap. Now *I* want to go into Cap’s office because I’m usually one of the first people London ‘runs’ things past. *Have I been demoted?*

“Sure thing. How about I save you from these larrikins and we go eat in my office?”

“Sounds good.”

“Aww Cap, you’re breaking Scotty’s heart. He was just getting cozy with London,” Zach, another of our firefighters, calls out. Cap—well used to our shit by now—narrows his eyes at Scotty, who I swear turns a new shade of pale.

“Anything you want to tell me, Firefighter Jones?”

“What? No ... I mean, not at all, Cap. I’m a taken man. You know that,” Scotty stutters for the second time in five minutes.

“Good to know, Jones,” Cap says, wrapping his arm around Lonnie’s shoulders. “Should we go eat before we get interrupted again?”

“Sure.” She leans into him, a soft smile curving her perfectly painted burgundy lips, the color accentuating them and making any single red-blooded male want to kiss them bare again. *Whoa ... where did that thought come from?*

Cap looks around the room at all of us. “By the way, the commissioner just wanted to check that you were all signed up for the charity auction at the end of the month. Since the money is going to the firefighter support fund, I assured him we’d all be there. *Right?*”

“Yes, sir,” everyone except Marco says. He holds his hand up like a student waiting for his teacher to choose him to talk.

“Marco?”

“Surely me getting married three weeks later might excuse me from participating?” my brother asks hopefully.

We all turn to Cap, who’s now rubbing his chin with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“I’m thinking you should auction off something that your future *wife* might want ... maybe a dinner date ... or a full house clean?” Cap suggests. “Start your marriage off on the right foot.”

“Why not the left?” Scotty, the idiot, asks. Instead of answering, we all groan.

“You’re coming to the auction, right London?” Zach asks, glancing my way with a smirk.

“I was thinking about it. Not sure I can afford to bid on whatever it is any of you are offering up though.”

“Money or sanity?” I ask with a laugh.

She meets my gaze and grins. “Both!”

“Yes, she’ll be there. And if my baby girl has a winning bid, you all will be respectful. Won’t you?” Cap’s narrowed glare roams the room.

“Yes, sir,” the rest of the guys murmur in chorus.

“Luca?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You too.”

“Maybe I can offer to have someone tutor me as my prize. You know, for the lieutenant’s exam I have coming up ...”

“Whoa. Go Luc,” Rhodes says.

Marco pushes off the couch and comes up to me, holding out his hand and pulling me in for a bro hug. “Knew you couldn’t resist.”

I chuckle. “Maybe I want to show you and Rhodes up.”

“Yeah, good luck with *that*.”

I turn back to Cap and London, the former looking very happy with my decision, the latter getting that soft, warm look on her face that makes me feel ten-feet tall and bulletproof.

“Well then. I guess time will tell if we have *another* Lieutenant Rossi in our midst. Won’t it?” Cap says.

“Yes, sir.”

“But no tutoring session for the auction.”

“I was joking about that. Lonnie’s going to be my study buddy and crack the whip. She’s the only one who could keep me focused and on task.”

“Just don’t get hot for teacher, know what I’m saying,” Scotty says, waggling his brows. His expression falls when Cap’s head snaps his way.

“Jones, you’re on cleaning duty for the week.”

“What? Why? I was only joking.” Scotty’s voice waivers.

“And next time you want to joke about my daughter’s love life, you’ll remember how you had to scrub the firehouse’s toilets with a toothbrush. Won’t you?”

London looks at me and mouths, “*Oh my God,*” and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from bursting out laughing.

“Yes, sir,” Scotty grumbles.

“Now, I’m off to enjoy lunch with my daughter, and then I’m going to confirm Luca’s lieutenant’s exam for four weeks’ time—a week after the auction, in fact.”

“Shit. Didn’t think *that* through, did I? How am I going to be ready in time,” I mutter to myself.

“Hey, you’ve got this, Luc. We all know you can do it, don’t we, guys?” London says. I swear, I could kiss the woman for her enthusiasm and the belief she has in me. As a friend, of course. A best friend’s supportive kiss.

“Yep,” Rhodes replies.

“Definitely,” is Zach’s answer.

Marco's "not a doubt in my mind" has my chest puffing up a bit.

"Maybe ... if he doesn't screw it up," Scotty offers, earning groans and frowns from everyone.

"Two weeks, and maybe you should go get started now," Cap says, and suddenly everyone's mood lifts as we laugh at the now scowling Scotty, who turns on his heels and grumbles under his breath as he walks out.

"Wow. All hail the Cap," Rhodes says with a snicker.

"*Now*, can I go eat lunch with my daughter?" Cap asks the room. We all nod, chuckling to ourselves.

My eyes are on London, though. There's a weird tightness in my chest. Warmth fills me at her smile, which returns as she gives me a small wave before hooking arms with her dad and leaving the room.

The fact my eyes slide down her retreating form before she disappears from sight means nothing. She's my best friend. A best friend can admire how amazing their best friend looks in painted-on blue denim jeans and a tight white tee that clings to every curve like it was made for her. Nothing weird about that ... right?

London

“So, what have you done or what do you *need* to do?” Dad asks as soon as we’re in his office and comfortably situated on the two-seater couch.

I pull out the Portillo’s offerings from the bag and hand his favorite Italian Beef sandwich to him, shooting him a cautious grin. “What makes you say that?”

Dad quirks a brow as if to ask whether I think he’s an idiot or not. The reality is that I’ve never been able to get anything past the old man. For as long as I can remember, he has always seemed to know me almost more than I know myself.

He picked up on my feelings for Luca a long time before I would even admit to myself I had them. Even then, instead of warning me off, he took me out on a Dad-and-London day date. We often have these little meetings of the minds now—usually over food—when he can tell something is eating away at me, or in this case, when I’ve built up the courage to tell him a life-changing decision. It’s not major; this isn’t my first time moving out on my own. But it *is* the first time I’ve decided to do it since moving back to Chicago, and it will be my first time living alone. And although Mom and Dad have never given any hints that I’m cramping their style or have ‘outgrown’ the nest, so to speak, Mom told me this morning that she’d been hoping that I’d do this soon. Not for them, but for *me*.

“C’mon, Lonnie. Hit me with it. It’s got to be something big to warrant Portillo’s mid-shift.”

I laugh and shake my head at him, putting my half eaten sandwich back in the wrapper. “I’m going to look at an apartment after work.”

“OK.” That’s all he says.

“Dad,” I groan. “Is that *all* you have to say about it?”

“London, you’re twenty-seven years old and far too old to ask for Daddy’s permission to do anything in your life.”

“I know. It just feels like a big step.”

He reaches over and squeezes my leg. “That’s ’cause it is, and I’m proud of you.”

“For moving out?” I ask with a snort.

“Well, I won’t like coming home and not having breakfast with two of my three favorite girls. That’s going to suck. But no, I’m proud of you for the woman you’ve become, standing on your own two feet, and living life on your terms.”

“Sometimes it feels like I’ve been in a holding pattern ever since I moved back.”

His eyes soften. “I can see why you’d think that, but what have I always told you? Life’s a journey. There are twists and turns, and ups and downs, and—”

“Sometimes it takes a step or two backward to see where you need to take a step or two forward again.”

“*Exactly.*” He pauses to take a big bite of his Italian beef and gravy sandwich, wiping his stubbled chin with a napkin before looking my way again. “And your mother and I didn’t raise a fool. You and Violet are our proudest accomplishments. The young women you’ve become are a badge I wear with honor, and I hope you know that.”

I playfully slap his arm. “Don’t you dare make me cry, Dad. I don’t want to have to redo my makeup.”

He rolls his eyes. “Wouldn’t want *that* now, would we?”

We fall silent for a while as we work through our food. “So, where are you looking? Like are we talking about the same block as us? The other side of town? Next door to the

firehouse?” he asks with a teasing glint in his eye. “Maybe near a certain soon-to-be lieutenant’s place?”

Now I’m the one groaning. “Dad ...” I warn. “Are you forgetting the rule?”

He bounces a shoulder, his expression one of totally fake innocence. “What? That’s for everyone else. I can veto the rule if it means my daughter is happy.”

“You know we’re just friends. It’s part of what has led to me finally deciding to step up and grow up a little. Stand on my own two feet and move on with my life.”

That gets me a jerk of his head, and if I’m not mistaken, a little tick in his jaw. “Moving on? What’s caused this? Did something happen?”

“Nah. Well, kind of, but not really,” I say, hedging my bets.

Dad’s dry chuckle cracks through the air. “You want to explain that to your dumb ol’ dad?”

I sigh. “It wasn’t an exact *moment*, per se. I think it’s just been building for a while. Luc and I are friends, best friends, and I think that it’s finally dawned on me that I’m wasting my life away waiting for that particular status to change—that’s *if* it was ever going to. Violet’s been in my ear about dating and putting myself out there.”

“Other fish in the sea and all of that?”

“Yeah. And after my date the other week, I realized that holding out hope for something that isn’t going to happen is giving me a mental block and stopping me from seeing what else might be out there for me.”

“Or who ...”

“Yeah.” This conversation seems to be making my decision more final than it was when I made it myself. Somehow, telling Dad is making it all the more real.

“Hmm,” he says. I watch him, expecting him to say more, but he doesn’t. Just like that, I have his acceptance, his approval, and his understanding, all in the space of mere

minutes. “Better not mean I don’t get visits during my shifts,” he mumbles around a mouthful of meat. “Because if I’m not seeing my girl at home, I damn well better be seeing her around the firehouse.”

I narrow my wet eyes at him. “I told you not to make me cry!”

He shrugs, a wry grin curving his lips. “I made no promises, Lonnie.” Finishing his sandwich, he scrunches up the wrapping and puts it back in the bag before wiping his mouth clean and turning his body to face mine. “But I will ask you to make me one.”

My brows furrow. “Okay ...”

“Luca Rossi is one of the best men I know, and there are only a few people I say that about—a lot of them work in this station and have my back when I need it.”

I nod. That’s not something I didn’t know already.

“You need to promise me that in moving on, you won’t shut the door completely.”

My frown deepens as I think about not only what he’s said but what he’s *not* saying. Then it’s like a light bulb goes off. “Dad ...”

“No, Lonnie. All I’m saying is that sometimes, a man needs to see what he could have slipping away before he pulls his head out of his proverbial ass and realizes what he’s losing. You get me?”

I shake my head. “Dad. It’s not going to happen. It’s better to keep my friendship with him and move on, open myself up to meeting someone who *can* return my feelings.”

He seems to mull on that for a moment before he nods just as the firehouse bells ring out over the speakers. “Duty calls.”

“No rest for the wicked, huh?” I say as we both stand. “I’ll clear all of this away and get going.”

“Thanks for lunch, kiddo. Let’s do it again.” He leans in and wraps me in a hug before kissing my forehead. “And if you need any help with the security deposit or—”

I shake my head. “I’m good. I have a father who taught me to save my pennies and who’s let me live at home rent-free for the past three years.”

“Man, you’re a lucky daughter,” he teases, his smile making his eyes crinkle at the sides.

“I *am*,” I say as he moves toward his office door. “See you tomorrow morning?”

“Definitely. And I mean it, Lonnie. If you need anything, your mom and I are always here.”

“I know, Dad. Now go hit the road and stay safe.”

With a grin and a wave, he walks out, and when I leave the firehouse a few minutes later, I do it with a smile on my face because hopefully soon, I’ll be stepping out on my own and taking control of my life.

“HEY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” I ask Val as she hops out of Renee’s car outside the three-story brick apartment building Renee and I had arranged to meet at.

“Can’t a boss tag along when her favorite employee is getting her first condo?”

I arch a brow. “You can ...” I say slowly.

“Good.”

I reach out and shake Renee’s hand. “Hi. Thanks for arranging this for me.”

Marco’s fiancée and Luca’s soon-to-be sister-in-law smiles at me. “Not a problem. I’m friends with the owners, and since you’re family, she was more than happy for me to show you around the place. Let’s go find out if this is going to be your new home.”

My heart squeezes a little at the family comment, but I don’t let it show. Val’s gaze on me tells me she didn’t miss it though.

“How do you know the owners?”

“It’s Cohen and his brothers’,” Val offers. “So we’re keeping this ‘in the family.’”

Yep, she definitely didn’t miss it.

A few minutes later, we’re stepping through the door of the first-floor condo, a small but newly renovated two-bedroom unit with a spacious open living area and a balcony off the front. It would be the perfect place for a relaxing morning coffee before work or to put a small day bed to curl up on during the weekends after a long week.

When I turn to look at the kitchen, my pulse kicks up because I can see myself cooking there, maybe for movie nights with Luc or—

“Oh, no. What was that look? Don’t you like it?” Val asks, leaning a hip against the counter.

I shake my head. “No. It’s great. It’s perfect, actually.”

“Phew. That’s good. Otherwise, I was going to have to slap you around the head. This place is just what you need.”

I smile at my boss and one of my closest friends. Val has been just as much a constant presence in my life as Luc has. She’s never been one to hold back her opinion on anything either. She’s good value, and I always make sure she knows how much she means to me and how much I appreciate her.

I look around again, taking note of the well-suited furniture placed in the room.

“All Jamie is looking for is a month’s rent upfront. That’s all,” Renee explains.

My head snaps her way. “No security deposit?”

“Nope. As I said, you’re family, and they’re as good as family given that their brother is married to Skye, and both Val and I have vouched for you. And it comes furnished as well.”

I switch my gaze between her and Val, my mind blown at how everything seems to be falling into place. Almost like it

was *meant* to happen this way. “Are you sure I’m not being punked?”

Val pushes off the counter and walks over to me. She places her hands on my shoulders and locks her eyes with mine. “Babe, this is your new home if you want it. If you don’t like it, Renee says she’s got a few others we can look at, but —”

“I’ll take it.” *That first big step toward independence ... from everything and everyone ...*

Renee laughs and Val’s answering smile is huge as she shakes her head at me. “You want to see the rest of the place first?”

“Well, *duh*. But yes, the answer is still going to be yes.”

“Awesome,” Renee says. “I kind of knew you’d say yes, but if you hadn’t made your decision yet, I knew that when you saw the rainfall showerhead you’d promise your firstborn to get the place.”

My eyes widen before I giggle. “You’ll be waiting a while before I’m anywhere *near* having children, let alone before I find someone to have babies with.”

She winks at me. “Little steps, London. First, you get a new apartment; next, you find yourself a man. Hey, you’re coming to the charity auction, right? Maybe we’ll find you a firefighter of your own to bid on.”

“Oh, God. I think I’ve had enough of firefighters. I *live* with one; I’ve grown up around a *bunch* of them. And I’m best friends with another.”

“Hey. I was anti-uniform, too, until Marco won me over.”

“Or maybe her best friend needs to sort his shit out,” Val mutters under her breath, earning an elbow in the ribs from me. She looks at Renee. “What? You agreed with me in the car that Luca is an idiot if he doesn’t wake up and open his eyes before it’s too late.”

“Val, I love you, but Luc and I aren’t going to happen. He effectively said as much when he dropped me home after

lunch at your parents' house.”

“Did he though?” Val says, studying me.

“He pretty much said in not so many words that he knew I had feelings for him. If there was *any* chance of him reciprocating, that was his chance to say it.” A week and a half after the fact, I’ve found my peace that it’ll never happen. Now I just need Val to accept it too.

“What if I wanted you as a sister, dammit.”

I smile, my heart melting. “You’re my sister from another mister already. You’re stuck with me. That’s enough, don’t you think?”

“For now,” she grumbles.

Renee’s shoulders shake and I can’t help but grin at Val. Nothing is going to burst my bubble today. Soon, I’ll be living in this amazing condo and the world will be mine for the taking.

“Right. Let’s check out the bedroom, then the orgasmic shower, then we’re meeting Skye for a drink at 42nd Street Bar. “

My eyes bug out at her. “Val!”

She holds her hands up. “What?”

“Orgasmic shower?”

“Hey, don’t blame me. That was Renee’s description, not mine. I’m just the one who said that if anyone needed a multipurpose shower, it was my office manager.”

“God help me.”

Val grins and hooks her elbow in mine. “Not God. The shower. But if it’s as good as Ren says, then it’ll be *you* screaming God.”

Then I’m led around the rest of the apartment by a grinning Renee and a laughing Val as we make plans for me to move in this weekend. Renee promises to get Marco and the crew on board to assist.

“And I’m sure Luc will help,” she adds with a hopeful look in her eyes. I let that go because I haven’t told Luc I’m moving. Usually, he’s the one I talk to first about *everything*, but something has shifted between us since the date with Brock and what came afterward.

One thing is for sure. With friends and family—by blood and chosen—like mine, there’s no wasting time when things fall into place.

First step, moving out. The next? Well, I’ll work my way up to that.

Luca

After handover to the next crew is done and dusted, I make my way down the corridor to grab my bag before I head straight home to bed

“Thank God that shift is finally over,” I say, slumping down on the wooden bench in the middle of the lockers.

“Aww, is someone getting too old to handle a busy night?” Rhodes teases as he walks in behind me.

“No. Someone is just tired. When was the last time we had a shift of big back-to-back calls?”

“It’s been a while,” he replies. “I’m definitely looking forward to not seeing this place for the next forty-eight hours, that’s for sure.” He walks over to his locker and opens it, looking back at me. “Got any plans?”

I bark out a tired laugh. “Sleep?”

“Then what? Studying I hope.”

I roll my eyes. I only announced I was going for the lieutenant’s exam yesterday and already I’ve had Marco, Rhodes, and the Cap riding my ass about putting in the hours and not leaving it until the last minute. “Yes, Dad.”

Rhodes chuckles and throws a balled up sock at my head, missing by a mile. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. I’m hoping London will help me buckle down and cram everything I need to know into my brain.”

His lips tip up. “You’re lucky to have her, you know.”

I frown, wondering why he’d say something like that. “I *do* know, but why would you think I didn’t?”

Now he’s the one frowning. “I’m just saying, she’s a great woman. You guys are good together.” My eyes narrow and my muscles tense. “As friends, I mean.”

My shoulders relax when he doesn’t give me shit about London like Scotty and everyone else does.

“Hey. I get it. I know it’s possible to be friends and *just* friends with a woman.”

“Good,” I grumble, scrubbing my face with my hands. My brain is a little messed up about Lonnie right now, but I can’t talk about it around here because these walls have ears, and the last thing I’d want is for anything I say to get back to Cap. *Yeah, I’m all screwed up in the head because Cap’s daughter has flicked a switch inside of me I can’t seem to turn off now*

...

He studies me for a moment before nodding, as if coming to a decision. “You meeting her for breakfast this morning?”

I shake my head. “She sent me a text last night saying Renee, Val, and Skye had dragged her out for drinks and she didn’t think she’d be human in time to meet me. Why’s that?”

“Well, I happen to know that Dee has been experimenting with different flavors of cinnamon rolls for the restaurant and that there are a few batches of her latest creations at home waiting for me.” Rhodes’s wife, Dee, owns a restaurant downtown called Delish, and she’s known for her amazing baking skills. It’s made their house a popular venue to host the crew’s monthly BBQs at.

I straighten, suddenly filled with a wave of newfound energy. “Say no more. I’m more than happy to be her cooking guinea pig.”

“Thought you might.” Rhodes smirks and nods to my locker. “Grab your stuff and I’ll follow you out. If we’re quick, we might get there before Jake wakes up and beats us to it.”

“Oh, hell nah. He’s eighteen; he’s got to worry about looking good for the ladies.”

Rhodes’s brows lift sky-high. “And you don’t? You’re thirty-eight and single.”

“I’m approaching middle age. Just got to get the mid-life crisis and sports car out of my system by forty, and then I can start looking for a nice young lady to make me look good.”

The look Rhodes gives me is far too telling for me to think about at this time of the morning. I point a finger his way as soon as the words are out of my mouth. “No. Get that thought right out of your head.”

He has the gall to look innocent. “What? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’re so full of shit, I’m surprised your breath doesn’t stink. But for your information, no, I didn’t mean London. Yes, she is young and beautiful and makes me look good regardless, but as a friend.”

He gestures that he’s zipping his mouth closed as he swings his gear bag over his shoulder and slams his locker door, waiting for me to do the same before walking out.

“Just saying, you know, that *if* there was something there between you two ... it would be OK with everyone.”

I groan again, shaking my head. “Not you too.”

“Hmm. You know what they say when more than one person is telling you the same thing, right?”

“What, oh wise one? What does it mean?” I say, adding a dramatic eye roll for good measure.

“It means that you’re an idiot.” He laughs and bumps his shoulder into mine.

“Ha ha. Just you wait, Anderson. I’ll get you back when you least expect it, you know ...”

“Yeah. But I don’t care. It doesn’t matter what shit you or anyone else throws at me. Want to know why? ’Cause I’m the one with a wife and two sons at home—a wife who *bakes* and

keeps my bed warm. A wife who looks after me and who I get to love and care for and cherish right back. A *wife* who puts a smile on my face, and I live to put an even bigger smile on hers. *That*, Luc, is the dream of any man right there. And I get to live it.”

I clap my hand on his back. “I’m glad you have that.”

“Believe me, I am too. But what I don’t get is why you won’t let yourself have that—or a chance of that—too. As far as I can see, you’ve got a woman who is kind, sweet, caring, and loyal. She knows the life of a firefighter, and for some strange reason, she puts up with your shit and *likes* it. Your family love her; she’s as much a part of this firehouse as anyone else, and yet you’re stuck on the fact that what? She’s the Cap’s daughter? You’re too old for her? You’re too busy? What is it?”

“I’m starting to think I don’t even know anymore.”

THERE’S no wiping the smile off my face as I lay flat on my back on my couch, watching some travel reality show on the television. But it’s purely background noise, because I’m having too much fun texting Lonnie

Luca: So, I was thinking. Tonight ... you, me, your favorite basil pesto chicken pasta, and whatever rom-com movie you wish to torture me with. What do you say?

London: I’d ask who are you and what have you done with my best friend Luca Rossi?

Luca: I’m hurt, Lonnie. Truly hurt by your lack of faith in me. Do you not know me at all?

London: I know you better than almost anyone, Luc. That’s why I know my suspicions are warranted.

Luca: Can’t a guy just wanna hang out with his best friend, feed her, and then entertain her?

As soon as I press send, I wince as it hits me how that text could be taken.

London: Entertain me? Do tell.

Luca: I meant the movie ...

London: Oh ...

Luca: And with my stunning personality of course.

I can't help but laugh as the three dots in the messaging app stop and start then stop again, as if Lonnie's typing then deleting. *Maybe I've rendered her speechless?*

London: I could never forget that—not when you're always around to remind me.

Luca: Wow. Someone's feeling rather MEAN today. Who peed in your Wheaties?

London: God. I'm never eating cereal again with that lovely visual. Thanks for that.

Luca: You're very welcome. Now, put me out of my misery and accept my dinner, movie, and study date invitation.

London: What's in it for me though?

Luca: Spending a night with me isn't incentive enough?

London: It depends ...

Luca: On ... ice cream? I've already got your favorite in the freezer, ready and waiting.

London: That's a good start ...

Luca: And a nice bottle of Chardonnay chilling as we speak.

London: Impressive, Luc. Let me guess—you asked Val what my wine of choice was?

Luca: I'm truly heartbroken now. I didn't need to ask because I already knew it. Besides, you left half a bottle here a few weeks ago, and I remembered the name of it.

London: OK. I'll give you that one. What else have you got for me then? You need to sweeten the deal if you want a night of my company. I'm in hot demand these days.

Dammit. Why does reading that have me gritting my teeth and gripping my phone all that little bit tighter? What does *hot demand* mean? Is she being wined and dined by a different suitor every night now? Is she on a dating app, getting slimed on by horny men with one thing and *only* one thing on their minds? A vein in my temple throbs in time with my pounding heart.

When my phone vibrates in my hand again, I realize I haven't replied yet.

London: Luc! I was joking. I *do* have things to do but I'm not in hot demand by anyone.

Luc: Why not?

London: What do you mean?

Luc: You SHOULD be in hot demand and having guys knocking down your door, Lonnie.

London: Aww shucks, Luc. You are good for a girl's ego.

Luca: You don't even HAVE an ego.

London: Maybe I should get you to write my Chicago Singles profile for me. Val threatened to do it but I think you might've just earned yourself the honor with all that praise for little ol' me.

Now I'm the one typing then pausing ... then typing, pausing, deleting ... pausing ... typing again. Then I stop. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

Luca: What have I told you, Lonnie? There will never be a man on this earth that will be worthy of you. Just ask Cap. I guarantee he'll agree with me.

London: I just got a funny look from Val because of how loudly I just sighed. You're kind of predictable, Luc. You know that, right?

Luca: And that's why I'm SO irresistible. Dinner, study, wine, and movie. See you whenever you're ready to come over after work.

London: Or I come straight from work and steal your clothes. A lot of mine are packed anyway.

I freeze with my fingers poised over the texting keyboard.
Packed?

Luca: Packed? Why? Are you switching out your wardrobe or something?

London: I'll explain when I get there. See you after five then? You better be ready to be quizzed about protocols and procedures by the time I get there ...

Luca: Want to explain why you're packed now?

I can't help asking again because now, my mind is racing ahead with all the possibilities.

London: It's better face to face. It's not bad news, I promise.

Luca: Okay ...

London: You're totally stressing, aren't you?

Fuck, this woman knows me well. *Shouldn't that mean something to you?* a little voice whispers inside my head.

London: Luc, it's good news. GREAT news even. I'll see you soon. And if you stop monopolizing my time with all these texts, I'll get to your place sooner.

Luca: Hey, I know your boss. I've heard she's really flexible with letting her employees leave early to go have dinner with handsome, sexy, *irresistible* firefighters.

London: Luc, it's Val. Stop bugging London and let her get to work. I'm turning off her phone now. Goodbye.

And despite being shut down by my sister, there's just something about my text conversation with London that has lifted my mood and fixed that little uneasiness I was feeling earlier.

London and I are going to be fine. I'm going to make sure of it. She's my girl. I'm her guy. And I'm determined to get our friendship back on track. Looking after her, helping her out, *being* there for her—whatever she needs, I'm going to be the one who helps her get it. Or I'll break my back trying to do it anyway.

That's after she tells me what the hell she's packing for.

London

Sitting in the guest parking spot of Luc's condo building, I'm more nervous than I was yesterday when I told my dad. Telling Mom was easy; she's all about being the wind underneath her daughters' wings, enabling us to fly. But telling Luc I'm not only moving, but that I've already found a place and signed the lease without him even having a clue what I was doing has my muscles all twitchy and my stomach doing flip-flops—and not the good kind.

I don't even know *why* I'm like this. It actually has nothing to do with Luc. *But it has everything to do with him too ...*

This is me pulling on my big girl panties and making moves for *me* and *my* future. Getting into my own space is just the first step. My job is more secure than concrete shoes, and Val and I are even talking about the potential for opening up at a second location, with me taking over management of it under Val's watchful eye. It would be a huge opportunity for me professionally and, as Val herself said to me today when she took me to lunch and laid out her world domination plans. *"You have your career, you'll have your apartment, and now ... all that's left is for you to find a handsome, hot-as-Hades man to warm your bed and make my brother jealous. Then you'll be set."*

I tried to argue with her about the making-Luc-jealous part of that future, but she waved me off and wouldn't hear of it. I love Val to death, but she needs to move past the idea that Luc will wake up and suddenly realize he's in love with me. If he

hasn't looked across the room at me and been hit by Cupid's arrow in the ass by now, it's not going to happen—because Lord knows, he's had long enough.

A knock on the glass of my driver's widow has a shriek escaping me and my head snapping left. An unhappy Luc looks back at me.

Shaking my head, I grab my purse from the passenger seat as Luc opens the door for me.

"You were sitting in your car alone in a basement parking garage with your doors unlocked," he says by way of a greeting.

I quirk a brow. "And?"

"And?" he growls. "Beautiful, you're too smart to be that dumb."

"I'm not dumb," I snap, getting all uppity.

"You're not, but you're a gorgeous woman driving alone with your doors unlocked. That's dumb."

"You're dumb," I retort, feeling ten years younger than I am.

He twitches his lips and softens his eyes. "I've been known to be dumb now and then, yes."

I snort and step out of my car, expecting Luc to step back. When I straighten and he's still *right there*, our chests less than an inch apart, my neck arched up and his bent down, I can't help my soft gasp. Nor do I miss the flash of *something* that crosses his gaze and the way his eyes drop to my lips ... or the fact that he *doesn't* move away.

"You're kind of in my personal bubble right now," I say, my voice surprisingly steady, if not a little bit rough.

"Hasn't bothered you before." His gaze roams over my face as we just stand there, staring at each other. *What the hell is happening here?*

I return to my default setting—sass—tilting my head and narrowing my eyes. "Maybe it has and I just didn't say

anything?”

He chuckles and shifts back a step, his hand dropping to the door handle. “Well then, I’ll make sure *not* to invade your personal bubble again in future, Lonnie.”

“Good. That would be great,” Now my brain is scrambled because I don’t want him to *not* invade my *anything*. Which makes me realize that moving on in my life isn’t going to be a magic Band-Aid when it comes to getting over my crush on my best friend. Not when he just can’t help being so charming and irresistible and—

“So, are you going to let me close the car door and take you upstairs to wow you with my cooking skills again, or are we hanging out in the basement tonight?” He shrugs. “Doesn’t really bother me either way. I’ll still be spending time with my girl either way; it just won’t be with the dinner I’ve cooked for you upstairs.”

“Dinner?” I’m still in a daze, or maybe my brain has been scrambled by Luc’s pheromones or something.

His answering grin is nothing short of proud puppy level. “Yep. And don’t forget the wine to go along with it.”

I move sideways, allowing him to close my car door before I beep the locks and we stand there awkwardly, looking at each other.

“Why do you keep staring at me?” I blurt out.

“I don’t know. There’s just something ... *different* about you. I can’t put my finger on it.”

I bounce a shoulder. “I’m just me, Luc. Nothing drastic or life-changing has happened since you saw me at the firehouse yesterday.”

“Then why are you packing?”

My head jerks back. “What?”

“It’s been bugging me since you said it so instead of letting it mess with my head for the rest of the night until you decide to put me out of my misery, I’m asking now.”

I gesture toward the elevator/stairwell leading upstairs to his condo. “We should get going.”

He nods, then reaches over and slips my purse off my shoulder, hooking it over his and reaching down to grab my hand. Then we’re moving forward but I still feel like my best friend has suddenly grown two heads. *What the hell is wrong with him tonight?*

“Uh, Luc?” I say as we start scaling the stairs.

“Uh, London?”

“Why are you holding my hand *and* my purse?”

“Because then you can’t fidget with anything to get out of telling me what I want to know.”

For the second time in as many minutes, I’ve been surprised by the man I *thought* I knew like the back of my hand.

I’m still frowning and confused when we reach his front door and he leads me inside, dumping my purse on the kitchen island and manhandling me onto a stool before he moves to the fridge and pulls out the bottle of wine.

He grabs a glass and pours it half full before sliding it across the counter toward me with a nod. “There’s your liquid courage, should you need it, although I don’t know why. Unless you’re about to tell me you’re moving to Antarctica or New York and leaving me—your beloved bestie behind—then there’s absolutely nothing to be so damn nervous about. Not with me, Lonnie. You can tell me anything, but I’d much prefer everything.”

“You’re making this out to be a bigger deal than it is,” I mumble.

He shrugs and spins around, moving to the stove where he dishes out the steaming-hot pasta into a bowl and sprinkles some waiting parmesan over the top, just how I like it. He walks back over and slides the plate across the counter in front of me before grabbing his own.

“God, that smells so good,” I moan, leaning down to get another hit of basil, chicken, garlic, and cheese goodness.

“Of course it is. I made it and I *know* it’s your favorite.” There’s no missing his smug tone, but as with most things Luca related, it’s more charming than arrogant. I glance up and roll my eyes at him. Can’t have his ego swelling *too* much. It’s not until I’ve spooned my first mouthwatering taste between my lips that he presses again. “So ... packing?”

I put my fork down and wrap my fingers around the stem of my wine glass, lifting it to my mouth and toying with it a little as I look over the rim at a waiting Luca. I quirk a brow. “So as long as I’m not moving to Antarctica ... or New York, was it? You’ll be okay with it?”

“Beautiful, if you don’t put me out of my goddamn misery here, I can’t be responsible for what I might do.”

I take a sip of the fruity chardonnay before lowering my glass back to the counter and focusing on my plate again, sighing when I catch him looking my way.

I narrow my gaze and point my fork in his direction. “Don’t you look at me with that tone of voice, Luc,” I say.

His lips twitch. “Is it working?”

“Does it make you look sad and a little desperate?”

He tilts his head. “Was that a rhetorical question or—”

“*Luc ... God, I forgot how tenacious you are when you want something.*” *That’s how I’ve always known that I wasn’t on the list of things Luc wants to keep ...*

He groans and throws his hands up in the air. “C’mon, Lonnie. Why are you packing?”

“Because I’m moving out of my parents’.”

His head jerks back and his eyes jump before a wide smile curves his lips and a “whoop” comes out of him. Then, before I know it, he’s moving around the counter and wrapping his arms around me in a sideways bear hug and giving me a kiss on the temple that leaves a searing burn in its wake.

“That’s amazing news, babe. I’m so happy for you.” He rounds the island and returns to his pasta, shoving a big spoonful in his mouth. “So, when are we going to start looking?” he says around his food. He drops his cutlery onto his plate and claps. “This is awesome. We can talk to Renee; she’ll know the right people to put you in contact with, and then we can make sure we look around and find you the perfect place. I mean, I would’ve offered you my spare room if you’d asked, but then again, you probably wouldn’t want to live with *another* firefighter, let alone a messy one like me.”

I snort, laughing at him and his chin covered in pesto cream sauce. I hold up a napkin and gesture to his face, earning a toothy basil-laced grin before he wipes himself clean. My heart melts in my chest at his enthusiasm. I wasn’t sure how he’d react, but this is better than I could’ve hoped. Except for the fact I don’t *need* any help finding a place.

“Well, lucky for *you*, there’s no need to help me look. I’ve already signed a lease and I’m moving on Saturday.”

At my announcement, the air in the room changes. My best friend’s brows narrow into a pointed look that’s spearing straight through me. “What?” he whispers, his tone and expression inscrutable, but now my nerves are on edge and goose bumps—maybe the good *and* bad kind—are spreading over my arms.

I return his frown, except mine is a confused one. “Renee showed me a condo that was owned by Cohen’s brothers. It was available and for let and is recently renovated, *and* it’s in my budget. They don’t want a security deposit either because Val and Renee vouched for me and obviously Skye’s married to Cohen too. I can move in straight away.” I shrug. “It’s a win-win.”

He grunts and shoves another load of food into his mouth, his eyes no longer meeting mine, but I don’t miss the way his jaw is tight and his body has gone taut.

“Luc?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything. “Luc, will you look at me please?” My pulse is thumping now, my Spidey senses going into hyperdrive. “Luc?”

He slowly lifts his eyes to meet mine. There's no missing the conflict and confusion I see in them. "I guess you've got it all sorted then."

"It is, but I still need your help, of course. I was kind of hoping you and the guys would help me move? There's furniture there already, so it won't take long. Maybe just one truck load? And then there's the shopping that I'll need to go do. I'll need my guy to help me choose the right TV and gaming system, and all that other stuff for when he comes over for movie nights at *my* place."

Finally I spot a spark in his expression and his shoulders relax a little. *That's something at least.*

"OK. I guess I can do that. Wouldn't want you to end up with a thirty-one-inch when my girl deserves at *least* a sixty," he says with a shrug, but I can see my suggestion has gone *some* way to smoothing out his mood. He nods down to my plate. "You better eat up before it gets cold."

I lift my fork but I'm still confused about his reaction. He went from being all excited to *not*. I thought he'd be happy I was being independent and capable, standing on my own two feet and making adult, grown-up decisions without any help from him or Dad or anyone else.

"Hey," he says, breaking the weird silence that's fallen between us. I lift my head and catch his soft, warm smile as he holds his glass in the air and nods down to my matching one. "My girl is moving out—"

"Again."

A smirk moves his lips but I'm glued to his eyes, which are guarded. "*Again*. But even still, that deserves a toast, right?" He waits until I've raised my glass, mimicking his. "To new places and *hopefully* a new rank for me. If I can pass the test, that is."

I tap my crystal glass to his with a clink and a huge, hopefully encouraging, grin. "You're going to ace it, Luc."

"You think so, do you?"

I scoff and roll my eyes. “Of *course* you’re going to. You’ve got me to help you study. There’s no way you can fail with me by your side.”

His eyes bore into mine for a spell, both of us looking at each other and not saying anything. If it were any man other than Luc, I’d swear we were having a moment. But since it *is* Luc, and there’s no ship to sail when it comes to me and him, I decide to wave it off with my default coping mechanism—sass.

“Well then. We better eat up so that I can quiz you before I make you sit through an ooey-goey rom-com that I know you’ll hate but you’ll watch with me anyway.”

His lips curl up and he shoots me a wink, the serious mood thankfully broken. “It’s a hard job, Lonnie. But someone’s got to do it.”

Luca

Many hands and the fact that London doesn't have a lot of stuff to be moved means it doesn't take us more than a few hours to load the hire truck up at her parents' house and drive the thirty minutes across town to her new three-flat building.

I checked it out after Cohen and I carried her bed upstairs and am definitely impressed with her choice. It is in a good, safe neighborhood, full of double-income-no-kids-type couples and single white-collar workers who likely travel downtown every day. Of course that doesn't mean I haven't worked out a few security upgrades I'll be making just to give me peace of mind. Can't have my girl's safety in question, after all.

"Have you seen the shower, dude?" Scotty calls from the bathroom.

Both Cohen and I look at each other before quickly making our way toward Scotty's voice, knowing that where our colleague goes, trouble and mischief usually follow.

What I don't expect to see is Scotty standing outside the shower with the water on, the room filling with steam and his hand under the water, groans and moans escaping him.

"What on earth are you doing, man?" Cohen says, sounding slightly traumatized at the amateur porn soundtrack crossing Scotty's lips. *I don't blame him.*

Scotty looks over his shoulder at us, his eyes hooded. "This shower is the shit. It's *so* good. And it has all these

different pressure levels and *three* shower heads. Who the hell has *three* showerheads?”

Cohen shrugs. “I do. Then again, Skye and I renovated it so that it was exactly what we wanted and needed.”

“Hello?” Lonnie calls out, her voice getting closer. “Do I want to know why you guys are gathered in the bathroom?”

“Get out of the damn shower, Scotty. Jeez,” I order.

“What? It’s not like I’m *naked* in her shower.”

“Please tell me he’s not naked in my orgasmic shower,” Lonnie says, squeezing into the room and standing close beside me, one hand covering her eyes.

“Orgasmic?” Scotty asks, and at the same time, Cohen laughs.

“Yes, I remember this renovation. We went for the full upgrade and the girls got drunk one night and decided that it was an ‘orgasmic’ showerhead. None of us dared to ask how they knew.”

“I’d definitely want to know,” Scotty says, clearly not knowing when to shut up.

I reach down and grab London’s hand—the one that’s not covering her eyes—and give her fingers a squeeze, loving the warm feel of her skin against mine as I dip my head until my mouth is by her ear. “It’s safe. You think I’d let any man go into your shower, babe, let alone Scotty?”

I don’t miss the way her breath catches and her whole body shudders or the way that I *like* the fact it does.

London turns her head and splays her fingers apart, peeking out to look at me, bringing her face so close to mine her sweet-smelling breath fans over my lips. I don’t move away. It’s like I’m frozen in place as something significant shifts inside of me. Something monumental ... something ...

“Who *would* you allow in my shower?” she asks, her tone low and *definitely* teasing, her eyes dancing with amusement.

I open my mouth to say “No one but me” but I’m saved from being Captain Fucking Obvious—and potentially a dumbass—by the sound of a slap echoing off the walls, followed by a “hey” from Scotty.

What on earth was *that* about? Not Scotty—he’s being an idiot and Cohen was the closest person to him and must have knocked some sense into him. But me ... and London ... me ... wanting to ...

Holy fucking shit.

My chest constricts, my lungs suddenly feeling like I’m wearing a tank with no air left, and all I can think of is that I need to get out of here. Like, right the hell now ...

I straighten and put some much-needed distance between Lonnie and I as we both look at a smirking Cohen and a frowning Scotty, who’s rubbing the back of his head and scowling at my brother-in-law. I plaster on a smile, all the while losing my goddamn mind as I try to work out what the hell just happened and why I was—moments earlier—filled with the overwhelming urge to wrap my arm around my best friend’s waist, tug her into me, and slam my lips down on hers. It was like there was a body and brain disconnect—a glitch where I wasn’t her best friend. I was her man, and all I could think about was shutting up her sass with my mouth. In that moment, all I wanted to do was kiss her and claim her as mine.

Mine? Where the hell did *that* come from? *God, I’ve got to get out of here ...*

“I’m just going to ... um ... head back down and get another load,” I rush out before leaving the room and getting the hell out of dodge—well, the apartment at least. When I get outside, I suck in some much-needed fresh air, wracking my brain for any inkling, any sign that I’ve caught feels for Lonnie. My best friend. My girl.

Then I think back over the past few weeks, all the shit the crew has been giving me. The interrupted date with Lonnie and that trainee doctor, the one who thought he was a relationship guru and imparted his supposedly ‘wise’ advice on me. London being upset with me. Me apologizing to her.

That awkward conversation in the car where she totally misunderstood me and thought I meant ... *Oh, God ...*

I'm equally relieved and horrified, and not at all for the reasons I'd have thought. More than once I've wondered why I couldn't return London's feelings for me. When she kissed me more than six months ago, she surprised and confused me, and I wanted her friendship and her presence in my life more than anything else. The mere thought of not having her absolutely terrified me.

So I'd put her in a box. A secure, locked, *dead-bolted* friends-only box. Because if I didn't let myself go there, I wouldn't be at risk of fucking it all up and losing her, annoying the Cap, and disappointing my mom and sisters, who I *know* have their hearts set on London and me becoming a thing. Then there's the rule of the firehouse—it's something that has always been in the back of my mind.

This means I've shut out thoughts of there being *any* chance of a London and Luca.

But now it's like the dam gates have been opened and everything is coming at me at a mile a minute.

How could I have been so *stupid*?

What if it's too late?

I brace my arms on the handrail outside the building, gripping the bar tight as all the what-ifs hit me like a Mack truck barreling down a freeway. What if she'd cut me out of her life when I rejected that first kiss? What if she'd hit it off with Perfect *fucking* Brock and went riding off into the sunset with him? What if she'd moved and hadn't left a forwarding address, or didn't tell me and then ghosted me and left me without a London in my life?

God, Luc. Get a grip.

The sound of the front door opening behind me has my back going ramrod straight. I turn around, plastering a grin on my lips as I prepare to pretend that I haven't just rocked my own damn world, except when I see that it's Cohen and he's

looking me over with a curious and somewhat amused expression on his face, I let the façade go.

“Damn, you okay out here? Because I can’t decide if you’re having an existential crisis or what?” he says.

“I’m fine?”

He quirks a brow. “You asking me or *telling* me, because from where we’ve been watching you from the balcony up there, I’d say you’ve found yourself an imaginary friend or you’re coming up with ways to put Scotty Jones out of his misery for even *thinking* about trying out your girl’s shower.”

I shrug at that but I must give something away because Cohen’s brows hit his forehead before an all-knowing smile appears. “Ah ...”

“Ah, what?”

“Just an ah.”

“Co, cut the bullshit. What the hell does *ah* mean?”

He steps in and lowers his voice for my ears only. “It means I think you’ve just had the epiphany we’ve all been waiting for you to have, and that’s freaked you out. Am I close?”

I can’t do anything but jerk my chin up by way of an answer.

Cohen holds out his hand to shake mine. “Welcome to the club, dear brother.”

I frown. “What club?”

“The ‘being in love with your best friend’ club, doofus.”

I groan and shake my head. *Love? I didn’t think love ... did I?*

“And that means my *ah* is exactly that. An *ahhhh*. Because I’m not sure if you remember, but a few years ago, I was the one in your position, and it happened when your sister stayed out all night with Val and I thought she’d been with someone else. So I stormed up to her place and confronted her, and then we—”

I make a show of gagging. “Don’t ruin this little heart-to-heart by mentioning you sleeping with my sister. Please. For the love of God!”

That earns me a full-body laugh from my brother-in-law. “Okay, I won’t. What I *will* say is take it from me—you don’t want to wait until you almost lose your best friend to let her know how you feel.”

“It’s going to take more than just an ‘I’m sorry I was an idiot’ speech and facing down a gauntlet of brothers like you had to do. She doesn’t have any of those anyway,” I reply.

“She kind of does, you know. She’s got a whole firehouse full of them, and the Cap ...”

My head drops forward with a groan. The Captain ... I’d been so sure that London and I were so firmly in the friend zone that this would never become an issue. That when I said to him that I was *just* friends with his daughter, I meant it.

Now look at yourself, dumbass ...

“God. Can this get any worse?”

“Well ... at least she didn’t see that doctor from the restaurant fire again. That’s a bonus.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“Oh, never fear, Luc. Once this all comes out, *everyone* will make sure you don’t forget how many times you denied that there was anything going on between you.”

I lock eyes with him so he knows I’m telling the truth. “There *was* nothing going on between us. I mean ... there is *still* nothing going on ...”

“You want to change that thought, right? You’re finally stepping out of denial and realizing that you’ve been a blind-ass idiot.”

I rub the back of my neck, my head pounding with all these newfound feelings and information and *everything*. I glance up toward the balcony of Lonnie’s apartment, and it hits me that if Cohen is down here, that means Scotty is up

there alone with London. *Jesus*. “Maybe we should get back up there.”

“Hey, man. Calm down. If there’s one girl you can trust Scotty to be around, it’s London. Besides, he’s a one-woman man these days ... right?” Cohen says, not sounding as confident as the words he’s saying right now.

“Shit. We’d better go save her otherwise she’ll never let me live it down.”

“A little tip, Luc. You don’t want her to ever let you live it down. Because then you get to make it up to them and that’s —”

I slam my fingers in my ears and sing “la, la, la” loudly until Cohen bursts out laughing.

“C’mon, idiot. First step, saving London. *Then* you’ve got some thinking to do.”

I stop and frown at him. “About what?”

“About whatever you’re going to pull out of your ass to prove to your girl that you’re in this.”

“I *am* in this,” I say defensively before my shoulders slump with the relief of finally admitting it out loud.

Cohen’s understanding gaze roams over my face as he nods. “Yeah, you are, and I believe you. But you’re going to have a hell of a job convincing *her* to believe it. Because you weren’t a dick about it, but we all know that she’s had a crush on you for a while now.”

“You *all* know?” I ask, my heart rate spiking at the thought that I might have done something that could have made my girl look like a lovesick fool.

“Within the family, sure. The firehouse? Maybe just Zach and Rhodes.”

I groan and scrub my hands over my face. “What the hell am I going to do, Co?”

“That’s something only you can figure out. But a word of advice ... get some help, because Lord knows, you’re going to

need it this time.”

“Gee, thanks for the overwhelming support, Co.”

He shrugs. “Take it from someone who’s been there before—you can deny you’ve caught feelings all you want, but at the end of the day, you’re the one who has to own up to the lie, then try and make up for it before it’s too late.”

I nod, my brain still far too raw and full of *everything* to think about what and how and *when* I might do anything about this.

What I *do* know is that this isn’t a situation where I can just say “fuck it” and fly by the seat of my pants. No. This needs a plan. A calculated, measured plan, one with a thorough risk-assessment carried out before I action it, just like I’d undertake if I was doing a SITREP at a fire scene.

“But if you want my advice,” Cohen says, interrupting my thoughts, “Valentina is the key. Because if you can convince *her* you’re all in, she’ll be the greatest wing woman you’ve ever had.”

“Ugh,” I groan. “Why does this have to be so *hard*. I’m thirty-eight years old. I should know how to deal with falling for someone.”

Cohen’s lips twitch as he reaches out and cups my shoulder. “I don’t think any of us ever really know how to deal with it. But I promise you this—you get it right, and you’ll never regret it for the rest of your life.”

And as I follow Co back inside and spot a smiling and laughing Lonnie standing there while Scotty animatedly tells her a story about God knows what, my panic subsides but a new feeling settles inside me.

It’s fear ... but not the exhilarating kind that I feel whenever I’m sent into a burning building. This is deep-seated terror that threatens to paralyze me.

Because more than any other time before, I’m realizing just how much of an idiot I’ve been, and I’m worried that it took me too long to catch up..

Too long to see what was right in front of me the whole damn time.

I can only hope that it's not too late.

London

After a week of getting used to my new normal—living alone in my own space, unpacking my things, and setting up the place exactly how I want it—I’m picked up by Val on the way to Firehouse 51’s monthly barbecue. This time, it’s being held at Rhodes’s house.

“You look good. Is that a new shirt?” she asks as she drives.

“Nah, it was just packed away. Now that I’ve gone through all the boxes I’ve had in storage, I’m finding some of my old favorites.”

She smiles, nodding in approval. “It’s hot. That low neckline is bound to cause a stir,”

Looking down at myself to check I’m not showing anything I shouldn’t be, I slowly turn and eye her curiously. “What I’m wearing is going to cause a *stir*? It’s a shirt, Val. The girls are covered; the material isn’t see-through, so there’s no accidental nip-slip action going on. What gives?”

“Nothing. I’m just saying it’s nice.”

“Oookaaay ...” I’m not buying her weird comment, but it’s easier to let it go than delve any deeper when it comes to my boss and friend.

“And that skirt. It’s pretty. Goes well with those knee-high boots.”

“Val, since when are you concerned about what I’m wearing?”

“Hey,” she says, going on the defensive a little *too* quickly. “Can’t a woman compliment another woman when she looks good? You know what? I think that’s what’s wrong with the world today. Too many women feel threatened by one another so they can’t just share the love. I, for one, think that if more people—more women—were to lift a sister up instead of dragging her down, the world would be a much better place.”

“With a throng of empowered women ready to tackle the patriarchy?”

“Exactly!” she says, pounding her palm against the steering wheel. “See? That’s what this world needs.”

I snicker and shake my head. “You sound like you’ve been on a Taylor Swift listening binge again.”

“Hey, don’t you sass me, London Kelly. You love T-Swift as much as I do. But don’t get me started. I could ride this women’s empowerment train all the way to the moon.”

“Don’t I know it,” I mutter under my breath, earning a laugh and a soft elbow jab from the driver’s seat.

“So ... new apartment, the chance at running your own clinic for me in the future. What’s next for my little Lonnie?”

I open my mouth to say ‘nothing’ but then I stop myself, because right now, the world is my oyster. Although the whole ‘I’m in love with my best friend and he doesn’t feel the same way’ situation with Luc is still sitting there, right on the surface. It’s like an itch I can’t fully scratch—or a rash I can’t find any cream to treat. But I’m still more than open to the idea of pushing through that, putting my big girl panties on, and putting myself out there.

“You could try online dating. I have a few friends who’ve had a lot of fun on some of those apps,” Val adds.

“You think *I* should try online dating? Like those hook-up apps where you mention in your profile you’re a woman and suddenly you’re inundated with foot fetishists and dick pics and sugar daddy requests? No, I don’t think so.”

“Oh c’mon, babe. I think that might be *exactly* what you need. Just to dip your toe in the water. See who wants to nibble on your line, so to speak.”

“I don’t think it’s my *line* they’ll want to nibble on.” I giggle and Val soon joins me.

“Okay, then. Riddle me this. Let’s say you get asked out on a date, and it’s going to be the most romantic date you could ever dream of. What would you want to do?”

I turn my torso so I’m leaning against the door. “If I was on the most romantic date I could ever dream of, and a man could pull that off? I’d be wanting to *do* him,” I say with a smirk.

Her lips still twitch. “Humor me for a moment, will you? I know. Close your eyes and imagine what you’d want to do if you met your theoretical dream guy and he wanted to give you the most memorable date ever. What would it look like?”

I give her an exasperated sigh before she spears me with a pointed stare that only Val and my mother would ever get away with giving me and I do as asked.

“I don’t know, Val. My last date involved a perfect-on-paper man who I should’ve been all over, but instead, I was too busy talking about your *brother* to give Brock a chance.”

“OK. So in a world where you *didn’t* let my idiot brother, who wouldn’t know what was good for him if it jumped up and bit him on the ass stop you from dating ... what would you like? A picnic by the lake?”

I screw my nose up and shake my head.

“What about a romantic candlelit dinner in a fancy restaurant with dishes you can’t pronounce and prices you could never afford?”

“No, no. None of that. I always thought that was a little try-hard—maybe a little flashy. Definitely not my style,” I say, getting into this little game a bit more now.

“Good. We’re getting somewhere. How about this—think about your favorite rom-com movies. Can you think of any

cute dates in those that you like?”

I pop an eye open and quirk a brow. “From movies?”

“Yeah. I used to tell my brothers that they could learn a lot from romance novels and romantic comedies. So, close your eyes and think about it. What about that one you made me watch ages ago ... *The Notebook*?”

“Yeah. Noah and Allie.”

“That’s the one. That movie made me cry like a mofo.”

“I think almost *everyone* cries in that movie at one point or another. Even Luc. I swear I caught a glint in his eye when I made him watch it.”

“Ha! I’m totally going to give him crap about that. Right, so think of a scene in that movie that made you wish it was you dancing with Ryan Gosling.”

I close my eyes again and run through the movie in my head. “The scene where they dance in the street.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. So, random dancing? Check. What else? Gimme another movie?”

I think about my favorite, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, and all the things Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey put each other through before they *finally* gave in to their feelings, something I’ve kind of wished could happen to me and a certain firefighter best friend of mine one day. But alas, that will *never* happen.

“Oh, I know. There’s this scene where they’re at a New York Rangers game and they’re trying to impress each other for their own purposes, right? Then the kiss cam points their way, and they’re on the big screen in front of thousands of screaming fans, and everyone around them is chanting for them to kiss. So they turn to each other and then kiss, thinking it won’t mean anything.”

“But that never happens, right? A kiss *always* turns into something when they both want it to. Right?”

I open my mouth to argue but stop myself, my brain tripping over what Val just said. Because when I kissed Luc all

those months ago, he *did* start to kiss me back, if only for a second, before he put a stop to it.

Nah, that was just a man reacting to a woman kissing him before letting her down easily when he wasn't feeling it. Had to have been. *Doesn't do me any good to think otherwise now anyway. Onwards and upwards, London Kelly.*

"I'm getting old over here, Lonnie. So kiss cam at a sports game. Check. Anything else?"

"Why do you want to know these things, Val?" I ask.

"Because I want you to imagine what you *could* and *should* be doing. You're twenty-seven, single, and fucking gorgeous, and you *should* be putting yourself out there and dating. So I figure that if you start thinking about what you want, maybe the universe might manifest it for you."

I snort and give her an incredulous stare. "Whoever thought you were such an ooey-gooney romantic, Val?"

Now she's the one laughing. "I didn't say *I* was the one who should be dating. I've got a good eight years on you, Lonnie. I'm taking over the world before I even *think* about finding a man worthy of my affections."

"Okay, okay. Manifest away."

"It's not me who's supposed to be manifesting, babe. It's you. Now, give me one more. There must be one more movie scene that made you go a little mushy inside when you watched it?"

And this time when I think about it, there's only one other movie that comes to mind. "*Serendipity.*"

"Oh, I *love* that movie. The whole idea of sliding doors and fate stepping in—that's *always* my favorite kind of romance story."

"Me too," I reply.

"Let me guess; ice skating ... Am I right?"

"Yep."

“So ice skating. A guy making a fool of himself just trying to impress the girl—that kind of thing?”

“Exactly! Even better if it’s the cockiest, most macho of guys who’s willing to put his ego *and* ass on the line to get her. *That* is sexy.”

“*Nice,*” she says, turning into Rhodes and Dee’s street, which is lined with cars I recognize from the firehouse, including Mom and Dad’s SUV.

“You want to tell me why you’re grilling me about dream dates and romantic movies?” I ask. Anybody else and I’d totally think they were up to something, what with all the questions and ‘manifesting’ mumbo jumbo. But since it’s Val, nothing surprises me.

She shrugs, a cheerful smile curving her lips. “I was just curious—that’s all. And besides, if you’re getting ready to start dating and meet new people, you should not settle for anything less than the way those movies made you feel, yeah?”

“I guess I never thought of it like that. Luc always says I torture him with my rom-com movie marathons.”

Val pulls her car into a parking space and shuts off the engine before turning my way and locking eyes with mine. “And yet he still sits there and watches them with you.”

“Because he’s humoring me.”

Val goes to say something but stops and clamps her mouth shut before looking over my shoulder and nodding. “Speak of the devil and he shall come. Let’s get inside before all the guys eat Dee’s yummy food and we’re left with corn chips and that weird salsa Scotty always makes.”

I turn to see Luc standing on the sidewalk just before he opens my car door and grins down at me. “Hey, beautiful. Fancy seeing you here.”

And after talking about nothing but romantic movies and dream dates for the whole car ride over here, my little romantic heart skips a beat at the warm fuzzies I feel seeing my best friend again.

One day, I'll get over him. One day ...

Luca

I'm a hopeless, pining, distracted mess. And it's all because of London.

Or maybe it's everyone's damn fault, because now that I've had the potentially life-changing realization that I want my best friend, I notice *everything*.

Like the way her dark brown hair glistens in the dimming daylight of Rhodes's backyard where the whole of our crew and families have gathered for our monthly get-together. Or how her smile, no matter how big or small, lights up not only her entire face, but the faces of those around her. Who needs night lights when you've got Lonnie and her grin nearby?

"You've got it bad, brother," Val murmurs under her breath from where she's seated beside me.

I jerk my head her way as if I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar. "Have not."

"Have too."

"Have not," I snap back, because I'm *that* immature apparently.

She quirks a brow, her lips twitching as she shakes her head. "You forget, big brother, that I'm one of *two* people in this world who know your little secret now."

"It's not a secret."

A snort is her response to that lie. "And you're not sitting over here being all silent and broody, and checking out Lonnie

like you don't want to steal her away and lock her in a room for a week."

"More like a month."

She bumps my arm with hers. "Go big or go home, Luc. Lock that girl up for life."

My lungs seize as my eyes nearly jump out of my head at the mere thought.

Val's gaze warms and a wry smile appears on her face. "*That* scared you? Not the fact that you're in lust, love, or *whatever* with the Cap's daughter, the *firehouse's* daughter pretty much, and that despite all of your arguments that you *don't* want her in that way, now that's the *only* way you can think about having her?"

"Way to freak me out even more, Val," I mutter, lifting my beer bottle to my mouth and taking a hearty, hopefully fortifying, swig.

"You've got it *so* bad, brother. I'd almost feel sorry for you if I wasn't looking forward to watching this whole thing play out."

I go to answer her with some smartass reply, but it falls by the wayside when I catch London's curious eyes drifting my way from where she's standing with my nephew Austin in her arms while she talks with Renee, Dee, and Skye. Images of London with a baby—with *my* baby—flash in front of my eyes, and it's such a shock that I have to brace my hand on the table in front of me for a moment.

"Jesus. You *have* got it bad. Get it together, Luc," Val says.

I slowly spin my head to lock eyes with hers. "I can't fuck this up."

"You won't."

"No, Val. I mean it. I *can't* fuck this up. Not with her. Not with the crew. *Definitely* not with the Cap. This is far too important."

"This is?" she asks. "Or *she* is? Because your answer will determine if I let you go ahead with this crazy-ass plan of

yours.”

“Wasn’t just *my* plan. You were there too.”

She holds her hands up. “Hey. If it goes south, I’ll take the hit. But it’s not me who’s putting everything on the line for his best friend that he’s in *lurvve* with and who is in *lurvve* with him.”

“You don’t know that.”

She pats my shoulder, looking at me like I’m the biggest idiot in the world. Right now, after recent discoveries, I’m not sure she’s wrong in that assessment. “You could keep doubting yourself and London, *or* ...”

“Or I can pick my balls off the floor and man up? Is that what you were going to say?”

She shrugs and shoots me a smirk. “You said it, not me.”

“You were thinking it.”

“You having fun there in my brain, Luc?”

“Yeah, it’s a *fascinating* place, Val. Lots of tumbleweeds with the occasional evil plan for world domination, one matchmaking success at a time.”

“*Finally*, someone gets me.” She winks at me before straightening and pushing up out of her chair. “Now, as fun as it is to be your new therapist ...”

“More like a life coach, Val. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Okay, life coach. I’m not missing out on any more of Dee’s delicious food, and *you*, dear brother, need to start putting things into motion.” She arches her brow. “You’re on your own now.”

“And if it doesn’t work?”

“Well then, some old biddy who wants you to clean her oven in your turnouts, and *only* your turnouts, will win you at the auction, and you’ll be serving the community on your knees with a cloth in your hand.”

“Thanks for the visual, Val. Very supportive.”

She grins. “Just doing my sisterly duty,” she says with a snicker before leaving me sitting there. My eyes naturally drift back to where Lonnie was standing but she’s disappeared.

Knowing it’s now or never, I down the rest of my beer and lift my chin to the guys around the table as I get up and cross the yard to look for her.

“Where you off to, Luc?” Marco asks.

“Just getting another beer.”

He studies me and for a moment, I wonder if he knows something he’s not supposed to. “Grab me one on your way back.”

“Sure,” I reply, but he’s going to be waiting a while. At least until I’ve found the object of my newly realized desire anyway ...

And when I *do* find her, she’s sitting on the arm of the couch in the living room, animatedly watching Rhodes’s son Jake and Rhodes’s stepson—Dee’s son, Harvey—dueling it out, playing a car-racing game.

I come to a stop beside her, nudging her thigh with mine. She looks up at me and smiles. My pulse spikes at the sight as warmth I’ve always known was there but never *let* myself feel courses through me. All I can think about is how stunning she is—so much so that she actually takes my breath away. *Good Lord, was I an ignorant fool not seeing it ...*

“Hey. You showing the kids how it’s done?”

She snickers. “Not yet. I’m due to play the winner, and I think it’s going to be Harvey if he keeps it up.”

“Yeah. See? Even hot chicks like me more than you, Jake. Take *that*,” Harvey says.

Jake snorts as a startled giggle escapes London’s lips, and I just smirk, shaking my head at the far-too-confident eleven-year-old.

London turns and looks up at me again. “Not sure whether I should be flattered or horrified that I’m a ‘hot chick,’” she whispers.

“Definitely a compliment, Lonnie,” the seventeen-year-old Jake mutters, eyes still glued to the screen as he twists and turns his whole body along with the controller in his hand, trying to catch up to his speed demon brother.

“Yeah,” Harvey says before jumping to his feet as the last lap flag is waved on screen. “C’mon, Jake. At least *try* and catch me, slow poke.”

I chuckle at the competitive kid as I’m reminded of how fiercely I fought in any kind of battle between me and my siblings when we were growing up. Even now, there’s always a friendly level of competition between us, whether it be on a run, or playing in rival baseball teams, or at the upcoming auction where Marco *and* Gio are talking up just how much they’re going to go for. What’s even funnier is that they don’t know that *I* know—thanks to Val—that both of them are getting their significant others to bid on them. Whatever it takes, however *much* it takes.

A minute later, with a lot of ribbing between the boys and cheering and encouragement from Lonnie and myself, Harvey wins with a huge yell of triumph, which just makes us laugh and clap as he jumps and twerks and teases the older Jake.

“I need refueling after that. Here, Lonnie. You and Luc should have a go,” Jake says, putting his controller in London’s hand before Harvey runs over and does the same to me.

“It’s fun, I promise,” the kid says with a grin before playfully shoving Jake out of the way and running toward the kitchen. “Bet I can beat you again.”

Then we’re suddenly alone and the race on the TV screen is starting to count down to the green light.

“You think you can handle being beaten by a *girl*, Luca Rossi?” London teases as she slides down on the couch cushions, bracing her feet on the floor and leaning her arms forward on her legs, ready to apparently kick my ass. *I think I can handle anything you’ve got to give me, London Kelly ...*

I take the other side of the couch and sit down just as the screen starts counting down from three. “Maybe I’ll *let* you win, beautiful.”

She snaps narrowed eyes my way. “You wouldn’t dare ...”

“Oh, look. Green flag,” I say, smirking as my car shoots off the start line and accelerates ahead of her stationary one.

“I see how it is,” she murmurs, quickly catching up to me as we speed around the track. Little grunts and huffs of breath are the only sounds in the room other than the game’s commentators and the loud roar of the car engines.

“So ... I was thinking,” I say, my entire torso turning in the same direction I’m steering, as if I’m actually driving the car in real life.

“Hmmm ...”

“Charity auction next weekend. You’re gonna be my plus one, right?”

“Uh-huh ...” She sounds distracted, as if her focus is taken up by the action in the game. “Why? Do you want to bring someone else?” she asks after I don’t say anything for a spell.

“What? No. Of course not,” I say with a gasp.

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

“Why would you even ask that?” I miss a chicane and end up having my lap time deleted, the distraction giving Lonnie the chance to catch up so she’s right on my ass now.

“No reason. Just as long as you know I’d understand if you wanted to take a date or—”

I give up the race and drop the controller on the couch between us, turning my whole body sideways to face her.

“Luc. The race!” she gasps as she quickly pauses the game.

“Fuck the race.”

“O ... kaaay ...” Fuck, she looks adorably confused right now. In fact, she’s cute all the time, but even more so when

she doesn't know what's going on.

“No. What I *mean* is, I don't want you thinking that I don't want you at the auction.”

“Okay, then. That's good. Can we get back to the race now? I was just about to kick your ass.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “I actually have a favor to ask.”

She frowns, her brows furrowed into a point. When her gaze turns expectant, I press on, ignoring the fact that my chest feels tight and my throat is suddenly as dry as the Mojave desert.

“Don't leaving me hanging here, Luc. What is it?”

“I need you to bid on me for the auction,” I blurt out, my voice surprisingly and thankfully steady despite the mess of nerves I am inside.

London tilts her head. “Why?”

“Because the guys got in my head, and now they've got me having nightmares that some horny old lady is going to bid on me and make me her house boy.”

A giggle escapes her before she purses her lips, her eyes dancing with amusement as she seems to struggle to hold it in. “*Luc ...*”

“I'm deadly serious. I'm far too pretty to be a house boy, and I suck at cleaning in an apron and *only* an apron.” That earns me full on laughter. “It's not funny!”

She snorts. “It kind of is, Luc. I promise you, it won't be a grandma looking for a firefighter of her own to use and abuse. It'll probably just be someone wanting things done around the house. That sort of thing.”

“They'll probably want me to do *them* around the house.”

“Oh God.” She snickers. The things her laugh does to me ... I really *do* have it bad.

“That's why I need you,” I say.

“What can *I* do? Play bodyguard?”

“Well *no*. I want you to bid on me.”

Her eyes go wide. “*Why?*”

“You need to bid on me to make sure nobody else wins me.” I shoot her my best puppy-dog eyes. “Please, babe. I’m begging you.”

She rolls her eyes, clearly more than aware that I’m pulling out the big guns. And, sensing that I’m wearing her down, I keep going. “I’ll pay for the bid, of course. All I need you to do is make sure that you’re my winning bidder.”

“And what do *I* get out of this?”

“My undying gratitude and devotion?” *Then the most memorable moment of your life, if I have anything to do with it ...*

“Hmmm ... is that even allowed?”

I shrug. “It’s money for charity. I’ll pay the donation—I’ll even add extra to it since it’s for a good cause.” *And showing you that I’ve finally realized you’re the only girl for me ...*

She umms and aaahs for a while. My heart thumps hard against my ribs as I wait for her answer. My hands go clammy as I wring them together. So much is riding on this.

Then, after letting me sweat it out for a while, she glances at the paused game and then back to me. “Okay.”

“Okay? As in, yes?”

She snorts and rolls her eyes. “Yes, Luc. I’ll be your bodyguard and keep all those horny grandmas at bay.” A huge sigh of relief escapes me and my whole body relaxes, my pulse finally returning back to a normal, healthy beat.

“On one condition,” she says, a devilish, dazzling grin curving her lips.

“What’s that? I’ll do anything, Lonnie. Seriously.”

Without warning, she presses play on the game and the cars roar back to life. “You’ve got to beat me in the next two laps,” she says gleefully just as her car zooms past me and she giggles.

“Just you wait, babe. I’ll show *you*.” Then for the next two laps, we swap the lead back and forth, laughing and teasing and heckling each other until I manage to pass her on the last corner and beat her across the finish line with not a second to spare.

And as I celebrate my win on the track, I look forward to the next battle I have to fight—showing my best friend that I care for her just as much as she cares for me, and hoping and praying that I haven’t left it too late.

London

Luca: Can I ask a favor?

London: You mean ANOTHER one?

Luca: Yeah ...

London: Depends on what it is ... and what I get out of it.

I grin as I anticipate his response.

“You *do* know you’re grinning at your phone, right? And it’s kinda creepy?” Val asks, walking into my bedroom dressed more like she’s attending a red carpet premiere than a fire department charity auction.

Tonight’s dress code is creative black tie: traditional formal attire but with the option of adding a whimsical or unique accessory to show your personality.

Val’s wearing a full-length silver glittery ball dress but with the Val touch of a black faux-fur stole. Her hair is piled up in a sea of curls on top of her head and finished off with diamonds around her neck and in her ears, and the most perfect smoky eyes I’ve ever seen. She’s the epitome of high class and style, and I can’t help but look her over. “You do know you look hot, right? Like, absolutely stunning.”

“You don’t look too bad yourself, Lonnie. I loved that dress on you when we went shopping for it, but with the hair and the ‘look at me’ eye makeup ... you’re gonna have every man in the place tripping over themselves to get to you.”

The truth is, when I was deciding what to wear tonight for the auction, there was only one man I wanted to have falling over himself. I may be *trying* to get on with my life and get to a place where I'm ready to move past my feelings for Luc, but intentions and reality are fickle creatures. Remembering the way Luc looked at me that night at the restaurant, I wanted to see if this same dress could work miracles. The fact it matches my eyes and makes me feel sexy and elegant at the same time is a double whammy.

“And tonight, you not only look freaking *amazing*, you're going to spend a *lot* of my brother's money to save his dignity from the old-lady brigade I totally made him think would be bidding on him. You're going to show that idiot of a man just *what* he's missing.” Val closes the distance between us, and with her hands on my shoulders, she gently turns me around until I'm facing my full-length mirror and she's standing behind me, looking me up and down in its reflection. “And in *that* dress, you're going to make him notice. I swear, Lonnie. Just you wait.”

Then her words register, and I whirl around with a gasp. “You *didn't* ...”

Val's lips turn up into a satisfied smirk. “Oh, I totally did. But not only that, I recruited Renee's grandma and a few of her friends to start a bidding war for my big brother. We can't make things *too* easy for the man.”

“Oh my god,” I say with a giggle, shaking my head. “I don't know if I can do that to him.”

“You can and you must. He thinks you're going to save him, and you will. But *my* entertainment for the night is watching him squirm ... just a little bit.”

“You, boss lady, are an evil sister.”

She cackles like she's the wicked witch of the Midwest, which just makes me giggle even more. “Hey, those brothers of mine had their share of fun at my expense growing up. I've gotta take payback any chance I get.”

My phone vibrates from where I left it on my dresser.

“Speak of the devil,” she murmurs presumptively.

I pick it up and open the messages. “He wants to ask me a favor.”

“Mm-hmm ... I bet he does. Something along the lines of ‘please don’t let me become some grandma’s rent boy’.”

I meet her dancing eyes and laugh. “Probably. Maybe we *should* let Renee’s gram snap him up. I’m sure she’d put him to work.” Then I turn back to my phone to see Luc’s message and I freeze.

Luc: So I may be asking too much and of course you can say no ... but could you wear that blue dress you accidentally sent me a picture of? The one that makes your eyes look like the deepest blue sea? With those silver heels that turn your legs into a work of art?

I stand there, mouth agape, my eyes just as wide, wondering whether my best friend has had a brain transplant or if someone is pranking me via Luc’s phone.

“London?” Val asks curiously.

“Huh?”

“You okay there?”

“Um ... I think I’m living in an alternate universe. But yeah ...”

Val snickers. “What on earth has you freaked out? Is that Luc asking you to kidnap him if you get outbid or what?”

I slowly look up from my phone, having reread the message a second time. I stare over at my boss. “I honestly don’t know. Luc just asked if I could wear *this* dress and *these* heels”—I glance down at my silver-heel-clad feet—“but the way he asked was kind of ... *not* Luc-like.” It hits me. “Maybe Scotty stole his phone.”

“Let me see,” she says, holding out her hand. She reads over the message and a slow smile transforms her expression. “Damn. He really does like that dress, doesn’t he?”

“But that’s not a Luc text. He doesn’t talk like that. Not to *me* anyway.” My cheeks burn hot, and I’m definitely *not* thinking about how my tummy flipped and my heart sighed when I read his words.

“That’s why your blushing? Sorry, Lonnie. But that text wouldn’t be from anyone *but* my brother.”

“But why is he talking like that? He’s made it clear more than once that we’re friends—*best* friends—and nothing else.”

“Stranger things have happened, babe. And I don’t profess to know the inner workings of a man’s mind, but sometimes they can get a wakeup call and realize things he either didn’t want to see before or didn’t *think* he wanted to see.”

Her cryptic words confuse me even more, because Val’s talking in riddles. *Maybe I’ve entered an alternate universe full of cyborgs who don’t make any freaking sense.*

She claps her hands, snapping me from my thoughts. “Right. Well, we have to get going anyway, otherwise we won’t get there in time for all the fun and games. And we wouldn’t wanna miss *that* now, would we?”

“Val, you know something, don’t you? About why Luc is sending me weird messages?”

“Lonnie,” she says, bracing her hands on my shoulders and dipping her head so that she locks eyes with mine. “Whatever happens tonight, I want you to just go with it. I’ve got your back. All of us Rossi women and soon-to-be Rossi women do. And we’d never do you wrong. So I’m gonna go to the kitchen and call for a car, I’m going to crack open that champagne in the fridge while we wait for it, and you’re going to spray some of that perfume I *know* Luc likes and meet me there ... *after* you text him back and leave him wondering for a while.”

With a wink and a grin, she lets me go and walks from the room, leaving me standing there feeling a little off-kilter, a *lot* confused, and a bit curious as to why Luc is being almost flirty with me and Val is being cagey about what this night might bring.

Luca: Lonnie?

I um and ah over exactly how to reply, smiling when I decide that two can definitely play this game.

London: I guess that's for me to know and you to find out. And BTW, don't forget that I'm bidding with YOUR money tonight, and if you're not enticing enough, I may have to bid on another eligible firefighter to entertain me ...

Luc: Over my dead body, beautiful. I'm the only fireman you'll ever need.

Something about the tone of the text has me feeling weird in a totally good way inside, but I'm not about to tell *him* that.

London: There is one important fireman in my life ... my dad

Luc: I'm truly hurt, Lonnie. Maybe I should take out the competition and claim that number-one spot as my own

I giggle and shake my head.

London: You're ridiculous.

Luc: Just how you like me. So, the dress?

London: I'll think about it ... but you'll owe me one.

Luc: I'm going to dazzle you.

London: Just dazzle? Well, that's disappointing.

Luc: I'm going to rock your world, London Kelly.

London: Cleaning my oven?

Luc: Just you wait.

God, that beautiful, confusing, man. What the hell am I going to do with him?

THE REST of the women attached to Firehouse 101 are waiting in the lobby of a ritzy downtown hotel when Val and I arrive.

“Damn, girl. That dress is *hot*,” Skye says, pulling me in for a hug before stepping back and looking me over, then stepping away. “My brother is an idiot.”

I swear that’s what she mutters under her breath before she embraces Val and talks about the facial she got at our clinic yesterday.

“Best thing I’ve had on my face in ages.”

“That’s what she said,” Renee mutters, earning a round of startled giggles.

“Ren!” her sister Hayley says with a smirk. “I don’t know what it is about you nearly being a married woman, but damn, girl. You’re letting your dirty mind out to play in public more now than you ever have.”

Renee shrugs like she couldn’t care less, glancing my way and shooting me a wink. “Skye isn’t wrong about that dress, Lonnie. That’s a showstopper, and I should know.”

“*Someone* might have asked if she’d wear it, not knowing our little Lonnie had already decided to anyway.”

“Wait ...” Dee, Rhodes’s wife, switches her gaze between Val and myself. “Luca *asked* if you’d wear the dress?”

I nod. “Yup.”

She groans and shakes her head from side to side. “I swear, that man needs to see what the rest of us all see and snap you up before *another* hot doctor comes along to whisk you away. At the moment, he doesn’t deserve to get eye candy like that.”

“Wait. You know too?” I ask her, suddenly feeling uncomfortable that everyone knows I’m in heavy like with Luc, or that I’m that so damn obvious that it’s just becoming a joke now.

“Okay, babe. No. I can see what you’re thinking and it’s definitely *not* that. I swear. I don’t think there’s anybody in the station that *isn’t* rooting for you two to get together. My husband included. He’s told me more than once that he can’t work out what Luc’s problem is.”

“It’s not a problem. It’s ...” My words get lost on my tongue because I never stopped to consider that maybe it’s not that Luc doesn’t want me. It’s that he doesn’t *want* to want me. Or worse ... he isn’t willing to risk anything else in his life to let himself have me.

Shit. Why am I even here?

“I should never have agreed to bid on Luc tonight. Maybe he needs Renee’s grandma to win him.”

“No, Lonnie. Get that thought right out of your head,” Val whispers, for my ears only. “You have *nothing* to worry about.”

I meet her eyes and shake my head. “I don’t want to be a punch line, Val. The Captain’s daughter mooning over the older lieutenant.”

“Well, you’re lucky there because he’s *not* a lieutenant yet. And you’re not a joke. This isn’t fun and games, and as soon as we get in there and the auction starts, you’re going to realize that. I just need you to trust me.” She looks around the group, women I class as my friends, since we’re all parts of the firehouse family. “You need to trust *us*. Can you do that?”

Something starts niggling at my brain because Val seems *very* encouraging tonight. More so than ever before. It’s like she’s *enjoying* this a little too much, and I’m starting to think that I’m missing something.

I know that none of them would steer me wrong, but their encouragement seems to be feeding into the crush that I’m trying hard to move on from. And the thought that I might have to distance myself from them, from the whole firehouse in order to achieve that objective, actually hurts. *How did I get myself into this mess?* Oh, that’s right. I agreed to come and bid on the best friend that I’m in love with.

“*But* you’ve got to promise us all that you’re going to make Luc squirm a little. Because there’s nothing I like more than seeing that cocky fucker get a little uncomfortable. So that’s where Renee’s grams and her friends come in. They’ve

come armed with dollar bills and they're willing to throw them at him if need be."

Just the vision of that has me giggling.

"Grams always did say she liked a man in uniform," Renee says with a devilish grin.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I think it's high time we went to our table inside and started enjoying the fire department's hospitality. I mean, they keep our men from us for a day at a time—the least they can do is supply us some champagne and good food for the pleasure," Val declares."

Dee's chest puffs up as she shoots us a proud smile. "Considering it's *my* restaurant catering this event, I can guarantee you it's good food."

Val loops her arm in mine. "You ready to make your entrance?"

"Sure. Champagne and Dee's food? You're gonna have to hold me back."

"Perfect," she says, sharing a strange look with Skye before the group moves forward toward the ballroom. For a moment I consider what I might be walking into ... then I remember it's a charity auction. I'm not walking into anything surprising. This isn't going to be a life-changing night. I don't have to do anything or even *think* about anything. Tonight's about having fun with the ladies of Firehouse 101.

So why does it feel like something big is about to happen?

London

“Now, tonight isn’t just about the amazing food that’s been donated by Dee Anderson and her restaurant, Delish,” the Area Commander John Parsons announces from the stage at the front of the room. The same Uncle John that I’ve known since I was knee-high to an engine wheel and toddling around the firehouse, following my father. I’m as much a part of the department as dear old dad. “Tonight is about raising much-needed money for charity, and I can’t think of any other cause more near and dear to our hearts.”

The air fills with applause and I catch Skye topping up my champagne glass for the second time tonight. I wouldn’t normally be suspicious, since there have been more than a few nights where the girls would turn up at the clinic on a Friday night and we’d share a few drinks.

But Val has also been keeping my glass topped up. It’s like they think I need Dutch courage or something. Do they think I’m going to get my heart broken if I get outbid on Luca?

Thank God I’ve eaten a full meal though, because otherwise I’d be a slurring mess who needed rolling out the door. *Like the last time I was wearing this dress and facing down Luc outside the restaurant.*

Dammit, will I ever get the damn man out of my system?
Do I really believe I want to?

“Now the fun begins,” Renee’s grandmother, or Grams, as she insisted we all call her, says.

“Grams ...” Renee warns under her breath but there’s humor in it. Val winks at me and that weird, uneasy, out-of-the-loop feeling comes back again.

“So without further ado, I’ll invite Captain Kelly of Firehouse 101 to the stage to start proceedings,” Uncle John announces.

More applause rings out as Dad walks on stage dressed in full formal uniform. Uncle John hands him the microphone and claps him on the shoulder before he heads down the stairs and returns to his table at the front. I look out for any of the guys or Luc but they’re all hidden side of stage.

“Right, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to get your wallets out and your bidding paddles ready as we bring out the foolish—I mean, *brave*—men and women who’ve volunteered to be auctioned off tonight. The winning bidders will win the prize put up by the firefighter in question, with time and place up for negotiation. So with all of that out of the way, let’s raise some big money and bring out the first victim—I mean ... yeah.” Dad laughs “Victim might actually be right. We just don’t know if that victim’s gonna be Scotty Jones or whoever wins the bidding on him.” That earns a round of cheers. If nothing else, Scotty’s reputation definitely precedes him at these charity events.

Then “You Can Leave Your Hat On” by Joe Cocker blasts over the speakers as Scotty struts out wearing his turnouts and a huge grin. He walks back and forth along the front of the stage and dances in time to the beat.

“Take it off!” Grams yells, causing startled laughter to erupt from some of us and loud catcalls of encouragement from others. Even Dad can’t help but laugh at Scotty’s antics as he comes over to stand next to him.

“Right. Now let’s see what Scotty wants you to know,” Dad says, looking down at the card in his hand. “Scotty Jones is hot to trot and ready to fix whatever your heart desires. He does want you to know that he’s happily engaged to the best woman on earth, who unfortunately cannot be here tonight as

she had to work, and for the winner to know that he'll do anything for charity but he won't do *that*."

Val and I groan before snickering and shaking our heads.

"That man is gonna get himself in trouble one day," Dee says.

"Yeah, but at least that's not our problem anymore. That's all for his fiancée," I say, lifting my glass in the air for a toast. "A drink to the brave woman who chose to take him on."

"Cheers to that!" my friends all say with a laugh before taking a drink.

"Let's start the bidding at one hundred," Dad starts as he calls out the open bid. Five minutes later, a woman at the front bids six hundred dollars and Scotty grabs the microphone and yells, "Sold" to raucous laughter.

"Thanks, Mom," he says.

"Oh God," I say, unable to stop giggling. "He got his *mom* to buy him. That's hilarious."

"Is it any different from a certain brother of mine getting his *best friend* to bid on him?"

"Touché."

Scotty walks down the stairs and over to where his parents are seated, hugging them both before waving to the rest of the crowd as Joe Cocker's voice sings him back offstage.

"Now, this next auction is a little different. Lieutenant Marco Rossi and Lieutenant Rhodes Anderson are offering a package deal for a day of handyman and gardening services. Two for the price of one, people, so let's see the bidding go sky-high on this one. C'mon out, firefighters."

Our whole table stands and starts cheering as Marco and Rhodes walk out from opposite sides of the stage, both wearing full turnout gear, helmets and all. They meet with a high five in the middle and walk forward to where Dad is standing.

Then the bidding starts up again and despite Grams, Renee, Hayley, and even Val bidding, soon Dad is calling out “Going, going, *gone* to Commander Parsons for three *thousand* dollars.”

“Holy shit,” Skye says, shaking her head. “I hate to think what Commander Parsons is going to make them do.”

“Probably clean out his gutters and wash his walls,” I say. “Or else he’ll just send them out on a recruitment tour at colleges.”

“Good. We need more women in the department,” Skye says with a knowing smirk.

“Hey, that’s my future husband you’re talking about,” a laughing Renee says.

“And my *current* husband,” Dee adds.

“At least make sure it happens the weekend of your bachelorette party. New York, here we come, right?” Skye adds.

“Oh yeah,” Renee replies with a twinkle in her eye.

A week ago over drinks at my new apartment, it was decided that Renee deserves a memorable send-off to her single life, and the best place to do that was in the city that never sleeps. So in two weeks’ time, all of us girls are off to New York to join my sister for a weekend of fun. I can’t wait.

“Now, it’s time for another Rossi brother. This time, it’s Luca.”

“Somebody to Love” by Queen starts playing over the speakers and my heart skips a beat when the man of the hour steps onto the stage and it stops all together. Because Luca Rossi isn’t wearing turnouts. No, he’s wearing a black tuxedo with an open-neck white dress shirt and a pocket square that is the exact color of my dress.

I hear talking around the table but I’m struck mute, my mouth agape as I take in the most handsome man in the room, not missing when he stops at the front of the stage and scans

the crowd. His eyes lock with mine his beautiful lips curve into a sexy grin before he winks at me.

“Well, now. That’s quite an entrance, Luc. Let’s see what you’re offering up for auction today,” Dad says, looking down at the card and frowning. He looks back at up at Luc. “Really?”

“Sure am, Cap.”

God, I wanna know what that card says.

I turn my wide eyes to the women around the table, all of whom are watching me closely. Val smiles as Skye moves around to stand on the other side of me, boxing me in.

“What’s going on?” I ask, my voice a little shaky.

“Just remember your deal with him, yeah?” Skye says.

“What deal? Oh, yeah. Okay ... I guess ...”

“Okay, then,” Dad says, looking my way, his stare boring into mine for some untold reason. “Who’s going to start the bidding?”

“Five hundred,” Grams yells out, waving her white-numbered paddle in the air like an airport runway controller.

“Six!” Renee counters.

“Seven hundred.” That was Skye.

“Eight hundred.” Val’s turn now.

And yet still I stand there, staring dumbfounded at Luc, my brain and mouth disconnected. I was supposed to be doing something, right?

A few women from the other side of the room start bidding before Grams enters the fray again. “One thousand, five hundred dollars!”

Luc laughs and shakes his head. “Thanks, Grams,” he calls out.

“Any time, Luc,” she replies.

Then Luc’s back to staring at me, his gaze intense and totally unreadable. The last time he looked at me like that was

when he was storming over to me outside the restaurant. I shiver, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not because I still can't work out what the hell is going on. I was supposed to be bidding on him. Winning the auction for—what was the prize again?

Luc turns his head and says something to Dad, who claps him on the shoulder and hands him the microphone.

“I must say, I'm flattered by the bidding so far but the one person I *want* to be bidding on me hasn't raised her paddle yet. So I think I should explain what the prize will be.” He takes a deep breath before his gaze locks on mine, pinning me in place as Skye and Val both reach out and hold my hands, each giving me a gentle squeeze. “The winning bidder will win a romantic date with me tomorrow night. It will be everything she dreams of. In fact, I happen to know it'll be her perfect dream date ...”

And I feel his words dig deep right down into my soul. “Is this a joke?” I ask.

“No, babe. It's not,” Val replies.

“Am I being punked?” I say, looking around the room for a camera crew.

Skye laughs. “Nope.”

“He wants a date ... my dream date ... with *me*?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I look around at Renee, Dee, Grams, Hayley, and Skye, and finish on Val. “But—”

“No buts. The choice is yours. He's put himself out there and now it's all up to you. If you want to bid, you bid. If you don't, let Grams win and she'll put him to work in her garden. This is up to *you*, London.”

“You did this.”

Val scrunches her nose up. “Actually, I just did the recon work for him. This is all Luc and before you ask, I would not have done any of this if I didn't think this was exactly what you both needed. After tomorrow night, you'll have an answer

to all of those what-if questions that have been holding you back. Once and for all, you'll know whether you *want* to move on or not."

"So, it's a pity date?" I whisper, voicing my worst worry.

"Fuck no. This is a Luc I've never seen before and I like it."

I worry my lip between my teeth, my whole body vibrating with indecision, my brain warring with my heart.

Then I look across the table to Grams, knowing that out of everyone at the table, she's got wisdom and a life's worth of experience on her side. "What do I do?"

Grams smiles. "London, you already know what you want to do. Follow your heart, and fuck everything else. You lift that paddle, yell out a stupidly high bid for Luc to pay for the privilege of taking you out on your dream date, and then enjoy the hell out of it. Give yourself one night. What's the worst that could happen?"

I could lose my heart to him forever.

But isn't that the biggest what-if question of all?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath of my own, willing my heart to stop trying to beat its way out of my chest before I open them again and lock eyes with the man watching me closely from the stage.

It's like the whole room blurs and there's only me and him, standing there on the precipice, both of us knowing that whatever I do next, whatever decision I make will change us forever. This is like the scene in every rom-com where the hero makes a big gesture to get the heroine's attention once and for all.

Fuck it. You only live once, right?

I lean down, up-end my half-filled glass of champagne and then, emboldened by sheer will and the warm buzz of liquor, I make my decision. Actually, that's a lie. I don't think there was ever any question.

“Two thousand dollars!” I call out, holding my banner up and quirking a brow at Luc, whose eyes widen at the bid. He made the first move. I countered. Now the ball is firmly in Luca Rossi’s court.

I stop breathing all together, because a slow-growing sexy smile, bigger and brighter than I’ve ever seen, appears on his handsome face before he lifts the microphone to his lips and says the five words that seal our fate.

“Sold, to my best friend.”

Luca

It was thanks to Marco and Rhodes that I was able to even get out on stage when last-minute uncertainty hit. All these questions I didn't have answers to raced through my head. Would this actually work? *Could* this work? What if someone else outbid her? What if Lonnie *didn't* bid on me when she realized what was happening?

What if she thought this was a prank instead of me being one hundred percent genuine?

After I blurted all of that out to Marco, he'd slapped me around the back of my head, then straightened my pocket square, gave me a grin, and told it to me straight. "Get your ass out there, otherwise you'll never know and we'll never hear the end of it."

Rhodes had snorted and shaken his head. "What your inspirational big brother is *trying* to say is that if not now, then when? Because you've gone to all this trouble to set up a date that'll be the big grand gesture that's perfect for her and her alone, and *now* you're having second thoughts? C'mon, Luc. You finally know what you want; all you've gotta do is go out there and get it."

So I did exactly that. I walked out on stage and took control of my future—well, the future I want anyway.

And now that I'm backstage and still in a state of shock, bewilderment, anxious excitement, and tempered hope ... I'm wondering if I'll even *make* it till tomorrow night.

“You, Luca Rossi, might just have the biggest balls I’ve ever seen,” Scotty says, coming over and slapping me on the shoulder. He holds his hands out wide. “Like *huge*.”

“You been checking me out in the locker room, Scotty?” I ask, deflecting how I’m really feeling with a smartass comeback.

Cap appears from behind the curtain, walking straight toward me, his expression unreadable, his eyes locked on me. I freeze in place, my body no longer willing to cooperate with me as I wait for my impending doom. Any chatter that had been going on falls by the wayside as London’s *father* and my *superior* stops in front of me, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at me.

My mouth is as dry as a desert, but somehow, I manage to swallow down the tight lump in my throat and square my shoulders. Cap is not a man to be treated like a fool, and I would never dream of being anything but my true self with him. And okay, so I could’ve given him heads up that I was going to do *that* in front of everyone tonight ... but in my defense, I wasn’t sure exactly how it would go down. I was also more nervous than I’ve ever been in my entire life. Like I can face a burning building on the verge of a flashover, but putting myself out there for my best friend—the same one I’ve been telling everyone I didn’t have feelings for when my subconscious was laughing at me, like the idiot I am—*that* had me nearly losing my dinner before I walked out on stage.

Now the indiscernible expression on Cap’s face has me sinking back down to earth, especially when he crosses his arms in front of his body and narrows his eyes.

“Cap, I—”

“About damn time, Rossi,” he says, his lips curving into a smile as he pulls me in for a man hug before letting me go. “You sure know how to make a statement too. Two thousand dollars? My god, I think we’ve been paying you too much.”

I let out a huge sigh and shake my head, my lips twitching as all the tension and worry I’d been holding onto leeches out of me. “Fuck, you had me worried there for a moment.”

“*You* were worried? Luc, you’ve been in denial for so long we started wondering if you were *ever* going to see the wood for the trees,” he says, looking around the crew who must have gathered to watch the show of London’s Dad Ripping Me a New One. Thankfully, that didn’t happen.

I meet his eyes, making sure he knows I’m being straight with him. “I may have taken my time, sir. But my intention is to sweep your daughter off her feet and prove to her that my eyes are well and truly open now. There isn’t anything I won’t do to make sure she knows just how serious I am about her and how strong my feelings are.”

Pride shines back at me in his gaze. “Luc, there isn’t another man on this crew that I’d trust more to look after my baby girl than you.”

“Hey! I take exception to that,” Scotty pipes up from the sidelines.

All heads snap his way, a chorus of “Really?” and “You’re joking, right?” ringing out around the group.

“What? I’m trustworthy. I’d never deny I had the hots for the Cap’s daughter like Luc did,” Scotty says.

Cap’s grin turns into a deadly scowl, one that we’ve all seen at one point or another over the years we’ve been together as a crew at 101. Scotty’s gulp and shrinking form prove he’s feeling the intense weight of the Captain’s glare.

“You want to repeat that, firefighter Jones?” Cap asks.

“Nope. Not me. I’ve got to ... um ... bye!” then Scotty’s gone faster than I’ve ever seen him move, and as hard as I fight it, I can’t help the snicker that escapes my lips. Marco and Rhodes chuckle right alongside me.

“We’ll leave you to it, Luc,” Marco says wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “I’m happy for you and here if you need advice.”

I arch a brow. “Advice?”

Marco rolls his eyes and laughs. “Yeah, and for once, you should actually let what I’m saying sink in.”

“Okay, big brother. What is this advice?”

“Don’t listen to anyone. Just go with the flow and what feels right.”

My head jerks in surprise, because that was *not* what I was expecting.

Rhodes appears beside Cap. “And make sure, if nothing else, there are no unanswered questions by the end of the night.”

Cap looks between Marco and Rhodes and nods. “They’re not wrong.”

“What? You’re not going to offer me your own little piece of wisdom, Cap?” I ask, my lips twitching up.

“Yeah. The most important advice you’ll ever get.”

“Okay. Hit me.”

“My daughter wouldn’t like it if I did that, Rossi.”

“Oh, look, the Cap has jokes. And here was I thinking I’d get the whole ‘you hurt her and your body will never be found’ speech,” I quip.

Cap’s lips curl into a downright scary smirk. “Do you need that speech, Rossi? Because I’m sure you know by now that if I *wanted* to make you disappear ... it wouldn’t be a problem.”

He stares me down for so long that the blood slowly drains from my face, and just when I start to think about the ways he *could* end me, his lips twitch, giving him away.

“Fuck,” I breathe, releasing the breath that had seized in my chest.

“Hey. As long you remember that I *can* do it, there’s no need for you to know *how*, right?” he asks, and I nod, marveling at just how scary Cap can be.

Marco claps me on the back and he follows Rhodes out of the room, leaving me standing there with Cap and suddenly feeling a lot more awkward.

When he asked me about the lieutenant's exam a few months ago, he also said he knew London and I were just friends. But now ... I don't think I could *ever* be just friends with her. Not now that I know I l—

“Dad, stop scaring Luc,” the woman of my dreams and object of my desires says, coming straight toward us, a look of determination on that cute little face of hers. *God, I really do have it bad. How did I not get it till now?*

Cap's amused gaze slowly switches from London to me. “Am I scaring you, Luc?” He gives me his best attempt at a menacing, foreboding expression and any other man, any other time, I'd be at risk of doing a Scotty and running off.

“No, sir.”

An all-knowing sigh comes out of my girl. “Dad ...” she warns, her exasperated tone saying everything.

“Nice bid, baby girl. I hope it's not *your* money that you were bidding,” he adds. London's eyes drift over to mine, and where I expected confusion and maybe wariness, all I see is challenge and determination. It's like we're playing the ultimate game of chicken and she's just waiting to see who blinks first.

“Oh, no. That was all Luc's hard-earned cash. I just felt he needed to be *very* generous, since he played me to get a date.” The way she's goading me with her words is having a far-too-inappropriate effect on me.

“That's my girl, Lonnie. I'll see you back out there,” Cap says, leaning in and kissing the side of London's head before finally leaving us alone.

“So ...?” she says, not backing off for a second.

“So ...”

“We're actually doing this?”

“Yep.”

“And this isn't some prank?”

I frown. “Beautiful, I wouldn’t even mess with you like that.”

She nods, and I don’t miss that little sliver of vulnerability that she usually keeps well hidden. It’s that same soft spot she showed me without realizing back when she rocked my world and kissed me in the car that first time. “OK.”

“Honestly, Lonnie. I—” I continue before her word sinks in. “What?”

“OK.” She laughs. “Serious, Luc. If you want to give me the date of my dreams that you totally had your sister research for you, then give it your best shot.”

“Val may have *helped*. But otherwise, this is all me.”

“Yeah, yeah. OK ...”

“No seriously.”

“Yeah. OK.”

“Lonnie, I totally want to date the hell out of you, starting tomorrow.”

She opens her mouth to throw out another retort but stops, her gaze roaming my face as if she’s studying me. “You’re *actually* serious.”

“I wouldn’t sell myself to my best friend if I wasn’t one hundred percent, absolutely sure.”

“Wow. So I own you now?”

I chuckle, lifting my hand up to rub over the back of my neck. “Yes, I guess you do.” For the first time while I know she’s looking, I lazily drag my eyes down her body and slowly let them drift back over those delicious curves of hers and that fucking gorgeous dress until I meet her eyes again. “You look amazing, Lonnie.”

“Well, you *did* request this dress,” she says, giving me a slow twirl. All I want to do is pull her into my arms and kiss her properly—a first kiss re-do. But that, too, can wait. I’m doing this right and I’m doing this properly. Because this isn’t just about me anymore.

I'm not giving up with this girl until she tells me it's done. Whatever I have to do, whatever it takes, bending rules, breaking them, anything ... I'll do it.

Because if my little epiphany last weekend has proven anything, it's that I've wasted enough time already, and if I don't hurry up and make London mine, then I really will be the fool everyone thinks I am.

And if there's one thing I love to do, it's prove people wrong.

"Tomorrow night is going to be interesting. Do I get any clues?" she asks, her voice a little rough, letting me know I'm not the only one thinking about fast-forwarding things at warp speed. *How have I never noticed those perfectly curved lips of hers and picturing my teeth digging into her skin...*

"That's for me to know and you to find out, London Kelly. But until then, you're going to let me take you back to your table, since it's *Val* who's your date tonight—not me."

She pouts and I have to clench my fists at my sides to stop myself from hauling her against me and kissing the shit out of her.

"But tomorrow?" I lean in, letting myself have this one gift as I brush my lips over her cheek, loving the way her breath stutters and her body trembles at my touch. "Tomorrow, you're all mine."

London

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope,” Luc says with a grin as he drives toward destination unknown.

“You’re not fun.”

“I disagree. I’m a lot of fun. And you are gorgeous.”

I blush and the butterflies in my stomach flutter yet again, a common occurrence since Luc turned up at my door thirty minutes ago with a huge bunch of red roses and a smile that would make a nun melt into a puddle on the floor. Then he waited while I locked my front door, laced his hand with mine, and led me down onto the street where his car was parked. After helping me in and closing the door behind me, he rounded the hood, slid behind the steering wheel, and took me toward our unknown destination.

As I look down at myself, I wonder for the tenth time today whether I’ve been transported into an alternate universe? Because I’ve got Luca “We’re Just Friends” Rossi calling me gorgeous when I’m dressed in—after a thorough text interrogation earlier—my favorite black wool-lined boots, jeans, which double as thermal leggings, a long-sleeved tee with “Just Feed Me and Call Me Pretty” on the front, and a black snow jacket and black beanie. It’s winter-date cute, and hearing Luc tell me I look gorgeous? Definitely worth it.

I’m still trying to wrap my head around the change in Luc. He’s attentive, observant, and kind of underhanded—but in a

good way.

“You could try and guess though if you want,” he adds.

I turn to look at him. “So it’s going to be like *that*, is it?”

“Yep.” His smile curls into a sexy smirk. “How about you use the powers of deduction and I’ll let you know if you’re getting close or not? I know you love a good puzzle.”

“You’re a damn puzzle,” I mutter.

He reaches down for my hand and lifts it to his mouth, brushing his lips over my knuckles and sending a shiver throughout my entire body before lowering my hand back down between us. *Damn, he’s good.*

“Okay. Well I already know you got Val to help.”

He nods. “I did. A man with a plan always needs a good wing-woman to help him.”

“I thought *I* was your wing-woman?”

“You’ve been upgraded.”

I scrunch my nose up, earning a groan and a shake of his head. “Upgraded or replaced?”

“Definitely upgraded.”

He still hasn’t let go of my hand and he also hasn’t elaborated further. “So Val told you what I might like to do?”

“Mm-hmm ...”

“And she used her own powers of deduction to make suggestions?”

“Nope. She simply asked you.”

My body jerks as realization hits me. “Her questions last week in the car.”

“Bingo,” he says as he takes the next exit off the freeway, heading toward Downtown Chicago.

I remember what she asked me.

“Let’s say you get asked out on a date, and it’s going to be the most romantic date you could ever dream of. What would

you want to do?"

I gasp as I recall what I told her. "You're going to try and squeeze all of that into one date?"

"Not gonna try, beautiful. I'm *going* to do it all."

"That's a lot for a date."

"A first date is the most memorable one. It's one of the most important milestones in any relationship. It's where a man wants to make the best impression, enough to get him a second date."

"Hold on. I only won *one* date, Luc. And it was with *your* money."

He shrugs. "Semantics."

"Ah, no. It's fact."

"Facts can be twisted for one's own benefit. I remember what I said to you last night and that was—and I quote—that I totally want to date the hell out of you. I may not be any good at any of this romantic date-like stuff, but I can guarantee that I'll give it everything I've got."

"And what—pray, tell—is the benefit for you?"

"That's an easy one, Lonnie. And if you don't know already, my aim is for you to have absolutely no doubt that I'm one hundred percent on board with this by the end of the night. So you're going to have to try harder to catch me out."

"I'm not trying to catch you out."

"But you're trying to come up with an explanation as to why I'm driving you toward the city and not telling you what we're doing or where we're going. All the while rationalizing in your head why I'm doing this when you already *know* the reason—you just don't believe it yet. But don't worry. You will."

"Now you're annoying me."

"No, I'm not. You're annoying yourself," he says with a chuckle. *Damn it, that's sexy too.* "I've got an idea. How about you take a deep breath and relax and just go with the flow?"

“Luc ...” I nearly growl, earning another knowing smile from my date.

“London. You’re adorable when you’re trying to be mad at me—do you know that? I’ve never realized just how irresistible it is. More fool me.”

This man is confusing and frustrating, and he’s impossible to get a read on. I decide to switch it up. “Okay. So you’re saying this is *actually* a date. Not an auction prize that I won. Not a pity date—”

He comes to a stop at a red light, hitting the brake a little harder than expected before snapping his gaze to mine. “Don’t you *ever* say that about yourself, Lonnie. You’re *never* going to be a pity *anything* as far as you and me are concerned. You know me better than that.”

Shit. He’s right. I do. “Sorry.”

His eyes soften and warm, and I have an urge to apologize to him a second time—*with my lips on his*. But alas, the light turns green, and we’re on the move again.

Luc gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “Babe, I know I haven’t been receptive to anything more than friendship between the two of us, but today, all I ask is that you let go of the past and just enjoy yourself. Don’t worry about what we’re doing or what I have planned for us. I just want you to relax and keep an open mind. Can you do that for me?”

I learned long ago that I’ll do anything Luc wants when he calls me babe. Thank God he hasn’t realized that.

I nod, earning another smile. When I gift him one right back, his eyes drift down to my mouth before his jaw clenches and he turns back and focuses on the road.

“So, are we there yet?” I tease, and that’s when I witness another one of my Luca Rossi kryptonites—his laughter.

Lord give me strength, because something tells me I’m gonna need all the help I can get to get through this date without saying fuck it and throwing caution—and my body—to the wind.

A few moments later, Luc is pulling his car into a parking garage in Wicker Park.

“Now are you going to tell me what’s on the agenda today?” I ask, hopping out of the door that Luc has opened for me.

“Well first, I do this,” he says, lacing his fingers with mine.

I glance down at our joined hands and then back to his face. “Good start.”

“Why thank you.”

“And next?”

“Next, we’ve got a train to catch.” Then without another word, we’re on the move, and I’m being led to Destination Unknown again.

Half an hour later, we’re off the train and walking past the Cultural Centre and waiting for the signal to cross the intersection toward Millennium Park.

“Are we there yet?” I ask again with a giggle, giddiness bubbling inside of me because if I’m right, then Luc is about to tick off one of my dating bucket-list items.

“Yep.”

“So I’m right?”

He turns his amused gaze my way. “You’re always right.” That earns him an eye roll. “But I’ll play. What do you think you’re right about this time?”

“You’re taking me ice-skating.”

“Yep.” He leads me across North Michigan Avenue and along the sidewalk bordering the seasonal ice-skating rink.

I step in front of him and start walking backward, bouncing with excitement. “So, is this a case of you sitting down and watching me skate? I know you can’t do it.”

He chuckles. “You remember that story?”

“You think I’d forget about you, Marco, and Gio going to join the local ice-hockey team, and you eating ice within the

first five minutes, knocking out your two front teeth? Oh yeah.” I grin wickedly at him. “That’s firmly in the Luc stories vault in my head.”

“My childhood trauma is your entertainment fodder?” He’s laughing now.

“Yep,” I say, accentuating the word. “Does that hurt your big, brave firefighter image, Luc?”

His answering smile is so wide and pure it has my heart dancing a little faster. When I almost trip over my feet, he quickly braces his hands on my hips to steady me, bringing his face just that much closer to mine and I forget to breathe.

With my mind spinning, and everything I thought I knew about Luc and I totally up in the air, we reach the ticketing counter and Luc flashes his cell phone, showing our pre-booked tickets for the 11.30-1pm session. He orders ice skates in both of our sizes and carries them as we walk outside to the nearest free bench. All the while, I feel like I’m in a daze.

This is like a complete role switch in our friendship. I’m usually the organizer, the task master, whereas Luc is the easy, breezy, go-with-the-flow one out of the two of us.

“What’s happening here?” I ask when Luc bends down in front of me and starts unlacing my boots.

His lips twitch, and I swear he *knows* he’s got me off-balance. “We’re going ice-skating, and I’m going to make an absolute fool of myself doing it.”

“I mean ... this.” I nod down to my sock-clad feet.

“Put your hands on my shoulders, babe. Going to need to get some leverage to get these on you from this angle.”

“I *can* do it, Luc.”

“I know. But doesn’t mean you’re going to.”

I sigh and do as he said. A few minutes later, I’m fully laced up and ready to skate while Luc is booting up.

“Are you really going to skate with me?” I ask, hope blooming in my chest.

He turns and reaches up, adjusting my black beanie with the fluffy pompom on my head and sweeping the tip of his finger along over my temple. His eyes track the movement before lazily shifting to meet my gaze. “It wouldn’t be much of a date if I came here to just stand and *watch* you skate. I’m not afraid to make a fool of myself—not in front of you anyway.”

If it was possible for a human body to melt, I’d be done for. How could he ever think he wasn’t any good at romance and dating? I swear, he just has to shoot one of those sexy smiles my way and he’d already be wining. Funny that we could be doing anything and as long as it was with him, I’d be happy.

“Ready to watch me fall on my ass?” he asks.

I stand and carefully make my way to the edge of the makeshift rink under the shadow of the famous Bean landmark. “Yes. I think I am. But don’t worry, Luc. I’ll look after you.”

“Yeah,” he says, his voice warm and raspy. “I think you’re right.”

“FUCK, THAT HURTS,” he grumbles as he gingerly sits down on the seat beside me on the L train heading back out of the city.

I giggle and lean into him. “I *did* offer to get you one of those skate aids.”

“They’re for kids.”

“They’re for *beginners*, Luc.”

“That’s what I mean—kids. Not thirty-eight-year-old men who have no business pretending they can skate on ice.”

“I appreciated the sacrifice though. I mean, you *did* catch me when you fell and tripped me up. It’s the thought that counts.”

“Right,” he grouses, making me laugh. “Tell that to my ass.”

“Aww, baby cakes. Want me to kiss it better?” I offer..

“Might be a bit scandalous for our fellow train passengers. I’ll take a rain check though.” He winks.

My mouth drops open before I catch myself and slam it shut again, turning my head to stare out the window as a giddy grin curves my lips and my cheeks burn.

Luc, being Luc, must sense my awkwardness because he just places his big hand on the middle of my thigh before sliding it slowly down to rest on my knee, the heat of his skin seeping through my jeans.

“So what’s next, dream-date giver?” I ask when I’ve cooled my jets and gotten my hormones at least a little under control.

He tilts his head, scanning my face. “How am I doing so far?”

“What do you mean?” I ask with a frown.

“As far as the date of your dreams goes? How am I rating? Because I know I could’ve done better with the whole ‘looking cool while skating’ thing, but saving your ass for mine must’ve got me some brownie points.”

This isn’t him joking—this is Luc looking as sincere and caring as I’ve ever seen him. He’s genuinely asking me for feedback on the date *he* planned after recruiting his sister to grill me, then getting up on stage in front of his colleagues and superiors and all of their families, and selling himself to me ... in front of my *father*, no less.

How can he not know that he was already hitting it out of the park when he yelled, “Sold to my best friend?”

I turn my body toward his. “This is already the best date I’ve ever had.”

“Better than Perfect Brock?” he asks without any hesitation.

“Luc, you could’ve taken me anywhere to do anything and it would have surpassed any date I’ve ever been on.”

He stills, his eyes wide. “No. Don’t say that. You’re saying I could’ve just rented all of your favorite rom-coms, ordered in takeout, set us up in a pillow fort on the couch, and we’d have been golden *and* I would’ve saved two thousand bucks?”

“Well firstly, the pillow fort is not going to be your thing anymore. It’s a Gio thing. And you can’t try and be the swoony, knight-in-shining-armor type like Marco, who swooped in and rescued Renee from her bad blind date.”

“Well, I *thought* I was doing that at the restaurant.”

A giggle escapes my lips. “And look how *that* turned out.”

He shrugs. “Okay then. What about the hopelessly infatuated single-dad type who stalks a restaurant and ends up saving the day?” he asks with a knowing quirk of his lips.

I shake my head. “Nope. That’s taken too.”

“Doesn’t leave me much room to be original and epic now, does it?” he says, rubbing his chin like he hasn’t already planned this date right down to the minute.

“Luca Rossi, look at me.”

“I *am* looking at you.”

“Okay. Now smile.”

He does, his eyes turning half-lidded and crinkling at the sides as he gifts me that warm, gentle grin of his that turns me into mush and has me smiling like an idiot right back at him. I fight the urge to grab his face and kiss him, the rest of the date be damned.

“Now will you tell me where we’re off to next?” I ask.

“Nope,” he says, just as his stomach grumbles.

I arch a brow. “I hope it involves food, because you’re like a bear with a sore head when you’re hungry.”

“It’s scary how well you know me sometimes. You know that, right?”

“That’s why you keep me around,” I say, making a decision then and there to stop trying to psychoanalyze every damn thing we both say and do. I’m going to just go with the flow and take whatever life—and this date—brings.

Luc mumbles something under his breath but I don’t get a chance to ask him to repeat himself because the train stops, and suddenly, he’s grabbing my hand and leading me out the doors.

That’s when I realize exactly where we are. And the prospect of what might come next has me near on skipping alongside him.

Luca

Putting your life in danger to put out a fire? Yes, sir.

Scaling a ladder one hundred feet in the air to save someone? Sure thing.

Taking your best friend in the whole world and the only person you've ever been totally gone for to an ice hockey game where there's the anticipation of having a first kiss *redo* with said best friend ...? Absolutely terrifying.

It took a lot of asking around and the calling in of a few favors to get good seats for the Hawks game at short notice. I also made a promise to visit the school of the Zamboni operator's granddaughter, with full lights and sirens. *That* means I now owe Cap and Marco a favor too.

But when I said I wanted to give my girl the date of her dreams, I meant it, so owing a few people is nothing if I can pull this off. I watched all the movies Lonnie mentioned to Val, even though I'd already seen them before, just to make sure I'd covered all the bases.

Despite all of that though, I'm still a bundle of nerves. Holding Lonnie's hand helps. Letting myself touch her in whatever way I can is the best salve I've ever discovered. Having the freedom to do that also serves as a reminder of why I'm doing this.

It's all for her, to hopefully help pave the way so that she can believe in this, in me ... us. *And so she can forgive me for being such an ignorant fool for so damn long.*

After collecting our tickets from the call window, we make our way to our gate and hand them over to the usher before walking inside the United Center. I can feel Lonnie nearly vibrating beside me, making me smile. I watch her eyes scan the whole ground floor, as if she's taking in the atmosphere like I am—the thick crowd of buzzing fans, the smell of fried food and beer overwhelming the senses, and the music coming from inside the arena. It's electric and addictive, and it doesn't matter how many games I come to. It still gets to me every single time.

Lonnie grabs hold of my shoulder and lifts on her toes. I wrap an arm around her waist, holding her close, liking the feel of her body against mine and not for the first time, wondering how the hell I ever thought I could resist this amazing woman.

“This is awesome. I can't believe you were able to get tickets,” she says loudly in my ear.

I grin down at her. “Let's just say I have a friend of a friend.”

“Well, sounds like it's a good friend of a friend to have.” She's beaming at me, and fuck, if it doesn't make me feel ten-foot tall and bulletproof. *I'd do anything to keep her looking at me like that.*

There's just one thing that we need to do before going inside. Looking around, I quickly spot where we need to go. I slide my arm around her shoulders and lead her forward, squeezing our way through the crowd to the Blackhawks team store.

“What are we doing?” she asks.

“We're getting decked out in Hawks gear. There's no way can we come to a game and *not* represent our team.”

Her eyes widen and a smile appears. “Seriously? Luc, I've got a jersey at home. We don't have to—”

I silence her by gently pressing my index finger to her lips as I shake my head. “Uh-uh, beautiful. Date of your dreams, remember? That means everything has to be perfect. So first,

we're getting matching jerseys and one of those giant foam fingers each. Then I'm going to wine and dine you with the best stadium food you've ever had."

"You're just full of surprises today, aren't you?" she says, not sounding at all unhappy with the date or my plans so far.

I lean in close, the scent of her citrus shampoo doing crazy things to me, and it hits me that I never have nor will be able to smell anything like that without thinking of her.

"You ordered the very best. I'm just trying my hardest to give my girl what she wants." I don't miss the hitch in her breath or the warmth filling her gaze.

"I've always liked it when you called me that."

Note to self—call her *my girl* at every opportunity if it gets her looking at me like that.

As if needing a distraction, she steps back and throws her arm out. "C'mon then. Jerseys and foam fingers await."

Thirty minutes, a chunk of change, and a big order of food later, we're in our seats getting ready for the puck to drop. The first period is passing far too quickly for my liking. Not because I'm not enjoying myself—I've always loved watching games with Lonnie on my couch in front of my big-screen. But as I look up at the scoreboard and see the time ticking away, I'm getting more and more nervous.

Ice-skating was fun and a total failure if I was trying to make a good impression when it came to my skating prowess. Thankfully, my best friend knows me better than anyone and just laughed at my misfortunes rather than judging me for them.

This next moment in our date is a *much* bigger deal, because it's a chance for me to give London a much-deserved redo of our first kiss.

When she kissed me in the car, she caught me by surprise, and it was just as awkward and unsynchronized as an unexpected 'didn't-see-it-coming' kiss could be. That doesn't mean I don't remember the soft, satiny feel of her warm lips against mine, and the taste of strawberry mint on her tongue.

But that wasn't a moment I want her to remember. I want our kiss to be epic ... life-changing ... world-altering—or as much of those things as a kiss on demand in front of thousands of people in the crowd and millions on TV could ever be.

Which means all I can think about is hand placement, the speed I should move in, which way should I tilt my head, or if I should lean in slowly, cradle her rosy-red cheeks, and then start teasing her lips with mine before gently probing my tongue in to beg for entry.

The other option is to say fuck it and just crush my mouth to hers, claiming her as mine and mine only for the whole damn world to see.

And I'm torn between the former and latter, which means I'm a little distracted when the siren sounds for the end of the first period and the players exit the ice just as the Zamboni comes on.

“Hey, you look a million miles away,” Lonnie says, elbowing my side. “Don't tell me I'm boring you already.”

I turn and take in the crinkles around her deep blue eyes and her perfectly curved Cupid's bow lips and smile. “Nah. I'm never bored when I'm with you, beautiful. Just thinking a bit too hard.”

“Oh, yeah? And what are you thinking about?” Her brows furrow. “You worried about the exam next week?”

I shake my head. “I've had the best damn tutor to help me study. Why would I be worried?”

She beams and I feel it like a punch to the chest—the good kind that makes me want to give her the whole world if she'd let me. “Good. Because even Dad says you have nothing to worry about.”

“Probably because he's been quizzing me every chance he gets. Middle of the fire ground and he's grilling me on protocol and procedures. Now my head is so full, I'm even dreaming about the damn test.”

“Well I happen to think you'll make an amazing lieutenant.”

“I don’t wanna leave 101 though,” I say, bringing a frown to her face.

“You think that would happen? I can’t see the brass wanting to separate your crew. You’ve been together for years.”

“Yeah, but unless someone retires or transfers out, there are far too many lieutenants in the firehouse.”

“Too many chefs and not enough waiters, ’ey?”

I chuckle. “Something like that.”

The very last thing I want to do is leave 101. The crew is just as much my family as those of my blood. And working alongside Marco, Rhodes, Zach and even Scotty is what I know. The prospect of having to move to another firehouse and learn the ins and outs of another crew isn’t something I want to entertain. “My future is and always will be at the discretion of the department.”

“I think you could work anywhere and fit right in. That’s just your way. But I happen to like visiting my dad and seeing my best friend there.”

“I happen to like seeing you there too.” I smile over at her. “Besides, I would hate to have to travel to keep up our breakfast dates.”

“Oh, it’s all about the breakfast, is it?”

“Nope. It’s all about seeing my beautiful girl sitting across the table from me after a long shift.” That earns me a bashful grin.

As if we’re being pulled together by an invisible force field, we both slowly lean in, eyes locked together, my heart pounding so hard it’s roaring in my ears.

Then “Kiss Me” by Sixpence None the Richer starts to play and the crowd cheers. We both slowly turn our heads and there, on the giant 8,600-square-foot screen are our wide-eyed faces. The fans around us chant, “Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.”

I jerk my eyes back to Lonnie, her cheeks a pretty pink, her expression a picture of anticipation and maybe a little

trepidation, her lips parting as her tongue darts out to wet them. Then all my awkward thoughts about the kiss redo and the how and the where and the when vanish. None of that matters anymore.

I shift forward in my seat toward her, my gaze locked with hers as I lift my hand to cup her jaw and dip my head to brush my lips against hers, everything Lonnie overwhelming my senses.

“C’mon, that’s not a kiss,” a Blackhawks fan behind us taunts. I move back an inch and turn my head to our mouthy neighbor. “Give her a *real* kiss, man, and make it good.”

I give Lonnie my full attention before glancing sideways at the screen to see a cartoon heart drawn around us with a giant banner flashing and reading, “Kiss. Kiss. Kiss.”

So that’s what I do, I throw caution to the wind and do what I’ve been dreaming of for the past week. *Hell*, probably for much longer than that, if I’m being honest with myself.

I shrug and take her in. Her pupils are blown, her skin flushed, and when she worries her bottom lip between her teeth, my mind blanks and I act on pure lust and instinct. I frame her face in both hands and kiss her how I *want* to kiss her, pouring everything into it, nipping at her lips, licking into her mouth until my tongue meets hers and when a breathy moan vibrates between us, I deepen our connection, closing my eyes and losing myself to the taste and feel and *everything* that is her.

By the time we finally pull apart, we’re both panting, London lifting her fingers to her swollen, well-kissed lips, her eyes wide as we stare at each other.

Fuck. Did I do it wrong? Was it bad for her? Was it—

I don’t get to finish that thought because she’s lunging my way and kissing me again. This time, with no camera on us, I don’t even try to hold back, dropping my hands to her waist and lifting her over so she’s in my lap. Our mouths are fused together as we kiss and touch and taste, the dam well and truly breached and overflowing. I don’t care that the kiss cam has

well and truly moved on, as has the attention of everyone around us. It's just the two of us, finally giving in to our feelings and *hopefully*, London realizing that I'm just as much into this as she is.

The next time we stop it's because we desperately need oxygen. Lonnie rests her forehead on mine as I flex my fingers back and forth in her hair while my arm stays tight around her waist.

Fuck the game and social appropriateness. Right now, all I can think about is getting more of her. Kissing her. Touching her. *Loving* her.

"How attached are you to staying till the end?" I rasp, my voice thick with lust and need.

Without warning, she jumps off my lap and tugs at my arm to join her. "Not as attached as I am to continuing what we just started. Let's go."

THE JOURNEY TO get back to my car and the subsequent drive home are the hardest exercises in restraint and control that I've ever had to master.

I can't stop touching her, and I know it's because I finally *can*. Everything that I'd planned for today not only went out the window, it leaped out of the damn door and ran down the street when I kissed her that second time. Now all I can think of is getting her home, kissing her again, and never stopping, if I have anything to say about it.

We hold hands the whole drive back to my place. London is quiet, but I also know that my girl would say something if she didn't want to come back to my place or if she'd had a change of heart.

When we walk into my condo, there's only one thing on my mind. There's still the last activity on her wish list, and I'm nothing but thorough when it comes to making sure I deliver

the date of her dreams. Whatever the night holds for us after that is up to London.

“Luc, I think we should—”

I move in close, tangling my fingers with hers and lifting her arms to loop over my shoulders before I drag my palms down her back and let them rest on her hips. “There’s one more thing I want to do, and I know it’s not a spontaneous dance in the rain moment like Noah and Allie had, but I figure that a little improvisation is okay ...”

My lips curl up at the sides when she sighs, her body relaxing under my touch.

“Alexa, play ‘Amazed.’”

Then right on cue, Lonestar’s iconic ballad starts playing over my sound system and London’s expression turns as gentle as I’ve ever seen it, a gentle laugh escaping her. She melts into me, our bodies slowly moving in sync to the melody. The world could be ending around us and I wouldn’t give a single fuck because I have my girl in my arms and her taste lingering on my lips. My heart feels full, and my only hope is that I’ve given her everything she’s dreamed of.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her eyes glistening in the dim light as her fingers glide up into my hair and she slowly pulls my mouth down to meet hers. I draw her in as close as I can as our tongues tangle and caress, my hands sliding up and down her back. Having Lonnie in my arms like this is the best feeling in the world.

Why did I wait so fucking long? One thing is for sure. I’m sure as hell not waiting anymore.

I groan into her mouth as she whimpers into mine, and our kiss turns ravenous, like we can’t get enough of each other.

And without another word, I start moving us toward the hallway, me walking backward, still kissing her the entire way to my bedroom before I kick the door closed behind us.

London

Luc kisses and touches me the whole time we're walking to his room until we get to the side of his bed and he stops. When he tears his lips from mine, it's only to drag his tongue along my jaw before burying his face in my neck. "Fuck, you smell so good," he growls as he nuzzles his nose against my throat. Wait ... is he *sniffing* me? Who is this man and where has my cocky best friend gone?

"Luc?" I whisper, my grip on his shoulders tightening as my knees get shaky, his touch making me all kinds of light-headed—in the good kind of way.

He lifts his head before slamming his mouth back down on mine, one hand tangling in my hair, the other gripping my ass and pulling me against him. The feel of his hard length pressing into me has me wondering two things—why haven't I jumped him before now and how did I not know he was packing *that*?

Not wanting him to stop *anything* he's doing but still wanting to see more of him, I drag my hands down his back, raking my nails over his jersey and grabbing the hem. I roughly tug the offending fabric up until he gets the hint and jerks away just long enough to pull it and his T-shirt underneath up and over his head, leaving him delightfully shirtless in front of me.

I barely get a chance to enjoy the view and suck in a much-needed breath before he's wrapping his arms around me and

lowering me back onto the bed, bracing himself above me, his hungry gaze roaming over my still clothed body.

“Please touch me,” I rasp, hooking a hand behind his neck and pulling him back down, moaning as his weight presses me deeper into the mattress. I part my legs, allowing his hips to notch in just the right place, the denim-covered bulge thrusting right on the money on his first try.

Our tongues tangle, our teeth clash, and the kiss turns hungrier, hotter, and more desperate. Nipping, licking, taking, *tasting*, I give him everything I’ve got. I’d already decided on the drive home that if we ended up in this position, I’d make sure I poured all of my feelings, my love, my frustration, and my pent-up lust for this man into it.

He sits up, straddling my hips carefully so as not to crush me before curling his arms around my shoulders and pulling me up, tearing my jersey and shirt off and throwing them somewhere behind him.

“Fucking beautiful,” he says roughly, his eyes dragging up my body as he seems to take in my pale curves and favorite purple satin bra until he locks his hooded eyes with mine. “You’re gorgeous, Lonnie.”

My blush deepens when he sweeps his thumb over the apple of my cheek before dipping his head, not breaking our stare the whole time he’s softly kissing me. All I can do is hold on, my body threatening to explode into a million tiny pieces purely from the fire in his eyes and the reverence of his touch.

His groan against my lips sends jolts of heat straight through me. Then something inside me snaps. Tomorrow be damned—I’m taking what I definitely want and giving Luc what he *seems* to want, to hell with the consequences.

I push on his shoulders. Luc gets my hint and rolls onto his back, giving me the room to clamber on top of him, kissing him passionately before straightening in his lap and making quick work of peeling off my bra. I love the way his eyes turn molten when I reveal my bare breasts to him. *Luc is a breast man ... Good to know.*

His hooded gaze follows the path of his hands as he smooths his palms over my skin. “You’re shaking.”

I smile and nod as goose bumps chase his touch. “So are you.”

“I can’t believe you’re here and I’m here, and we’re getting naked ...” He knifes up to drag his lips over mine in a move that I’m starting to crave as much as his hands being all over me.

“I’ve dreamed of this for way too long,” I say, my voice wavering.

He watches as his hands run down over my breasts. He cups them in his hands while the tip of his finger traces around the pebbled peak, his lips tipping up into a slow, satisfied smile. “And how’s the dream going so far, beautiful?”

“Better than I ever could’ve imagined,” I say with a challenging smirk.

“Well, let’s see if I can make this the best damn dream I could ever make come true.”

Planting a foot on the bed, he rolls us back, switching our positions before crushing his mouth against mine in a fast, hard, toe-curling kiss before he pushes up so he’s standing next to the bed, looking down at me. The hungry look in Luca’s eyes has me struggling to stay still, let alone hold myself back.

He drops his fingers to his belt, making quick work of it and his fly before he’s pulling his jeans down and his boxer briefs too. My mouth waters as I take in a naked Luca Rossi, his broad chest with a smattering of sparse hair over his pecs, his firm but not cut abs that might just be my new favorite body part of his ... until I follow the dark trail of hair pointing to his jutting cock. Scratch that—*now* I’ve found my favorite.

“Like what you see?”

I poke the inside of my cheek with my tongue as if I’m thinking about the answer when there’s absolutely no question that I *more* than like everything about this man.

“Oh, it’s going to be like that, is it? Well then, now I think it’s time to make my *own* fantasies a reality.” He bends over me, sweeping his tongue into my mouth before kissing my chin, then my throat right over my pulse point. He runs his tongue over my collarbone, nipping the sensitive skin there and making me tremble with want, then lower, peppering kisses down my sternum before dragging his lips over my breast, circling my nipple and drawing it deep. My back arches off the bed as I release a whimpered mewl, my hands framing his head as my fingers flex against his scalp.

He pays my other breast the same attention, tasting, sucking, driving me crazy. My heart is pounding when he moves down the bed, the tip of his tongue leading the way to my navel where he circles the sensitive skin there and lower still until he reaches the waistband of my jeans, running his lips along the edge of them.

When he looks up at me, his pupils blown, his expression full of hunger and heat, I feel it. *This* is what I always wanted—for Luc to gaze at me with pure lust and need. He arches a brow in silent question, but when I drop my hands to rip open my pants myself, he chuckles and bats them away.

“Don’t you take away my fun,” he murmurs, kissing his way over every inch of revealed skin as I lift my hips. He drags and I twist and turn until my jeans and purple satin briefs are gone and I’m lying there completely naked and bare with my best friend, the man of my dreams, the one I thought I’d never *ever* be in this position with.

All thoughts of that leave my head, a gasp escaping me as he lifts my leg and presses his lips to my ankle, dragging them up my smooth legs. He sucks the skin behind my knee and licks his way higher until his hands grip my hips and I’m tugged down the bed, and his mouth is right there.

He dives in. My back arches off the mattress at the first touch of his lips on my clit, his tongue circling, his mouth pulsing, then he’s ravenous, his hands spreading me wide and holding my legs apart as he *devours* me. He growls against my sensitive core. I can’t stop the moans and cries coming out of me, my hand darting out to rest on his head while he traces my

soaked seam down then back up, over and over again until I'm writhing beneath him. Then he's moving back to my clit, drawing it deep between his lips and flicking the nub and he sets out to drive me wild.

My legs clench, fighting against his hands as my body tightens. I buck up to get more of his touch when he plays with my entrance then slowly pushes a thick finger inside. "So wet, so good. Fuck, Lonnie. Jesus. Can't get enough," he rasps as he pulls out and adds another digit, the sensation hurtling me closer to a climax I'm not sure I'll survive.

"Luc! Please! Don't stop," I cry out as he wraps his lips around my swollen bundle of nerves and pulses his tongue in time with the thrusts of his hand. When he crooks his finger deep inside me, my lungs seize, my vision turning white as I scream out my release. "Oh, God. Yes. Luc!"

I barely have time to catch my breath before he's jostling sideways and jerking open his nightstand drawer. He pulls out a telltale foil packet and rips it open with his teeth.

"Please tell me you want this, beautiful. I have to feel you. Need to bury myself deep inside."

"God, yes. I need you, Luc. *Please,*" I beg in a rush of words as he reaches down to cover himself before he's surges up and over me, his cock poised right where I so desperately want him most.

I frame his jaw and pull his head down, kissing him deep and slow, the taste of myself on his lips setting my body on fire all over again. I loop my legs around his thighs, locking my ankles together and thrusting forward until the tip of him is inside me.

With a growl that vibrates through my entire body, he drops an elbow to the bed, hooks a hand around my shoulder, and buries himself to the hilt, filling me, completing me. It's so perfect, so good, that my eyes fill with tears as he dives his tongue into my mouth, tangling it with mine. He starts to pound into me, over and over, as deep as he can go. I wrap my arms around his back and hold him tight, closing my eyes and

giving myself over to the feel of Luc inside me, the smell of him, the taste of his kiss, everything overwhelming me.

There's no more talking after that. There's no need—our bodies are saying everything as they move together in perfect synchronicity. He groans into my neck, his breaths quickening as my body tightens. Intense pleasure, the likes of which I've never known before has me hurtling toward a second orgasm that's I have no doubt will be more powerful than the first.

Luc kisses me again. It's messy and rough and oh so good, the force of our lovemaking shifting the bed along the floor with a maddening thud. I nip his bottom lip, earning me a growl before he braces a hand beside my head and reaches down, hooking one of my legs over his arm so he can go deeper.

“Oh. Oh. Please. Luc. I'm so close.”

“I got you, Lonnie. Fuck. It's so good, I could live inside you and die a happy man.”

He gives me his weight, holding my leg high, his cock now hitting the perfect spot, his hand between us, and his thumb on my clit the final straw. My whole body tightens. Muscles I didn't even know existed spasm and squeeze him as I crash right on over the edge and dive headfirst into the most earth-shattering and mind-blanking climax of my life.

“Luc. Yes. Right there!” I yell as he plants himself deep and groans a guttural “baby” into my throat. That's where he stays, buried inside of me, breathing heavily into my neck and peppering my skin with slow, lazy kisses as he comes back down to earth.

It's not until the next morning that I move again. Luc's heat at my back rolls away as he turns his alarm off and gets out of the bed, walking around to my side and leaning down with a chuckle. “You stay here. I'm just getting ready for my shift, but you stay and sleep.”

“Mm-hmm,” I hum, pulling his blankets higher around me, snuggling in. I'm far too tired and sated and sleepy for rational or responsible thought this early in the morning.

“Fuck, you’re cute.”

I smile as his hand glides down my cheek, the pad of his thumb rubbing over my lips. “Love you too,” I mumble.

Luc’s breath catches and his fingers tense as he gently moves away.

“Lonnie,” he whispers, but I don’t answer. I physically *can’t*. Because my brain is stuck on what just happened and what my stupid mouth just opened up and said.

It takes everything I’ve got to feign sleep but the sound of his resigned sigh, followed by the soft retreating steps to the bedroom door and the schnick that cuts through the air like a gunshot as he shuts it behind him have my eyes snapping open.

What the hell am I going to do? I had the single best date of my life, followed by the best sex, best *everything*, and now I’ve gone and ruined it all by blurting out my feelings like some lovesick fool.

More importantly ... how the hell do I get out of here so I can do my own walk of mortification back home again where I can lock the door, pack all my things, and move to Alaska ASAP? At least then I won’t have to see Luc’s face when he tells me this can’t happen again—that *we* can’t happen again.

Fuck.

Luca

I hold my breath as I make my way out of the bedroom and head across the hall to the bathroom, closing the door and leaning back on it. I finally let go of a big, contented sigh as London's words bounce around my head on repeat.

"Love you too."

Did she know what she was saying? Was she even *saying* it to me? Was it just a reflex from mishearing me and thinking *I* said it first?

Whatever it was, I'm not going to let her take those words back now. They're mine. She gave them to me, and I may have taken my sweet-ass time getting my head to listen to my heart, but that doesn't mean those three words haven't been branded inside of me.

Love. Romantic love. It has always been a foreign concept to me. I've liked seeing my brothers, my sister, and friends all meet their one and onlys and settle down happily with them, but that has never been something I've wanted. It was always something that could or *would* happen eventually ... one day ... with the right person.

And until then, I was happy to just take things one day at a time. I had my career, I had family, I had friends, and for the past three years, I've had Lonnie.

Then a week ago, I *saw* Lonnie how I always had been seeing her, but without a blindfold of denial on.

Yesterday, I set out to give her a day of dreams—full of things that were special to her and that *she* wanted to do. Because the thing with London Kelly is that she always puts others ahead of herself, and for once, I wanted to give her a day that was all about *her*.

Last night, though, the realization that my feelings ran a hell of a lot deeper than even I knew was shocking and exhilarating. And suddenly, it was like the fuse had been lit. One kiss was all it took for me to *know* that London was *it* for me. She always has been and—if I have my way—she always will be. When we made love, we were so in tune with each other. It was about give and take in equal measure, and afterward, as I lay there in my bed with my best friend sleeping in my arms, burrowing in as close as she could, I *knew* that I'd do anything to keep her there. Whatever I had to do.

Hearing her say “love you too” has me walking on air as I turn the shower on, my brain a whirl of emotions and feelings, and full of all the things I want to say to her. How I want this to be the start of something real, open, and honest, and out there for everyone to see. I want everyone to know that Lonnie is mine and I'm hers in return. I even decide that if she wants to take things slowly until she trusts that I'm committed to her and *us*, then it's the very least I can do. She's had years of having feelings for me; that's a hell of a lot longer than being in denial for three years, like I have been. I simply wouldn't *let* myself be open to the possibility. Now, I'm kicking my own ass for wasting so much time when I could've had Lonnie in my arms and in my bed for a long time.

Turning the shower off, and feeling ten-foot tall and bulletproof knowing that London Kelly *loves* me, I dry myself off and wrap a towel around my waist. I move to the vanity, quickly shaving and fixing my bed hair. Then I make my way out the door and down the hallway to the kitchen to turn the coffee machine on before checking my watch and realizing there's more than enough time for me to wake my girl up and hear her scream my name again before I have to leave for the firehouse.

I hum the Lonestar song that will now forever be known as *our* song before stopping outside my bedroom and slowly opening the door with a wry grin on my face.

A grin that falls when I find the bed empty. Lonnie's clothes are gone, her purse is gone—in fact, any sign that she was ever here, all of it ... is gone.

What the fuck ...?

I grab my phone from the dresser and dial her number, bringing the handset to my ear and closing my eyes when it goes straight to voicemail.

I must've fucked up.

Or she's regretting it ...

Luca: Beautiful, I came in to wake you up and you're gone. Please let me know you got home safely. Otherwise I'll see you at breakfast at the diner tomorrow after I've clocked off?

My phone buzzes in my hand and my head jerks down to the screen, my body relieved in the knowledge that there must be some good reason why London would sneak out while I was in the shower and not say goodbye ... or leave me a note ... or send me a text message ...

Except it's not London's name on my phone. It's Marco's.

Marco: Just so you know, we don't *want* to know about how your date went, but we're all kind of invested. Tell me now on a scale of one to ten how it went, and I'll let the guys know before you get here so we don't have to hear *all* about it for the next twenty-four ...

My gaze is locked on the empty space and mussed up sheets where the woman I love *should* still be. With no time to hunt her down and find out what the hell she's thinking. I lift my phone up and send my brother a brutally honestly reply.

Luca: Honestly, I don't know.

When I get to work, I go straight to the locker room, checking my phone as soon as I've stowed my gear bag away, still holding onto the hope that everything is fine and maybe

she had to leave for whatever reason. Maybe she was in *such* a rush that she didn't have time to tell me. Or it escaped her mind ...

Or maybe I'm an idiot and I'm just fooling myself.

At roll call and shift handover, I'm quieter than normal, struggling to even laugh at Scotty's usual jokes and smartass comments to the outgoing crew. I'm too distracted, running over the events of yesterday and last night while I try to work out what the hell might've happened and what I might've missed.

An MVA and a few broken down elevator calls keep us busy during the morning, but every chance I get, I'm checking my phone for any word from Lonnie.

After lunch, I take my turkey and pastrami West Sider sandwich and bottle of water with me into the bunk room, not feeling particularly sociable today. After checking my phone again and still not seeing a reply from her, I send one last text before vowing to myself to give her time and maybe some space.

Luca: Babe, please just let me know you're OK. I missed you after my shower.

It doesn't make me feel any better, though, as defeat and resignation set in. I'm beginning to wonder if I *did* do something wrong? Or bad? Or too fast? Or *oh God*, was the sex good for me and *not* for her? *Shit.*

Is this what most women feel like when they have a one-night stand with a man who just wants to dick and dash? That's never been my style. Why take a woman home just to sneak out of their bed like they're a dirty regret you just want to forget? *What if I'm London's regret now?*

Val: Hey. How did it go? I figure that since I haven't heard from either of you, the date is still going?

Luca: I'm on shift. You haven't heard from her?

Val: Why Luc?

Luca: Because you're her friend. I thought she'd go to you

Val: Why? What did you do? Whatever it was can't be THAT bad ... can it?

Luca: I don't know! She left when I was in the shower this morning.

Val: So this morning sounds good. Her sneaking out ... not so much. But to put you at ease, she's asked me to go to her apartment in an hour.

Luca: Can you get her to at least text me and tell me she's OK?

Val: Will do. But seriously, stop thinking the worst until I find out what the hell is going on. Maybe being with you was SO bad that she's wondering where she went wrong, ha ha. I'm KIDDING, Luc. It'll be fine. It's London. She thinks the sun shines out of your butt on a bad day.

Luca: Val ... please. I'm turning into a girl right now. This is like a total gender switch or something.

Val: Firstly, girls are fucking awesome, so if you're turning into one, then good for you. Maybe this is revenge from the female population as a whole?

Luca: I never sneak out and leave a woman feeling confused or used?

Val: Are you feeling used, Luc? Really?

Luca: I'm fucking frantic with worry and scared I've fucked up the most important relationship in my life somehow.

Val: And that right there is how I know you haven't and you won't. I would never have helped you with the auction and the date if I thought you'd hurt her. You've messaged her though, haven't you?

Luca: Yes. Twice now. And I've tried calling a few times. The phone goes straight to voicemail and the messages haven't been read.

Val: OK. Let me find out what's going on, and then I'll report back what I can. I love you, Luc, but I won't break girl code for you.

Luc: What does that even mean?

Val: It means I decide what I'll tell you and when, and only if London wants me to.

Luc: FUCK.

Val: That's the rules, big brother. Just stop worrying and focus on staying alive.

Luc: She said she loved me. I thought she was just sleep talking. Could it be that?

Val doesn't reply straight away. The three dancing dots across the messaging screen seem to go back and forth forever.

Val: Well, shit ...

Funnily enough, that's the exact same thing I'm saying to myself when I get to the diner after my shift on Monday morning and London is a no-show.

Well shit, indeed.

London

“I’ve called you all here today for an intervention,” I announce, standing in front of my TV. On the couches are Skye, Val, Renee, Alex, and on my tablet perched on a chair is my sister, Violet, on a video call.

Skye frowns. Val smirks. Renee looks confused as hell, and Violet ... well, she literally face-palms.

It has been a day and a half since I snuck out of Luc’s condo and waited a block down the road for an Uber. Then I came home, crawled into bed, turned my phone off, and stared at the ceiling as I replayed the auction and the date over and over again. And every time I did, I swung from being in surreal shock, to feeling wonderful satisfaction, to experiencing mind-numbing fear.

Because what happens when you seemingly get everything you’ve ever wanted? You realize that you’ve been irrevocably changed and a seed gets planted ...

What if it all goes away? Now it’s so much worse than before when I didn’t know what I was missing. Now I do, I’ll know exactly how good it *could* be, and that’s what has spooked me. Well, that and also realizing that I blurted out “*I love you*” like a lovesick fool and sent the man running.

OK, so I don’t *know* that he was running. But this is Luc. He’s a perpetual bachelor—it’s casual and easy. In and out. I’ve never known him to have a woman in his life for long. *Except me ...*

And now I've well and truly shown him all the cards in my hand—amongst other things—I knew that I had to put a callout to the girls before I did something rash—hence the intervention.

“OK. So the date was *bad*?” Renee asks with a grimace.

I shake my head. “It was the complete opposite of bad.”

I glance at Val. She's being surprisingly quiet. It's as if she's just sitting back as a neutral observer and taking it all in. “Val definitely did her homework for Luc to arrange the most perfect date for me.”

She locks eyes with mine. There's no missing the concern there, and I know she knows. She's talked to Luc—of course she has—so she's heard his side of the story and is waiting for mine before giving her verdict.

“So, he's good?” Violet presses, leaning into the camera and waggling her brows, making me snort, and Skye and Val groan.

“Please, I do *not* want to know what my brother is like in the sack. Like, seriously, that shit will be burned into my brain, never to be scrubbed off,” Skye states emphatically.

Val just shakes her head.

All eyes go to Renee, who's the only one in the room who hasn't reacted yet. She just shrugs. “Well, is he? Because he's not related by blood to me, so if he's good then at least I know Lonnie is getting taken care of. Maybe good sex runs in the Rossi family.”

“I've always wondered.” Everyone turns to Alex, mouths and eyes wide.

“You *have*?” Skye gasps.

“Well, of course.” Alex quirks a brow back at her. “Are you telling me you haven't seen a hot guy and wondered whether the promise of the package in public matches the delivery in private? C'mon, you'd be lying if you said no. Not Zach? Or Rhodes? Maybe even Scotty?”

“Oh, fuck no. No. Just no,” Skye chants, putting her hands over her ears and screwing up her face. “I’m blaming all of you for my husband not getting any for a *long* time after this conversation.” She glares at the now smirking Alex. “Scotty? Really?”

Alex bursts out laughing, shaking her head. “Well, no. I can unequivocally say that I have *never* wondered how Scotty is in bed. The others ...?”

“I have,” Val replies. “I mean, he must have *something* going on in his life to score his pretty fiancée.”

“Well, we grew up surrounded by big, burly, *fit* men. Alpha to a tee, and all about their woman and protecting them,” Violet says. “Lonnie is the one who met Luca Rossi and fell head over heels at first sight.”

“Old news, Vi,” I mumble, my cheeks burning hot.

“Hey. It’s cute. Kinda adorable. And even after you went away and came back, you’re *still* friends with him, despite everything.”

“Despite nothing. He’s gone from ‘no, I don’t see you like that’ to ‘I’m going to drop two thousand big ones and give you the date of your dreams with the man of your dreams then give you the best sex of your life and—’” I slap my hand over my mouth, my wide eyes slowly scanning the amused and approving faces of my friends and family.

“I knew it!” Val says. “It’s still eww, but good on Luc. At least he’s got *that* working for him. The rest can be a work-in-progress.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, if you’ve got chemistry, respect, honesty, and yes—hot sex—anything is possible,” Skye adds.

I sigh. “Do I have honesty though? Because he took *three* years to make a move after more than a few chances.”

Renee shrugs. “Maybe he’s just slow on the uptake.”

“More like a damn snail,” Val says.

Skye giggles. “Or a sloth.”

Val's brows furrow "Is a sloth slower than a snail?"

"Wait. I'll look it up," Renee says, pulling out her phone.

I collapse down onto the ottoman with my head in my hands. "Oh, God. This is just nuts." I look over at Val. "This is nuts, right? I should be happy. I should've stayed there and waited for him to come back. I had everything I've ever wanted, and I screwed up by freaking out and running away."

"You need space to get your head on straight," Skye says. "Sometimes that break can help you see things more clearly."

"Did it work for you?" Val asks her. "Because you drew a line in the sand and were absolutely miserable until Cohen came along and bulldozed the whole sandpit."

"Didn't he throw *himself* in front of the bulldozer too?" Alex asks. "From how Gio put it, Cohen walked right into the firehouse and fronted up."

Skye's eyes soften. "Fuck yeah, he did."

"There you go," Alex says.

"But he did it after going from having me to *not*."

"And talking it through with everyone and anyone who'd listen so he knew he wasn't going to screw it up completely," Val adds.

"Is that what Bridge is doing with all of us now?" Violet's voice fills the room.

Skye looks over to me. "OK, London. What do you need from us? What do you need to work out? Is it where to from here? Because an intervention is usually for an addiction or self-destructive behavior. So, do you want help with your addiction to Luc?"

"Or maybe his talented co—" Vi announces before Renee cracks up laughing, blocking her words out, thankfully.

"In two weeks, Luc *will* be my brother-in-law. Maybe it's good to set boundaries so we don't talk about talented body parts of family members," Renee says.

“Yeah. I second that. I love you, Lonnie, and I wanna know you’re getting it good. I just don’t need to think about the fact it’s with my doofus of a big brother.” Skye snaps her gaze to Alex and Renee. “That goes for you two as well.”

“Can we get back to what Lonnie needs from us?” Val says after their laughter dies down a bit.

I lock eyes with hers—Luc’s co-conspirator, my boss and mentor, and one of my best friends.

“Have I screwed this up?” Then I think back to that night in Luc’s car all those months ago when I shot my shot and kissed him that first time. “I don’t want to lose what we have for something that he’s not all in for.”

She nods and leans back in her chair, her expression full of deep thought and consideration. “I think you need time to get used to the idea that Luc is now fully in this with you. My brother has been a lovable but ignorant idiot for years, but I need you to trust me when I say that he knows exactly what he’s got and what he doesn’t want to lose now. For the past week, he’s been one hundred percent eyes on the prize, and that prize is you and just you. But if you need to, then take some time to catch up. I don’t care if it’s a few days, a week, hell—take a month. You take as long as you need for you to believe this is real, because everything I’ve seen is telling me that this is as real as it gets for him.”

Renee nods. “The only difference is that this has been real for you for years, so it’s a big change to have Luc finally on the same page as you.”

“I can’t lose him. Honestly. It was *so* good—not just after the date, but the date itself. And being with him, touching him, not thinking whether I’m being too touchy or overstepping or anything—it just felt so natural and right. Do you know what I mean?”

Renee grins and holds her left hand in the air, waving her sparkling engagement ring. “I’m marrying *my* natural and right in two weeks, babe. I get it.” She nods over to Val. “And Val’s right. You do whatever you need so that you’re feeling good about this change in your relationship with Luc.”

“Do you regret saying you loved him?” Val asks me seriously.

I open my mouth to say a loud resounding “yes!” but stop ... and think for a moment. I shake my head. “No, I don’t. But I *don’t* want to stuff this up and rush him and then screw it all up just when I might finally get everything I’ve ever wanted.”

All of them smile at me, a mixture of pride and understanding in their gazes.

“Just saying, it would be totally okay with Marco and myself if you walked into our wedding in two weeks’ time, hand in hand, blissfully happy and with goofy ‘I’ve had too much sex’ walks going on,” Renee adds with a wink.

“Oh, God,” Val and Skye both say with a shocked laugh that turns into gagging from Skye and snort-giggling from Val.

“Until then, bring on next weekend’s New York bachelorette extravaganza,”

I frown. “How is that supposed to help my head catch up to my heart about Luc?”

“Don’t forget your vagina, Bridge!” Vi calls out helpfully.

“Heaven forbid I forget about *that*,” I mutter, shaking my head with a giggle.

“I can help with this one,” Skye says, leaning forward and resting her hand on my bouncing knee. “Well, first you turn your phone on and put my brother’s mind at ease that you’re at least okay.” I bite my lip and nod. “And you be honest. Then you say he’ll be the first person to know when you’re ready.”

An hour later, I’m snuggled up on my sofa with junk food and one of my perennial favorites, *Sweet Home Alabama*, all cued up and ready to play. But first, I owe someone an answer.

London: Hey. Sorry I’ve been M.I.A.

Luca: Oh, thank fuck. The only thing stopping me from banging down your door was Val telling me she’d tell Mom about the time I stole her car to go see Jennifer Grant in the school parking lot at sixteen.

I giggle, unable to stop myself from smiling because that is totally something Val would've threatened to make sure I got the space I so desperately need.

London: Was Jennifer Grant worth it?

Luca: She's nothing on you, babe

Fuck, shot to the heart right there.

Luca: Do we need to talk things out, maybe slow it down and take things at your pace? Is that why you freaked out yesterday? Because I get it. I've had more than my fair share of freak-outs when it comes to you. You've just gotta tell me ...

London: So remember what you said to me in the car when I first tried to kiss you? You were totally right. I don't want to lose what we have but now that I've had more, I can't imagine having less.

Luca: Beautiful, take as much time as you need for you to realize that this is real and I'm not going anywhere. I'll be here waiting whenever you're ready. Because just so we're clear, I totally want what we had, what we have, and what we're going to have. I want it all.

~~**London: Sorry for blurting out I love you.**~~

London: I'm sorry for ghosting you.

Luca: Babe, you can ghost me for as long as you want. Just promise to always come back. Just know that I may not have the willpower to stay away for too long xxx ooo

Those X's and O's have me smiling as I put my phone down and lose myself in a Reese Witherspoon happily ever after.

Luca

Friday morning. Five days after waking up with Lonnie in my arms and a huge smile on my face.

Four days after she told me she just needed some time to sort things out in her head.

And today, it's D-Day. I'm ready for it too. *More* than ready. I've been living, breathing, and dreaming about the Chicago Fire Department's lieutenant test. Cap gave me yesterday off the engine to study.

Thankfully, he hasn't asked me about how things with London are going. I think that's more out of self-preservation than anything else. Who wants to talk to their daughter's whatever-I-am, especially when the said man who's dating the daughter is one of your subordinates?

Instead, he made sure I was kept fed and watered and monitored me like a wayward student, quizzing me and throwing out different scenarios so I could describe how I'd manage the scene. It was exactly what I needed and yet another thing Cap has done for me that I know I'll never be able to repay.

Then I was sent home and told to do nothing but eat, relax, and sleep, and then turn up to the convention center downtown where the department's promotional exams are held.

While waiting in the lobby to be called in, I pull out my phone.

Luca: I have another confession ...

Every day since Monday, I've been sending Lonnie texts. I respect her honesty and her need for space, especially since I took my sweet-ass time to realize I was totally gone for her. Our friendship turned into a relationship at warp speed after all, so if she needs a week or two, that's fine by me. Me and my feelings aren't going anywhere. Which is why I've been sending her messages with things I would tell her if she was with me, or curled up in my arms on the couch watching her rom-com movies, or teasing me about the wrong way to eat a taco. At the start, I figured if she didn't answer, at least I knew I was confessing my truths to her, the ones I'd denied for so damn long—*too* long.

London: Okay ... another story about Jennifer Grant?

I snort and shake my head.

Luca: I'm going to regret that, aren't I?

London: Maybe. I haven't decided yet. I mean ... *I* could always tell Mama Rossi myself ...

Luca: YOU WOULDN'T?!

London: I guess that depends on what you're going to tell me.

Luca: Do you know the first thing I thought when you kissed me?

London: Was it 'Oh shit, she's kissing me'?

I chuckle to myself.

Luca: Well, THAT. Then it was GOD, this girl knows how to kiss.

London: And yet you froze

Luca: My life may have flashed before my eyes

London: Ha ha. Now that is funny. Shouldn't you be sitting your test?

Luca: Just about to go in. Wish me luck?

London: You don't need it. You're Luca Rossi. You're going to kick ass and take names.

Luca: God, I love you

I type it out without any hesitation, knowing it to be true. But now is *not* the time to be dropping that bomb on my best friend, so I delete it..

Talk about a role reversal. Now it's *me* who is full of all these feelings and worrying about how soon is too soon to purge them all out of my system and tell Lonnie everything I want—no, *need*—her to know.

Luca: Couldn't have gotten here without you, beautiful.

London: Go pass that test, Luca. I'll cross everything so that you have good luck.

Luca: Well maybe not EVERYTHING ...

Not wanting to see her answer to *that* particular message, I shut down the power and slip my phone back into my pocket, just in time for the lieutenant candidates to be called and ushered inside the examination room.

With one last breath, I do a quick sign of the cross over my chest and step inside.

SATURDAY

Luca: I bet you're having more fun than me.

London: Because I'm in New York?

Luca: Because you're NOT sitting here at the Cubs vs White Sox game, watching your team get their asses kicked.

London: And because you're not drinking cocktails in New York like we are ...

Luca: That too. I'd much rather be wherever you are.

**London: You're sweet when your team is losing
*winking emoji***

Luca: What cocktail are you drinking?

London: Skye bought a round of Quick Fucks.

Luca: And do you like it?

London: Never been a fan of a quick fuck.

I'd stupidly chosen to take a mouthful of my beer before reading that message, something the two girls in front of me *don't* appreciate when I choke and splutter, getting it everywhere.

Luca: ~~Maybe you haven't been doing it with the right man.~~

I quickly delete that one because that's not exactly giving my girl space.

Luca: Can I make another confession ...?

London: You ARE a fan of a quick fuck? I can totally see that ... maybe under the bleachers with another cheerleader. What did Val say her name was ... Kelly Clarke, was it?

Luca: God *facepalm emoji* Can I ban Val from telling you anything about my high school days?

London: Yeah. Skye says she's got stories from your twenties too.

Luca: Can I ban you from talking to my sisters about me at ALL?

London: You can try ...

Luca: Can I say that I miss having you next to me watching your romance movies so much that I watched *Dirty Dancing* last night? It felt strange.

London: Did you like it though?

Luca: Well, there's no way I'd ever let anyone put you in a corner.

I watch as the three dots in her chat bubble move and then stop and then move again.

“You gonna sit there and moon over your phone all night? The seventh innings stretch is about to start,” Marco says, nudging me with his elbow. “I thought this was a boys’ weekend. You know, to celebrate the end of my single life forever?”

“Dude,” Scotty says, shaking his head.

“Did you just *dude* your lieutenant?” I ask, arching a brow across the row of guys to Scotty.

Scotty rolls his eyes. “We’re not in uniform, therefore I can call anyone *dude*. I looked it up.”

I splutter out a laugh as Marco’s chin drops with a groan, Rhodes chuckles, Gio stares at the man dumbfounded, and Zach drops his head. Cohen, the closest man to Scotty, throws his arm out and whacks him around the ears.

“What did I do?” Scotty asks, rubbing his scalp.

I hold my beer in the air in a toast. “Scotty Jones, never change. Keep being the loveable idiot you’ve always been.”

“Hear, hear,” the rest of our group chant just as “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” begins to play.

My phone buzzes just as we finish yelling “gaaammme” along with the rest of the crowd.

London: That might just be the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me.

Luca: Buckle up, sunshine. You know I love a challenge.

London: I figured it was ME who liked a challenge, you know, since I’ve had a crush on you for years ...

Luca: Just means I have a hell of a lot of catching up to do when you’re ready.

London: I’ll hold you to that.

Luca: That’s what I’m counting on.

WEDNESDAY

“Thanks for coming with me today,” Marco says as he pushes through the doors of the jewelry shop.

“Isn’t that the job of the best man?”

He quirks a brow. “Your job is not to *forget* the rings, or lose them, or let them out of your sight until Saturday.”

“Right. So no wearing them in for you?” I bite back a smirk at the incredulous look he gives me.

“You’re joking, right?”

“Wait ... you mean they’re *not* like shoes you’ve gotta stretch before the big day?”

“Um, *no*.” His eyes look like they’re about to jump out of his head.

I shrug. “Oh well. That’s one thing to scratch off my to-do list.”

“Sometimes I wonder why you and Scotty are friends. Then it’s moments like *this* that remind me why.”

“Hey, I resent that. I’m in no way, shape, or form anything like Scotty Jones,” I reply with a glare.

“*Most* of the time you’re not.” Now the fucker’s smirking at me. “Let me go get the rings and then we can go pick up the suits.”

“Sounds good,” I reply absentmindedly, pulling out my phone and sighing when the screen is clear of notifications. I start looking through the glass cabinets, thinking that I could get London something, maybe for her birthday next month. What says “I love you but no pressure” or “I want to be everything you want and need until you get sick of me?” *That* is the kind of gift I need to find.

Then something catches my eye in the next display unit—a rose-gold ring with a sapphire heart, the stone the exact same

color as the woman's eyes that are bored into my damn soul whenever I close mine.

I'm wondering if it would be something she'd like when the salesperson calls out.

"Rossi?"

Out of instinct, I turn around at the same time as Marco. The moment I see the salesperson, my mouth drops open.

"Luca? Wow. Long time no see."

Marco looks at her name badge. "Jenny?" He shakes his head. "I'm so sorry. I didn't even make the connection."

She waves him off with a grin. "I've only just started here so you probably wouldn't know. But congratulations on your wedding. Who's the girl making you the luckiest man in the world?"

"Her name's Renee. And you're right. I'm definitely the lucky one."

Jenny turns my way, not hiding the fact she's checking me out. "How about you, Luc? Not married like your brother is about to be?"

"No. Not yet. Hopefully one day." I catch Marco giving himself whiplash as his eyes snap my way.

"I can highly recommend it. My husband Petey and my kids are my world."

"Happy for you," I say, my brain still stunned. It's like Val and London talking about her conjured her up. *What are the odds?*

"OK, well how about we check these rings of yours out then, Marco? Let's make sure they're absolutely perfect for your big day and get you on your way. I'm sure you've got a *lot* to do before the weekend."

I leave them to it, and without realizing, I find myself standing back in front of the cabinet with the sapphire ring. I grab my phone and start typing.

Luca: You would not believe it. Guess who the salesperson at the jewelry shop where we picked up Marco and Renee's wedding rings from was?

London: Another lost and wayward ex from Luca Rossi's past?

Before I can answer, she sends another message through.

London: Val thinks it's Nina Brown from senior year, stadium locker room *laughing emoji*

Luca: I really need to muzzle my sister.

London: Why would you spoil my fun?

Luca: Because soon, you're going to wonder if there's a woman in Chicago I haven't made out with.

London: Maybe I already wondered that?

Luca: Did you?

London: Nope. It's just fun teasing you.

Luca: How can you make me smile even when you're not here?

London: It's part of my charm. So who was it?

Luca: Jennifer.

London: Oh my God, Luc. Is this a sign? Maybe it's serendipity.

Luca: Whatever it is, it's too late. There's only one girl I want to make out in a car with now.

She doesn't reply to that. I stare at my phone as she leaves me on read with no answer.

Now I'm overthinking again, wondering whether I'm being too eager, too needy, too *everything* when it comes to London. I haven't been like this with anyone else before. There's no doubt in my mind that I've been an idiot. I grabbed onto any excuse and reason I could come up with as to why we couldn't be more than friends when really, there was never any other woman for me.

That's why I know that I'd wait forever for London if that was what it took to have her by my side, in my life, and in my bed. I'll spend the rest of my life making up for the time we lost when my head was stuck up my ass.

"You ready, Luc?" Marco says, coming up beside me.

A slow-growing smile curves my lips as I look over at him. "Yeah. I think I am. I just have to grab something real quick."

FRIDAY MORNING, the day before the wedding and the last shift for most of us for four days, and I still haven't seen London or even heard from her since that text exchange at the jewelry shop.

I've read through that convo and the other text messages I've sent her over the past week and a half, and I don't *think* I've been pushy. I've just been trying to keep that connection with her, craving it, realizing that I've never gone this long without seeing her, and hating that the only reason I *know* I'll see her tonight is because of the pre-wedding dinner Marco and Renee are having, then I'll see her again tomorrow for the wedding ceremony. Not because she *wants* to see me, but because we'll both be in the same place at the same time.

I've turned into that whiny, moping, sad-sack guy pining after the girl he wants and not knowing what to do about it.

Zach pops his head through the locker room door. "Luc, Cap wants to see you in his office. Said to make sure you saw him before you leave."

"Sure thing. See you tonight?" I add

"Yep. It's high time Renee made an honest man out of the lieutenant."

"Amen to *that*." I return his wave as he walks back down the corridor. I check my phone yet again, hoping for a message that isn't there.

Is this how women feel when a guy doesn't talk to them after hooking up? Because I'm seriously wondering why we put ourselves through this? I said I'd wait for London, and I meant every word. I've pulled back on the texts, not wanting to seem pushy or needy. I've taken to distracting myself by helping Marco and Renee out with errands and getting everything ready for the wedding festivities this weekend.

That doesn't mean I'm not as frustrated and confused as ever, trying to wrack my brain as to what I can do next to prove to her that this is it for me. *She's* it for me. Done deal.

After saying my goodbyes to my crew, and telling Marco and Rhodes I'll see them later, I make my way to the Captain's office. I knock on the closed door before stepping inside.

"Luc, take a seat," he says, sweeping his arm out as he moves around the front of the desk to lean his hips against it.

"This isn't ominous or anything," I say with a nervous snort.

When he smirks and waves a white envelope in front of me, I forget to breathe. "Is *this* ominous?" Cap replies.

"Already?"

Cap bounces one shoulder like it's no big deal. "Made a few calls, pulled a few strings. Got your results fast-tracked."

I slump down into the seat in front of him, leaning forward, my eyes locked on the envelope in his hand, the one that could mean a lot of changes coming my way.

"But before you open this, I want to make one thing perfectly clear." *Now* it's not ominous—it's fucking scary. He continues, "Whatever the result, your home will always be 101."

My throat feels a little tight all of a sudden. "Orders are orders, sir."

He nods. "Yeah, they are. But the thing is, I've made it my mission not to lose any good firefighters from my house. And, as luck would have it, as of the end of this month, 101 is losing a lieutenant on one of our crews. This means if *this*—"

he holds the results of my test out to me—”says what I think it does, then there’ll be a place for a lieutenant with your name on it.”

I open my mouth, words escaping me for a minute before I quickly blurt out, “Cap, I don’t know what to say.”

He grins and shakes the envelope. “Well how about you put us both out of our misery and open this up so we know if we’re celebrating or I’m running a retest boot camp, huh?”

My hand is shaking and my stomach is clenched tight as I take the results from him and stare down at it. “I didn’t realize just how much I *wanted* this until now.”

“Seems you’ve been having a lot of revelations lately. May this just be the first good news of many.”

My eyes bug out. “Cap, I—”

“Rossi, open the damn envelope.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, hooking my finger under the tab and ripping it open. I slide my fingers inside, pull out the crisp white paper, and unfold it.

I read the words and jump to my feet. “I passed,” I say, pulling Cap in for a hug.

“Of course you fucking did, Luc. Why do you think I put your name forward?” He claps my back, his voice full of pride.

“Thank you, Cap. I just ...” I stare down at the letter and I’m struck with the feeling that something—no, *someone*—is missing. I step back and meet his gaze. “I have to go.”

His lips twitch, his eyes all-knowing. “Go see your girl, Luc. Everything else can wait.”

Not having to be told twice, I get up and walk out the door. Throwing my bag in my car, I slide behind the steering wheel and message my sister.

Luc: What time are you meeting up with London today?

Val: Why?

Luc: What time, Val?

Val: Not until twelve. Why?

Luc: So she's at home then?

Val: Yeah. Luc, what are you going to do?

I don't answer.

Val: Luc ...

And when I still don't answer, my sister replies anyway.

Val: Go get her, Luc.

Funnily enough, that's exactly what I'm about to go do, because space or not, there's only one person I want to share this news with right now.

London

“Luc?” I say, opening my door. His eyes are feverish and bright, his body held tight. “What’s wrong?”

He lets out a huge, relieved sigh, so big his shoulders slump with it. “Hi.”

I eye him curiously. “Hi ... are you okay?”

Shaking his head, he rakes his fingers through his hair. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“What?” I gasp, my brows narrowing. “You can’t do *what* anymore?”

“This.” He waves his hand between us. “Not seeing each other. Me overthinking every text, every thought. Us not being *us*.”

My pulse skyrockets. “Luc, what’s going on?”

He takes a step toward me. “This is just all so stupid and ridiculous.”

“What is?” I ask, moving back as he walks past me and toward the living room, leaving me standing there wondering what the hell is going on but also finding this out of sorts and disgruntled version of my best friend amusing and endearing.

“Come in, why don’t you,” I say.

He turns when he reaches the middle of the room, watching me as I follow and perch myself on the corner of the couch.

“You’re confusing me. What happened?”

“You happened. *We* happened. And now I can’t do anything without thinking about you and wanting to see you and talk to you. To touch you. To do everything I’ve wanted to do to you and couldn’t before, and I thought I could give you all the time and space you needed but I couldn’t stay away.” He shakes his head with a sigh. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m just ... Cap gave me my results and all I wanted to do was share the news with my girl.”

I jump to my feet. “Oh my God. You passed?”

His face lights up. “I did. And I don’t have to leave 101. Which is even better news. But none of that matters without you, Lonnie.”

Oh, my beating heart. My sweet, loveable idiot.

I go to move toward him but he starts pacing, but realizing there’s obviously more he needs to get off his chest, I stop.

“We had an amazing date and then an even *more* amazing night together. I got up to shower and get ready for work and told you I’d be back. Then I went to wake you up, walking on air because you’d said you loved me and I was about to tell you I was right there with you, but you weren’t there.”

My mouth opens to say sorry but he keeps going, making my planned apology pointless. “And I get that, I do. You’ve had these feelings for me for so damn long, and I stupidly didn’t want to give in to what I was wanting with you, and I grabbed onto whatever excuse I could think of to hold you back.”

Now I don’t want to stop him talking. This is the Luca Rossi I’ve wanted—the open, honest, laying-everything-out-for-me version.

“It’s like the roles are reversed, and suddenly, we had amazing sex and you’re here looking completely fine and put together, and I’m a needy, impatient, confused mess who just misses his girl and wants her back. Is it something I did? Was it not good for you? Am I wrong to think that everything changed and we’re starting something here?”

My whole body jerks. “Luc ...”

“Nope, don’t answer that. It doesn’t matter,” he says, shaking his head as he turns to pace again.

“Luc, please stop moving and look at me.” Thankfully he does, our eyes locking together and suddenly everything is right.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Do I get to say anything now?”

He clenches his jaw, lifting his hand to scrub over his stubble. “I don’t know. I didn’t exactly come here with a plan. I just knew that I’d passed my exam and you were the only person I wanted to share that news with. I needed to see you, beautiful. I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you too. So much.”

“Then why are we not together? Why are we texting and then not, and then I’m overthinking everything I say because I don’t want to screw this up and lose you when I’ve just realized that I never want to live without you?”

All of the air rushes out of my lungs. This man totally floors me in the best possible way without even trying sometimes.

“Never?” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “Never. I want everything with you. Marriage. Kids. A lifetime of good sex. All of it. And I only want it with you. Who else would put up with me?”

My lips curve up. “Are you calling yourself a handful?”

“Of course I am. I’ve been in love with my best friend for years and only realized it three weeks ago when she smiled at me in her bathroom. You’re the only person I know that would stick by me, put up with me, and *still* want to be with me.”

I freeze. “Say it again ...” I whisper. Now I do move, one foot in front of the other as I walk toward him.

“You’re the only person I know—”

As I come to a stop right in front of him, I slide my hands up to rest on his chest, right over his racing heart, and shake my head. “Before that.”

Luc’s eyes close slowly and I feel the tension leach out of him as he moves his hands to rest on my hips. His fingers reach under the hem of my T-shirt, stroking my skin and making me tremble.

Meeting my gaze again, he dips down and leans his forehead against mine. “I’m in love with my best friend,” he says roughly, and I *feel* the words like a warm fuzzy blanket wrapping around us both, holding us together.

“So if you know you’re in love with me, and I’m in love with you, why are you so riled up?”

“Am not,” he murmurs, his gaze dropping to where my tongue wets my lips.

I smile. “Are too.”

“Am no—” He stops mid-sentence and jerks his head back with a frown. “You’re mocking me.”

“Would I do that?” I ask, tilting my cheek and arching a brow.

“You’re killing me here, beautiful.”

“We can’t have *that* now. I had plans for you.”

“Plans?”

I nod. “I was coming to see you after you had a sleep.”

“I can sleep when I’m dead. Why were you coming to see me?”

I grin and slide my palms over his shoulders and up into his hair. Then I push up on my toes. “To do this,” I say before I crush my mouth to his, swallowing his long, deep groan.

He soon takes over, his hands cupping my ass. I jump up into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and deepening the kiss as he carries me to the couch and lowers me onto it, following me down and covering me with his body.

“Fuck. I missed you. Missed this,” he says in between kisses, both of us all hands and fingers, lips and teeth and tongues, holding each other as close as we can get.

“I’m giving you my heart, Luc. Please take care of it.”

He leans up on one arm and looks down at me, his gaze so intensely full of heat and passion and absolute sincerity that it brings tears to my eyes. “Till the day I die, Lonnie. I promise.” He brushes his lips against mine but much to my annoyance, moves back again. “First, I’ve got something for you.” He reaches down into his pocket and pulls out a ring. My eyes jump wide when I see the most beautiful rose-gold and sapphire ring, the stones in a line across the front.

“It’s not that ... not yet,” he says, reading me like a book.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I’m happy we’re together and we’re on the same page, but *that* would be a whole new book that we’re not ready to read yet.

“One day though, I will move this onto your left hand and make you mine forever. That’s a promise.” His eyes bore into mine, and I feel the depth of his love right down into my soul. I nod and bite my lip as he slides the ring onto my right-hand ring finger, lifting it to his mouth and placing a gentle kiss there, still watching me as he does it.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Just like my girl.”

I quirk a brow and shoot him a smirk. “Then why are you all the way up there? We’ve got two weeks to catch up on.”

“Anything you want, beautiful,” he murmurs, bringing his lips down to rest against mine. “Be prepared. I plan on taking my time with you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Luc. Not again.”

“I know. Because I’ll follow you regardless,” he says, smiling against my skin before tilting his head and *really* kissing me. “

Soon we’re both tearing at our clothes, helping each other in between kisses and roaming touches. I tremble when I feel

his warm skin against mine, memories of our first time rushing back to me. Today is so different though. We're together; we're going to be together. No more worries or space or overthinking. This is it for both of us.

When we have to catch our breath, I smile again. "Roll over, Luc. There's something I wanna do."

He wraps his arms around me and flips us so I'm draped on top of him. Then I'm all about exploration. First his chest, then lower, over his abs and lower still, one of his legs bent down, his foot on the ground, giving me the perfect access to his hard and thick cock.

"Fuck," he grinds out.

My mouth waters as I settle between his legs and look up to find his lust-filled eyes watching me. I wet my lips and arch a brow. "Now it's my turn to drive you crazy."

Then I flatten my tongue and lick a trail from his balls up to the leaking tip of his cock, the buck of his hips telling me all I need to know about whether he's enjoying himself or not.

I roll the head between my lips and move over him, slowly lowering down to take all of him in, his clean taste filling my senses. I watch him as he watches me, shooting him a wink, his lips curve into a wicked smirk as I suck and taste. I touch everywhere I can while I take his whole length over and over again. I reach a hand down between my legs, more turned on than ever before as I stroke my clit.

"Fuuuccck," he groans when I rake my teeth over his sensitive head and hum around his shaft.

Then suddenly, I'm on the move. Luc bends at the waist and hauls me up and over him so that I'm straddling his hips, his cock notched right where I need him most as he glides himself back and forth through my slick seam.

"I'm not coming until I'm inside you," he growls, tangling a hand in my hair and bringing our lips together. "Tell me you're mine."

"Always, Luc." I buck my hips against him. "But right now, I need you to take care of what's yours."

“With fucking pleasure,” he rasps, crushing his lips to mine as he grabs my hips and slides deep inside, stealing my breath.

There are no more coherent words after that. All I can do is whimper and moan and hold on tight as my best friend, the man I love, proceeds to literally give me the ride of my life.

Luca

After spending the day more than making up for lost time with my girl, in between snacks, a much more fun than usual shower, and a nap, I park my car and make my way around to the passenger side, then hold out my hand to help London.

Tonight she's wearing a dress that I voted as being even hotter than my favorite navy one. This one is a dusty pink, with a low V front and floaty sleeves, and it goes to mid-calf. It makes her blue eyes sparkle and had me growling when I came into the bedroom and saw her wearing it, which means it's a damn miracle we're actually here on time for Marco and Renee's pre-wedding gathering.

I slowly rake my eyes over her, earning a knowing smirk from London as I shut the door before her. Before I can think about moving, she hooks her arms over my shoulders and tugs me forward until my front is covering hers and her back is flush with my car .

"Hey," I say, rubbing my nose against hers, my grin so big it hurts. "You need something, beautiful?"

She tilts her chin up and gazes up at me, that ten foot-tall feeling now jumping to twenty with the love I see in her eyes. *Definitely an idiot for wasting so much time in denial with this one.*

"Just wanted a moment to breathe you in."

"Sniff away," I say, turning my head and bringing her face to my neck. "Never knew you had that fetish but each to their

own, babe.”

“Stop.” She giggles, playfully tapping the back of my head. “I actually thought *you* were the one with the sniffing fetish.”

I pull back and arch a brow. “When?”

“Never mind. You can indulge in any fetish you like as long as it’s with me.”

I dip my head down, smiling against her lips. “I love you, Lonnie.”

Her eyes flutter shut and she slowly exhales, and fuck, if that doesn’t act like the best punch to the gut I’ve ever had. To know that she wants that, she *has* wanted it for so long, and that I can make her catch her breath by just telling her I love her might just be the best damn feeling in the world. So of course I have to kiss her, and of *course* it goes long and deep and soon enough, I’m groaning into her mouth and her fingers are pulling at my hair. We come back to earth when a throat clears behind me.

In slow motion, I tear my lips from hers, not stepping back because I’m not in a physical state that’s suitable for the public right now. Turning my head, I freeze on the spot when I meet the curious and amused eyes of Cap and Lonnie’s mom, smirking beside him.

“Shit!” I say, stuck in fight-or-flight mentality. Lonnie’s hands holding steady on my shoulders keep me in place.

“Hey, Dad,” she snickers before burying her face in my chest in a fit of giggles

“London. Luc.” The Cap’s voice is deep and semi-awkward, but I know that’s only because of the circumstances rather than the fact I was mauling his daughter. “Nice to see you’ve sorted things out. We’ll see you inside.”

“I expect to see you at my table for dinner on Sunday night, Luca,” London’s mom calls out over her shoulder.

My girl looks up, her eyes crinkled at the corners and meeting mine. “Looks like the secret’s out.”

I sweep a loose tendril of hair behind her ear before cupping her face in my hands. “Not sure it was that much of a secret from anybody except me, beautiful.”

She shrugs, her smile growing wider. “Means everyone is going to know that you *lurvveee me*.”

“Good.”

“You sure about that?”

I dip my chin. “You mine, London Kelly?”

She lifts her mouth to press against my lips. “Are you mine, Luca Rossi?”

“Fuck yeah I am.”

“Then c’mon, Lieutenant. I think it’s high time we make our big entrance.” She pushes her palms into my chest and I step back, reaching down to lace my fingers with hers, craving that connection now that the floodgates have been opened and I can touch her whenever I want.

“Isn’t stealing the limelight breaking the rules when it’s not your own wedding?”

She shrugs and shoots me a wicked grin. If I’d thought London was beautiful before, she’s absolutely fucking gorgeous now with pink swollen lips and flushed cheeks.

“What’s a little rule bending between friends and family?”

“Like falling for your best friend?” I ask with a chuckle.

“Exactly.” She lifts up on her toes to smack her lips against mine for a far-too-brief kiss before we reach the door to the restaurant. “From my experience, that’s the best rule to bend, break, and ignore out of them all.”

I rub my thumb over her promise ring. *Yes, it totally is.*

CAP MUST’VE ANNOUNCED our arrival before we walked in because the moment we do, every person in the booked out

restaurant is on their feet, clapping and cheering, making even *my* face blush. We're enveloped in a big hug by Mama with my father right behind her, his proud smile beaming at me.

When Mama and Mrs. Kelly pull Lonnie away from me, Dad comes up, cupping my shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "About time, son. I'm glad you finally saw what the rest of us have known for a while now."

I groan and shake my head. "Yeah, yeah. All I care about now is that I *did* pull my head out of my ass and Lonnie loves me. Nothing else matters."

"Good, Luca. All Mama and I have ever wanted is to see you with *that* smile on your face."

"The one that says he got some?" Scotty pipes up, earning a spluttered snort from me and a knowing wink from my dad as he moves to join the women. Cohen's hand meets the back of Scotty's head, and Marco and Rhodes laugh next to them.

Then I remember something and a cocky smirk tugs at my mouth. "Hey Scotty, did you hear the news?"

"What's that?" he asks, his brows bunched together.

"You've gotta do what I say now." His eyes narrow before he looks around the group and finally, the light bulb goes on.

"You passed? Oh my God, you actually passed! That is awesome, Luc. Congrats," Scotty says, sounding more happy about the news than I was. "Wait, does that mean you're leaving 101?"

I shake my head. "Nope. Shifting over to the other crew at the end of the month."

"Even better." Then I'm wrapped up in a Scotty bear hug.

I catch Lonnie coming back my way and carefully get myself out of my friend's clutches, grabbing hold of my girl as soon as she's within reach. "Everything good?"

"It's great."

"Good." I drop my lips to hers for a quick kiss. "That's better though."

Lonnie moves her mouth to my ear. “No, Luc. Better will be later when you repay me for the couch.”

“Fuck,” I breathe.

She nips my ear with her teeth. “That too.” My previous physical impairment threatens to make a return, something I think is going to be an ongoing problem with Lonnie nearby.

Thankfully, I’m saved by the bell—well, by my dad tapping a fork against his wineglass.

“Everybody grab some champagne and gather ’round. Our Marco has a few things he’d like to say before we sit down to eat.”

I move Lonnie to stand in front of me, reaching out to swipe two glasses from a passing tray and handing one to her before resting my arm around her waist, holding her close.

Looking around the room, I lift my chin when I meet the eyes of Gio and Alex, and Rhodes and his wife, Dee, standing next to them. Then there’s Skye and Cohen standing with Val and a squirming Austin, Skye winking at me while Val gives me a thumbs up and mouths “*Told you so.*”

My attention shifts to the head of the table when Marco and Renee walk onto a small, raised platform, Mama and Dad joining them on Marco’s side, Renee’s sister, Hayley, and her Grams standing next to her.

“I won’t keep you long, but Renee and I, along with our families”—Marco looks to our parents and then Renee’s family—“wanted to thank you all for being here with us ahead of what will be the most important and memorable day of our lives tomorrow, when this one *finally* becomes *Mrs. Hamilton-Rossi.*”

“Woohoo!” Scotty calls out, followed by an “Oww. What was *that* for?”

“Shh,” his fiancée, Mandy, says with a smirk.

“*Anyway,*” Marco continues. “It seems fitting that as we embark on the next stage of our lives together and I get to call

the love of my life my wife, that I acknowledge everyone that's helped us get here.

“Hayley and Grams. Thank you for loving and supporting Renee on her journey to become the amazing, beautiful, absolutely perfect woman she is today.”

I swear I can hear a collective sigh from all the women in the room.

He shifts his attention to our parents, our father with his arm wrapped around Mama's shoulders as she wipes away happy tears. “To Mama and my dad, thank you for being you. For raising us kids to be strong, supportive, loving—yes, even Luca—and independent human beings. Your marriage, and the way you surrounded us all with a house full of love, have shown us the kind of relationships we should strive for. And now us kids have found our soul mates because of the amazing example you've shown.” His eyes lock on mine, pride shining in his gaze. I nod, unable to wipe the huge grin off my face as I drop my mouth to press a gentle kiss on the curve of London's neck.

“Hey, not all of us need to be coupled up,” Val calls out. A round of laughter and snickers fills the air in response.

“OK. As Val so rightly pointed out, not *all* of us Rossi siblings are spoken for now, but as my sister has always said, she's married to her job and that's the only partner she'll ever need.” That brings more laughter along with an “amen” from Val.

“Finally, to my wife-to-be, Renee, my showstopper, my new dawn, and the best part of every day, thank you for loving me, for supporting me, and for being the brightest star in my sky and the soft landing spot I need when life gets hard. Tomorrow you'll get my vow, but tonight I'll tell you my dream. It's you. It always will be you, and I'll never stop trying to be a better man, a better partner, and a better husband for you. I love you more every second of every day, and I can't wait to be called Mr. Hamilton-Rossi tomorrow.”

Renee launches herself at my brother, crushing her mouth to his as he tightens his arms around her and seals their last

night as an engaged couple with a kiss.

My father steps forward and holds up his glass. “Please raise your glasses as we toast Marco and Renee.”

We all lift our hands in the air as Renee and Marco finally pull apart and the crowd of their family and closest friends clap before moving towards the tables to get ready for dinner.

Before I do that, I’m caught up in my own honeymoon phase and delirious loved-up state of life. I slide my hand to Lonnie’s hip and turn her around to face me, dipping my lips to brush against hers before sliding my tongue inside her mouth for a teasing taste. Leaning my forehead down to touch hers, I relish in this new version of us that I very nearly missed out on.

“Thank you for loving me too,” she whispers, her voice thick.

“Thank you for waiting for me to realize everything I’ve ever wanted was right beside me all along.”

“You’re welcome?” she says with a laugh.

“With pleasure sounds better,” I rasp. “A lot of it.”

She shrugs and shoots me a wry grin. “I think I can deal with that. They do say you’re only as young as you feel.”

I run one hand down her back to grip her ass as the other cradles the back of her head. “I’m good for a good long while then, aren’t I?” I say before I kiss her again, but this time I do it long and hard, not giving a single damn as to where we are or who is here.

My girl deserves nothing less.

Epilogue

LONDON

Eighteen months later

The whole day has been a surprise, just as Luca had planned it to be. It started in the best possible in our bed, moaning his name as he woke me up with his mouth, then when he slid inside and soon had me screaming out again afterward.

Then he got up and left me dozing—since I was in *no* position to move—and brought me pancakes in bed. Then I got my birthday presents, since today is my twenty-ninth birthday. First was a weekend trip to New York to go visit Violet, who has now started her own fashion line, and a rose-gold necklace to match my promise ring. Then there was what I consider to be the best gift of them all, a certificate for a tandem skydive with Luca, his first official one since becoming a licensed skydiver.

Now, we're back at one of the sites of our first official date day—sitting front row, center ice, on the second level of the United Center, both of us decked out in Blackhawks jerseys and ready to cheer on our team. Ten minutes before the puck drops, I'm trying to stave off a hungry Luca, who's determined to steal a bite of my hotdog, when I spot familiar faces coming down the row toward us.

“Mom? Dad? *Vi*? What are you doing here?” I say, turning my gaze from them to my grinning boyfriend.

“Surprise!” he says with a grin. Using the distraction of my parents, he wraps his hand around my wrist and jerks the food

to his mouth for a sneaky bite.

“Hey!”

“I luff you,” he mumbles, still grinning.

I narrow my eyes but move past him to hug my family, especially my sister who I haven’t seen for months.

But the surprises keep coming when the rest of the old crew from Firehouse 101 makes their way down the aisle and fill all of the seats around us—including Luca’s parents.

“What did you do?” I ask Luca when we all finally sit down after we’ve greeted everyone.

He leans over, hooks his hand behind my neck, and pulls me in for a long, deep, super-hot kiss, ending it with a smile against my lips. “Making sure my girl has the best twenty-ninth birthday ever.”

“I’m with you. Of *course* it will be.”

That gets me a growl and another kiss, this time hard and quick but no less dirty. *Happy birthday to me!*

Halfway through the intermission between the first and second periods, the stadium’s Jumbotron lights up and “Love Shack” by The B-52s starts playing, signaling the start of the kiss-cam shenanigans.

This time, it goes to a lovely elderly couple who look like lifelong Hawks fans. All of us cheer when the man lays a big wet one on his wife, much to the crowd’s delight.

Scotty and his new wife Mandy jump and wave to get the cameraman’s attention, having just gotten back from their Hawaiian honeymoon, which followed there over-the-top and surprisingly romantic tiki-themed wedding. The moment their faces fill the big screen, they’re all over each other, lips, hands, and even Mandy’s leg hooked around Scotty’s hips. Their kiss earns hollers of “get a room” from all the firehouse guys, my dad included.

Next, the cam comes to Marco and a six-months pregnant Renee. Marco makes every woman in the arena sigh and

swoon when he rests a hand on her round belly before leaning in and kissing her sweetly.

The camera shifts to Luc's parents. Mr. Rossi, the man who taught the Rossi men everything they know about how to treat their women, hooks an arm around Mama's waist, dips her back, and kisses her soft and slow, making a real performance of it.

Then it's Rhodes and Dee, who proceed to gross out their sons Jake and Harvey with a hot and heavy make-out session. Gio and Alex are next, kissing and laughing the whole time while they do it, with Skye and Cohen following, making a show of being all over each other.

When it shifts to Val, I start to wonder if the kiss-cam cameraman is obsessed with our section. Val, never one to be outdone by her siblings, turns to her partner, Mel, and winks straight at the camera before cupping her face and laying one on her, too, to a huge roar in the crowd.

I start to feel a little disappointed that Luc and I won't get a turn—especially since almost everybody else in our group has—when the music changes, and “Kiss Me” starts playing.

I gasp and turn to look at Luc, but he's not standing. Instead, he's somehow squeezed himself down onto one knee next to me.

Tears spring to my eyes. My smile is huge as he reaches out to hold my hands. The whole arena erupts in a roar of cheers and chants. But none of that matters as he slides my promise ring off my right hand and shifts it to the left, his gaze lifting to mine.

“I promised you that one day I would make you mine forever and right now, in front of our friends and family, I'm asking if you'll make me the luckiest man on earth and do me the honor of becoming my wife.”

I nod, my lips stretched so wide as tears stream down my cheeks, and he slowly slides the ring down to the base of my ring finger, fulfilling the promise he made eighteen months ago.

Then I'm leaning down, he's surging up, and we meet halfway before I frame his jaw in my hands and give him the best damn kiss the United Center kiss cam has ever seen.

Best birthday ever.

The End

Of this series...

Of this Chicago world ...

Of an Era.

To the readers who have read, loved, and devoured these books from Mac and the gang through to the Rossi family and Firehouse 101 ... thank you.

Other Books By BJ Harvey

Romantic Comedy:

Bliss Series

Temporary Bliss (Bliss #1)—Mac and Daniel

True Bliss (Bliss #2)—Kate and Zander

Reclaiming Bliss (Bliss #3)—Sean and Sam

formerly Blissful Surrender

Permanent Bliss (Bliss #4)—

Mac & Daniel's Wedding

Finding Bliss (Bliss #5)—Noah and Zoe

Building Bliss (formerly Game Player)—Matt and Mia

Secret Bliss (formerly Game Maker)

—Zack and Danika

Faking Bliss (formerly Game Saver)

—Cade and Abi

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—Thomas and Amy

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—Cameron and Sarah

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Cook Brothers Series (Game series spin-off) - House Flipping Rom Coms

Work in Progress — Jamie and April

Work Violation — Jax and Ronnie

Working Back — Bryant and Faith

Hard Work — Cohen and Skye

Working For It — Ezra and Gilly

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Love & Consequences

Romance Suspense

Lost Series

Lost in Distraction (Lost #1)

Lost For You (Lost #2)

Lost Without You (Lost #3)

Standalone

Crave

About BJ Harvey

BJ Harvey is the USA Today bestselling author of the Bliss Series. She also regards herself as a smut peddler, suspense conjurer and a funny romance thinker upper. An avid music fan, you will always find her singing some hit song badly but loving every minute of it. She's a wife, a mom and hails from the best country in the world—New Zealand—but currently lives in Perth, Australia.

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