

# DESPERATELY SEEKING

# *Kitty*

A  
WINTER  
ROMANCE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**TARYN QUINN**

# DESPERATELY SEEKING KITTY

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A KENSINGTON SQUARE STANDALONE  
SMALL TOWN ROMANTIC COMEDY

TARYN QUINN



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Desperately Seeking Kitty

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Rainbow Rage Publishing

Cover by Shanoff Designs

Photo by Lindee Robinson Photography

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First Print edition: March 2023

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## DESPERATELY SEEKING KITTY

*Looking to rent a pussy.*

Say what?

I'd never seen an ad phrased quite like that before. Not only did it raise my eyebrows, but the late night attention it drew dangerously exceeded our kitten rescue's bandwidth.

So I did my admin duty and sent the ad writer a warning message.

I didn't have to send her personal messages.

Or have flirty chats on the phone.

I especially didn't need to go to her place for late night... kitten calls.

I soon realized she might be exactly who I needed to get my matchmaking family off my back, if she would just attend an important event with me.

She told me over and over she wasn't girlfriend material—fake or otherwise.

I didn't listen.

And now I'm ready to put it all on the line to make sure my Kitty understands that our love is very real.

Let the fur fly.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Lots of authors say it takes a village. Ours may be small, but it is mighty.*

*Huge thanks to our editor, Kelli Collins, for coming back into the fold. You are **amazing** and we've missed you desperately. We're so glad you didn't hold our long hiatus against us.*

*To Tori and Kim who have always been an invaluable part of our team. You guys keep us running even when the coffee and Harry vids fail. Thanks so much for everything you do.*

*And to our sweet new virtual assistant, Megan, who has been helping us get current with social media. You are always game to try something new.*

*Sometimes we make up fictional places that end up having the same names as actual places. These are our fictional interpretations only. Please grant us leeway if our creative vision isn't true to reality.*



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Dear Reader,

Last year I (Cari) lost my beloved girl kitty GK to cancer. After her loss, I struggled a lot with grief. Writing was difficult afterward. Heck, living was difficult. I miss her terribly still and some of my ongoing issues with anxiety became greater. Writing Kitty in many ways was therapeutic.

Mental health is very personal to every individual and no two people experience their challenges with it the same way. In some ways, Kitty's concerns were made more humorous for this book, but rest assured, there is nothing funny about dealing with agoraphobia or anxiety and depression. Your world can become very small and Kitty fought her way back from that in the best manner she knew how, as we all try to.

I hope if you're struggling, that perhaps Kitty and Clint's story will bring a smile to your face. You're not alone.

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XOXO,  
Cari & Taryn

# ONE

## Katherine

AFTER MIDNIGHT, ANYTHING WAS POSSIBLE.

Or so the tarot cards and reheated Chinese told me.

My food wasn't talking to me—I'm not quite that batty yet—but I was having...a moment. I had a pleasantly full belly and Loreena McKennitt was playing while snow swirled beyond my windows on the third floor of my building. Down below, the few cars moved about sluggishly, their jewel tones mixed with a heck of a lot of neutrals.

Kinda like my life.

But right now, I felt cozy. Warm. Safe.

Rare for me as of late.

I'd pulled The Sun and The Star. Positive cards that encouraged me to do what I was about to do.

Even if I half believed fortune telling of any sort was a bunch of hooey.

I shifted on the padded window seat, pressing my suddenly warm cheek to the cold window. Beside me, Princess Goldenrod snored lightly with her wet pink nose pressed against my bare thigh. I tried to tug my robe back into place without disturbing her, then gave up and went back to my phone.

Want ads for all kinds of pet-related items scrolled down my screen. Kitten Around was a local charity that mostly focused on saving the most desperately in-need kittens, usually those that were critical or special needs in some way.

Exactly why I couldn't afford to help them in any way but financial right now. I'd lost my beloved cat earlier this year—Princess Goldenrod's bonded mate—and as much as I empathized with those kittens who needed homes, I couldn't take the risk of losing another so soon.

Couldn't take the risk period.

Not to mention owning or fostering another cat would require more interaction with the outside world. More vet visits, more grocery trips—even if I almost always ordered delivery except in extreme cases—just more of everything.

But my Princess was lonely. So I'd brainstormed another way for her to get her required interaction with her species without her running free as an indoor/outdoor cat. That was too dangerous for a number of reasons—communicable diseases, inclement weather, fights, cars. Just way too many threats out there.

Surely there was another way. And lo and behold, I'd come up with one.

I would rent a cat.

Okay, yes, the idea sounded kind of nuts. I'd certainly never heard of such a thing before. I supposed I could've gone the cat café route—assuming I'd been okay with the whole public interaction thing. That was not an option right now. And I didn't know if you were allowed to bring your own pet to interact with the ones there. Probably not.

Besides, sometimes you had to try something new.

My *new* was helping someone who perhaps was in a financial bind while they handled all the cat's vet visits and other needs. One thing I had was money. In return, I would rent their cat for a pre-approved number of hours a week, depending on what my girl seemed to like best.

It wouldn't be a quick process. She was finicky. Her human mama was even *more* finicky. It had to be exactly the right fit.

So far, I'd been deluged with offers since I'd first placed my ad in Kitten Around's classifieds section two days ago. If

deluged meant zero.

Which meant it was time to change things up.

Maybe I needed to make it seem...I don't know, more appealing? How did one entice someone to be willing to rent out their cat? Just for perfectly innocent cuddling and inter-cat relations of a playful nature.

I wasn't selling sex, although I had reason to know that a hint—or more than a hint—of naughtiness definitely got attention. I could always try an experiment. If it didn't work or my ad attracted some kind of weirdo, I'd just cancel it and go back to living my life as a mysterious oddity who locked herself in her apartment and liked cats more than people and would rather type than talk to anyone.

It was now closer to one a.m. I still had zero bites on my very factual ad.

---

*Princess Goldenrod, a gold—duh—DSH cat, would like to pay for the services of a preferably male cat for afternoon playdates. Several sessions a week with all toys provided (though they will remain at my home after your boy goes home). She is spayed and has all shots. Requesting same. Pay negotiable.*

PRGLDNROD

---

So I used my honed skills at crafting provocative text to write myself a doozy. Only slightly encouraged by two—fine, three—cans of Brothers Three Orchard's hard apple cider.

---

*Seeking pussy for a few playdates a week. I started out wanting a male for my gold girl, but I decided to open the field. So, a male or female can work depending on fit. I have toys and beds, though they will stay on premises. Must be up to date on shots. Top dollar for the right candidate. Discretion is advised.*

PRGLDNROD

---

I reread my ad one last time then finished the last of my cider. My cat had wandered away, so I curled up on the window seat for a short nap. It wasn't the most comfortable position and my ample parts dangled off the cushions, but I just needed a few minutes to rest. I was a night owl, after all, and I had a ton of work to get done tonight. Damn cider had hit me harder than I'd expected.

Two hours later, I shot up into a seated position with my dark curls half covering my face, my eyes bleary, and the snow outside reaching epic levels. Not unusual for my small town in central New York, but I must've somehow missed a weather alert.

I lifted my phone, swiped it awake, and squinted at the screen with one eye, sure I must be seeing things. I'd left my Kitten Around profile open and my mail icon was jumping madly. The red number above it read 213.

What the hell?

I opened my inbox and started reading the messages with growing horror. They got more and more salacious, describing sex acts and positions that even I wasn't familiar with.

And I knew my sex acts. I actually prided myself on my knowledge of a wide array of the ways people got off, so that I could help my editing clients.

These people apparently could teach me a few things. At least intellectually. I wasn't looking for those kind of playdates, thank you very much.

I shuddered. And neither was Princess Goldenrod.

I went through every message. Some went right in the trash bin. A few of them, I noted their contact information in my notes app so I could possibly contact them with questions later.

That left me with three candidates. Three out of the now 226 messages.

I took a deep breath.

Perhaps I'd gone too provocative. I needed a beta reader when I wrote these things, apparently.

*This* was why I just edited romance novels and didn't write them. I'd probably set the internet on fire if I tried.

Shivering, I tightened my robe as message #227 came in. I wasn't sure I had it in me to read any more about pony play except with cats. Or humans dressed as cats or something along those lines. Hey, you do you, whatever works. I just hadn't expected quite that level of enthusiasm in response to my ad.

Maybe I should have. I hadn't exactly posted it at the best time of day for such things. But who spent the overnight hours trolling Kitten Around's classifieds section?

Color me schooled.

I opened #227 and read it with my heart racing.

ADMIN

Hi, you don't know me, and maybe I'm not understanding what you're looking for, but considering where you posted this, you might want to reword it? I can't imagine the kind of replies you're getting. Actually, I can, but don't tell me because I'm not a pervert and not interested. You probably won't even see this.

I frowned and responded before I thought better of it. Although I probably wouldn't have thought better of it, anyway. I had a vague hard cider buzz and it was three a.m. and my toes were freezing. How those three things worked together, I wasn't certain.

PRGLDNROD

When someone says they aren't a pervert, they most certainly are. It's like someone in a cabin in the woods saying they aren't a serial killer then holding out a handful of candy to a hapless stranger.

I don't know what made me say that. I wasn't that drunk, if I even was at all. But there was a little devil on my shoulder who felt bold behind the screen.

I often did while I did my work, too, despite the fact they weren't my words I was editing. I just rearranged sections that needed help. I didn't *create*.

Kitty Armor, developmental editor, was the brave one, not Katherine Armitage, mousy recluse with a pair of red heels she'd probably never actually wear anywhere other than her own apartment while she edited.

So who was being brave here? Kitty, Katherine, or someone new altogether?

While I pondered that, another message came in. And it wasn't from my cabin-candy giver.

Whom I'd apparently scared away. Even my typed words were intimidating somehow. My dad would shake his head sadly and say he'd told me that men like to make the first move.

I hadn't made any moves. I was looking for a cat, not a man, for fuck's sake.

Then he messaged again. Assuming *he* really was a he.

I just wanted to help. But if you don't need help, fine by me. Good luck on your pussy search. Though maybe next time post this on a more appropriate site.

A pussy is a cat. A CAT. This site is for Kitten Around, a kitten rescue. I posted it exactly where I wanted to. What are YOU doing here, genius?

I'm an admin. An alert went off while I was sleeping about extremely high traffic on the server. I logged in to see someone posting a request for pussy, so I figured I'd send a message first before I removed it. Our servers don't have the bandwidth to support your solicitations.

Solicitations? You think I was trying to get sex?

You tell me.

I am telling you. Do you have access to my first post?

The one you took down?

Yes.

He responded twenty-nine minutes later. Yes, I kept track. In that time, Princess showed up and stared at me for several minutes until I received her telepathic communication that apparently breakfast today wasn't at her normal seven-thirty but at four thirty-six.

After I fed my fuzzy overlord, I returned to find my cabin-candy giver had responded with the message board version of *hmph*.

Your post was poorly worded unless you deliberately were being provocative.

Give the man a ribbon! Assuming he is a man. Also assuming he really works at Kitten Around.

Do you see the Admin tag beside my name?

I did see that, yes. Dammit. Harder to accuse one of things when the proof otherwise was right there, but I wasn't one to go down without a fight.

Maybe you're a hacker.

Sure. And if I was, hacking into Kitten Around's site would be my first target. A site that usually has approximately 3 visitors on an average Saturday night in the midnight to six a.m. time period. Tonight? Over five hundred.

Wow, go me. Maybe I should start writing books.

He didn't reply so I sent another message.



Fine, you're an admin. Maybe you're female.

And if I am? I didn't indicate any interest in the pussy you're seeking, so my sex is irrelevant.

Oh, come on. Women don't get excited by that word. That's a male trigger. You probably have a pussy search-term alert on the server so it flags you first. Sorry to say you were #227 in my inbox.

And maybe you're a man. You're the one seeking pussy. All I want is for you to reword your post for clarity without deliberately inflammatory terminology.

Pussy is slang, not terminology.

He responded quickly this time.

Pussy for a cat is slang? Good to know, since it's the first definition in Webster's. The dictionary in case you're unaware.

Much to my shock, I sat back with a smile. I didn't play chess, but in my brain, someone was screaming *checkmate*.

And that someone was directly connected to my mostly dormant libido.

A man who quoted the dictionary to me? Even if he wasn't a man, I wasn't sure I cared. This person intrigued me.

Then he sent a picture. Probably to kill me dead, the bastard.

For you. Just so you know my sex since that's apparently a concern of yours.

I opened it, expecting a dick pic. Because of course. The possibility disappointed me. I hated when someone turned out to be predictable.

But when I clicked to download it, the picture that emerged was not of an erect penis. No, it was of a golden-skinned man with washboard abs and tattoos of palm fronds

on either side of his groin just above the waistband of his plaid flannel pajama bottoms.

Oh, and a cat. He wasn't wearing the cat as an accessory. The cat's fluffy black bulk was draped over cabin-candy guy's discreetly hidden groin, staring at the camera with the cool green disdain that only a cat could pull off.

My mouth was now officially dry. Those abs were things of beauty.

How to respond? I'd just go by instinct.

I can reverse image search that to see if it's widely available, you know.

Be my guest. You going to send one back?

Send what back?

A picture.

Oh, are we internet dating now? Should I tell you my measurements, my astrological sign, and what enneagram I am, or do you want to go first?

Now she's angling for my measurements. Beginning to think someone is a pervert and it's not me.

Again, why would I troll on a kitten rescue site? Isn't that what Tinder is for?

Oh, I knew you seemed familiar. Is your screen name Vulva69 on there?

As much as I liked a snarky man, I didn't respond immediately. Just to ease my mind, I did that reverse image search. No such thing existed.

By then he'd sent another picture, this one of the gold collar with reflective paw prints the black kitty wore in the photo, looped around his fingers. Both collars said Lucky on their little fishy tags.

Enough for you?

Sure. Yeah. I guess. Whatever.

You googled, didn't you?

So you have a pussy.

If you mean cat, yes. As you can see, his name is Lucky and he rules the roost. Are you really wanting playdates with an actual cat for your DSH?

So he *had* gone back to check out my previous post on the server. And he appeared to be comfortable with the term DSH, so he at least knew that much.

I supposed I would tentatively trust hot-abs guy—at least for now. Until he slipped up and I caught him in a lie.

Do you spray tan?

What? No. Of course not.

Do you live in Kensington Square?

I'm local. Are you?

Depends. Where do you live?

Like an address?

No, like spatial coordinates. Yes, an address.

1831 EastView Road on the wooded side of Crescent Lake, but I don't live in a cabin. You?

I frowned as Princess Goldenrod hopped onto my window seat and started kneading on the bottom of my robe, her sharp nails digging into my leg. “Don't worry. I'm not giving our address to a strange man with a spray tan and abs for days. I'm feeling him out.”

Then again, how had I expected to have playdates with a rental cat and my cat if I didn't give out my address? It wasn't as if we could meet in the park in the middle of winter, even if

I had been okay with hanging out anywhere but my apartment. It was only November, but we lived in the snowbelt—proven by the fact that it was indeed snowing.

That left us going to hot-abs guy's not-a-cabin. But that didn't feel any safer. Going there held its own dangers, not the least of which was I hated leaving home. At least here I was on my own turf and I could disable him with a two-finger jab to the eyes.

I'm not prepared to disclose that.

Are you prepared to go to bed? It's five-thirty in the morning.

I squinted at my screen. Now that he mentioned it, I was still tired. But I hadn't done the work on my docket. I hadn't set up a playdate for Princess. All I'd done tonight was get halfway to drunk and kind of bantered with a man who'd thought I was soliciting female companionship of a personal nature on a kitten charity site.

Yeah. I'm tired. Good night.

I didn't wait for him to say anything else. Didn't make plans to chat later or meet or exchange more photos. Well, *he'd* be exchanging more. I hadn't sent anything yet.

Maybe I never would.

"Let's go to bed," I said to Princess, scooping her up before she could argue. She tended to do that with a few well-placed meows.

Wonder where she'd picked up that personality trait.

## TWO



I LOVED CATS. *LOVED* THEM. ALL ANIMALS, REALLY.

Women, on the other hand, were trying my nerves.

“Dr. Hauser, my tabby Brutus is constipated. Do you have any appointments? Please. I’ll pay extra. Or!” Mrs. Bianchine’s voice brightened. “I could make you my famous jalapeño mac and cheese. I’ve heard you like it hot. I mean, spicy.” She giggled, her feigned concern for her cat disappearing in a rush of hormones. “You know what I mean.”

“Let me check my schedule. It’s Friday evening, Mrs. Bianchine—”

“Oh, just call me Carla. Can I call you Clintondale?” More giggles.

*No.* How had she figured out my full name, anyway? I did my best to make sure it didn’t show up anywhere but on official paperwork.

“What time can you make it in? I have appointments at 6:45 and 7:30, and then I’m afraid you’ll have to see if Dr. Thorn or one of the other vets can fit you in.”

“No, it has to be you.”

“Does Brutus have a preference?” I was pretty sure I knew who had a preference, and it wasn’t the cat.

“He’s very particular. I’ll take your 7:30, and then we can go to dinner?”

“I’m sorry, I’m seeing someone.”

Hmm, that was news to me too. Worst of all was, the person who'd entered my mind as I said that had not given me so much as her name, never mind any identifying details.

If *she* even was a she. She could be an eighty-year-old male for all I knew. She'd been seeking pussy, after all.

Though that didn't prove anything either.

My mystery woman was an enigma in every possible way, and now I was telling clients I was dating her? God help me.

"Since when?" The accusation in Mrs. Bianchine's question nearly pierced my eardrum.

"Recently," I said pleasantly, noting the appointment on my calendar. "Give my best to your husband. See you soon." I hung up before she could make up some lame excuse as to why she was hitting on me while she was married.

Last time it had been because "they were nearly divorced." Nearly didn't mean squat in my book. I wasn't interested in any case.

I tossed my pencil across my desk, making a big jagged mark on my blotter calendar. I was old-fashioned in too many ways to count, and I only wanted to date someone who was single.

How silly of me.

Yet I was hung up on someone I'd probably never talk to again. Obviously I needed to loosen my standards a little, because I'd been lonely for too long.

Alone, not lonely. I was perfectly happy single. The looming holidays made it harder, of course, when all the cute little families with their Yorkies and Golden Labs and Persians came in for routine checkups and chattered brightly about getting to see Santa soon and other similarly festive activities.

As for me? I had sitting in front of the TV with a cold one to watch a holiday movie to look forward to.

Assuming I could successfully avoid my very large, very noisy—and thankfully not exactly local—family. That remained to be seen.

Thorny Paw Clinic's new receptionist, Alice, hurried in to my office, her cherubic face flushed. The clinic was in a retrooled stable on the outskirts of town, serving larger animals as well as smaller domestic pets in the newer buildings that had been added on. "Clint, we've got a bunny who might be in stasis. Can you help?"

I was already on my feet. I was one of the few local vets who could handle exotic animals too, a designation many people didn't realize applied to rabbits who needed veterinary care. "I've got it, Alice. Thank you. If you can contact my 6:00 and let them know there's an emergency." I allowed myself a brief, small smile. "And my 7:30 too. Thank you."

I went out to talk to the worried dark-haired couple, consoling each other on the bench in the corner. Beside them sat a bright pink soft-sided carrier with a lethargic lop-eared brown bunny inside, his eyes lacking any spark.

My shoulders tightened as I crouched to murmur to the rabbit. His ear twitched, but that was the only sign of recognition I received.

"What's his or her name?" I asked the bunny's worried parents.

"Merlin." The woman dabbed her damp cheeks with a tissue and tried to smile. "I was looking up his symptoms online and they said—"

"Never google. It just makes you worry more. I'm Doctor Hauser. And you are?"

The man gripped his wife's hand. "I'm Jay and this is my wife, Leeann. Thank you, Doctor, for seeing us on such short notice. We called around to everyone and none of the vets could see our bunny. We're so frightened. This shortage is so hard on pet owners."

"And on vet practices," I said gently.

I knew far too much about the shortage in skilled veterinary care. A few years ago, the long hours and stressful atmosphere had led to me bowing out. I'd spent about a year pursuing another line of work, one I'd fallen into partly out of

rebellion against my father and partly because it was so different from being a vet.

Then the desperate need in the vet community had drawn me right back.

Taking care of pets was rewarding in so many ways—and hard and painful in so many others. But this was where I was meant to be. I felt in it my bones.

Even if right now those bones were aching. Soon I'd be off my feet and reclined in my easy chair. First, we had to get Merlin feeling better if it was possible.

I'd do my damndest in any case.

I rose to a standing position. "Come on back with me." I motioned for them to head down the short hall to the exam rooms and took a moment to grip the medal around my neck—my talisman of sorts—and sent up a quick prayer that Merlin could be helped.

More than an hour later, the bunny was resting in a large cage in our observation room, where he'd stay for the night. I'd assured his concerned parents we had a very capable overnight crew of assistants, and if there was any change for the worse, we would notify them immediately. Otherwise they could come by in the morning and pick up their bunny, since I'd diagnosed him with a mild form of gastrointestinal upset—likely due to consuming something he shouldn't have—rather than the more dangerous stasis.

They thanked me profusely and even cried a little on my shoulder, which I'd dealt with more often than I liked to remember. But at least this time, the story would have a happy ending.

I fervently hoped.

Just as I was about to head home, Mrs. Bianchine rushed in with a yowling Brutus. My guilty conscience led me to take him back to the exam rooms for a quick look. One diagnosis of constipation and a script for a gentle laxative later, she was on her way back out after swearing I was going to get her famous mac and cheese whether I wanted it or not.



Since my stomach was now growling, I almost consented, even if I was pretty sure she wanted to deliver it to me in her lingerie. I was just weary enough I might've been tempted there, too, if not for that shiny gold band on her ring finger.

Instead, I swung through the drive-thru of the new chicken joint in Crescent Cove and dug through the bucket while I sat in my boxers and watched SportsCenter like a proper bachelor.

Then the server overload alert sounded again on my phone from Kitten Around.

*You've gotta be kidding me.*

It had almost been a week since she'd signed off without a word other than good night. I was rather ashamed to admit—even in my own head—that I'd kept a far closer watch on the classifieds section than I normally did, including when I wasn't even on volunteer duty.

Part of the reason I was so sleep-deprived. I'd taken to lingering around the site like a bad habit in the middle of the night when I should've been sleeping. But my hyper-focus still hadn't made her reappear.

Not only that, she'd taken down her post the next day. As if it mattered. I could only guess how many replies she'd received. What number was I again? Number two-twenty-seven. She'd probably set up half a dozen "playdates" by now with her gold DSH, assuming that wasn't just a ruse to get some action.

Even if I couldn't begin to imagine why she'd pull such shenanigans on a charity website. There were all kinds in this world.

And *this* kind had apparently yanked my chain. Or something.

The alert probably had nothing to do with her. What were the odds she'd return to the scene of the crime? Surely she wouldn't pull the same crap again, even if her intentions had been pure—and sorely misguided.

Besides, she knew my address. Why not pay me a visit if she was so desperate for a playdate? She'd seen my cat. And

my abs.

Which had been intentional.

Me, the guy who was used to dissuading women from pursuing me since they all seemed to want the same thing—to date a vet who had money and/or to get me in their bed, in that order—had actually shown off his body.

I was clearly in need of a playdate of my own. Without the presence of Lucky, thanks but no thanks.

I did a quick server check, saw a traffic uptick as reported, and then took a deep breath laced with disappointment as I realized the bump was relatively tiny. No one was seeking pussy tonight. Or if they were, they weren't getting the amount of responses they had last weekend.

Dammit.

I scrolled down the classifieds just in case, my heart rate slowing down with every banal ad that belonged there. Plenty of ads for dog walking and boarding and mobile grooming salons to get your pet ready for winter pictures.

No pussy-seeking.

Then my own picture—the one I'd sent her last weekend—caught my eye.

---

*Desperately Seeking Lucky.*

*If you're the owner of this cat, inbox me. I'm ready to take you up on your offer.*

PRGLDNROD

---

## THREE



I FROWNEED EVEN AS MY SLUGGISH HEART RATE SHOT INTO THE danger zone. *My offer? Had I made her an offer?*

And if I hadn't, was I going to?

As I clicked over to send her a message, I decided the answer was a vigorous *yes*. With whatever that entailed.

I hadn't even seen her. Didn't know her name. Didn't know if she was a *she* or if her cat had two heads. And I was ready to cyber put out, sight unseen.

What was life without risk? Boring as hell, that's what.

ADMIN

About time you show yourself.

I grabbed another piece of chicken while I waited for her response. She took her sweet-ass time.

PRGLDNROD

I haven't shown myself yet. Did you miss me?

The fact that I had should've disturbed me. I wasn't a guy who went without female companionship for long periods of time—or at least I didn't used to. But a couple of months ago, I'd taken a break. Stopped dating, stopped looking, stopped even considering fitting someone into my life. I'd just retreated into myself and my work. Sort of my own winter hibernation, though it had started in early fall.

Maybe now I was beginning to wake up.

I wiped off my greasy fingers on my napkin just as Lucky ambled into the room, his black nose tipped upward as he sniffed the air. My chicken would soon be in danger, so I typed fast.

Maybe I don't like being left hanging.

Did I do that? I said goodbye.

You know you did. I think you like teasing me.

Is that what I'm doing?

I snatched my chicken bucket a moment before Lucky was about to take a swan dive into it, though there was no way in hell he'd fit his considerable bulk in there. But he was happy to make the attempt.

"No," I said firmly at Lucky's pronounced scowl before I took another bite of my drumstick. I'd better enjoy it because my cat was most likely plotting my demise.

Holding my bucket between my legs while Lucky eyed me with disdain, I typed quickly.

You tell me.

Can I see more pictures of Lucky?

What the hell? Maybe she really was only interested in my cat, the little bugger. I lifted my bucket as Lucky flung himself at my lap, missed, and landed on my bare foot, digging in his murder mittens until I howled.

I howled manfully, of course.

He's going to be in timeout soon.

As soon as I sent the message, I took a picture of Lucky clambering back on the coffee table to eye my dinner plate.

The plate I hadn't bothered using because I'd eaten the chicken straight from the bucket like a wild animal with no manners.

Shrugging, I sent over the photo. Only after I hit send did I notice my name badge sitting in plain view next to the remote.

*Dr. Clint Hauser, DVM*

Well, shit. Too late now.

She didn't reply right away, giving me time to dump the rest of the chicken after I took pity on Lucky. He got a couple of tiny pieces of white meat, then he stationed himself on the back of the couch to clean his face as if he'd had a five-course meal. I put on my flannel pajama bottoms and a T-shirt before I heard the ding from a new message.

I returned to my recliner and frowned as I read her response.

Is the badge real?

Huh?

Or did you get that off the internet like some tin star? Use it to impress the ladies?

Oh, sure. Plenty of vet badges for sale. Check eBay. Tons.

I typed quickly to try to stem my annoyance.

Speaking of impressing, did it work?

She didn't answer for long enough that I considered going to take a shower instead of sitting there, staring at the screen. Which I should have done before putting on my pajamas but whatever. Then she surprised the hell out of me.

Can we move this to the phone? I can call you.

Sure.

I rattled off my number and closed my message inbox. If she was going to ghost me again, so be it. She already knew so much about me, and I knew absolutely nothing about her.

My cell went off in my lap, and I leapt on it like a man who hadn't gotten any since summer.

*Rough living, Hauser.*

I picked up on the second ring. "This is Clint."

"Clint is a name for a sharpshooter in an old-time Western."

Her voice was pure sex. The kind you couldn't stop having until your skin was damp and your body was wrung out and you were so limp that even breathing was a chore.

All the blood inside me routed downward. Maybe it was better she hadn't sent a picture.

"Clint?" Then a hint of tremulousness underneath the erotic veneer. A slice of vulnerability that was even more intoxicating than the seduction.

I cleared my throat. "I'm here. What's your name?"

"Kitty Armor."

"No way. Is that real?"

"It's as real as I am." She let out a half laugh. "We make a pair."

"If you combine our names, it makes Clitty."

Her laughter shot over the line in a gust of sound, making me smile in spite of my situation down south. "So you're not a sharpshooter, you're a wordsmith."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"And a tech admin for Kitten Around. And a vet."

"I donate vet services for Kitten Around for their vaccination and spaying and neutering clinics, but I don't work there full-time. Mostly they're an adoption center. The admin thing is just an occasional deal."

"Where do you work full-time then?"

“Thorny Paw Clinic.”

A pause. “That’s Princess Goldenrod’s vet.”

My chest tightened uncomfortably. We were closer than either of us realized. It remained to be seen whether or not that was a good thing. “Dr. Thorn’s her vet? I’m assuming Princess is a she. Nice name, by the way.”

“Yes. He’s so kind. He sent her a birthday card with treats last month.”

The tightness grew worse as I gripped the phone. “Yet you didn’t want to see if he was interested in a playdate?”

“You’re hung up on those, aren’t you? I want my cat to have a friend. She needs one.”

“How about her mama? Could she use a friend?”

“I’m kind of short on those at the moment, so yeah, I guess so. Depending.”

“On what?”

“On...suitability. I have a lot of quirks.”

*Who doesn’t?* I wanted to reply.

But I was more interested in deciphering the emotion lacing her voice. “Why not just adopt another cat?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? Don’t have the space? The finances?” I frowned as the silence grew heavy. “Kitty?”

She sighed. “I lost my boy earlier in the year. I’m not ready to adopt another cat. I’m—I’m just focused on keeping Princess as happy as possible.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I murmured.

She didn’t reply for a moment or two.

“What about her mama?”

“Back to me again, huh? What about her mama?”

“Are *you* as happy as possible?”

She laughed again but the sound held no joy. “I’m still working on that. So when can you drop off Lucky?”

I actually drew back the phone to stare at it. This woman was a Rubik’s Cube where none of the cubes locked together the same way twice. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. I’ve seen Lucky. He’s cute. Actually, he kind of reminds me of...” She huffed out a breath. “My Muffintop.”

“Muffintop?”

“Yeah. Shut up. My dad named him when he gave him to me.”

“And you kept the name?”

“It was the only way the word didn’t hurt anymore. Eventually, I didn’t hear my dad saying that in my head any longer and just associated it with the cat I loved.”

“Wait. Your dad named him Muffintop as an insult?”

“No, not exactly. I mean, kind of, but he said it affectionately. I’ve always carried extra weight.” She explained it as if this made all the sense in the world.

It made no sense.

“Your dad made fun of you for your weight, then gave you a cat as a reminder of how he’d hurt you?”

“Yes. No. He’d called me that since I was little. Then it just stuck. You know how girls have that little roll of fat above their waist? Mine wasn’t so little.” She laughed softly. “Guess you won’t be bringing by Lucky now, huh?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Because your dad sounds like a thoughtless asshole?”

She whistled. “Wow, maybe you’re a psychologist instead. You figured out in ten minutes what took me nearly twenty years and therapy to understand, though I stopped going a while ago. Bravo, sir.”

I didn’t know what to say. She’d left me speechless not for the first time.



And never for the same reason twice.

“Look, you don’t have to come over. It’s fine.”

“So you’ll just respond to #226 instead? Fuck no. I’m coming. When do you want me?”

Okay, now I was sounding desperate—which I was, but not because I was horny. Some part of me needed to make up for the wrongs of another man, one who’d made mistakes that shouldn’t have been my concern. But they were.

None of this made sense.

Even Lucky had abandoned the couch to climb up on the arm of my chair to stare me down as if he was concerned for my welfare.

To be honest, he gave me that stare often, usually when I came home smelling of other cats. And dogs. And bunnies. And whatever animals happened to cross my exam table.

The silence on the phone extended so long that I could practically hear Kitty’s thoughts whirling.

“How about now?” she asked quietly.

My gaze shot to the antique wall clock that had belonged to my grandfather, one of the few relics I’d taken from my parents’ place when I moved out. “It’s late in the evening. I need a shower.”

“If you’re busy—”

“No.”

I didn’t know when she’d make this offer again. Somehow, I doubted doing this was as easy for her as she made it seem. The flashes of pain in her voice, the heavy silences, the loss of her beloved cat...

I just had to go now. I was sure of that in my gut.

“I’m not busy, Kitty. Give me your address.”

After she’d told me where she lived in downtown Kensington Square, not at all far from my Crescent Cove

apartment, she hesitated before saying more. “You don’t have to shower. It’s not like a date.”

“Yes, I do. I worked all day. Eau de rabbit isn’t the most appealing.” Even if I’d been too exhausted to wash away the day a short while ago, now I was energized.

I was clearly off my damn rocker. Working too hard. I needed more sleep and less time spent meeting snarky, sad girls with voices like phone-sex operators.

Not that I knew what a phone-sex operator sounded like.

She chuckled softly. “Okay, take your time. I’ll be waiting.”

Those casual words heated my belly like a cup of warm tea on a frosty winter’s night. And I wasn’t a tea drinker.

At least I hadn’t been before.

“You know, you’re being surprisingly trusting compared to last week.”

“I looked you up on Thorny Paw’s website. I like the studious look.”

Guess she liked my reading glasses. “Oh, so you want me for my body?”

“Nope, I want you for your pussy.” Again, she ended the conversation before I knew it was coming.

But this time she left me smiling.

That smile lasted until the heavy *thwomp* of boots outside my front door stopped me on the way to the shower. No one had buzzed upstairs for me to release the door so that meant it was probably someone close.

Most likely someone with my last name. Now what?

Never mind the shower I still needed to take, I also still had to round up Lucky and get him into his carrier, a task I never relished despite my healthy supply of fishy treats for just such occasions.

But first, I had to deal with my visitor.

I shoved a hand through my hair, squared my shoulders, and opened the front door to my sobbing sister, Emmaline.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded as she buried her face in her giant fuzzy green mittens.

“The engagement’s off,” she wailed before throwing herself into my arms. I was prepared, since I was used to such displays from my actress baby sister, but there was one part of this visit I was *not* used to.

“Engagement? What engagement?” I gripped her shoulders and drew her away from me. She blinked up at me, her blue eyes awash in tears.

“I didn’t tell you I was engaged?”

“Uh, no? To who?” I set my jaw. “And now you’re not engaged?”

“It only happened a few months ago.”

“A few months? Like how many?”

“Six? *Ish?*”

I took a deep breath so my head didn’t explode. There was a reason I was drawn to women who weren’t temperamental, and my over-the-top siblings probably had a lot to do with it. Both my sisters *and* brothers. “We’ve talked plenty of times over the last six months and you’re just telling me you were engaged now? Also, you’re twenty-one, for God’s sake.”

“I’m graduating in the spring. Besides, Pierre and I broke up.” She sniffed delicately. “He’s probably screwing Terri. I suspected something was up when he gave the lead in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to her, although he had me audition three times.”

“Wait a second, he’s your drama teacher? Uh, can you say ethics violation?”

“Oh, please. I’m an adult. Don’t be so pedestrian.” She rolled her heavily made-up eyes and shoved me back. “It’s over anyway.” She frowned and seemed to finally notice I was in my pajamas. “Are you going to bed? It’s not late.”

“It’s not early either.”

“Says the old man thirty-something,” she teased.

“Everyone is old to you, squirt.” I ruffled her hair, and she shoved me back with a faint smile. “I was on my way to shower.”

“Oh, sorry. Dammit, do I smell chicken?” She charged into my living room, dropping a cursory kiss on Lucky’s head on her way to the bucket of chicken, now covered on the coffee table. She flipped off the lid and let out a dramatic sigh. “I almost forgot I’m vegan.” She pursed her lips and then pulled off a crispy piece of skin. “Maybe just a little wouldn’t hurt.”

But she didn’t move fast enough, so Lucky nipped it out of her hand and streaked across the room and down the hall.

“That little stinker!” But she was laughing and her tears seemed to have dried.

At least for now.

She dropped her coat on the arm of the couch and flopped down beside it before dragging the bucket of chicken into her lap. “Ahh, to hell with my diet. Not like anyone is going to see me naked anytime soon anyway.”

“Hey, hey, my ears.”

“Oh, jeez, Sparky, I’m a grown woman. We have needs too, you know.”

“Yeah, fine, I just don’t want to hear about them.” I sat beside her and snagged another piece of chicken for myself.

“What are you up to? I mean, you’re wearing pajamas, but then you mentioned taking a shower, so does that mean you’re heading out?”

“Would that be so shocking? It *is* Friday night.”

“True, but how long has it been since you’ve partied on a weekend? Months?” She elbowed me, her long blond hair flinging into my face. “Years?”

“Hardly.” I snorted. “Besides, my idea of partying at my age is far different than yours.” I frowned as I realized I’d

never asked Kitty how old she was. It hadn't ever entered my mind.

She couldn't be too young. Her voice definitely didn't scream barely legal. Or worse, not legal. Jesus. I knew better than to assume.

Of course, I didn't make a habit of meeting women on classified pages on pet websites either.

"Hello, I'm talking to you. Why do you have that wrinkle right here?" Emma leaned up to rubbed her thumb between my eyebrows. "What's up with you? You seem even more thinky than usual. Is it because Dad's thing is coming up?"

"What thing?"

"Duh, his Thanksgiving shindig at the chalet. What is your deal? Have you been working too hard? You need some recreation too." Her smirk told me that the kind of recreation she had in mind did not include gladhanding with Dad's supporters and my enormous extended family.

And now, Emma's broken engagement meant I was the only one of my siblings who hadn't had a steady relationship in a millennia. Just about all the rest of our brothers and sisters had a significant other, at least the last I'd known. Even the triplets, which was basically a shock because Fraser, Felicia, and Corwin had all been born with the player gene fully activated.

God, I was the eldest. Single at the holidays for several years running was a recipe for disaster when your father was the mayor of a small town and your mother lived to decorate and micromanage her children's lives.

No wonder I'd deliberately put the Thanksgiving hellscape out of my mind.

"You have to help me." I gripped Emma's shoulders.

Her big eyes widened. "How?"

"Does Dad know you were engaged to your theater teacher?"

“What? Um, not exactly. I was planning to bring him to dinner...” She trailed off, her eyes narrowing. “What do you want?”

“Just a little mutual help. I’m assuming you don’t want Dad to know you were hooking up with your teacher.”

“We were going to get married! Age doesn’t have a thing to do with love. So what if he was 37?”

“Thirty-seven?” My voice lifted to a level that scared Lucky out of his current sneak attack around the back of the sofa. He jolted and high-tailed it out of the room, his black tail sticking straight up.

“What do you want?” she asked through her teeth.

“Just play along with whatever I do at dinner, okay?”

She cocked her head. “Are you scheming? You never scheme.”

“That should tell you how drastic this situation is. I just can’t deal with Mom matchmaking, and if I’m alone for the holiday, she will make my life hell.”

“Better that than asking if you’re prepared to run for mayor when Dad retires.”

“He won’t ever retire. He’s a vampire.” I sent up a quick fervent prayer that my words were true.

Family legacies were important, yeah, yeah. But when our ancestors founded a tiny town in upstate New York a million years ago, and your father and grandfather and great-grandfather had all been mayor...well, there was a reason I didn’t go home often. Crescent Cove was only a couple hours from my hometown of Clintondale, but I still felt a measure of security from the distance.

Until Em had shown up at my door, a harbinger of holiday horror. Her college was located between here and our hometown, so it wasn’t that far, but still. A little warning she was on the way might’ve been nice.

Too bad my family wasn’t into sharing such information ahead of time.

“Look, just follow my lead, okay?” I set aside the bucket of chicken and tugged my sister to her feet.

“What lead? You weren’t even planning on coming, were you?”

“I was in denial it was that time of year.” Which wasn’t exactly true since it was almost impossible to ignore the decorations hanging from every light pole on Main Street and the jolly fucking music playing in every store.

My sister stared at me as I dragged her to the front door. “Are you throwing me out?”

“No. I just have somewhere I need to be. Let’s hang out soon.” I gave her a long hug. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“I’m worried about you, Clint.”

“Why? You’re the one with a broken heart from your old lech of a teacher.”

She stuck her tongue out at me. “He’s only a year older than you are, so if Pierre is an old lech, then what does that make you?”

I didn’t really want to consider that. “Not a lech.”

“But still old?”

“*Pfft*. Just remember we have a deal. I keep your secrets, you back me up.”

“Are you going to tell me what that means?”

“Nothing yet.” I wondered if my unexpected delay had killed my chance with Kitty already. I wouldn’t have thought so with anyone else, but she was different than any woman I’d known and I barely knew a thing about her.

“I’ll let you know when there’s something to know,” I said finally.

Em shook her head. “So basically you’re going to join witness protection soon so Mom can’t find you another Nellie Musselbottom.”

“That was not her name.” Was it? My memory had deliberately wiped away some of my past dating experiences to protect my mental health.

Emma shrugged. “Close enough. Good luck on your date.”

I started to correct her as she sailed out the front door, then decided maybe it *would* turn into a date. Maybe Kitty with the sex voice could save me from my mother’s secret hatred of her eldest son.

Hell, she wanted to rent a cat. I needed to rent a girlfriend.



## FOUR

# Katherine

SHIT, WHAT HAD I JUST DONE?

I paced around my apartment, still wearing my heels from the editing session I'd cut short when I messaged him. I couldn't wait any longer. All week, the need to talk to him again had been an anvil pressing against the base of my skull.

Or else it was PMS, that wily bitch. She was never convenient.

I shot a glance at my phone. I could text him, say I had cramps. Or that I was having a mental breakdown. That made sense, right? Especially since I was a borderline agoraphobic—though probably no one but me would tack on the borderline part.

All of this was out of character for me. I didn't troll for men online.

*No, you troll for cats. To rent. You weirdo.*

I paced around long enough that Princess Goldrenrod uncoiled herself from her fluffy pink bed and blocked my path to remind me it was treat time. I sat on the window seat and stared out into the snow swirling on the other side of the glass. Snowing again. Cozy for a first date—ha.

Assuming he ever showed.

“Don't look at me like that.”

The cat stared at me unblinkingly with her wise green eyes.

“I didn’t say it was a first date for me. It’s actually for you.”

She lifted a paw and began to wash.

Feeling like a chump, I gave her three more fishy treats than normal.

“You don’t have to like him. You have the right of first refusal.”

She sashayed off and disappeared into my bedroom, probably to curl up on my pillows as she did most nights.

I glanced down at my robe. I should shower. I had this morning, but I couldn’t meet him like this.

The dude was seriously hot. And he was seriously late.

Not that we’d set up a time or anything, but we were now closing in on midnight.

Maybe he hadn’t been able to corral Lucky into his carrier. It wasn’t easy to get Princess into hers, that was for sure.

Maybe Lucky was hiding under the couch. That was one of Princess’s favorite hiding spots when the vet was imminent. Most cats assumed a carrier meant vet.

“I’m not looking for a hookup,” I said into the silence.

So I didn’t need to shower. I’d just throw my wild hair in a topknot and meet him as I was. No artifice, not even lip gloss.

That would send the clear message I just wanted him for his cat—*if* Princess liked him.

Not him.

Then again, he wasn’t here. He hadn’t called to alert me he’d had a delay. And it was snowing.

Maybe he’d skidded off the road into a ditch somewhere and it would be my fault for luring him into the darkness with the promise of pussy.

Not the first man to meet such a downfall.

I turned on Loreena and forced myself to open my editing document. My client was expecting me to return the first

quarter of her book to her by the end of the weekend and I'd barely started. Missing deadlines wasn't something I did.

Ever.

I wasn't going to start now. If Clint had encountered trouble, he could text me to tell me he was injured, dammit. Otherwise, I was editing.

The sound of my buzzer sometime later nearly jolted me off the edge of my chair. Blearily, I rubbed my eyes and checked the time.

12:30.

He better have an excuse. He'd interrupted the good part.

Flustered, more than a little turned on, and questioning all my life choices to this point, I made sure my edits so far had saved in Track Changes and set aside my laptop.

When he buzzed again, I stumbled to the door. Assuming it was Clint.

Did serial killers ring the buzzer?

I had to figure usually not but this was considered a safe neighborhood. Maybe they changed up their modus operandi depending on location.

I pressed the speaker. "State your business."

"Kitty?"

"Who is this?"

"Clint. And Lucky." His cat let out a plaintive meow to demonstrate proof of life.

Or his extreme displeasure at being jailed for a late-night, sexless booty call.

For the *cats*. Even if I'd just edited a scene hot enough to frizz my already curly hair. I had my eye on the prize and it wasn't Clint's body.

"Are you expecting someone else?" Clint asked crossly.

"I could be. You took fucking forever."

“Look, my sister stopped by unexpectedly and she just went through a breakup with a guy who was old enough to know better. Then Lucky bit my hand as I was trying to get him in the carrier. He even has a damn custom-made mobile, the little fucker. So I had to change plans.”

“A mobile?” I had to laugh. “Like one for a kid?”

“It distracts him,” Clint muttered. “I even told him he was going to meet a woman and he didn’t care. He’s on his way to being a crochety old man like his dad.”

“You can’t be crochety. Haven’t you read romance novels? One is sunshine, one is grumpy. You can’t be grumpy because I am.”

Here I went again, spewing nonsense. My vocation was going to ensure I never got to first base with a man again.

Or a woman.

Or a particularly full plant.

Basically, I was destined to live alone forever with only my cat for company.

Gah, I had sex on the brain and this was *not* that kind of playdate.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Clint demanded. “Can I come up? I’d rather not stand in the lobby with a cat strapped to my chest, staring at me with murder in his eyes.”

*Cat strapped to his chest?* I supposed that was the plan change he’d mentioned.

I laughed again and released the door.

He made it upstairs in record time and was at my door in what felt like seconds. I opened it at his knock—and was struck by the most mesmerizing green eyes I’ve ever seen.

And this time, I wasn’t talking about Lucky’s, although it was a close race. His were pretty stupendous too.

“You actually do look like father and son.” I managed to keep a straight face as I pushed my glasses up on top of my head.

It was actually a smart move because Clint was a little *too* good-looking. The kind that made a woman like me forget my morals.

He frowned. “What was that about romance novels?”

I waved a hand. “Think that was static on the speaker.”  
Lame save. I wasn’t embarrassed about my profession. I just didn’t want to hear the usual questions and jokes. “The super barely keeps this building up, but hey, it’s rent controlled, so yay me. Come in?”

“Um...” He smiled briefly, revealing perfectly white teeth that seemed almost too bright against the darkness of his scruff. Just the perfect amount too. Not too much. Just enough that you knew it would offer the perfect friction against sensitive areas that probably would’ve settled for lackluster scruff just about now.

Nothing about Clint Hauser seemed lackluster in any way.

Clint was looking around my place with a frown, which made me frown back as I tried to see the place as he would. My style could best be described as spartan. I didn’t have much furniture—just the couch, a couple of tables, a small bookshelf crammed to the brim with books, a single recliner, and an assortment of cat condos, trees, and toys.

No wall hangings or decor. No knickknacks. Just two photos—my favorite of Muffintop and one other. But he didn’t notice that. Oh, no.

“No TV?” He diverted his sexy eyes to my face, his dark brows knitted together as if I was a new and puzzling alien life form.

I shrugged. “Princess watches Cat TV on my laptop, so why bother?”

“Your only use for a TV is Cat TV?”

“Why else?”

“I don’t know. Movies, sports, porn?”

If the last one was meant to shock me, he was snarking up the wrong tree. “I can watch that just fine on my laptop.”

His black eyebrow winged up as Lucky looked back and forth between us as if we were his own form of entertainment. Who needed squirrels and birds on a screen? “Are you saying you watch it?”

“I didn’t confirm or deny. Just that I have the capability.”

He gestured wildly. “What about Christmas?”

“What about it?”

“Your place isn’t decorated.”

“Duh. It’s November. Halloween was just last month.”

“So? Many of your brethren put up the tinsel on November 1st. Not to mention the town has started decorating. The apartment on the first floor of this very building has a festive lit-up duck tangled in Christmas lights in her window.”

I shrugged. “Some are into it. Some are not. Some are indifferent.”

*Indifferent* was a great word. I’d been trying to reach that state regarding one thing or another for most of my life.

Especially family matters. That one, I had a feeling I’d be striving for until the end of time.

“Which are you?”

“Take a guess.”

As the silence extended, the snow on his leather jacket dripped onto my hardwood floor. I huffed out a sigh and put my glasses back on. “Well, enough chitchat. Let’s get on with this, shall we?”

He let out a strangled sound crossed between a laugh and a growl. “That’s what you call chitchat? How old are you?”

I blinked at his rapid-fire questions. “Twenty-four in a few weeks. Why?”

“Fuck.” He shut his eyes. “Sure that first number isn’t a 3?”

“Uh, no, I’ve seen my birth certificate.” I looked him up and down thoroughly in the name of science. “You’re not

secretly like fifty, are you?”

“No. Thirty-six in February.”

“Egads.” I gasped and his eyes flew open as I pressed a hand to my chest. “Why, you’re practically my father’s age.”

“Stop it. I am not.” He cocked his head. “Am I?”

“Ha. Hardly. My dad was over forty when I came along. Middle-age oops baby and he felt compelled to marry the mother—for like fifteen minutes.”

“Oh. Ouch. *The* mother? Not your mother?”

“Too personal for a non-date.” I held up a finger and Lucky took that opportunity to lurch out of his dad’s chest cat sack to take a swipe at it.

“Lucky, mind your manners,” Clint chided while I beamed.

“Now I know you’re the one.”

“I am?”

“Not you, your cat.” I held out my fingers for Lucky to nuzzle and he bit them—hard. I would’ve laughed if I hadn’t winced.

Hmm, did I have any Neosporin left? I went through that stuff like coffee.

When Clint didn’t reply, I added, “I was about to say never mind, but we can proceed with the introduction.”

“Why would you say never mind to *me*? You’re the one who practically lives in a college dorm room.”

“Is that supposed to be an insult? I always wanted a beanbag chair.” I’d have to put it on my Amazon wishlist, assuming they were still available.

I was always behind the times.

“I’m just saying. You’re even in a bathrobe.”

“So?” He didn’t realize my robe was my version of a security blanket. It also sent a distinct message that I refused to play games and try too hard.

Also, it was close to shapeless so not needlessly provocative. And it was comfortable.

I made the rules here, dammit.

“Those heels don’t match the rest of the picture.” His gaze drifted down my body in a way that should’ve felt sexual but instead seemed curious. “You’re not short.”

“Nope.”

“Yet you wear heels in your bathrobe. You’re a puzzle, cat lady.” He angled his head as I scratched my nose then put my glasses back in place. “Going along with the college theme, do you have moldy pizza still in the box laying around somewhere too?”

My stomach took that moment to growl, so I went to the couch and lifted the box I’d stashed between the overstuffed pillows. “Snack of champions.”

“Teddy Grahams?”

I shrugged. “I live alone and make my own decisions. Deal with it, suit-and-tie guy.”

He looked down at himself. “I’m in jeans and a sweater. That I changed into after showering to come meet you.”

“Are you robe-shaming me?” I crossed my arms over my chest in a mock defensive stance, because my heart was beating way too fast from imagining him in the shower.

Even picturing all that thick wayward dark hair glistening with water was making me...glisten too.

“No. Just that someone who wasn’t me might get the idea that you’re conveying a certain message by wearing something like that to meet a strange man after midnight.”

He had a valid point—one I hadn’t considered because I quite honestly did not only not get out much, I did not get out at all.

I exhaled. “It’s only after midnight because you have more sob stories than you have cats.”



Apparently tired of chatting, Lucky shoved his paws against Clint's chest. Somehow he worked his big head under one of the breakaway straps and made a flying leap for freedom while Clint swore and tried to hold on to him.

He was not successful.

Unbeknownst to me, Princess Goldenrod had quietly crept into the room—and was now hiding under the glass coffee table hissing while Lucky flattened his bulk on top of it and stared at my baby with nothing short of malice.

Clint scrubbed his now reddened hands over his face. “I should've stayed for overtime at work.”

Ignoring him, I approached the coffee table and crouched down beside it to try to coax out my girl with soft words and, failing that, a handful of fishy treats from the pocket of my robe. Only realizing when Clint cleared his throat that my robe clung to my upper thighs in an unexpectedly flashy way.

I yanked my robe back into place with one hand and held out treats to a dismissive Princess with the other. “I'm not trying to get you interested in my goodies.”

*Doth protest too much, Kitty.*

I couldn't help being very interested in *his* goodies. He was ridiculously hot, and he was a vet, which most likely meant he loved animals. And so freaking hot.

Why couldn't he have been homely? I hadn't expected to be confronted with my own baser needs while setting up Princess's playdates.

My baser needs had been ignored so long I'd assumed they'd gone dormant.

Until tonight, apparently.

“You mean your cookie?” he asked.

“Goodies, cookie, T&A, whatever you call it. I'm not on the market.”

But maybe I could be...

God, I needed a profession that didn't make me horny. I supposed that proved how skilled my authors were. But did my loins have to be at their whims?

Alexa took that moment to announce the evening's podcast selection. "Now playing Morbid Murders: Dying for Love, episode 16 by Brothers Grim."

"Alexa, turn off podcast."

If I started editing more true crime, would I develop a taste for serial murder? Considering current events, it bore examining.

Clint unhooked the other strap of his cat sack. "Not on the market because your boyfriend is cooling off in the refrigerator?"

I didn't want to laugh. I shouldn't have. Especially since he appeared caught between laughter and discomfort, a common reaction from people after meeting me.

My business partner and friend, Magnus, hadn't balked at my strangeness when we'd first met. Probably why we'd lasted for eighteen months so far.

Professionally, that is.

"Or is your husband stashed in a cold box somewhere?"

"Nobody is stashed anywhere. But if you're volunteering, I've heard some interesting techniques..."

"You are quite possibly the oddest woman I've ever met."

"I'm also the oddest woman I've ever met, too, so we have something in common." I slipped Princess another fishy treat and stood to dust off my hands. "I'm not going to murder you. Or have sex with you." Inwardly, I sighed in despair. "You're safe in all possible ways."

"Can you harvest someone's organs without murdering them?"

"Sure, depending on if you're talking about something nonessential like a pancreas. But that would take the skill of a surgeon." I cocked my head. "Or a vet."

“Animals and humans are a bit different.”

“Tomato, tomahto. We could always work as a harvesting team. The 9-to-5 has to be such drudgery sometimes.”

“I’m mostly okay with it, although 9-to-5 is a dream. What about you?” He eased a hip on the arm of the couch, keeping an eye on Lucky while he spoke to me.

His cat had belly-shimmied forward to hang off the table as he attempted to reach the one treat Princess hadn’t snatched yet with his big Polydactyl paw. No wonder his slash on my fingers had hurt like a bitch.

Extra toes.

“I work from home.”

His jet-black eyebrow shot for his hairline. “Just so you know, I left your contact details with my buddy, who’s a cop. You won’t get away with it.”

I laughed richly, far too delighted with this guy, considering I was standing around in a robe too inclined to reveal parts of myself I wanted to stay hidden. Like my very full thighs and calves that would never fit in trendy leather boots unless I used lubricant in a way it had never been intended for.

Or my ample hips. And ample everything else.

At least I could be sure my robe was tied tightly enough he wouldn’t be catching a glimpse of my triple-D’s.

“I don’t like to get my hands dirty, Doctor.”

“Pity.” He stepped closer. “I love getting dirty.”

## FIVE

# Katherine

I WAS NO EXPERT ON THE SUBJECT, AT LEAST PERSONALLY, BUT I was pretty sure we were currently experiencing the phenomenon known in romance novels as sexual tension.

With a capital S and T and possibly more glistening.

Which made us very bad pet parents, because we were not watching our charges due to the sudden activity in our nether regions.

Distracted by the treat, Lucky lurched forward at the same moment Princess did. One of them shrieked and then fur went flying in every direction as they rolled end over end and crashed into a side table, upending my quarter-full hard cider and my laptop.

Shit.

I gasped, stunned into inaction, unsure whether to save my laptop or my cat first, since she had claws and teeth and my laptop had no protection against an unexpected bath.

Especially since—*oh God, no*—my screen was still open to my edits. Because a freaking moron who looked just like me had opted to make my screen stay active for twenty minutes to account for my occasional pacing while I was working.

Big mistake. Huge.

Clint nimbly snatched up his large, squirming, growling bundle of joy with one arm and my laptop out of the splotch of cider it had landed in with the other hand.

I tried to snatch it back but he simply held it over my head. I was tall for a woman, but Clint was a mountain. Apparently, he also could not feel pain because Lucky was currently going to town on his arm as if he was a leather-jacket-clad steak sandwich, and he barely reacted as he read my screen.

Out loud. With inflection and dramatic pauses and an arched brow that could've impressed a stage actor.

“Rina rolled over in bed, her body loose and sated for now. Sven had put her through her paces—twice. That man owned her. Ruled her. Her tits and pussy and even her ass were all his for the taking. And he had. Oh, he had.” Clint shifted his smoldering green gaze to my face. “Rina sounds like an adventurous woman. What side of that line do you stand on?”

My face was flaming enough that I wasn't sure my vocal cords were still operational. “Give me that.”

“I'm reading.”

“It's privileged material.”

The winged brow climbed to new heights. “Then next time don't leave it open.”

He had a point. And me? I was absolutely point-less and smoking in a pile of ash.

I didn't interact much with the opposite sex anymore since I rarely ventured into society. I had no clue how to behave. Even in the days of yore, when I'd actually been sexually active, I'd fumbled through most of my attempts to be flirty.

“You should have more manners,” I muttered, deliberately stepping on his toes as I lurched up to snag my laptop.

Which I hastily wiped off with my sleeve, closed, and tossed to safety on my sofa.

Sensing a possible opening for escape, Lucky angled his body in an attempt to bite Clint's neck. But his owner had other concerns at that moment and simply dropped the cat on the couch.

Dazed, surprised to be free, Lucky shook his head and stared down at the floor, where Princess had frozen as if she

was playing dead. He jumped down, nabbed her last fishy treat and sniffed in her general direction before trotting down the hall toward my bedroom as if he owned the joint.

Clint inhaled, his nostrils flaring. “Did you write that?”

“I prefer not to say. You should go collect your cat.”

He continued staring down at me, his lids heavy and his full lips too sensual for my liking.

Fine, I liked them altogether too much.

“What were all those bubbles on the side?”

“Edits.”

“You edit it that thoroughly? Wow. I didn’t know people cared about syntax and grammar and stuff in these.”

“You’re thinking they’re just spank-bank material?”

He shrugged. “Well, yeah. Aren’t they?”

I grabbed my Teddy Grahams box and whacked him in his disturbingly firm gut before tossing it back on the couch. He was wearing a thick white fisherman’s sweater under his jacket because of course he was. Snow droplets still clung to his sex hair, his gorgeous warm sweater was built for shenanigans in front of the fireplace I didn’t have, and he flashed his toothpaste-commercial-worthy smile...

And then there was me in my giant plush robe, the kitten heels I habitually wore for editing to put me in the mood, so to speak, and my hair a wild bush only partially tamed by a scrunchie.

We totally fit. If that meant not at all.

He shoved a hand through his hair and left it in spikes, making him look adorable. How could he be sexy and adorable at the same time? “We messed this up, man.”

I blinked, still pondering the mysteries of life. “We did?”

“Jackson Galaxy would be ashamed of us.” He dropped onto my sofa and dug into my cookies. “I should go get Lucky

before he decides to use your bed as a scratching post, but you know what? I don't want to."

I sat beside him and held out my hand until he passed the box to me. "Who's Jackson Galaxy?"

"You don't know Jackson Galaxy? I was sure you must because you've catified the hell out of this place. You need some vertical spaces though." He glanced at my bare walls while thoughtfully popping cookies in his mouth. "Does your landlord allow you to hammer shit into the walls?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but are you on drugs? I won't notify your job, as long as you keep it recreational during your non-work hours."

His laughter burst out of him, crackling like that fireplace I didn't have on a cold winter's night. Like, oh, tonight. I told myself the shiver that went through me was because the place was drafty. Not because I really liked the sound of his laughter.

You couldn't be lonely or sad with someone laughing with you—or even at you—so deeply and richly. It just wasn't possible.

"I'm not on drugs. I rarely drink. Don't smoke. Haven't had sex other than with my hand in a while. I'm boringly devoted to my work." His phone went off, and he tipped back his head on a sigh. "Speaking of..."

Though he seemed absolutely exhausted, he tugged out his phone, scanning the readout with concern. "I hate to ask you for this."

"Go," I replied without thinking.

"But Lucky... I don't know what he might be doing in the other room. You don't have plants, do you?"

"Just an old Christmas cactus. But that won't kill him if he's nosed into it."

"There's a relief. He has a tendency to nibble on green things. Handily, I have ten black thumbs so I don't have any plants." He rose to his feet and frowned. "I can't do this to you. You don't know my cat."

“No, but he’s disagreeable, so I think we’ll be fast friends.”

“He’s really not—okay, yes, he is. Sometimes.” He frowned again, activating all the delicious crinkle lines beside his eyes. “Are you sure? I don’t know long I’ll be. I could pay you—”

“You are not paying me. I can handle your cat, Clint.” In truth, I could handle his cat far better than I could deal with *him*. “Now get out of here.”

He made it to the door before he turned and raked a hand through his hair again. “I owe you big time. It’s an emergency involving a dog and a car, and I don’t know how bad it is, and if I had to gather up Lucky and take him back home before heading to the clinic—”

I stood and went to him, surprising myself by cupping his jaw and shifting his mouth to mine. At the last moment, I air-kissed his cheek instead of his lips.

That mouth wasn’t one you could kiss and survive, I was fairly sure.

“Just worry about work. I hope it isn’t bad.”

“Me too. Thanks. Though, sorry, that won’t do.” He cupped my cheeks in both hands and kissed me hard enough to make my knees drop out from under me. I remained standing through some force of nature, but I was free-falling with nothing to catch me.

My only tether to this Earth was a firm, hot mouth pressing into mine with a sense of possession I’d never known before.

He didn’t try to delve inside. No, he rocked my world with a chaste meeting of lips that made me pant as I stumbled backward.

Clearly going too long without sex was bad for your health.

“I’ll be back.”

Then he was gone, and I was still breathing so hard that spots danced at the edges of my vision.



And who the hell was Jackson Galaxy?

## SIX



MY NIGHT WAS UTTER SHIT. AND YET IT WASN'T AS BAD AS I'd feared it would be when I'd walked out of Kitty's place.

Stray dog, possibly hit by car. Under further investigation, his limping and substantial bleeding was due to trauma to his paw. He'd gotten a foreign body in it and removing the large thorn and stitching him up had been messy, exacting work. Nothing I hadn't handled before, just not usually at three a.m.

My eyes were burning and my head ached like a bitch. Advil hadn't touched the headache. My next hope was the bottle of cheap liquor I'd picked up at the closest all-night convenience store, although I'd just told Kitty I didn't really drink.

But if I didn't do something, I'd keep hearing that poor sweet dog's whimpers in my mind. At least he'd be safe in the clinic while he healed under the watchful eyes of our dedicated vet techs and assistants. But knowing he didn't have someone waiting to take him home just about killed me.

*You don't have anyone waiting for you at home either.*

Except tonight I did.

Okay, she wasn't waiting for me in a way that implied her all warm and relaxed, curled up between satin sheets. Candlelight, sexy music. Her soft, giving lips. Soft, giving everything, all the parts of her hidden beneath thick layers of terrycloth. She'd seemed very tightly wound, more likely to wrap her arms around herself or draw her legs in close to her

body than to reveal much of anything. The vibe she gave off was the opposite of welcoming.

So why was I almost desperate to know more about her?

Obviously I was sexually frustrated. She was gorgeous with her big eyes and uncontrollable hair. And just a little bit odd, which made her even more attractive to me, since I mostly tucked away my own streak of oddness.

As the eldest son of Clintondale Lee Hauser, Junior, I wasn't allowed to be odd in any way. My only choice was to be perfectly respectable.

Even if I'd already violated that, not that anyone knew. Or would ever know, I hoped to hell. Not because I was ashamed. I just didn't want to deal with it.

That was pretty much how I handled most family things, including holiday meals: avoidance until the very last second.

Until then, I hoped yet again a meteorite just might turn me into flaming rubble so I wouldn't have to go.

I loved my family. I truly did. I just didn't particularly relish spending time with them, especially as a whole.

Our family was freaking gigantic. Loud. Noisy. Boisterous. And then there were the family pictures that would end up on the Mayor of Clintondale's Christmas card to remind everyone that Mayor Hauser truly was the world's best family man.

It was a wonder I didn't drink more often. Not counting the paper bag of cheap liquor on the front seat.

Did Kitty have a sordid present of her own? What had that sex scene been all about? And was there more where that came from?

Was that something not for sale, like maybe some sort of fan fiction? Maybe Rina and Sven were some kind of code names for, I don't know, Damon and Elena? Though I was pretty sure butt sex never made it onto network television.

Dammit, I should've checked how many pages that document was.

*You're never going to get another look at it, so don't torture yourself.*

It had to be fan fiction. If it was a short story or novel, that might mean she was in the romance author community unless a friend had sent her something to read for her as a favor. But the possibility existed Kitty was involved enough in the business to recognize me.

Or my abs. Although, she'd gotten a look online and hadn't seemed suspicious.

*Don't flatter yourself. All abs and dicks look roughly the same. Even the better ones.*

Rather than go further down that rabbit hole, I veered back to thinking about the sweet pug sleeping off his surgery in a cage at Thorny Paw. Before I could consider the impulse, I scrolled through the list of phone numbers in my contact list and hit a button on my car's in-dash screen.

A very cranky voice answered. "Dude, you know I don't get up this early."

I had to laugh at my buddy Dex's obvious irritation. He'd been giving me shit since he, our cop friend Jimmy Greer, and I had been undergraduates together at Syracuse University. "Yet you answered."

"It was reflex. What do you want? I'm not getting you out of another traffic ticket. This time it's defensive driving school for you, pal."

Jeez, speed once accidentally in a school zone and some people never let you forget it.

"It was only that one time a long time ago, and I thanked you profusely for your help. But I have a gift for you."

"Hmm. What kind of gift?"

"What were you saying you needed last time I saw you?"

"A look up Lacy Lancaster's skirt at the bar?"

I sputtered out a laugh. Only Dex, man. "Not quite. A stray pug came into the clinic tonight with a paw injury. Fixed him

right up, but he needs a home.”

“Aww, poor little guy...wait, what? No. I’m not home enough to have a dog.”

“Just come meet him tomorrow on your lunch. I bet you’ll be fast friends. I’ll pay the adoption fee,” I added quickly.

“Oh, yeah, that was what’s holding me back. The fee.” He sighed heavily. “I’ll come meet him but no promises. Now let me get back to sleep, will you?”

“I will. Thanks, man. Dinner with Jimmy next month?”

“If I’m still talking to you. See ya.” He clicked off and I grinned with satisfaction. Dex would take that adorable pug home with him, I just knew it. He pretended he was a badass but he secretly had a heart of gold.

And a very active social life I was not at all jealous of.

*Liar.*

I gripped the wheel tighter as I maneuvered through the icy streets to Kitty’s apartment. Geographically, we weren’t very far apart at all. Where I lived in Crescent Cove, Christmas was already in full swing although it was only mid-November.

Thorny Paw Clinic was between the two, both in location and in decor. The reception area of the clinic itself was bright, fun, and festive in an attempt to represent a happy place rather than one to be feared, both for pets and parents alike.

The treatment rooms in the converted stable were more businesslike, but our receptionist Alice still put up little happy touches like white twinkle lights to dispel some of the winter gloom.

Here on the edges of Kensington Square’s business district, the holiday touches were subtler than the Cove’s—just the occasional tinsel bell on light poles or the smiley-faced lit snowman hung on front doors. Once Thanksgiving was past in a week—heaven help me, less than a week now—the upcoming holidays would be in full bloom in downtown Kensington Square as well.

And on the radio I wasn't paying any attention to? Ol' Blue Eyes was singing "Jingle Bells". I'd better find some holiday spirit fast.

As fast as I needed to find a date-slash-girlfriend so my mother wouldn't ruin the rest of the year by guiltting me into dating her latest "perfect find" for me. Last time she'd made sure to let me know the woman she'd picked out still had all her eggs. Which seemed physically inaccurate to me, but whatever.

I had to ask Kitty to come with me to dinner. No, I had to *beg* Kitty.

I could offer her the use of Lucky's services for Princess at no cost for as long as she needed him, even if I still didn't know exactly what she wanted to do with him and Princess. Maybe Princess had a far-too-nosy family too? I laughed out loud at that as I turned into the drive for Kitty's building.

My exhaustion was making me loopy. Now I was going to pimp out my cat to trade for a fake girlfriend for a weekend. Was this really my life?

Apparently it was.

I climbed the front steps, noted that Kitty had two other tenants on the other floors, and rang her buzzer, half expecting her not to answer because it was almost five a.m.

Instead, within seconds, she practically purred over the speaker, "Come in. Door's open for you."

Damn if that didn't sound like an invitation worthy of Rina and Sven.

I headed upstairs and she was standing at the door, holding it open. She had a voluminous towel covering her hair except for one wet curl that had escaped to flirt with her mouth.

I wanted to do very bad things to that mouth.

"You should've asked who it was." I tried to sound stern instead of horny as hell.

"As if anyone else would've rung my buzzer at five a.m. How was it? Is he or she okay? Did the car stop?" She tilted

her head, her gaze zeroing in on the lapel of my jacket. “Oh, no. It was bad, wasn’t it?”

My head pounded with each of her questions. I followed her gaze to my jacket, my eyes narrowing on the big dark splotch that couldn’t have been anything but blood.

I glanced up to see her cupping her hand over her mouth as tears filled her big dark eyes, and I didn’t think. I pulled her into my arms, shifting my jacket out of my way so I could tug her right up against me.

And I do mean right up, so even the thick fluff of her robe had no chance at hiding the soft fullness of her breasts.

Hot damn. I was delirious. I was imagining things.

“Am I dreaming?” I muttered.

She hauled back and punched me. Hard. In the gut.

At least she hadn’t used the graham cracker box this time.

“Is this really the time for that?”

She was staring down in the direction of my suddenly wakeful dick with nothing short of disgust. I was just tired enough to say what was on my mind as if it was a good idea.

“I’ll have you know plenty of women love my dick, and the rest of me. I used to even get paid for it.”

At the horror that crossed her face, I groaned.

*Really, Hauser? You are never going to get laid again, and you know what? You do not deserve to.*

“That came out wrong. I’m exhausted.” I rubbed the heels of my hands into my eyes. “I’m not a prostitute. Nor am I a pimp. What are your plans for my cat? Is he still alive? Did he bite Princess?”

Rather than kick me out into the cold, she drew me by the arm farther into her apartment and shut the door. Then she helped me remove my jacket and hung it on a peg beside the door. “Just tell me this. Is the dog still alive? Please say he or she is.”

“He is.” I turned back and glimpsed fresh tears on her cheeks although her steely voice didn’t give anything away. “I swear, sweetheart.” I reached out to thumb away her tears, and she gripped my hand.

“Did you call me sweetheart?”

“No. I don’t call anyone sweetheart.”

Or I never had before tonight. From the way Kitty’s face softened despite her steely tone, I wanted to keep right on calling her that. I had a feeling not enough people had used pet names for her.

“He’s alive? Really?”

“Yeah.” I curled my fingers around hers. Why was touching her so easy? So right? “He’s the cutest stray pug, and thankfully, he wasn’t hit by a car at all. He got a foreign object in his paw, some kind of thorn, embedded so deep between his toes I had to do minor surgery. But he was limping and bleeding and whining, so the good Samaritan assumed he’d been hit. Fixed him up and left him to get some rest.” I blew out a breath. “I think he might even have a home come tomorrow. I hope.”

Dex would never let me down. I just knew it.

“Oh, thank God.” Her grip tightened on mine. “You performed surgery in the middle of the night? As tired as you are?” She leaned up on her tiptoes to lace her arms around my neck.

I should’ve nudged her back, but she’d kissed me before I’d headed off to war—err, surgery. So this was kind of an extension of that, right?

God, she felt good in my arms.

Right.

“You’re the only man I’ve met taller than me,” she continued while my worn-out brain halfheartedly tried to convince me why I should get to hold her. Or...more. “Well, not met. Only man I’ve hugged and—”



“Kissed,” I reminded her, deciding now was a fine time to put on an exclamation point on that sentence.

I tilted her head so I could take her lips in the way I wanted. Needed to. My fatigue had stripped away any hesitancy I had in that direction, and this time, I didn’t skip the tongue.

I didn’t skip anything.

The moan she let out made me harder than stone. And she gave as good as she got, if maybe with a bit too much exuberance so that I was pretty sure I tasted blood. Our noses collided more than once. Teeth bumped. Her tongue lashed against mine until I wasn’t sure who was leading this dance. Didn’t even care.

Damn, she tasted like a cherry lollipop. Sweet and delicious with a hint of spice. All Kitty.

“I don’t have condoms,” she gasped between kisses. “But I’m on the Pill. Please tell me as a doctor you’re regularly tested for STDs.”

If someone had been filming me, I was pretty sure they would’ve seen my head nearly pop off my shoulders.

What? *Whaaaat?*

“I can’t.” I was physically unable to stop kissing her. “I can’t.”

She slipped away. “Oh. I see.”

“No, you absolutely do not see.” I gripped her shoulders. “I am so tired, and God, I’m really, really sorry—I mean, *really*—but I can’t guarantee I won’t drop off on top of you mid-thrust. And a relationship just can’t come back from that, you know? Especially not on the first night.” That made me step back. “It’s really still the first night?”

I felt as if I’d lived a million lifetimes since my solo bucket of chicken. Was this some kind of out-of-body experience? Was I going to wake up alone in bed with my spent cock in my hand?

She rubbed her throat as she swallowed again and again. “I do believe so. Whoa, sorry. I can’t keep editing late at night. I practically mauled you.”

“Oh, honey, feel free to maul me like that any time you want.”

She frowned. “First sweetheart. Now honey.”

“Just wait until you hear my dirty talk.”

Her pale cheeks scalded red. “I hate to inform you, but I’m a discerning judge when it comes to high-quality dirty talking. I even get paid to judge it.” Her smirk was fleeting but packed a punch. “So you better bring your A game.”

“Duly noted.” But I wondered yet again if I’d known her in my *other* life. I’d definitely never seen or talked to her before this. But perhaps we’d briefly run in the same circles...

I rubbed the ache in my temple. I’d officially hit the end of the line with pondering existential matters. “Bed. Me,” I added, with more than a little regret as her dark, depthless eyes sparked with interest.

Sometimes my life truly sucked.

“Can I crash somewhere? I probably only need two to three hours to be functional again. I’m used to getting by on not a lot of sleep. But I’ve got this fucking headache.” I yanked the bagged bottle out of my inside jacket pocket. “Hoping this helps me sleep.”

She nodded and pried the bag out of my hand. I had a feeling I wasn’t going to be allowed to drink my cheap liquor. “Did you take something?”

“Didn’t work.”

She was already pushing me down the hall to what I assumed was her room. I didn’t see any clumps of fur or hear any feline yowling, so I had to assume things were under control in that area.

Or else Lucky had been put out to pasture somewhere.

“Where’s my cat?” I managed as we entered a spacious, dimly lit bedroom. I could barely make out a large armoire, a big bed, and a desk and chair.

Maybe I was falling asleep standing up. If so, good thing I aimed right for the bed and fell onto it facedown.

“He’s fine. That Jackson Galaxy guy knows his stuff. He’s kinda cute too. Never knew I could appreciate bald men,” she mused as she yanked off my shoes.

If she’d thought it strange I was prone before her, she didn’t say.

Could be my hearing was also shorting out. I couldn’t dredge up enough concern to care.

“He’s not cute. You know who’s cute, Kitty?” I didn’t wait for her to ask. “Me,” I mumbled into the pleasantly scented pillow. Something floral my brain was too fuzzy to discern. “I’m definitely cute.”

“Did the women who paid you say that too?”

“No. Sometimes they say it for free.”

Satisfied with that comeback, I promptly passed out.

## SEVEN

# Katherine

I HAD A VERY LARGE, VERY WELL-BUILT MAN ASLEEP IN MY bed. Taking up most of it. His arms and legs sprawled in all directions, leaving me precious little room. I'd have to curl around him. Or maybe I'd just stare at him for a few hours while he didn't know I was watching.

Fuck me, his behind was perfect. I'd never told anyone I was an ass woman, and I might not have been before tonight.

Okay, before this morning, because the sun would be up soon.

But his was damn near exceptional. I'd wanted to snort at his chutzpah for claiming women paid for his body, but now that I'd seen this side of him—even fully clothed—I was about to search my purse for dollar bills.

Hey, I'd seen *Magic Mike* like every other healthy red-blooded woman. Though the sequel had kinda sucked.

I studied the bottle of whiskey I'd set on his bedside, unsure if it should be chilled. I was hardly a connoisseur of alcohol. My limits involved locally produced hard cider and the very occasional margarita. I had no idea what this even tasted like.

With a frown, I unscrewed the cap to sniff. Hmm. I couldn't say it intrigued me. But I was nearly jumping out of my skin, both from trying to get Lucky and Princess to tolerate each other enough not to draw blood—a process I'd discovered would most likely take a lot longer than one night—and from worrying about Clint and his emergency.

Thank God the pup had not been hit by a car. Sweet baby. Clint was a damn hero. No wonder I'd wanted to show my appreciation. I'd nearly given him all my cookies and the whole damn bakery too.

*I don't have any condoms, but I'm on the Pill.*

Holy crap, did I have absolutely no chill? I didn't even know him. His first cousin could be Ted Bundy, for all I knew.

Or he might have some truly distasteful hobbies. What, I couldn't quite parse at this time of day, but I knew there were some. Like...taxidermy. Highly unlikely for a vet, I figured, but you just never knew with people.

He did have a fine posterior and a nicely shaped cock, at least through his trousers. And really when it came to sex, what more did you need?

It wasn't as if I was going to marry the dude.

And screw it, I was trying this whiskey.

Steeling myself, I tossed back a healthy swallow and tried to keep from choking as flames singed my throat and fireballed straight into my chest. I stumbled into the hall, pressing my spine to the wall while I tried to get control of myself without waking Clint.

No worries there. He never batted one long dark eyelash.

Once the heat began to settle, I lifted the bottle experimentally and tried again. And again.

And maybe a few more *agains* for good measure.

I moved my party for one into the living room and went back to editing while I drank straight out of the bottle and waited for sunrise. I didn't have to wait long.

A text came in from Magnus and I peered at it with one eye open.

MAG

Can you take a rush from LaToya? She just finished her latest Vortex mystery. Needs it edited by Thanksgiving weekend.

LaToya was one of my favorite clients, so I started to reply in the affirmative until I remembered how behind I was. I really shouldn't take on any more work until I was caught up. As it was, I'd be scrambling all week.

Eh, what the hell. It wasn't as if I had any plans with family or friends. As usual.

KITTY

Sure. Tell her we can do it. She knows how much I love her mysteries.

I went back to editing Rina and Sven, expecting the conversation to be over.

So you don't have plans for the holiday?

With a boozy sigh, I answered him.

No, why would I?

I don't know. You do have a father.

I snorted loudly enough I feared I'd awakened Clint.

He's the turkey, he's not about turkey.

Man, I was positively hilarious when I was half drunk. Or perhaps more than half.

So you don't want to do something else instead?

I frowned.

Like what?

Well, I was thinking of coming for a visit.

Why?

*Smooth, Kitty. Real smooth. Try not to insult your only friend, okay?*

I took another gulp as a sound came from the bedroom. Was that grunt Clint or had Lucky pulled down my mini plant shelf in the bathroom again?

Because we haven't seen each other in forever. I miss you. And no one should be alone for holidays.

Katherine?

I blinked at Magnus's texts on the screen.

Sure, okay, whatever. I gotta go...do something.

I turned off my phone and blinked at the pinkish light of morning now filling my room.

I'd almost been asleep before Magnus's texts, and that was a feat. Between the blazing-hot scene I was editing and the occasional low yowls coming from my bathroom while Princess stuck her golden paw under the closed door to taunt Lucky, sleep shouldn't have been on my mind.

If I hadn't been tipsy, that is.

I let out a loud hiccup and covered my mouth as if I expected Princess to be horrified. Add in exhaustion, worry, and just general overstimulation, and I was on my way to joining Clint.

Except I was now fully awake thanks to that unidentified noise. At least Clint had been asleep for his two hours by now.

I was sure he needed much more than that. The guy had been beyond running on empty. Thank God he'd been smart enough to turn down my impetuous offer. What had I been thinking?

Oh, yeah, that I was horny. Still was. In fact, the situation between my thighs was pretty much at a crisis point.

Editing hot stuff, late nights, and too much alcohol weren't a wise mix.

I turned the whiskey bottle toward the light and contemplated its much lower level. I was drinking more than I should.

Maybe I should take the edge off. Then I'd feel less... jittery. But my vibrator was in the drawer beside my bed.

And I did not feel dexterous enough to get the job done myself. Not that it took much coordination, but mmm, whiskey.

I'd had so much that I hoped he'd slept off his headache because there wasn't much left for him. *Oopsy*.

Not that he should drink before work. But who was I to judge? I was drinking during work. His occupation was far different than mine, however.

My gaze snagged on the screen where Sven was pumping into Rina from behind. I bit my lower lip and looked toward the hallway that led to my bedroom.

I really should not do this.

But I could be very, very quiet though. And quick, because my charges would need breakfast soon. Princess was already giving me the eye before batting Lucky's massive black paw every time it snaked out under the door. I didn't have much time.

So I'd just sneak into my bedroom, make sure Clint was still breathing, and then finish myself off in—hmm, not the bathroom with Lucky.

Right here on the couch? No, I couldn't do that with Princess nearby to observe, although my robe hid a lot. Especially since Jackson Galaxy kept saying cats understood more than people knew.

I didn't want to traumatize my fur baby by doing things in front of her she could never *un-see*.



But there was always my rarely used spare room/storage area and my nice wingback chair...

Carefully, I saved the document I was editing, slipped off my editing heels, and padded down the hall to my bedroom, as quietly as an inebriated church mouse.

I peeked into the room and noted that Clint hadn't moved from his position other than to fling off his socks to locations unknown.

His bare feet were huge. I knew what that meant. Although I'd already known thanks to the impressive erection he'd popped from my breasts.

I had to say his reaction went miles toward bolstering my often shaky self-confidence.

At least physically, most notably when I was without my clothes. Mentally, I didn't at all doubt my abilities.

When it came to interpersonal dynamics...let's just say I did better with cats.

And maybe vets? This vet in particular.

I took a deep breath and crept closer, wincing at the yowl-screech that sounded from my bathroom. I really hoped my new Christmas cats shower curtain survived this day.

Clint slept on.

I pried open my nightstand drawer and felt around for my bullet vibrator. After some effort, I found it stuffed into the compartment in my fake book, the one I knew my nosy father would never touch due to the risk of a sudden bolt of lightning.

The Holy Bible.

My father had started searching my drawers for drugs when I was younger after one too many "talk to your teens about substance abuse" commercials. He'd considered it a point of pride that he was a "with it" parent although he'd left me alone on countless weekends and holidays where I could've blazed up a whole pot farm if I wanted to. I'd never touched the stuff, but even now that I was an adult, he occasionally would poke the sofa cushions to make sure I

hadn't developed a nasty habit he needed to warn me away from.

I tugged out the book and held it to my chest as Clint's phone went off with a series of tones.

From the bed, Clint groaned, opening one eye. "Answer it for me, would you?"

How could he trust me to take his likely professional call?

Then again, how could he not? I was smart and capable and carried my vibrator in a Bible.

Oh, and I was also a little bit drunk.

"Me?" I asked in a wholly innocent tone.

"Please. I gotta get more sleep." His voice was pure raw grit.

Hot as hell.

"Code?" I asked, swiping the screen awake.

Shockingly, he told me, and I answered the call as I hurried out of the room.

"Hello?" I whispered.

"Hello, who is this?"

"Who are you?" I tossed back, belatedly checking the screen.

Kitten Around. Oh, okay. I could handle this. Maybe.

"Doesn't it say on the screen?" the caller asked in an irritated voice. "Kitten Around Rescue Clinic. I'm calling for Dr. Hauser. Is he available?"

"I'm sorry, may I please take a message? He's supposedly detained."

I coughed. *Supposably* wasn't even the right word. And I called myself a knowledgeable editor?

At least I was when I wasn't drunk off my ass.

"I mean unavoidably." I hiccupped loudly then giggled to cut the embarrassment. "State your business, please. I must

keep this line clear.”

“Well, I’m so very sorry, but there’s been a situation at the clinic due to possible unprofessional behavior, and we need to get to the bottom of the situation. We need to talk to Clint before we get our lawyer involved.”

*Uh-oh.* Was this about me soliciting pussy? And then offering him my pussy while he was very much off work grounds? Surely that couldn’t be a workplace offense.

“Lawyers are pigs.” My tone was high-pitched but very matter-of-fact. “I’m related to one.”

She cleared her throat. “Who exactly is this? Last I knew, Clint had no personal entanglements.”

“Oh, we aren’t entangled. I don’t even know him.”

“How then do you have access to Clint’s phone?”

“He gave it to me. He’s sleeping. He performed surgery last night.” I enunciated each word carefully, hoping she understood the gravity of this situation.

“Oh. Okay. Well, I can call back in a half hour—”

“No! The man needs his rest, for pity’s sake. Give him a break. Do you understand the word surgery? He gave life! I mean, saved a life.”

The woman let out an exasperated breath. “Who exactly are you? Is this Emma?”

Who the hell was Emma?

“Absolutely not. I’m Katherine,” I snapped. “Last night was our first meeting. He wouldn’t even sleep with me.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew my mouth was running faster than my brain could process. That was typically a no-win situation.

Not that I’d ever been in a situation quite like this before.

Maybe he didn’t want to sleep with me because of this Emma. Was she petite and sweet and blond? Maybe she was his ex-girlfriend. Perhaps even his *ex-wife*.

She had to be an ex unless she was a secret. He'd said he'd been alone for a while, hadn't he?

But men lied. I knew that all too well.

Leaning against the wall, I rubbed my head to try to dispel the cobwebs growing by the minute. I needed sleep. Lots of sleep.

The woman on the other end of the line let out a long sigh. "Okay, look, I don't know who you are, but this is Clint's number so I have to assume—"

"You know what they say about assuming. It makes an ass out of you and me."

"Give me that, Kitty."

I startled and jerked away from the wall to peer up at Clint, looming over me looking deliciously sleep-rumpled and gorgeous. His scruff had thickened too, unless I was imagining things.

At this point, I wasn't even sure.

How had I had the bad luck of finding a super-hot dude with a cat? I would've preferred just an ordinary, average sort who didn't make me tongue-tied with a glance.

Wordlessly, I handed him his phone and clutched my Bible to my chest as I went to see if our cats were still alive.

He found me sometime later trying to dispense cat food to both cats without them attacking each other.

"Jackson Galaxy said to keep it a positive experience. Feed them close but not too close. But he probably wasn't drunk— whoa," I muttered as Clint grabbed my shoulders and nuzzled the side of my neck.

"You're doing just fine. Other than almost getting me written up."

"What? Huh?" How could he sound so calm when he said stuff like that? "It's because I told her I only met you last night, isn't it? I thought she'd be impressed you had honor enough not to fuck and duck."

His chuckle was deep and rough and stirred the still-damp curls on my neck. I didn't know where my hair towel had gone.

Or my good sense.

"Your whiskey did it," I said miserably as I stirred warm water into the ocean whitefish paté in Princess's bowl. She didn't drink enough water so this was my compromise. "I overindulged and said bad things."

"Is that why you turned to Jesus? To repent?" His tone was mild as he picked up the Bible I'd set beside me on the counter.

"Put that down," I barked, panicked. "Right now."

"Think I'm gonna self-immolate if I even touch the holy word—" He broke off as the fake book's top swung open and my bullet clattered to the floor.

Loudly.

And Princess pounced on it. Toy!

Dear God, I'd sobered up entirely within the course of thirty seconds.

"So did you get in major trouble?" Feigning casualness, I leaned a hip against the counter and pretended my cat wasn't chewing on an object I'd put unmentionable places. I'd thoroughly cleaned it every time using cleanser made just for that purpose, but still.

My life was a horror show.

"Sorry," I added weakly as he bent to pick up the bullet and held it up to the light as if he was examining a priceless gem for occlusions. "I should've just taken a message."

"Yeah, you should have. But Theresa at Kitten Around set up an appointment to give me a thorough talking to for my 'questionable judgment'. She wouldn't have even done that in a normal situation, just let me go, but she's short-handed and usually my behavior is above reproach."

“A thorough talking to for what? Also, can I have that back?”

“You.” His eyes narrowed as he pocketed my vibrator. “I think it needs service.”

“*What?* A vibrator can’t need service—and what do you mean, me?”

“Evidently, due to the inappropriate post last weekend, the server is being overloaded due to people using our classified section as a, and I quote, ‘meatmarket.’ Thanks, Kitty.” He rimmed his lower lip with his tongue. “Or did you say your name was Katherine on the phone?”

I gave up. Simply ignored Princess’s paw batting against my calf now that her toy—*my* toy—had been snatched away and buried my face in my hands with a whimper.

Maybe I was really in bed and dreaming. Could be I’d never really gone on that classified section with my ridiculous rent-a-cat request at all.

Even if Lucky’s continued yowls every time Princess tried to eat from her own dish indicated otherwise.

“Look at me.” Clint’s low voice made a shiver work its way down my spine. “Katherine, look at me.”

I dropped my hands and looked.

“My full first name is Clintondale, named after the town my ancestors founded forever ago farther upstate. I’ve spent years trying to outrun my legacy. Do you think I’d judge you?”

“Clintondale, huh? Very stately.”

“Fits, since I’m Clintondale the third.” He rubbed his thumb over the dent in my chin, tilting my face upward in that seductive way of his. “But you did make my life harder in some ways.”

“Is that a pun?” I dropped my gaze to the front of his trousers.

One corner of his mouth lifted. “That too, but I have no complaints in that department.”

“Then?”

“You owe me,” he said lightly. “I’m helping you with your rental cat needs, weird as they may be. But I’m not judging. Honestly.”

His earnest expression certainly fit a man who would never judge. Not to mention he was awfully cute with his hair dipping over his forehead.

I swallowed hard. “Uh, thanks.”

“Besides, I need some help myself.”

I frowned. “With what?”

“My parents have a big shindig for Thanksgiving every year. It’s basically a family requirement.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

He gave me a winsome smile. “Be my girlfriend.”

## EIGHT



I HAD A BEAUTIFUL NEAR-STRANGER'S VIBRATOR IN MY pocket, a newly dry-cleaned-via-rush-service leather jacket on my back, and a meeting with my supervisor at Kitten Around on my day off.

Well, partial day off, since I'd gone in during the overnight.

After that bit of exhaustion-induced insanity about asking Kitty to be my girlfriend—fake, dammit—she'd insisted I needed more sleep and nudged me back to her bed with an actual cup of milk without replying one way or another to my request.

Alas, she did not join me. Nor did she make any other mention of sex without condoms.

Or sex with condoms. Or any sex at all.

But I'd taken her vibrator hostage. So maybe eventually she'd turn in my direction again. Possibly. Though she still had ten fingers.

And that was something I did not need to think about right now.

I didn't know her. Not that I needed to know her to have sex with her but some part of this whole thing between us felt like it had a purpose. Like we met in that fucking odd way for a specific reason. Dismissing it—and her—to pretend this could just be fun and then nothing at all felt...wrong.

All wrong.



As did putting up a false pretense to convince my parents I wasn't on the market. Fuck that. If I told them I was with her, then I was really with her.

For a reason or a season. Not just about sex. But jumping in with both feet to see where it could go.

I didn't do stuff like this as a rule. I didn't love change and adhered to my schedules and guidelines because they served the comfortable routine I liked for my life.

But Kitty/Katherine had shaken up everything for me, and I wasn't in any hurry to rush back to boredom.

Which was how I ended up explaining to Theresa at Kitten Around, that no, I had not actively participated in trying to turn the classified section of her rescue charity into a sex consortium.

Nor had I wanted to enable people to find sex partners. Or play partners. Or anything of the sort.

“Absolutely not. She really did want to find a cat as a companion for her grieving cat. And I think she's grieving too. But she's not ready to put herself out there all the way. Like, she wants a trial basis.”

*Like you want a trial basis? Just something for show with extra added sex because she's super fucking hot and a little weird and probably knows kinky sex acts you'd totally be on board with.*

“We have many people who come to us in that situation,” Theresa said slowly. “Many of our fosters want the companionship of a temporary pet. Our program allows them to provide a home for an animal in need without all the responsibilities that usually come with it. Then at the end of the term, they can choose to adopt as a foster fail or return the pet to us so we can find he or she a better-suited home.”

“Yeah. So that's kind of a rental too. Just doesn't use the fancy language. Like when you rent a car. You get to drive it around but you don't have to keep it if you don't like the ride. Don't have to pay for repairs. You just get to enjoy it, strings free.”

She frowned. “Clint, you’ve been working very hard. You mentioned you had an emergency last night and performed surgery in the middle of the night. Add in the stresses of the looming winter and the vet shortage, never mind the pressures of being in a famous political family—”

“That’s bullshit,” I snapped, making her jerk back. “As if my so-called pressure from the privilege I’ve been granted is worse than what so many people deal with every day. I just gotta get my head out of my own ass.”

Theresa smoothed her neat brown bun into place before she made a few quick notes on her pad. Probably comments on my imminent breakdown.

Eh, well, I’d gone nearly thirty-six years without being so much as written up from my part-time drugstore job in high school. I was probably overdue.

Overdue for a lot of things.

I rubbed my still scruffy jaw. To hell with shaving today. “Putting a pretty name on something doesn’t change the reality. Aren’t we all going through the motions until we figure out what’s real? You can’t do that standing on the sidelines.”

“Clint, I’m submitting a request for time off for you. Right through the end of the year if you’d like. This is a volunteer position, but you’re a valid member of our team. The last thing we’d want is for you to burn out. That wouldn’t serve either of us.”

“I don’t need time off.” I thought of the chalet trip rapidly coming at me. “Okay, yeah, I do, but just a few days. I’m taking the woman I’m...seeing to meet my parents.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Please tell me you aren’t talking about the rent-a-pussy woman.”

My first inclination was to deflect. But I was tired of living half a life. I didn’t have anything to be ashamed of. Neither did Kitty.

Was that what she liked to be called? I needed to ask.

Besides, this wasn't only about me. Sure, it had been initially. I absolutely did not want to be matched with my mother's newest "lonely friend."

But Kitty wasn't in a good place. She hadn't said it in so many words, but I could read between the lines.

Her mom and dad situation. Her spartan apartment with virtually nothing personal. None of the usual girl stuff like knickknacks and throw pillows with fake jewels or fringe or snowmen with dopey grins.

That gigantic shapeless bathrobe, which would be fine to wear at home alone. But to meet someone new?

*Sorry, dude, she's just not that into you.*

And worst of all, her indifference to Christmas. Who was indifferent to the holidays? I mean, once in a while, fine. Everyone had their bah humbug moments. But it seemed like more than that for her.

I might not love the holidays but my family put on a display worthy of a Griswold family Christmas. Mostly because it actually ended up on TV every year.

No one could be indifferent surrounded by that much ho-ho-ho. It just wasn't physically possible. Perhaps it might even put a smile on her too-serious face.

And maybe she'd rue the day she'd ever met me.

"Clint?" Theresa leaned forward to peer into my eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Fine. Dandy." I flexed my hands and tried to lose my grimace. My own attitude needed some serious repair. "Anyway, the weekend after Thanksgiving is booked, then I'll be back to work my usual schedule."

"Are you sure? These long hours between your day job and your volunteer hours can take a serious physical and mental toll."

Was I imagining her extra emphasis on the word *mental*? I didn't think so.

“I’m sure,” I replied tightly, unfolding myself from my chair. “Trust me when I say this is all not nearly as salacious as it might seem. She just used words to try to get attention. Her first post wasn’t even noticed.”

Theresa rose to stare me down across her crowded desk. Her entire office was crammed to the gills with secondhand furniture and piles of paperwork stuffed in straining files. “Well, I commend her then for meeting her objectives. That post has been down for days, and it continues to receive attention. She was very popular.”

With a grunt, I turned to leave.

“I assume you don’t want me to forward any messages to her inbox?” she called as I shut the door behind me with more force than necessary.

No, I did not want her to forward anything. In fact, I didn’t even know for certain that she wasn’t talking to anyone else from the site. For all I knew, she could have set up five meetings to meet other men—or women—in her bathrobe.

It wasn’t as if she owed me exclusivity for our fake dating arrangement—that she had not even formally agreed to. Or informally.

Besides, it would become very real very fast, if I had my way.

I wasn’t asking for lifetime fidelity or anything. I was almost sure that wasn’t in the cards for me, anyway.

Any woman I brought into my life on a long-term basis would be subject to the Hauser vetting process, which was much more rigorous than one might expect.

My dad intended to pass the mayoral torch to me someday. It was our family legacy and my opinion on the matter didn’t hold much weight. So my future wife would be evaluated as future mayor’s wife material.

Unless I disappeared to parts unknown, which seemed as good an option as any.

I tugged out my phone and texted Kitty.

## How do you feel about not fake dating?

She didn't answer for over five hours.

*Five.*

I didn't have illusions that I was some sex god who would make any woman's heart skip a beat—or a woman to scream *dear God, Sven, your cock is piercing me so deep I feel you everywhere*—but I was used to a certain level of response. Objectively, I was attractive. Women were always propositioning me. I couldn't count how many times I'd been hit on at work.

But Kitty didn't seem affected in the same way, even after suggesting we have condomless sex within hours of meeting in the flesh. True, she'd wanted to comfort me after saving the pug, but that was a whole lot of soothing considering I was a near-stranger.

Not that I minded. No, ma'am. I just wished I'd been able to take her up on her offer.

I also wished I had the bottle of cheap whiskey she'd decimated. At least I could've been drunk while waiting for her response instead of vacuuming up a thick mat of black cat hair from my sofa.

The owner of said hair had been pissed at me today for introducing him to Princess Goldenrod. Granted, he'd apparently spent most of his evening in the bathroom.

If I didn't stop thinking about Kitty's offer very early this morning, I had a feeling I would too.

*Hello, cold shower.*

When she finally got back to me, I was trying to reach under the couch with a sheaf of paper towels for what looked suspiciously like the remnants of Lucky's dinner. The stinky pile of tuna along with a honking hairball somehow fit the rest of the day.

I dealt with the mess then sprayed a cat-safe scent neutralizer and inched backward—right into the coffee table, knocking off the lamp and a stack of books and bruising the hell out of my leg.

But I still snatched my phone to check my messages without even a care for my personal safety. That just proved how conscientious I was.

Or how horny.

I read her message with a raised eyebrow, my most typical expression when dealing with this vexing woman.

KITTY

I'd be quite fine with it. Does this mean any future meetups with Princess Goldenrod are canceled? If so, I have other avenues to explore but I do thank you for your service.

I hadn't serviced her yet. What the hell?

Here I'd been trying to ease her into trying a real dating thing—at least for Thanksgiving weekend—and she was ready to lose me like last week's crumpled-up newspaper.

And other avenues to explore? Had Theresa gone behind my back to send Kitty her stacks of messages?

Damn horndogs.

*Just like you, hmm?*

Then I reread my initial text and realized it sounded as if I was rejecting her help before she'd even truly offered it. So much for being perfectly functional on not enough sleep.

I started to type then backspaced and started again. Something crashed in the kitchen and I kept typing.

And backspacing.

My caps button kept getting stuck every time I wrote OTHER AVENUES?

Finally, I changed tacks completely.

Just what am I supposed to tell Lucky? He's already attached to Princess Goldenrod.

So that was a bit of a leap considering that morning's incessant yowling, but at least I hadn't diminished my cool factor—much—by ranting like a jealous knob.

Again she didn't respond in a timely fashion. I was left with no choice but to check on the chaos in the kitchen, only to discover my cat hanging from the metal basket of bananas over the counter. And the little bastard had the nerve to give me an innocent look as he swung by one paw.

I was actually speechless as I rushed to grab him, but I was a moment too slow and the metal basket detached from the ceiling due to the additional bulk of an overweight cat using it for a playground.

Lucky dropped to the floor and pranced away, tail held high while I swore under my breath and bent to collect the bananas.

I grabbed my phone and noted Kitty's lack of response with a frown.

You know what? You can have Lucky. He's a big pain in the rump.

*That* got a quick response.

What? No. You can't give away your cat. Not to me. I'm not ready. You're not ready. You love your cat. Don't you?

I frowned. Of course I loved my cat. I would never give him away.

It had just been a joke. But obviously she was in a worse place than I'd even realized because she seemed almost panicked at the idea of adopting another.

*She told you she couldn't adopt. Try actually listening to her.*

I rubbed my forehead. As a vet, I'd seen a lot of pet parents who had a hard time losing their beloved furry family member. I'd also lost several of my own over the years. Every grief experience was different.

The last thing I wanted to do was cause Kitty even a moment's concern that I would rush her into something she wasn't ready for.

On any level.

I sent back a quick message.

I was just kidding, Kitty. Being sarcastic.

She answered right away.

Oh. Sorry. Of course you were. I'm not good at sarcasm. My authors know they can't

Abruptly, she'd stopped typing, but I saw the text bubbles that indicated she was probably writing something or she kept erasing her thoughts.

This continued for approximately four minutes while I stood there staring at my screen like a guppy while chaos reigned in another part of my apartment. At least the sound of this chaos I recognized. It was the rapid whirling of the toilet paper roll in the bathroom. Lucky was likely going to town on it, as he did at least twice a week. Usually he did this to show me he, yet again, disapproved of my choices in some area or another.

Or he was just hungry. Regardless, there was a reason I kept a six-pack of toilet paper stocked in the linen closet at all times.

Finally another message came through.

Disregard last message. It has a typo.

Man, that was a lot of typing for a supposed typo. That clearly wasn't a typo at all.



She didn't want me to know she had "authors," whatever that meant. Though it confirmed that Rina and Sven's adventures likely had not been written by her.

Was she the author's editor? That made sense with her fixation on mistakes. Or maybe some kind of coach. But she seemed rather in need of some coaching herself, although that didn't mean what she coached had anything to do with confidence.

Okay. I'm not giving you my cat. Other than on a temporary basis for Princess to bond with.

I paused then sent another message.

Though they kind of seemed to hate each other the other day, but I missed the rest of their interactions that night. Jackson has ideas how to make new cats get along, but not sure we can un-ring that bell now, you know? So we have to make the best of where we are.

Kitty didn't hesitate to answer.

No.

I sighed. No, she didn't understand or no, she didn't want to make the best of where we were?

We can't go back and start over. To do things in a manner more likely to achieve the results we want

Kitty was still on her quick reply roll.

What results do we want?

For the cats to get along, right?

Well, not necessarily. Princess had an adversarial relationship with Muffintop. So under those conditions, things are actually going swimmingly. She gets bored by too much domestic tranquility.

Hmm. Did that apply to Princess's owner too? I had a feeling trying to get a straight answer out of Kitty would be like trying to extricate Lucky's murder mittens from my shredded TP roll.

Okay, that's fine then. Cat experts don't recommend it but I suppose we can continue keeping it loose, seeing how things go.

I'm sorry, did you or did you not say you no longer wanted to fake date me? Or are you recommending a separation of church and state, as it were?

I had no clue if honesty or keeping her in the dark with my intentions—which seemed to change hourly—was the right way to proceed. I was normally an honesty-is-the-best-policy sort of guy, even if it got me in hot water.

Except when it came to my father. In that case it was better to avoid too much interaction altogether.

But we were going to be interacting soon. So I needed to figure out my game plan and stick to it.

The last thing I wanted was to cause some kind of Hauser family blowout. We'd never had one of those—mainly because if it was big enough, TV cameras would likely be involved.

No, thanks.

I took a deep breath and dove into the deep end of the pool.

I still need your help. But I was thinking maybe it wouldn't have to be fake. We could just...date. Like normal people.

Are you normal? Pretty sure I'm not.

I had to laugh.

I think I'm too normal, actually. I work too much and there's not a lot of room for fun in my life. Or spontaneity.

I'd never known anyone like Kitty before. I never knew what she'd say or do next.

I liked it. Actually, I fucking *loved* it.

Kitty answered quickly once again.

I could use more fun too. But I kind of suck at dating.

Me, too.

I've never actually had a real date.

I blinked.

Ever?

No. I've had boyfriends. But they never really took me out. We just had a lot of sex.

Someday I'd get my jaw off the floor, especially since now I could hear the telltale scraping sounds that meant Lucky was attempting to turn on the faucet. Big bugger fancied himself a drink of cold water right from the source now and then.

If he was really feeling feisty, he'd take a soak while he was at it and then jump in the litter pan to track wet globs of litter all over my freshly vacuumed apartment.

Why did I love cats again?

But Kitty wasn't quite finished.

Not good sex, mind you. Nothing like the screaming orgasms Rina has. I was happy with just a nice, quiet ripple. Truthfully, the ones from my bullet are far better than any I've had delivered by a man.

A moment later, she followed up.

Hey, can I have my bullet back? I'll have to sterilize it thanks to Princess playing with it but it's been a stressful week.

She wasn't kidding.

Let me take you to dinner tomorrow night. Your choice. And I'll give you back your bullet.

In my head, I added *probably*. I suspected my only use to Kitty might be as an orgasm-dispenser that didn't need batteries, so I wasn't entirely certain I'd return the damn thing. Or that I'd ever get to dispense anything in her direction.

With Kitty, rolling with the verbal punches was the only way to go.

McDonald's drive-thru? Chocolate milkshake.

I laughed out loud. No swanky restaurant for Kitty. Nope, just a fast food joint. But my mother had raised me better than that.

Okay, your choice, so that works. But I get to pick the place for dessert.

We'll see. What time should I expect you?

I glanced at the wall clock. Past eleven. Dinnertime tomorrow seemed entirely too far away.

I already missed her. Wanted more of her in every possible way. She was like a refreshing drink and I'd been parched for so long.

I sent her a text.

Is six okay?

Perfect. See you tomorrow.

Great. Oh, and Kitty, I fixed your vibrator. You're welcome.

With that, I shut off my phone.

I had a vibrator that wasn't even broken to service. And possibly a cat to dry off.

## NINE

# Katherine

I PLANNED MY METHOD OF ATTACK ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON.

Since the cats interacting had not been mentioned, I had to assume Princess Goldenrod would not be part of our outing to McDonald's.

Princess enjoyed the occasional french fry dipped in vanilla milkshake, however, so I promised to bring her back a doggie bag.

Hopefully Clint wouldn't mind the drive-thru. I didn't really feel like dealing with people today—or ever.

I almost texted him to just ask him to pick up our food first.

“I'm bringing you back a snack,” I told my cat as she glared at me from my window seat.

Unappeased, she continued to delicately wash her face while I got dressed.

“So what do you think? White or black?” I pivoted in front of her in my top and decidedly un-sexy underwear. I should change those before I left. They even had little cherries on the front.

But hey, a woman who worked at home and rarely ventured out when the mercury was below 50—or for that matter, above it—dressed for comfort, not sexual desirability.

Also, my sexual parts had not been seen by anyone who wasn't me in a damn long time.

Princess sniffed at my attire and went back to washing.

Okay, so black was out. Besides, a black turtleneck was an understated statement piece. White, however, indicated something else. That fashion fell far below comfort. Especially when it was covered in mini snowmen.

Hey, a girl could be seasonally appropriate if she wanted to be. Sometimes I even paired the turtleneck with my robe for extra warmth. But even I wasn't ready to drive to McDonald's in my bathrobe.

I switched my turtleneck to the snowman one and swiftly decided to up my bra game to my most supportive. Turtlenecks put the girls on full display even if I tried to disguise them with my sweater vest.

He probably wouldn't want sex after catching a load of me this outfit. And maybe that was for the best. I wasn't going to pretend to be someone else just to try to interest him. That never ended well.

I mean, I wanted his cat still. For Princess Goldenrod, of course. But I'd never intended to be more than moderately friendly with the dude.

Why I'd propositioned him impulsively for bareback sex was between the universe and the desire to offer him comfort after the difficult night he'd had. I certainly couldn't explain it.

Oh, yeah, and my hormones had played a large part too. But I had them under control now.

I was almost sure.

I paired my turtleneck with a long black wool skirt and dark tights, my version of a chastity belt. You had to work to get tights off. There was no quick dives and quicker escapes.

To seal the deal, I put on my beloved leather boots that weren't meant for snow but to look cute. I'd worn them approximately twice. But they reached my knees and were one more lock on the chastity belt.

Surely with this kind of no-access clothing, should I slip in my resolve to not have any kind of sex with Clintondale

Hauser, DVM, I would be deterred long enough to come to my senses.

Besides, the turtleneck was a surefire erection deflator. I'd been told this more than once. Despite its inherent cleavage highlighting abilities, turtlenecks represented a weird juxtaposition between childhood and older women for men of a certain age. Especially ones with cartoon snowmen.

This article of clothing should not represent sex in any shape or form. And I liked them, dammit. So eff the patriarchy.

Or something.

"What do you think?" I did a slow spin in front of my disinterested cat.

Nada. Not even an eyelash bat. She was a cold woman. Didn't she get I needed reassurance?

I didn't date anymore. Especially absurdly hot men like Clint who suddenly wanted to date me for real and not just to satisfy his parents. Pretending to date meant trying to make our story seem real, so maybe we'd have some hot sex then part as friends while ensuring our cats were happy together. Or unhappy together, depending.

But he'd changed the whole script now. Best for me just to cool things down on the personal front so that he realized any kind of dating for us was not in the cards.

The butterflies in my stomach were about to take over my entire body.

And he was due to arrive in nine minutes.

I perched on the edge of the window seat and braced my hands on my thighs as I forced myself to take deep breaths. This was no big thing. Friends went out for a quick meal all the time.

*But he specifically said this wasn't a friend thing. And you're not exactly an expert on friends, since you don't have any.*

That wasn't entirely true. I was friendly with my authors, some more than others. Some of them I'd been editing their books for years. And I was friends with Magnus, my BookDoctor business partner. He handled the formatting and cover design while I was the proofreader and editor.

In the coming years, we hoped to add audio book narration—I'd been told I had an appealing voice—and maybe even translation services. That was off in the future though. That was why I'd decided to take a German language course, so maybe I could at least act as an audio proofreader for translations someday.

Lots of maybes.

Speaking of, I needed to do today's lesson. I could do that while I waited for Clint.

I grabbed my phone and pulled up my language course app. I cleared my throat and read out loud the first phrase to translate into English.

*Entschuldigung, wo ist das café?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Princess giving a head shake of disgust before she slinked away.

I frowned. Considering I was a beginner, I thought my German accent wasn't half bad.

The ring of the buzzer a couple minutes later caused me to jolt. I checked the time.

One minute early. Eager beaver.

I took a deep breath and buzzed him in, then I stood at the door, smoothing my hands over my wild hair in its headband. I'd left it down and I was already regretting it.

This dating thing was a racket. It was like custom built to make a person uncomfortable.

At his soft knock, I opened the door.

“Hi.” His voice was gruff as he looked me up and down shamelessly. “No robe.”



“No robe.” I pushed my glasses up my nose and hoped my hand wasn’t shaking. I wasn’t connected enough with my body right now, to be sure. “I do own clothes.”

“You sure do. You look amazing.”

This man obviously wasn’t a normal human male. I was wearing a sweater vest, for heaven’s sake. Most younger men would not say I looked amazing.

And *this* was why I kept offering him sex acts.

I finally dared to meet his burning green eyes. His gaze was squarely centered on my face, not on my tits. He was racking up the points already. “I expected your attention to be lower.”

His quick smile almost made me smile back. Almost. “I can’t deny I noticed them.”

“Well, it’s hard to avoid looking at the sun.”

He laughed and swallowed hard. “Can I kiss you hello?”

I nodded because I couldn’t speak. This didn’t seem like casual date protocol—especially first date protocol—but he was obviously more adept at this sort of thing than I was, so I’d accede to his greater knowledge.

He didn’t grab for my ass or my breasts or any part of me, just cupped my cheek in gentle fingers cool from outside and leaned in to take my mouth. Slowly. Carefully. His lips were warm in direct contrast to his touch, and his minty breath swept over my face before he bit my lower lip, tugging with an urgency that sent a bolt of need right between my legs.

Lo and behold, I could still get aroused in an instant even while wearing a wool chastity belt.

*Hormones, didn’t we have an agreement to remain unaffected?*

So much for that.

“God, Kitty,” he panted between kisses. “I didn’t intend to do this. I already preordered your milkshake on my app. I had a feeling you’d want to do the drive-thru and I had points.”

I had to break away to laugh semi-hysterically against the shoulder of his leather jacket. The combined scents of leather, cinnamon aftershave, and just clean, crisp male were making me dizzy.

God, I wanted to bury my face into the curve of his neck where his pheromones would be strongest while he drove between my legs.

And I didn't care about a chocolate milkshake.

Well, at least not right now. There was always later.

I gripped the open sides of his jacket and used them for support as I leaned back to thoroughly check him out. His broad chest was heaving in his forest green sweater, lightly pearly with drops of rain. A quick glance down south revealed he'd chosen to wear that most potent of female catnip—gray sweatpants.

“So not fair,” I said under my breath.

“Hmm?” he asked innocently, tracing his fingertip under my chin to where my pulse throbbed. “I was putting up some shelves, and I ran out of time, so I didn't change. I didn't know you'd dress up.”

“You're a cocktease,” I said as he backed me toward my couch, kicking the door shut behind him.

“I don't think a guy can be that. Though holy shit, this thing is doing the job.” His fingertip drifted between my breasts, and I swore my whole body flushed hot.

Next time I considered wearing wool, someone needed to tie my arms behind my back.

I shivered. Oh, man, that was *so* not the thought to have in this situation.

“Shivering already? And I haven't even gotten started yet.” He gave me a light push back onto the cushions.

Luckily for me, I'd moved the Teddy Grahams box from its usual location. I hadn't edited last night or today because I didn't need any help revving my motor with this man.

“Oh, but I have.” I looked up at him looming over me, his sheer size making me feel almost petite. My legs were splayed as much as possible in my long skirt, my position utterly sprawled without a thought to what was drooping where.

I just basked in him looking at me with such reverence in his eyes.

“If you look this good dressed, I can’t wait to see you not.” He shut his eyes and held up a hand. “Sorry. This is where I remind you there’s a large chocolate shake with your name on it waiting for you at McDonald’s even as we speak.”

I laughed again and unbuttoned my sweater vest so he could see my turtleneck. *This* was where the rubber met the unsexy road. “Did you see my snowmen?”

“Oh, I did. Yes. Very nice.”

Somehow his happy pants became even happier, and then I realized why. It wasn’t because snowmen with candy cane noses turned his crank.

But apparently my very hard nipples did.

I sat up slightly. “It’s chilly in here.”

“Do you hear me complaining?”

“You’re supposed to though.” I pulled at the hem just in case he’d failed to get the full picture. “Women my age do not wear stuff like this.”

“Remind me not to show you my ugly Christmas sweater collection then. And I actually like them.”

Guess the turtleneck test had failed. Leave it to Clint to ruin the curve.

I sat all the way up as his smile dimmed. “Now you’ve done it.”

“Kitty—” He broke off as I shrugged off my sweater vest and then pulled my turtleneck over my head.

Without removing my glasses or headband first, so you can imagine the innate hotness of that move. Except it was even worse.

He leaped into action to help me, trying to yank my tangled hair away from my glasses while I fought with material.

Somehow I got the shirt off and he set aside my glasses and then we were rolling around on the couch as if we just hadn't laughed ourselves breathless.

"You're so gorgeous." His low voice against my ear was liquid kerosene inside me. "We don't have to do this. We can stop anytime."

"No. I want to. I'm good."

Vaguely, I recalled all my personal admonitions not to indulge in carnal delights with this man. Yet here I was.

His gaze dropped to my overflowing cleavage, one deep breath from popping the clasp of my bra. "Oh, yes, you are."

I was fully aware the one I had on was the least sexy undergarment ever. My plan to dissuade him sexually had backfired.

Because I wanted him to see me naked. I wanted him to do things to me. Even if I was doomed to disappointment, I craved those thrilling moments where it seemed as if this time would be the one that counted.

Hell, it already counted more than any other had. I'd never laughed so much with a man while getting naked with him. I'd never just honestly liked and admired one so much either.

*Dangerous waters, Kitty.*

He knelt between my spread legs as I leaned up to free my breasts. I didn't look down at myself while I did it. My gaze stayed on his.

Right now, I wanted to see myself as he saw me.

"You're stunning." His long fingers nudged back the cups before he caged in my breasts and tipped them up to his mouth, his gaze riveted to mine as his mouth closed around one peak.

Flame-hot green eyes lit the match inside me, and oh God, his lips, tongue, and teeth worked miracles.

No wonder he was a doctor.

Wordlessly, I trembled underneath him. Every time I tried to say something, he shushed me and resumed his task, laving first one nipple then the other. Over and over. In between, the sweet pinch of his fingers centered me even as I shifted against the cushions and wished I could make my stupid tights and binding skirt disappear.

I was burning up, my skin on the verge of flaying off my body. I needed air. I needed to come.

“Clint,” I whispered urgently.

“I know, baby. I know.” He lifted his mouth to mine and angled his body to drop down between my legs just where I needed the extra friction—

I came. Hard. While my body shook under his, he continued to twist my nipples and gently thrust his tongue into my mouth, making me ache down deep.

I’d just come yet my body still yearned for him.

He eased back from me and smiled, his expression soft and proud in the cutest way. “Good?”

Suddenly shy, I looked somewhere over his shoulder. “It was okay.”

He laughed and kissed me, one hand still caressing my breast while the other found its way into my hair. His fingertips massaged my scalp as I strained against him, needing to be naked. All the way naked with this near-stranger when, with other guys in the past, sex had always progressed in stages with the lights off.

My lights were all very much on tonight.

Between kisses, he oh so casually gripped my wrists and tugged them up over my head. Thrills shivered through me, sparking in my still-hard nipples and pulsing in my clit.

“You’re at my mercy,” he murmured, flexing his hold on me to show how loose it was.

“Then make it count.” I heard myself answer him and couldn’t make sense of the words.

Or that he’d lowered his head to suck on my breasts again, this time with a hint of aggression he’d kept banked before. I twisted beneath him, trapped by my skirt and my tights and the need I couldn’t seem to slake.

“Can I take the rest off?” he rumbled against my nipple, the sound another sensation when I was overwhelmed by them.

“You can try.”

He shot me a puzzled look and then released my wrists to make quick work of my skirt, tossing it over the back of the sofa as if he couldn’t wait to have me.

Dear God, for this instant, I felt as if I’d stepped into my own romance novel.

“Hurry up,” I begged as he faced down my tights and my boots.

“Trying,” he muttered, unzipping my boots and yanking mightily. But they were kind of a tight fit—wide calves are a bitch—and then with the whole tights thing...

Well, it was a process. But he gritted his teeth through it and got the boots off. Slowly. With a lot of grunting.

Though I didn’t much mind because I focused on those sweatpants. All that gyrating was not a bad thing from where I was reclining.

Then I remembered I was not exactly...prepared for him.

“Um, I’m half Irish, half Greek.”

“Okay. Great.” He continued to struggle with my tights, clearly concerned he’d rip them.

“I didn’t think we’d have sex. In fact, I wore this stuff to keep you out.”

That dark eyebrow winged up. “You did a good job.”

I had to laugh. “I’m just saying I’m not prepared for... intimacy.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

To hell with subtleties.

“If you’re not into the natural look, you might want to respect the barrier and go take care of things yourself. Or I can. Tit for tat and all. Because I kind of look like an overgrown chia pet down there. No foliage though.” I sincerely hoped.

I was babbling now, and he was still undressing me with the focus of an Olympic skier facing his most challenging course with grim-eyed determination.

Then he stopped. “Are you trying to tell me you don’t wax?”

I shuddered. “Would you want hot wax or however they do it near your penis?”

It was his turn to shudder. “Uh, no. And I have no problem with hair. So *shh*.”

Somehow he tugged the tights off without ripping them and held them up victoriously. Then his gaze snagged between my legs. “Oh, fuck.”

I glanced down. My panties were soaked.

My cheeks burned. “I get really...”

He did not wait for my explanation. He just threw my tights where my skirt and boots had gone, tore off my cherry granny panties—literally tore them right in two—and opened my damp thighs as if he was dying to taste me. And dove right in.

I tried to warn him. I didn’t even know for what. That I was going to come again? That I might pass out? I wasn’t sure.

But I didn’t know where to put my hands while he devoured me, and in any case, I couldn’t think straight with those laser-like pulls on my overstimulated clit.

I wanted to touch his hair. Maybe pull those soft curls while I pushed him deeper like all the heroines in the books I edited.

But I couldn't. That seemed even more intimate than *this* somehow. So I closed my eyes and reached up to grip my own breasts to try to soothe the relentless ache inside me.

He swore against my pussy. "You're going to fucking kill me, Kitty."

I opened my eyes to find him watching me as I restlessly tugged at my own nipples, my hips rising and falling. His short beard was wet from me, and, while he watched me touch my breasts, he slipped a finger inside me, groaning as I squeezed around him.

"Need another," I whispered, and he didn't hesitate to comply.

"Goddamn, you're tight. You're not going to be able to walk tomorrow. If I let you out of this," he gazed around dazedly as if he'd forgotten where he was, "couch."

"Not going anywhere."

He lowered his mouth again, sucking and licking my pussy while he used his fingers to work magic inside me. I was already shaking so hard that my teeth were practically chattering.

I turned my face into the crook of my arm, too overwhelmed by his scrutiny when I was so close to detonating again. I never came this fast a second time, even with my vibrator.

I braced, expecting him to stop anytime now. To say he needed to feel me come while he was inside me. Which was code for finally needing to come himself. He'd earned it, and I'd endure dutifully—

Then he stopped sucking on my clit and rose to kiss and caress my breasts. His fingers continued their dual assault inside me. In and out, deep and hard and slow, all at once. A methodical finger-fucking my body had no defense against.



My eyes were shut when his damp mouth slid over mine, making me gasp as he slipped his tongue between my lips. He tasted like me. Smelled like me. And when he bore down, subtly driving his fingers deeper inside me from the weight of his heavy cock against his hand, I let go.

I made sounds. I knew I did. I couldn't swallow them. This wasn't my usual quiet-ripple orgasm. This broke through me like a supernova, making me thrash beneath him and suck on his tongue just to get more of myself.

I was a woman gone wild. Drunk on cock I hadn't even had yet.

I opened my eyes and his face was close. So close. I was staring deep into the warm firelit green of his eyes—but the fire was inside him, not in the room.

I'd gone boneless beneath him as he simply eased me down, sipping from my lips and touching my breasts and my belly and my hips. Reverently exploring and appreciating every bit of me, my curves and everything else in between.

Maybe even the curves most of all.

Sweat was cooling on my skin, and he cuddled close to transfer his body heat, seemingly in no hurry despite his current predicament. He seemed entirely focused on me.

By the time he tugged his sweater off from behind his head, I couldn't do more than watch. His golden chest was perfectly dusted with dark hair. His shoulders and arms rippled with muscle, but the leanly efficient kind a vet should have.

"You're not on steroids," I mumbled, and he just nodded as if that made perfect sense.

He probably had his eye on the prize and my sex-addled meanderings weren't going to divert him from his goal.

"Did you lose your jacket?" I tried to lean up to look over the back of the sofa to see if he'd dropped it where he'd thrown my clothes. But he simply gripped my chin and drew me back down with a kiss designed to make me forget either of us had ever been anywhere but naked right here.

Alone together.

He lowered the glorious sweatpants and I didn't even see what he was working with. But I felt it, so hard and urgent against my thigh.

His mouth stayed steady on mine as he fumbled between us. Somehow I knew he'd put on a condom though my brain was detached and floating free from my body.

Then he was angling my hips, positioning me even as I spilled over the cushions. I couldn't seem to control my limbs. But he took over and lined us up, nudging against my still-twitching pussy, biting my lower lip an instant before he plowed deep.

Not slipped. Not eased. Nothing that size could move in a way to diminish its presence. He took such thorough possession of me that all I could do was moan and clutch his muscled shoulders.

I didn't even remember to be afraid to touch him. That it was too much, too soon. Too pseudo-familiar. My pussy was his to plunder but gripping the parts of him not made for sex seemed too clingy somehow.

But I had to hold on. And I didn't want him to stop. I didn't want him to *ever* stop.

The climb felt endless. His hips churned against mine and he stroked in and out of me for so long that my moans turned to whimpers.

"I can't wait," he breathed against my mouth.

I moaned in reply. I didn't have vocabulary for this moment.

Me, the brainiac who always had something to say in all situations, could do nothing but hold him as he reared back and emptied himself into the condom, his big body shaking as it collapsed on mine.

As his breathing slowed, he roused enough to reach between us, his fingers circling my clit so expertly that not coming wasn't a possibility.

Again. Somehow. Breaking all records.

He'd broken *me* in the best way.

We didn't talk post sex, just curled together and shared the same air in companionable silence. I felt myself drifting into sleep before I could even question the impulse.

Before I'd been so anxious. So overwhelmed with questions and concerns. Now I could just be—and he could be with me too.

Oh, boy, I was in trouble.

That thought stirred me back into wakefulness, just as I realized he was asleep on my shoulder, his body crushing mine, his thick dark lashes lying heavy on his cheeks, his lips soft and slack.

They tasted of me. Of us. He'd laid me bare and he'd liked what he saw. He hadn't seen things to correct or to compare and find lacking.

He'd just seen me as I was at the very core.

Was there any more powerful drug than total acceptance? Too bad my father had forgotten to warn me about the addictiveness of this one.

My heart was trembling in my chest. I wrapped my arms tighter around him to stop the quivering.

Didn't work.

I didn't even know what was going to come out of my mouth until the words were there.

"I love you."

Oh my God. I'd said it aloud. He was going to brand me a freak and get up and leave.

How could I blame him?

I didn't even know him. How could I love him?

But I loved how he made me feel. Valued. Seen. Understood. I'd been longing for those very things for so long.

I'd find the words to explain away what I'd said. Great sex messed with the mind. I was just babbling.

It had to be that. There was no other explanation.

He didn't wake up. Didn't even move. I might be rendered immobile by his weight, but he hadn't heard me embarrass myself.

No one knew how I felt but me.

## TEN



I SLEPT BETTER THAN I EVER HAD IN MY LIFE.

I had no idea how long I was out. Or even where I was. When I woke with my face pressed into an unfamiliar couch cushion, I took a deep breath, the scent of lavender reminding me of Kitty.

Kitty. My favorite person in the world.

I smiled, drawing in a deep breath of her. Best scent ever. I fumbled out for her, punching at the cushions when I found her missing.

There wasn't enough room on this sofa for us. But we'd made it work.

God, had we.

My hand opened and closed again and again as I sought something—someone—who just wasn't there.

She'd escaped. Of course she had. Because she wouldn't just be chill about this. She'd tense up and focus on the cats. She'd demand to know what was up with our fake dating because I'd been stupid to think we could try to make it real.

Make *us* real. For a day or a year or more. Whatever happened.

All I wanted was to stay naked with her and get drunk off her skin and her smell and her taste. To laugh at weird stuff with her and make jokes that made no sense to anyone but us and leave the rest of the world outside.

Locked on the other side of the glass.

A sharp prick along my spine made me wrench my neck with a groan. Princess Goldenrod was sitting on the small of my back, washing her face.

Unbothered.

“Jesus.” I flopped down and went back to sniffing Kitty’s scent like a creeper. My lips curved almost against their will.

“She’s a pervert.”

Kitty’s throaty voice had me jerking my head up again, guiltily this time because I’d been sniffing her scent like a junkie.

Seeing her didn’t help my situation, as she was not only in her huge robe again, she’d mis-tied it so there was a gap in front that just showed a hint of her cleavage.

Instantly, I was brutally hard.

While a cat perched on top of me. Apparently, the cat wasn’t the only pervert.

Kitty stepped closer and plucked the cat off of my naked body and cuddled it close, deftly closing that gap in her robe. She sat on the coffee table opposite the couch, sliding her legs in such a way that I got a healthy glimpse of the darkness between her thighs that indicated she probably still wasn’t wearing panties.

My dick, trapped under my body, jerked in a plea for freedom. Because it wanted inside her again.

Then she itched her opposite calf, and I realized she was wearing fuck-me red heels. It was a damn miracle I didn’t spend myself all over her sofa.

My cock twitched helplessly. Still might happen yet.

Before I could fall to my knees to beg to eat her pussy forever, the buzzer rang.

“DoorDash,” she said simply, carting her cat to the door.

Princess looked at me over Kitty's shoulder. I had to be delirious because I would've sworn she was sticking her tongue out at me.

While Kitty dealt with the delivery person, I located my boxers and went to the bathroom to take care of business.

Just bathroom-related business. I didn't jerk off even if I groaned merely touching my damn overeager dick.

Then I studied myself in the mirror. My hair stuck out in every direction. But there was no denying my dopey half-asleep smile.

I was officially screwed.

When I returned to the living room, Kitty was juggling an overflowing bag of McDonald's and her cat, who was trying to climb into the bag. My stomach growled loudly, making Kitty laugh as she spread our feast on the table.

But there was just one milkshake.

And dammit, I'd wasted my points on a meal I'd never picked up. Eh, what the hell.

*Worth it.*

Kitty set Princess on the floor where she immediately went into begging mode. "If you can believe it, they ran out of chocolate. There was just enough for one."

"That's okay. I'll just eat yours."

She ignored Princess's soft pleas and she didn't look at me as she precisely separated food into piles. Hers. Mine. Then out came a tiny cup that I soon discovered was a vanilla milkshake for Princess. She tipped the white liquid into the cat's bowl, added four French fries, and set it on the fish-shaped placemat near the galley-style kitchen.

When she turned back, my heart rolled over painfully in my chest.

What was happening to me?

She lifted a hand to her hair while Princess devoured her snack. "What?" she demanded.

I shook my head to clear it. The post-sex haze remained.  
“Nothing. Uh, I’ve never done this before.”

“Had sex on a couch?”

“No, I’ve done that. Just, I’m a serial dater, I guess. I usually take the proper steps. A few dates, get to know each other, then maybe a couple makeout sessions before we do the real deal.”

“So I’m guessing no woman ever propositioned you with bareback sex the first time you came over.” Instead of eating her food, she moved behind her counter and began taking ingredients out of the fridge and bowls out of the cupboards and utensils from drawers.

“No. That’s true. A shame, that. By the way, I used a condom in case you didn’t realize.”

“Noted.”

I leaned forward to snag a fry, relieved to find she’d gotten burgers for both of us. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“In a minute. Do you like cookies?”

“Sure. Who doesn’t?”

“I ordered ingredients to make them the other day. Baking is a nice neutral activity. You have to measure the ingredients correctly or you’ll just end up with a mess.” She began cracking eggs with a ferocity that was oddly stimulating.

My cock was officially going on hiatus. It couldn’t be trusted.

“I’m not much of a baker. If I want cookies, break and bake works for me.”

“Usually me too, but my father should be here any minute, and seeing him stresses me out.”

I nearly spit out my mouthful of burger. I managed to chew and swallow and set down the burger in its box, not about to leave it for the eagle-eyed cat to descend on. I knew very well my own cat’s proclivities for snatching takeout food, and



Princess was watching me with the fixation of a voraciously hungry feline.

I leaped to my feet and hustled behind the couch to dig through my pile of clothes for my pants. “With no warning? It’s late. It’s gotta be late. And you didn’t tell me your father was coming? I’m sitting around in my boxers.”

It was a damn miracle I’d even managed to pull those back on.

“He won’t care. He’s been naked half his life.” She glanced at the cat-shaped wall clock. “Besides, it’s not even ten. This isn’t late for him. He stays up all night. His plane just landed.”

“I was more worried about me. I’d rather not meet your father in my underwear, if it’s all the same to you.”

“He won’t care what you’re wearing,” she repeated. “Just be prepared for him to judge you.”

“Isn’t that the job of a parent?”

She sniffed and stirred the ingredients in her bowl hard enough to repeatedly bang her spoon against the sides. Guess she didn’t agree with my opinion.

“He only drops in and out,” she said, almost too low to be heard. “He’s never been consistent yet tries to pretend he has a right to have a say in my life.”

At a loss what to say, I pulled on my sweats.

“You’re not supposed to wear underwear with those.”

“I’m not?”

“No, it makes it harder to ogle your cock.”

“Um, okay.” I tied my sweats tighter in my version of clutching my pearls, at least when it came to freeballing it in front of Kitty’s father.

I turned to pick up my shirt and sweater, only to find Princess Goldenrod had made a nest out of them and promptly gone to sleep. Shit. She was too cute to disturb, but I couldn’t meet Kitty’s father bare-chested.

Or bare-balled, but at least I'd handled that part.

“Don't suppose you have an extra shirt I could wear?” I smiled at the cat despite myself.

I was a sucker for a cute pet. So sue me.

Kitty stirred her mix fiercely, not looking up. “Why do you think I hid my vibrator in the Bible? He claimed he was looking for a lighter when he knows damn well I don't smoke.”

I cleared my throat. “Uh, T-shirt? And excuse me, what?”

She liberally poured in chocolate chips from a bag and then continued whipping her batter into a frenzy. “Any other father would've just ignored it. Not him. He should've been happy I didn't have the drug stash he was snooping around for. Instead, he made it all awkward, as if plenty of people don't have sex toys. Now, if I had a full-blown Sybian in here, fine.”

Maybe I could just wear my jacket. I bent to pick it up then stopped, cocking my head. “Isn't a—”

“A sex machine. Yes. So I know what it is. I've seen stuff, okay? When a woman spends time alone, she has every right to fill her time as she chooses. Besides, one of my authors—” She broke off and stared into her bowl of batter as if it were a pile of tea leaves. “You know what? I'm an editor for independent authors. I've edited mysteries, sci-fi, true crime, some historical, and now I mostly edit romance. That includes erotic romance.”

“Okay,” I said slowly in deference to her almost defensive tone.

“I'm not ashamed of what I do. I'm proud of the books I edit, whatever genre they are. I just hate talking about myself.” She stirred faster. “People like to ask too many questions.”

“That they do.” And Kitty had shown over and over again that when she tired of a conversation, she just...ended it. So I could see why excessive questions would bother her.

Which was why I didn't pose any on this subject myself.

Hell, there was a chance she'd edited a book I was on the cover of. Granted, those were fewer and farther between, now that I'd been out of the game for a couple of years, but some authors stockpiled cover stock, so I could appear anytime on a new book.

Now there was a thought. Some random book with my torso on the cover could suddenly become a New York Times bestseller and my secret, brief former career would become public knowledge.

At least discreet covers were more popular than so-called "manchest" ones now. I'd definitely posed for ones of the manchest variety. Although there had been one artistic one with fruit and—

Whatever. We might've even walked past each other at a romance convention years ago, though editors didn't attend those as often as authors themselves.

I definitely didn't remember her. Not the wild hair, not the blazing dark eyes staring defiantly at me right now.

Not that gorgeous body I wanted even more, now that I knew all she was hiding underneath that thick terrycloth.

She knew about sex machines. Watched videos with them or edited stories with them or...

"Why are you staring at me?"

"I find you endlessly fascinating," I admitted, shrugging on my jacket and zipping it up despite the warmth of the apartment.

Or maybe it was all this talk about sex machines.

"Ugh." She uncapped a dark bottle and dumped something liberally into the bowl. It might've been vanilla or vodka.

With Kitty, you just never knew.

"Why aren't you eating?" For that matter, why wasn't I?

*There is no sex machine in sight. Down, boy.*

"I will. I'm stress baking right now." She didn't let me ask any questions about that factoid before she continued. "Are

you ever going to give me back my bullet?”

Though it pained me, I unzipped the inner pocket of my jacket and fished it out. “Want me to put it back in the Bible?”

“It’s a hollow book, not really the Bible. Jeez. Can you put it in my nightstand drawer?”

It took so little to put naughty pictures in my head involving this woman. A blessing and a curse for sure.

“Sure thing. I—” I broke off as her phone rang. “I’ll be right back.”

I did as she asked, ignoring her hollow book though it was right there in the drawer. I couldn’t help wondering if it had another secret compartment where she stored other toys. Not my place to check.

Unfortunately.

When I came back out, she was stirring with one hand and laughing at whomever was on the other end of the phone.

“Oh my God, you’re unreal. Just do as she asked. She wanted those headings, give her those headings. Hey, candy canes need love too.” More giggling.

I wasn’t sure I’d heard her giggle before. Laugh, sure. But her giggle was something else. Girlish, even a little breathy.

Who was she talking to?

“Hey, at least she didn’t ask for dicks. Well, yeah, but you know, the customer is always right. Finish up and get some sleep, Mag. You’ve been working too hard.”

I sat and ate more French fries while I listened avidly. Without shame.

Who was Mag, and why could he or she make her giggle when I’d never yet managed that feat?

“I’ll get you those final chapters soon. She said I could just sign off on any changes I make. No, I haven’t finished yet. I’m not slacking. Just was busy.” When she glanced my way, I winked and ate more fries.

Her flush was my reward. She was so damn hot, even more so because she seemed to have no clue.

“Nothing important. I’m back on track now.”

Inflated and deflated within a single minute. She was good.

“I’ll have it to you by tomorrow morning. Get some sleep, Mag—and don’t text me any more inappropriate candy canes.” She clicked off and set down her phone.

“Who’s that guy?”

She went back to stirring. “Who says it was a guy?”

I rose and came around the counter to step closer to her, inordinately pleased when she stiffened. I nosed back the curls along her neck, shifting to murmur into her ear.

“The guy who was inside you an hour ago and knows your reactions.”

She was caught off guard enough to drop her spoon. I leaned around her to pick it up and taste the dough.

Mmm, delicious.

“It was a couple of hours ago now. You fell asleep, remember?”

“Vaguely. Turn around.”

She did as I asked, tilting back her head as I held out her spoon for her to lick. “You aren’t supposed to eat raw eggs.”

“Not what I wish I was licking right now, but it’ll do.” I took a taste of the spoon then offered it to her and she took a tentative lick.

Her pupils dilated as I lightly pulsed my hips against hers.

“What do you have on under this robe?” I already suspected not much, but it was fun to watch the flush creep up her neck.

“Better question. Why are you wearing your jacket in the house?”

“Princess made a bed out of my sweater.”

“Oh. She does that a lot.” She bit her lip. “I’d like to curl up on your sweater too.”

“Maybe later. Now about your robe. And what you don’t have under it.”

She took another lick of the spoon and swallowed as I nudged the cleft between her thighs. “You can’t be—”

“Oh, I am. Tell me what you have on under here or I’ll find out myself.”

“Nothing.”

The spoon clattered to the counter as I boosted her up and stepped between her spread legs to nuzzle her throat. “Good girl.”

“Because I’m wearing nothing or because I answered you?”

“Both.” I tapped her chin until her dark eyes leveled on mine. I absolutely loved her height and how it matched so well with my own. “Now tell me about the man you were giggling for.”

Her full unpainted lips trembled open. “I wasn’t giggling for him.”

“Who. Was. He?”

I expected her to toss some snark or attitude back at me. She had every right to. I knew I was being heavy-handed. But she seemed caught in this weird sexual thrall between us too. “Magnus, my business partner.”

I cupped her cheek until she met my gaze. “Are you more than business partners?”

“God, no.”

“Ever?”

She sniffed indignantly. “That isn’t professional.”

“Kitty.”

She sighed. “No, mister bossy pants. I haven’t seen any parts of him naked, nor vice versa.”

“Good. Keep it that way. Now how do you feel about me fucking you on top of this counter?”

“Next to my cookies?”

“You can do very interesting things with batter.” I untied her robe and tried to maintain my powers of speech at the sight of her curves. I was pretty sure they’d render me mute every damn time I saw them.

Just her breasts and hard light brown nipples alone were damn works of art.

“Not with my batter, sir. It has Madagascar vanilla and peanut butter chips as well as chocolate. I’m not wasting it on shenanigans of a sexual nature.”

Laughing, I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You’re amazing, you know that?”

Her lips curved. “I guess all those Kegels paid off, huh?”

## ELEVEN

# Katherine

WE DIDN'T TALK A LOT AFTER THAT.

Even aware my father could show at any second—*could* being the operative word—we did a number of inventive things beside that bowl. Then on the floor in front of the sofa.

Then in the shower with grape-flavored body wash. That I only owned because an author had once sent me a book-themed gift.

For a woman who'd been out of practice for years, I supposed this could be considered trial by fire.

Much later that night, I woke to humming. I didn't recognize the sound but it made me smile as I snuggled into my pillow. A pillow richly scented with cinnamon aftershave.

I cuddled it close as I drifted off again.

Sometime afterward, I sat straight up in bed and clutched my sheet to my naked breasts. Clint was dressing in front of my closet mirror, knotting his tie with a precision that shouldn't have made my very well-worked thighs squeeze together.

I would've asked where he'd come up with different clothes if I didn't vaguely remember him mentioning getting an overnight bag from his car in the wee hours of the night. He'd also talked about feeding me the dinner I'd never eaten in lieu of mad cookie making and loads of sex, but I'd been asleep before he got back.



I hoped he'd put my dough in the fridge on his way out. That vanilla was prime.

Yet even my concern over my cookies couldn't quiet the biggest question of all in my mind.

“Did you meet my dad? Did I miss him?”

*Did we really have sex most of the night before we both passed out?*

At least I could answer that in the affirmative. Even though it had been such a very bad idea.

Not the sex. The sex had been so, so good. I still didn't believe it could be that good. I'd been sure that kind of thing only occurred in romance novels.

In fact, I might have even had an argument with one of my authors once about how a screaming orgasm was not a thing.

Surprise, Clint had techniques that I'd been unable to even fantasize about. My knowledge base had been too small.

Even Sven had nothing on my vet.

*Ha, joke's on you, Rina.*

See, that was the problem. Clint wasn't my vet. He was just flinging with me. Or dating me just so he didn't have to lie to his parents about my being his girlfriend. He'd been vague enough every time I asked post coitus that I wasn't clear on that score. Something about dinner and some woman named Musselbottom.

But one salient fact remained.

I'd told him I loved him. Which—thank God—he hadn't appeared to hear. Obviously, it was a sex-based delusion, but I'd still said it.

So I needed to put distance between us immediately in case he slipped his dick in me again and I pledged lifelong fealty to the guy.

I hadn't last night. Probably because I'd been moaning so much.

Also, what the hell was that about? I didn't make noise during sex—not even demure little sounds that encouraged the man to *keep going, slugger*. If he didn't hit at bat, I wasn't going to inflate his ego.

Of course, it had been so long since I'd had sex with an actual man, maybe I didn't even know *what* I did anymore.

I wished I was less predictable when it came to my father.

“Kitty?” Clint frowned at me and braced a knee on the bed. “Did you hear me?”

I shook my head. I needed to stay in the game.

“No, sorry, half asleep still. What did you say?”

“I said I didn't see your dad. Wonder if he called. I don't think he came by last night. Well, I hope he didn't. That would have been awkward.”

“Why?”

He bit his lower lip distractingly. “Uh, we were kinda occupied.”

“Yeah, but that never stopped him when it came to me.”

“Excuse me?”

“He'd have girlfriends over when I was there. I mean, like when I was a teenager. He wasn't worried what I could hear.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Seriously? That's so—”

“So my dad.” I wrapped my arms around myself and found it didn't do a thing to cut my sudden chill. “He didn't come.”

“No, I don't think he did.”

“Where's Princess?” I started to get out of bed. “I need to feed her.”

“Sit. Already done. I gave her half a can from the rainbow collection of cans in the kitchen. She demanded more but I didn't give in. Then she went to sleep in the bathroom sink.”

“One of her favorite spots. Part of why she was so mad when Lucky was in there and she couldn't sit in her place.” I angled my head. “You're too smart for your own good.”

“Cat dad. I even have a T-shirt.”

Princess must’ve heard us talking about her because she pranced in, tail held high. Clint scooped her up and held her against his chest, talking to her in a soft voice that undid me in the very best ways. None of that cooing stuff most people did with cats. Nope, he spoke to her as if she was human.

“Did you come in here for more food? Was breakfast not enough? Not for me either. Cold fries don’t keep a body and soul together very well. Though I’m hungry for something else right now.” He shot me a smoldering glance even as Princess cuddled against him and nudged his scruffy chin.

“I’ve been replaced.”

Princess leaped from his arms onto the bed to knead on my covered thigh for approximately half a minute before she streaked out of the room. We then heard the distinctive sound of her digging frantically in her litter box.

“Nah, I’m just the new guy. By tomorrow I’ll be yesterday’s news.” With a laugh, he sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward to brush his fingertips over my shoulder. “I marked you. Beard burn. Fair skin.”

I followed his gaze and discovered he was right. “You don’t sound dismayed.”

“Fuck no. I hope I marked you all over. Especially between your thighs. If not, maybe I should try again—” He yanked up my comforter and dove underneath, making me laugh even as tears sprang into my eyes.

Hated fucking tears. I thought I’d avoided them this time. Too many distractions.

But nope. Of course not.

*Sucker.*

I should be basking in the night I’d spent with Clint, whatever may come. Instead I was yet again wondering why my father just couldn’t help causing me pain.

As if he sensed the change in me, Clint crawled back out and swallowed at whatever he saw on my face. “You okay?”

“Sure. Fine. Why wouldn’t I be?” Furiously, I swiped at my cheeks and threw my legs over the side of my bed, gripping the edge of my mattress until my knuckles burned from the strain. “He’s done this before. He’ll have an excuse. Something colorful. Not just ‘I didn’t bother to come’ because that’s too boring.” I tried to bite my tongue on the rest but it just spewed out of me. “I should be focusing on what an amazing night we had. I tried so hard to block him out. But the moment I woke up, after I checked you out—nice tie, by the way—I was right back on my *stupid* daddy issues.”

“Here I thought you were checking out my ass. Instead it’s my tie?” He flopped it against his chest.

I was so flabbergasted I had to laugh—until I cried.

He didn’t say anything else, just tugged me into his arms. I’d never had a better hug. Even with all our nakedness, I hadn’t taken time to properly appreciate how his arms were perfectly formed for comfort.

“You’re not only good at thrusting,” I said against his neck when my tears finally began to slow.

“No? And I’ve prided myself on it for so long.” He stroked my hair. “Are you hungry? You didn’t eat last night.”

“Neither did you.”

“I did after you fell asleep. Then I baked the cookies and ate some of those.”

I eased back to look at him. “How could you make my cookies? You don’t have the recipe.”

“Three-hundred-fifty degrees is pretty standard. I eyeballed them, and they were delicious.”

“You probably ate them raw, you animal.”

He shrugged. “They tasted good.”

Because those words reminded me of other...things he’d tasted thoroughly last night, I flushed and looked away.

Unfortunately, my gaze landed on his pristine white dress shirt, now soaked with my tears.

“Oh, God, I ruined you. You can’t go to work like this.”

He jerked a shoulder. “It’ll dry. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. I’m not fine. I shouldn’t be dating you. Dating is for balanced people only.”

“Really? I hate to tell you, most of us are cracked cookies in one way or another.”

I sniffled. “You’re only being nice because you loved my cookies.”

“That is a very true statement.”

I flushed again and tried not to burrow into his chest. He was so solid and warm and he smelled so damn good.

Next time, I’d try adding cinnamon to my cookies. The baked ones.

“I’ll buy you a new shirt.”

“You most certainly will not. But you could bring me lunch.”

My head shot up. “You’re sneaky, Hauser.”

“I am. Do you make sandwiches?”

“No. I’m fairly rubbish at cooking all the way around.” Though that didn’t stop me from binging British baking shows when I couldn’t sleep. “Baking is different and I save that for special occasions. Usually stress-related.”

“Well, making a sandwich isn’t really cooking.”

“Says you.”

“There’s a deli a half mile away from Thorny Paw. And I’ll likely be there late because I actually had the whole weekend off after the surgery, plus it’s a holiday week...”

Was I imagining his wheedling tone? Probably not, knowing him.

And I did feel like I knew him already. Trial by fire via classified ad and hours of sex, I supposed.

“Ugh, holiday week. Is the trip still happening on Thanksgiving?”

“Yes. If you’ll come with me.”

“Were you plying me with sex to ensure my cooperation?”

“If I say yes, was I successful?”

I shook my head at him and forced myself to ease back. I couldn’t cleave to him like ivy on a brick wall. I wasn’t that woman. I was strong and independent even if I did make bad decisions because I really enjoyed sex and didn’t get nearly enough.

“I’m not the right woman for the job. I don’t understand family dynamics.”

“No one understands family dynamics like mine. I don’t. And stop blaming yourself for your father being a selfish dick. That has nothing to do with you, even if it affects you, over and over.”

I shut my eyes and let the truth of his words soak into me. I knew that intellectually but somehow every time he pulled his crap, it was like the first time all over again.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

“I don’t want to push you into something you don’t want to do.” Clint huffed out a breath. “Well, I do, because I want you to make a difficult day easier for me. But that isn’t fair, so I won’t do it.”

“You need a date though?”

“More so my mom doesn’t set me up with someone who so isn’t my type. Just gets messy.”

I curled my arms around my pillow and bit my lower lip.

“Do you want me to ask someone else?”

I frowned up at him and noticed his dimples were on the verge of making a rare appearance. “No. But I only want you for your cat.”

“Obviously. And you’re probably going to get him, because I can’t imagine what he did to my place in my absence last night. I didn’t leave him enough food.”

“I can go over to your place today, make sure he’s okay.”

“You can?” He squeezed my hand. “You’re a lifesaver.”

I really hoped I could handle it. That remained to be seen.

“Well, I’m self-employed. Someone needs a nooner, but otherwise...”

“I was only expecting a sandwich, but if that’s on the table, I’ll take it.”

His eager expression made me laugh, thoroughly drying the last of my tears. “I meant in the edit I have to finish up.” I shoved aside my pillow and tugged him to his feet. “But how long can the edit take, right? I’ll find time to check on your cat.”

I’d try my best in any case. Hopefully I wouldn’t end up parked on the side of the road breathing into a paper bag.

I soon found out that finishing the edit would actually prove to be the easiest part of my day.

In record time, I finished the last pages I had left and sent them over to Mag. He texted back almost immediately.

MAG

About time, Armitage. Not like you to be riding a deadline.

KITTY

Not like me to be getting some dick either, but I guess that voodoo love spell I did last month actually worked.

Wait, what? I’m calling.

That was entirely unnecessary. I wasn’t into the phone. I’d talked to Clint against all sense and look where that had led.

*To about a zillion orgasms?*

Yeah, I couldn't really fault that series of events.

I picked up on the second ring. "Mag, this isn't like you."

"I'm not the one getting random dick."

"If you were, I'd allow you to discuss it via text."

"Yeah, well, I'm not you. Who is this dick?"

"Do we have to do this? I'd prefer if we keep things professional."

"Our daily work conversations involve sex acts, discussing manscaping stock photos, and if there's too much crease in those jeans for the prudes at Amazon to let through. What part of that is professional?"

"I guess you have a point. Look, it's not a thing. He's just a guy."

"You never leave your apartment. How did you meet a guy?"

He wasn't wrong. I did leave it, just not often. "Online."

He groaned. "Don't tell me you turned to Tinder. I figured that bullet I sent you after you edited that toy biz book would satisfy your curiosity for a while."

I tended not to think about the fact that Magnus sent me my bullet for purposes of research. I'd never even told him I didn't know a thing about sex toys, but I supposed I must've sounded as clueless about what I was editing as I felt, because he'd sent it to me as a business deduction.

Sex toys as a work expense. My job was wild. And I loved it.

"He stole it, the bastard. But he returned it right after," I added hurriedly when Mag growled.

I wasn't used to dealing with growling men. Clint had very nearly growled over Mag too. Somehow I felt like a juicy piece of meat. It was oddly titillating, sure. But was this really my life?



I had to be dreaming.

“Oh, really.” Mag’s voice sharpened. “Speaking of keeping things professional, you sure didn’t object when I sent you that bullet, now did you?”

## TWELVE

# Katherine

I WAS SPEECHLESS FOR A FULL MINUTE.

This was why I stuck mostly with interaction via screen or phone. I didn't understand people, so minimizing contact with them was best.

Clearly.

“You sent it because I was editing *Playing for Love*, right? So I'd have some personal...knowledge. For work.” At least that had made sense in my head at the time.

Sex toys were just implements of our job. I mean, not *our* jobs specifically, but they were sort of related, no more unusual than party favors. It wasn't as if I'd gone into detail about just how much I'd appreciated the gesture.

Not that I couldn't buy my own sex toys. I just hadn't. I'd been in the dark about what to try.

So, yeah, my business partner had sent me a vibrator.

Hmm.

Why did it not sound so innocent when literally half my body parts were still tingling from last night?

Specifically, from another man. One who had no use for a sex toy while getting me off, because he was pretty damn skilled at that all on his own.

“I've been your friend for a long time.”

An uncomfortable chill prickled along my spine. “Yeah, and you know how much I appreciate your friendship.”

Princess jumped up on the window seat beside me and I gave her head an absent stroke. “Friends have been hard to come by for me for a while.”

“I know you’re lonely. The holidays are rough for a lot of us. But jumping into bed with the first random guy you meet isn’t smart. He could be a serial killer.”

“I met you online a couple years ago too, if you recall.”

“But not for sex.”

“So that’s why you didn’t murder me? Thanks so much.” I huffed out a breath. “Look, the guy I met is a vet, and he’s very kind. He’s way less weird than me.” I stroked Princess’s back too hard and she yowled and gave me the paw, claws extended, before streaking down the hall in disgust.

I sighed. Par for the course.

“Oh, a vet. Right. Did you tell him about losing Muffin? Seems a little coincidental. Are you sure he’s not playing on your emotions?”

“He’s an actual vet, Magnus. I swear.” Why was he being so suspicious? “I’m going to bring him his lunch where he works at Princess’s vet.”

“So you knew him in person before you talked online?”

“No, but I use the vet where he works. We just hadn’t met yet in person but I’m sure we would have. It was just pure chance we hadn’t.”

And the fact I’d missed many appointments due to my... issue with dealing with people over the past year plus.

Sometimes I could handle my panic better than others.

Other times, I had to sit down to put my head between my legs just so I didn’t pass out if I had to actually venture out.

Even if I’d happened to meet Clint at a vet appointment, I likely would’ve made no attempt at conversation, kept my head down, and never even caught his eye. I was far more open with words than deeds. That hadn’t always been true, but it sure was now.

And I never would've known what it was like to have a night like last night—even if it had made me think I was in love with the guy.

Which I wasn't. Absolutely not. That was something my father would do, not me. He'd fallen in love so many times on his first "dates" that it was almost laughable.

I wished I could laugh about any of this but it all felt so deadly serious. So life-changing important.

Mag was still silent. Not like him at all.

"He's legit, I swear," I added. "Do you think I'd hook up with just anyone?"

"After today, I really don't think I can guess how you'd react in any way, period."

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't want to hurt him—even if I had no clue how I had.

"You're blowing this all out of proportion," I protested, catching the time on the clock on the wall. "Look, I've got stuff to do before I go get his lunch but we'll talk about this later." I kicked at the bottom of the window seat in frustration. "Though I honestly don't know what the problem is."

"I just bet you don't."

I didn't answer. What was I supposed to say?

"Go on then, bring him his so-called lunch. He's probably just dying to have you again." Mag clicked off and I was left staring at the phone.

What had just happened?

Sickness brewed in my belly. I didn't understand any of this. Why was Mag so mad? Was he really that worried I was risking my safety? Clint wasn't dangerous. I knew that down to my bones.

I rubbed my neck, trying to ease the sudden tightness in my muscles. All that blessed looseness from earlier—gone in a flash. I mean, I hadn't entirely been loose, thanks to my no-show father. But that hadn't been tension so much as sadness.

Again.

Now I was sad, mad, *and* tense. Most of all, I was confused.

I wished I had a girlfriend to talk to. I used to have those, years ago. And they hadn't been the type to really confide in, just hang out with. I needed to talk to someone who understood men and would give it to me straight.

At a loss, I googled Clint Hauser III, DVM. Which sent me down a rabbit hole that led to his many professional awards and certificates and his long list of positive reviews at Thorny Paw Clinic and elsewhere. His middle name was Lee, same as his father.

And wow, there was also a model named Lee Hauser. How weird was that? He even did covers.

*Romance* covers.

I couldn't click on them fast enough. In most, the guy's face was cut off. There were a lot of torso shots. I mean, what a torso it was, so who could blame them for focusing on that part of him exclusively?

Then I landed upon a treasure trove.

There was a blown-up shot on an easel at a romance convention that I stumbled upon after diving into a deep web of romance covers that didn't really do much for me.

I was used to looking at them as part of my business. Styles had changed in the past few years, so the half-naked shots weren't as common now but—

Son of a bitch, Lee Hauser was my vet!

I recognized those tattoos. They were right by his sin lines, as one of my authors called them. They'd tried to airbrush out the tattoos but for this cover he was playing a pirate, eye patch and all, so apparently they hadn't tried very hard.

And there was Lee Hauser in the flesh, pirate costume in place—which wasn't much more than britches, eye patch, and fake sword in his, um, holster, next to his very real sword that was not on display.

Actually it was. Those pants didn't hide much.

Even with one eye covered, there was no missing the brightness of his green eyes. He was more beardy here, but that cut granite jaw still made my belly flip.

I swallowed and sat back. Mag was right. I really didn't know everything about him. Just the part he'd seen fit to tell me.

What else was a lie between us? The chemistry? The way he seemed to laugh and get me and like spending time with me, even when I was weird?

What would be the point if it wasn't real?

It had to be real. It felt more so than anything else ever had.

*Did you forget telling him your name is Kitty Armor? That's not true either. So if you're going to accuse him of scamming you for some purpose, you did the same thing.*

But I hadn't been trying to scam him. I'd just been using the name that made me feel brave.

Armor was something I desperately needed, both with my father and Clint.

Now I also needed it for some reason with Mag too. My only real friend.

Or at least he had been. I didn't know where we stood now.

I swallowed furiously over the lump in my throat. This day had started so good. I'd slept with a man for the whole night—well, when we'd actually been sleeping. That had never happened before. He'd microwaved my Big Mac for my breakfast, which had tasted better than any fast food burger had a right to. And when he'd gone off to work and I'd kissed him goodbye, it had felt...normal.

Or what I'd assumed normal might feel like. I'd never had any experience with it. A normal couple with plans for lunch and a possibility of something more.

Not just a “see ya” with nothing else on the horizon except a potential call for a hookup on the weekend.

And you know what? I’d always been fine with that sort of arrangement. I wasn’t a forever girl.

Until I wasn’t fine with it anymore.

It wasn’t as if Clint owed me his life story yet. I certainly hadn’t told him mine. But he knew I edited romance novels and he’d neglected to fill in that part of his past.

Why? Were men just incapable of being forthright? Including my father and Mag, who obviously had some unknown issue with me that I couldn’t decipher.

Jerks. The whole lot of them.

My phone went off in my lap and I scowled at it hard enough to make the boulder in my throat dissolve.

“Yeah,” I snapped after accepting the call.

“Hi, honey. Did I wake you? I know you’re a night owl like your old Pop.” His cheerful laughter made me grip my phone tighter so I didn’t throw it.

“I waited up all night for you to show, so no, I wasn’t sleeping.”

A lie, but he deserved the extra dose of guilt. Not that he’d feel it.

“Are you okay? You don’t sound like yourself.”

“No, I’m not okay. I’m really fucking annoyed at men right now. I might become a lesbian. So I guess it won’t matter if I can attract a man then, huh?”

My father did not speak. This might’ve been the first time that had ever happened. I was used to him dominating every minute of every conversation, marching his way through as if I didn’t exist other than to agree with his every utterance. And if I didn’t, he didn’t notice.

“Katherine, you know I said some things when you were younger that weren’t as kind as they should have been. I’ve apologized for that before.”

“Apologies don’t turn off the voice in my head. I was insecure about myself even before I turned ten. I’m a hot fucking mess and it’s partially your fault and you can’t even come by when you decide to drop by unannounced.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice was soft. “But I met a woman on the plane—”

I laughed bitterly. “Of course you did. And let me guess, now you’re in love with her? Because that’s what you do. Get swept away by someone you don’t even know and then it’s over five minutes later.”

*Pot kettle. Guess that’s what you do too.*

The difference was I’d only done this one time in my entire life. The dudes I’d hooked up with before certainly hadn’t aroused that feeling in me.

It was just Clint, and it wasn’t a mystery to understand why. He seemed like he genuinely gave a shit about me. Like I mattered.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I needed to get off the phone before I said something I couldn’t take back. Not because my father didn’t deserve it. He was the first man who’d broken my heart and he’d done it over and over—and he didn’t even know it.

Didn’t even care.

“You know, you’re right.” My father’s voice was weary. “I’m in love with love.”

The ridiculousness of this conversation made me laugh. Hard. “You’re pushing seventy, Dad. How can you still be in love with love?”

“Look, your old man has made some mistakes.”

I snorted.

“But I always treat these women well. We have a good time. When it’s over, it’s over, true enough, but there’s no hard feelings on either side.”



“There’s no hard feelings on your side. How can you be sure there isn’t on theirs?”

“They never said.”

I rolled my eyes and nudged Princess’s crinkly ball with my foot, which sent her careening in to chase it—right under the couch.

The couch I was probably going to have bronzed.

“So where’s your plane chick? Waiting for round fifteen?”

“You overestimate your old man. I appreciate it at my age.” He laughed heartily and I imagined him puffing on a cigar, kicked back in his recliner. I missed the jerk.

And I was actually admitting it, if only to myself. It had been so long since I’d acknowledged how I felt. Usually, I kept everything on lockdown.

One guess who’d broken down my defenses with his magic tongue and strong arms and love of animals.

I was like a romance novel *don’t*. So much for me knowing better.

“Actually, she came over for an early breakfast, we talked, and she had to get to work. She wants to meet you.”

“They all do.” I rolled my eyes. “Until they see I’m not some Barbie lookalike who wants a mommy substitute for the winter.”

He was quiet for a long moment. “You’re so cynical. I never noticed that before. Is that my fault?”

I frowned. Was he actually asking a question and listening for the answer? One that might reflect badly on him, no less?

“It’s my fault,” I said instead of spewing at him. Not to let him off the hook, but because I was an adult, dammit, and I couldn’t keep blaming him for how I reacted to him.

As much as I wanted to.

“I let myself get bitter.”

“After Muffintop died. You don’t go out much anymore. Or even leave your apartment. I worry about you, Kate.”

I almost tossed back *since when* but I managed to hold my tongue.

“Lacey saw your photo on the mantel here last night. She said you were beautiful.”

“Me? I didn’t know you had my picture.” I couldn’t believe he’d bother to display it either.

“Yes, you. You’re a beautiful young lady.” He cleared his throat then cleared it once more. “I know I said some things over the years that maybe made you think I felt otherwise. No one teaches you how to be a parent. Some of us are better at it than others.”

“Couldn’t be much worse than my so-called mother.”

“That’s what I always told myself. Good or bad, hey, at least I was around. But if I did damage to you...” He trailed off.

“You’re still doing damage to me,” I said quietly. “When you tell me you’re coming by and never show, it hurts.” My voice broke. “I hurt.”

“Some old patterns can be hard to break, baby girl. I’m getting older. And when I meet someone and get to chase that high... Well, I lose track of time. That’s no excuse.”

My throat muscles tightened and I nearly went silent. That was what I’d almost always done in the past. Stuffed down my emotions and muted my voice to protect myself.

If he didn’t know he hurt me, at least I could take comfort in that.

“No. It isn’t.”

Though even as I said it, I thought of how I’d gotten lost myself last night. If my father had come over—worse, if he’d used the key I’d given him some years ago to look in on the cats before Muffin had passed—he would’ve gotten to be a bystander to someone else’s indifference to his presence...

Just as I had been so many times.

I dug the heel of my hand into my forehead. I prided myself on never being like my father. Yet here I was, somehow repeating patterns I didn't even realize.

Clearly I wasn't fit for any sort of relationship. I'd told Clint that, but of course he hadn't listened.

So I had to make him hear me.

He was definitely better off not dealing with my baggage. He was a great guy. A vet with an obvious streak of goodness inside his very pretty package.

Ahem, not talking about that package. Not thinking about it either. Nope. Just meant his gorgeous exterior.

He'd even been a model, for pity's sake. Which he felt he needed to hide for some reason.

But I hid that I edited romance, so who was I to judge?

Hey, maybe we could end up friends. We'd already had sex, so that could just...be off the table. That made sense.

Above all else, Katherine Armitage always valued cold logic. I used to, anyway. It was time I close the door on these last couple weeks of weirdness before Clint realized I was just not what he wanted.

I mean, how had I ever considered I could go as some normal girlfriend stand-in to meet his family?

I wasn't normal and I didn't want to create friction between him and the people he loved. I needed to put a stop to this now before things got needlessly messy.

And before I lost my only friend—even if I had no clue why.

As for Princess and Lucky, well, maybe that wasn't meant to be either. Somehow my cat rental project had fallen apart in my pursuit of hot sex.

Maybe I should start editing sci-fi again. Obviously the constant aroused state of my loins due to my editing was a road to perdition I could not sustain.

“Kate?” my dad repeated a couple times before my brain fully clicked into gear.

“Yeah.”

His breath whooshed out. “Oh, good. I thought you were giving me the silent treatment.”

“Tried it for years. Didn’t change much, did it?” Before he could reply, I rushed ahead. “You’re a man, right?”

“Far as I know, yes.”

“Let me run something by you. If you gave a friend a... personal gift, and then another friend borrowed that personal gift and you told your friend he had taken it, and your friend became irrationally angry, what does it mean?” I was aware I’d left off stuff, but I could not tell this story in full to my father.

Even if he was sort of a swinger. But maybe he would understand Mag’s reaction because I so did not.

I had no one else to ask. Except Clint, and even I knew he was not the one.

Plus I was about to tell Clint I was done with sex, no offense, since none of this stuff made any logical sense to me so he probably wouldn’t agree to be my Dear Abby in any case.

“So one person is female and one is male.” My dad coughed and I imagined him puffing on his cigar while he mulled over my issue. “That’s your problem right there. Men and women can’t be friends. Feelings always get messy. Not to mention, you add in the possibility of sex and it screws up everything.”

“Well, you know women have sex with women now too, right? And men have sex with men. So literally no one can be friends then without sex rearing its head in some way?”

“I never thought of it that way, but you’ve always been the brainiac in the family, baby girl, so you’re probably spot on.” He paused. “You have a male friend? Other than Magnus?”

And he's more of a collaborator in business than...oh." He cleared his throat. "Oh. That's sticky."

"Tell me about it." I swallowed hard. "But it can't be about sex with him. I just know it can't."

Though he *had* given me a sex toy. Dear God, I was a freaking dolt.

Mostly because I trusted him to level with me. I assumed he'd given it to me for the reason he'd stated—work research. Why would I assume he'd lie about that when he'd always been honest about everything else? At least that I knew.

*Because men lie.*

"Is he making trouble?" my father asked.

"No, I guess I am. I met someone." I heaved out a breath. "I haven't been with anyone in quite a while yet somehow, now I'm beating them off with sticks."

My father laughed. "A fine problem to have. Just be gentle with Magnus. From all you've told me, he seems to be a true friend. Those are hard to come by."

"Even though you just said men and women can't be friends without sex rearing its ugly head?"

"Just because it rears its head it doesn't mean you can't figure out a way around it. Just be honest with everyone involved." He let out a windy sigh. "Take it from me, the things you try to keep to yourself have a way of coming back to bite you in the ass."

## THIRTEEN



MY DAY WAS PACKED FROM THE MOMENT I STEPPED INTO THE clinic. Actually, even before.

I met Mrs. Gunderson in the parking lot, where she was fretting about her Shiz Tzu Freda and her constipation and *oh, couldn't I just fit poor sweet Freda in today so she could get her rest without worrying?*

I wasn't sure if she meant Freda or herself regarding rest, but I managed to fit Freda in just before noon, after I got a cancellation from a new kitten patient of mine with ringworm.

Well, from the kitten's mom, not the kitten herself. That would be a feat.

The time I'd allotted for my lunch break came and went with no deli sandwich—and no Kitty. I didn't get a text. I didn't get anything.

As much as I wanted to assume that was odd behavior from Kitty, deep down, I knew it wasn't. When we were together, we did awesome. Trouble occurred the second she was alone to think or dwell or whatever my thinky...not girlfriend—I couldn't call her that yet until she agreed—did when she was on her own.

So I grabbed a sandwich from the vending machine and took a short break later in the afternoon to run home to check on my cat.

I found him sitting on the mat in the foyer of my apartment, one of my slippers under his body as if it was an

egg he was guarding. He glared at me and let out a plaintive yowl of disapproval.

“Yeah, yeah, I know I didn’t fill up your bowl enough. I’m going to have to get you one of those timer feeders if I’m going to not be home as much—” I stopped and frowned.

What if this wasn’t just some blip with Kitty? She’d told me she wasn’t cut out for a relationship. She was unfailingly honest, though I knew she kept some stuff close to the vest.

Amazing sex aside, she was worried, and I probably hadn’t done enough to try to allay her fears.

No, I’d told her I needed her to come to Thanksgiving with my huge, gigantic family and pretend we were in a typical low-key relationship that hadn’t started on a cat rescue classified site.

*Yeah, good one, Hauser. That’s the way to keep things nice and neutral. Drop her into a blazing frying pan right at the beginning.*

A frying pan I’d been trying to avoid myself.

Not that my siblings would allow that. Despite it being a very busy workday, I’d gotten calls from two of my brothers and one of my sisters so far. And it was early in the week.

Within the next few days, I’d likely hear from every one of them in some capacity, either about what dishes they were bringing or why they couldn’t bring anything or if I’d finally found an excuse to get out of the shindig altogether.

That was negatory.

But Kitty clearly hadn’t even come by to feed my cat. Even if she had issues with me for some reason, she’d offered to do that, and I wasn’t cool with her letting down Lucky.

Neither was he, judging from the shredded toilet paper roll in the bathroom and the wrecked litter pan in the hall. He was usually tidy as a pin but not so today. Litter had been flung in every direction in obvious kitty temper.

I didn’t blame him. I was suffering from my own bout of temper at the moment myself.

While I could see where I'd made some errors in judgment—okay, fine, numerous errors—I was more than a little annoyed she'd let Lucky down. Who did that after offering to help in the first place? Especially considering how we'd met.

And she had my key. I'd given her a key after one night spent together.

What had I been thinking? I supposed it didn't much matter because she hadn't used it.

*Dodged a bullet there.*

So why didn't it feel that way? And she still had my key.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my pocket to see a message from my elderly neighbor down the hall. My building had a couple of units per level in our three-floor building, and almost all were occupied. And almost all of them had pets they consulted with me about on a frequent basis—and usually for free.

MRS. FIELDS

Your girlfriend stopped by to ask me to look in on Lucky.

I frowned but Mrs. Fields replied before I could answer.

Katherine said she tried to give him more food but she couldn't undo the lock on his feeder so she asked if I knew it. Your feeder has a lock?

I sent back a quick message.

CLINT

The little criminal knew how to open the old one so I got one with a combination. He hasn't figured out how to open that yet but I expect he will soon.

Figures. He's a smart one. Anyway, I told her I didn't know how to open the lock so she told me she'd left a bowl for him instead.



I smiled despite myself. She hadn't let Lucky down.

Me, however... I was still craving the deli sandwich I'd missed at lunch. The vending machine version just didn't get the job done.

Yeah, right, as if that was all I was missing.

She also said she put your key on the table in the entryway. She wanted me to tell you all this. Not sure why she didn't just tell you herself...

Oh, okay, thanks. Sorry for the trouble.

No problem. Your girlfriend is nice. A little different though.

Hope flared inside me. Was she ever.

Did she call herself that?

No. She insisted she wasn't. She seemed so sweet and kind of shy. As well as a little nervous. I just had a feeling she was. She talked so highly of you. Was I wrong?

Thanks for everything, Mrs. Fields.

I turned off my phone before she could ask more questions I didn't want to answer.

As I turned around, I noticed the patterned soup bowl poking out from under the sofa. Upon closer examination, I pulled it out to find two measly pieces of dry food left—that Lucky pounced upon as if he was on the verge of starvation.

“So she left you food, huh? Not exactly as desperate as you wanted me to believe.” I ruffled his fur.

When he didn't give me the paw in retaliation, I scooped him up and carted him into the kitchen to give him some of his tuna mousse in my version of an apology.

He accepted it. At least he accepted the mousse.

With that problem solved, all I had to do now was replenish his feeder, figure out how to deal with Kitty, and get

back to work for round two. I only hoped it ended before midnight.

I tugged out my phone and texted my sister Emmaline—ironically, not one of my siblings who had contacted me today. I owed each of them a call back. But she was my sounding board when I had nowhere else to turn.

CLINT

I need girl advice.

EM

Oh, brother. Here I was going to ask if you thought I should bring my sweet potato casserole to dinner.

Duh, is the pope Catholic?

I'm also bringing something else to dinner.

Pierre?

No. We're through, for real. He's dating a student. Can u believe it?

I'm so shocked. Not like he's done it before.

You're so predictable.

So what are you bringing?

A baby in my belly.

I nearly dropped my phone.

Are you serious?

Very. I thought I had a stomach bug. Nope. How mad do you think Mom and Dad will be?

One could never tell. My mom read a lot of self-help books and sometimes she tried to be more Zen. My dad, not so

much.

But bright side for me was if Emma took the brunt of the familial heat, my lack of a date—assuming Kitty wouldn't go, which seemed likely—wouldn't be important.

*Your sister is pregnant, asshole. Worry about her, not yourself.*

I'll call quick. I have to get back to work. Needed to check on Lucky at lunch bc I wasn't home last night.

Ooh la la. Good mood for a Monday, huh?

Started off that way but it's gone downhill.  
Calling.

She picked up on the second ring.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly.

“I'm fine.”

“Are you sure? Physically, yeah, but emotionally too. Finding out you're having a baby right after a breakup is a lot.”

“Yeah, it is.” She blew out a breath. “But I'm taking things one hour at a time. Making sure I eat and take my prenatal vitamins and drink much more water than coffee. I even had broccoli as my side with lunch instead of potato chips.”

“That's impressive, Em. I'm proud of you.”

“Me too. I'm going to be okay, Ace. I'm made of stern stuff.”

“I know you are. And if anyone gives you a problem, send them to me. I'll set them straight.”

She let out a short laugh. “You probably mean Pierre but I haven't told him yet. Honestly, I'm not even sure I want to.”

I frowned, biting my tongue before I said something off the cuff that might hurt my sister. It was hard not to put myself in the position of that creep ex of hers, but I was a guy and I

couldn't help imagining a woman doing the same to me. Even if it was justified, as it seemed to be here.

“Okay,” I said carefully.

“What, no argument?”

“It's your body, your choice. I'm sure you'll think it through and make the right decision for you—and your child.”

She sighed heavily. “You always know how to make your point without sounding like a know-it-all or being judgmental. I'll take my time thinking it through, I promise.” She paused. “So what do you need a sounding board for? Your booty call last night?”

The back of my neck heated up. “Don't call her that.”

“Smitten kitten, huh?”

“Yeah, maybe. But I'm pushing her too fast.”

“So back off.”

“Yeah, but Thanksgiving—”

“Thanksgiving is a lot for a new couple. What's your hurry?” Then she laughed. “Duh. Preggo brain is making me slow. You can't show up alone. I forgot for a second. Your singledom is like a bullseye for our parents. But hey, you're off the hook with me knocked up. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “I may have considered it.”

“Don't feel guilty. As the eldest, you've always taken the brunt of the parental attention. Time to spread it around, I guess. Lucky me.”

Lucky heard my sister's unnaturally loud voice over the phone and rubbed against my leg. I bent down to give him a scratch.

“I'm still figuring out what to do there. I don't want to freak out my girl and the Hausers as a group can be overwhelming.”

“Um, yes. Understatement.”

“So maybe I shouldn't come at all.”

“You wish, dude. You can come even if your girl doesn’t.”

“I might want to spend the holiday with her. If she’s even into it. She doesn’t seem to have any affection for the holiday season in general, but I don’t want her to be alone if she doesn’t want to come with me.”

“Hey. I have the perfect idea.”

I raised a brow and waited.

“We can have Thanksgiving together. You, me, and your dream girl.”

I started to protest, then the idea started to grow on me. Why not? Kitty would like Emma and vice versa. At least, I thought so. My sister made friends easily and she was funny and easygoing. And then Kitty would get a much more low-key taste of a Hauser holiday.

Plus, I couldn’t stand thinking of her alone while the rest of the world celebrated with their families. That bothered me way down deep.

Emma needed to have a low-key holiday too. No stress. No worrying how to tell the family. Just food and friendship and laughter.

*And you both can avoid dealing with your parents.*

Our parents weren’t awful people. They just wanted to keep us on their version of the straight and narrow. Propriety came first, always. But if we made mistakes or went through some trouble, they were still going to be there for us regardless. That didn’t mean they weren’t overbearing sometimes.

A lot of times.

“Clint?” Emma asked. “I hate when you go all silent.”

“Sorry. I have a lot on my mind. Sure, that sounds fine by me. I just don’t know about Kitty. I’ll have to ask her if she’s good with that idea. If not, we can still have dinner here.”

“And drop her off a turkey breast or something, unless she might have other plans. No one should spend Thanksgiving

totally on their own. Unless she's vegan and hates turkey."

I smiled. That was my baby sister. She was impulsive, sure, but she also had a solid gold heart. "You're going to make a great mom, sis."

"You really think so?" She sniffled.

"I know so. I'll talk to you later after I talk to Kitty. And eat some peas, okay? They count as a green vegetable."

She laughed. "Got it. Later."

I refilled Lucky's feeder and put a second serving of his wet mousse in his bowl.

And then I pulled his catnip mouse out of the toilet, his surest sign of displeasure other shredding the roll of toilet paper. I dried off the mouse, futilely replaced the TP and faced myself in the mirror.

I looked more tired than usual, and I knew very well why—and it wasn't just because I'd been up all night with Kitty for very good reasons.

I knew I couldn't run from my family forever. Dad was getting older. He'd mentioned the last time I saw him that he was beginning to consider his exit strategy for retirement and he really needed to know my plans so he could leave the constituents in a good place, knowing their leadership structure was intact.

Assuming they wanted yet another Hauser in office, but all signs pointed to the fact that they did.

He understood I loved my job and it was a field I was badly needed in, considering the current vet staffing shortage. But he assumed I'd take a leave of absence for however long and just...go be the mayor of Clintondale, the minuscule town I'd left right after high school. It wasn't more than a few hours from where I'd settled but that wasn't the point.

I wanted to stay here. I had no interest in being mayor.

*So just tell him already.*

Letting him and my mom down wasn't easy. They were all about the family's legacy in town. I appreciated that and respected it. It just wasn't for me.

I was building my legacy somewhere else. And maybe Kitty would be a part of my life, too. I was already hoping she would.

*And you call Emma impulsive.*

The clinic texted me and let me know I was needed right away. Animal control had just been alerted of a hoarding case in the nearby small town of Turnbull. They were bringing in cats—and a few dogs—by the bucketload.

Thorny Paw Clinic was already on the search for fosters to take care of some of the animals in better shape, and they were coordinating efforts with Kitten Around Rescue Clinic to take on some of the worst cases. Some had respiratory and eye issues and many were malnourished.

So it was basically all hands on deck—and during Thanksgiving week, a time when resources were even more strained than they usually were. Some of the staff had planned vacation time and of course, at this time of year, kids were sick at home, which meant still others were unavoidably out.

I could've really used Kitty's sandwich. And Kitty, just for five minutes, to make me smile in that way only she could.

“Okay, slugger, I'm off again. I'm not going to say be good because I won't waste my breath.” I picked up Lucky long enough to kiss his furry cheek before sitting him down on the rug with my slipper. I knew better than to push my luck by taking it away from him when he was already in a mood. “You're set for both wet and dry food. Hopefully I'll be back later tonight.”

I'd slept at the clinic before a few times and it royally sucked.

Just in case, I turned on the TV in the living room and pulled up the YouTube video of colorful fish swimming around in a giant tank. Lucky instantly climbed up on the back

of the sofa and plopped down to enjoy the show from his preferred vantage point.

I headed back to work and walked into the waiting room to the usual chaos of a vet clinic during a holiday week. A bird was squawking frantically and flapping its wings from its perch on a high shelf and Alice was doing her best to talk him down.

Funnily enough, the bird wasn't even a patient. It appeared to be a pigeon that had flown in from outside.

Ignoring the melee, I stopped by the desk to see if I had any messages and stared as Francine, one of the techs who was currently covering the phones while Alice attempted bird control, handed over what appeared to be a footlong sub.

Wrapped in Christmas paper festooned with dancing cats, no less.

“One of your admirers dropped off a gift. She ran off before I could get her name. Skittish much?”

There was a Christmas-style name tag on the outside of the paper addressed to me and the “from” line simply contained a crudely drawn paw print.

I swallowed hard, stupidly touched. “You just don't know her,” I said vaguely, although yeah, probably, I could see calling her skittish at times.

At other times she was as relaxed as anyone else.

Whatever she was, she was perfectly made for me. I didn't know how or why or if maybe we'd just been sucked into some weird vortex.

All I knew was that I was so fucking grateful I'd been the admin that night at Kitten Around when she'd posted her ad.

Before Francine could ask more questions, I went back to my closet-sized office and dug into my sandwich. I hadn't even requested anything in particular, but she'd delivered my favorite from the deli—thick-sliced carved turkey with a layer of cranberry dressing. But the Christmas paper part of the deal was new.



I smiled as I finished the first half and carefully wrapped up the rest for dinner, though I wanted to eat it now. I wondered if the deli would do that Christmas paper add-on for me next time I ordered or if that touch was all Kitty.

It had to be Kitty. But how did someone “indifferent” to Christmas have paper and tags? Maybe she’d bought them to give a gift to Magnus.

I crumpled the paper in my fist. I was not going to focus on silly jealousy now. Magnus hadn’t been inside her last night, now had he?

The important thing was that I was part of her present—and I intended to stay that way.

Hopefully.

I pulled out my phone, sent her a quick, casual text—no pressure here, nope, no ma’am—and shut off my phone to deal with my next appointment. I had to clear my mind to handle the rest of my day.

Certainty was just not a factor when it came to Kitty Armor.

## FOURTEEN

# Katherine

THE MAN WAS TRYING TO KILL ME.

On that particular day, I could've been referring to one of the three men in my life but at this moment, I was thinking of Clint. And only Clint.

I expected him to be pissed at me. He had every right to be. I'd sneaked around and been uncommunicative and late at fulfilling his very simple requests—ones I'd even offered to do.

I'd just conveniently forgotten the fact that I'd spent the better part of the last year locked away in my apartment because I couldn't handle people.

Not just people. The noises of the city. The traffic. The pedestrians getting too close on the sidewalk. Even remembering how to order at the counter of the deli when I wasn't familiar with the menu and had to think on my feet while the clerk waited.

And then when I did, stuttering through the words, trying to act as if ordering was an everyday activity for me like every other normal person.

My apartment was a controlled environment. I said who came and went—and that was mostly no one.

Or it had been until Clint.

Even Mag, the latest pebble in my shoe, had only been to my apartment twice in the eighteen months we'd been business partners. One of those times he'd stayed for a week,

which had been awkward and a little panic-inducing at first until I'd calmed down around him. Somehow he related to my issues due to his own anxiety problems in the past.

But at no time had I been tempted to mount him like a polo pony. That urge was strictly reserved for Clint.

We'd never fooled around—God, no. Never even hugged for more than a few seconds that had ended with a weird laugh on both sides. But we'd talked for hours a day sometimes. There were months of my life in the past year when Mag had been virtually my only link to the outside world—other than my grocery delivery persons and the occasional drop-in visit from my father.

I'd forgotten for a few minutes today with Clint. He had a way of making me feel as if I was the old me...the one who'd been fine with stopping out for a quick errand at the deli or to check in on a...*friend's* cat.

The woman who could have casual relationships with guys that didn't last. I *liked* being fancy-free.

The lie had sounded good in my head.

And then Muffintop had started getting sick—although I hadn't realized what was happening right away—and the worse he'd gotten, the worse I had, as well.

I'd stopped going out. The few girlfriends I had stopped calling once partying wasn't an option for the sad friend who'd started feeling hemmed in by congested bars. Who had to fight the urge not to drink too much, not to have fun but to deaden the pain of knowing I was losing my baby.

My life had become consumed by vet visits and trying new foods and hand-feeding my boy when he hadn't had the energy to feed himself. Holding his head up as he managed to have a little bit for lunch, trying to keep the flare of hope going even when he wouldn't so much as take a drink.

Watching him waste away while I tried everything I knew to keep him alive had been one of the hardest things I'd ever gone through.

Was still going through, although he'd been gone now close to a year.

And then finding the strength to let him go...

I wasn't the same as I'd been before. I didn't think I ever could be.

But Clint had given me moments where I wasn't just a shell going through the motions. I'd been fully in my body, present and living. Not trapped in the endless whirlpool cycle of my brain.

Somehow I'd responded to him as I would have in the past.

*Sure, I'll help. No problem.*

Until the moment came and panic flooded my system.

In the end, I'd ordered from the deli and had it delivered to my house. Then I'd wrapped his lunch in the last festive paper I still had from years ago, when I'd still actively participated in the outside world instead of hiding beyond the windows of my apartment like a ghost.

Even my attempt to be normal had failed. Who wrapped up lunch like a present?

I'd just wanted to make him smile. He had to be tired, and I was sure he'd been swamped and overwhelmed.

Okay, maybe not overwhelmed, because he seemed utterly competent in all things. Unlike me.

It had been harder to get up the nerve to go to Clint's place without him there. I'd hurried through his apartment without barely seeing any details other than the cat I'd clung to like a teddy bear until I could take a full breath again.

Somehow, Lucky had let me hug him, and I wasn't even missing any limbs.

I'd babbled while talking to Clint's neighbor. I wasn't even sure she'd been able to understand me. But I'd tried. Then I'd dropped off the sub at the clinic, somewhere I'd actually been

quite often with my cats over the years until agoraphobia had shuttered me inside more often than not.

Such an awful word. Agoraphobia sounded like a fear of something deadly, like maybe tarantulas. But nope, in my case it was just rampant nerves about being away from home. Out in the big bad world unprotected. Without my safe couch and safe windows and safe privacy.

I'd barely made it back to my car without hyperventilating. But I'd done it. And even I, the one most likely to never see a bright side willingly, had to admit that the more times I left my house, the easier it got to manage.

Not a lot easier, mind you, and sometimes I backslid. Trying again was the important thing.

I didn't want to be a prisoner in my apartment. I'd have to take Princess to the vet again sometime soon. It had been too long. Maybe I'd even take myself to the therapist I'd stopped going to a while ago because hey, I was okay. I could get by.

Except I'd been home after my errands for three hours now and I still hadn't fully settled. A hot shower had helped, as had my meditation app on my phone.

Princess delicately taking tuna treats from my fingers had helped too. Normally she wolfed them down as if she was starving. She'd even hung around with me after the goodies were gone, curling around my feet on the window seat and drifting off to pleasant, likely tuna-scented dreams.

But it wasn't until Clint texted me that I finally managed to smile, even if no one could see it but me.

CLINT

I missed you at lunch. But you made it up to me with that sub. Can I request every sub I ever get from now on be wrapped in Christmas paper with dancing cats?

I was so delighted by his response, I forgot to wait an appropriate amount of time to reply.

KITTY

Even if it's April?

Especially if it's April. But I'd settle for dancing bunnies too.

Right, as if we'd still be talking in April. Or getting naked. But he sure hadn't balked at my question.

Maybe he was having those kind of thoughts too. But he hadn't slipped and said he loved me.

Of course not. Because we were virtual strangers. I'd even done something crazy while I was out—and I hadn't even had a racing heart as I slipped into a nearby bookstore. I'd special-ordered a certain book that had a certain man on the cover and then come home to make a place of honor for it on my crowded bookshelves. I didn't even have a copy of all the books I'd edited.

The funniest thing about my impromptu errand? I'd been so focused on having Clint's abs all to myself on a book cover, I'd almost forgotten to freak out.

Until I ran out of the store and left my credit card behind.

The saleswoman had immediately chased me down and nearly given me a heart attack, but I had my card back and Clint's book cover would soon be in my mailbox.

Cold comfort, I supposed, even if he never made his way back to my bed.

*That ball's in your court. Don't say anything you will regret later.*

I sent him a quick reply.

I'll see what I can do.

The phone rang in my hand. I accepted the call before sense could kick in. I was too greedy for the sound of his voice.

Already.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly before I could figure out how to say hello.

My face grew hot and I shifted on the window seat, making Princess leap off and streak toward the bedroom. She hated how fidgety I could be.

Me too.

“I’m okay.”

“When you didn’t come for lunch...”

“You expected me to never speak to you again?” I asked, equally quietly.

I’d thought of it. Not because he deserved that sort of treatment but because it took so much out of me to try to seem normal—even my slightly twisted version.

“I didn’t know. I just wanted to say I’m really glad you didn’t do...that.”

“Me too.” I bit my lip. “Aren’t you busy right now?”

“Yeah.” He let out a little laugh. “I’m in the janitorial closet. Only place I could get a moment’s privacy other than the john. I have another appointment in like two minutes. We’ve been dealing with a hoarding case today. So many kittens that are sick and there’s been a pregnant dog, and ill rabbits, and God, it’s a mess. And then there were the ones we couldn’t save.”

My throat tightened to the point of pain. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Are *you* okay?”

“Yeah. Just it’s hard. I shouldn’t even be talking about it but it’ll be all over the news tonight.” He exhaled. “Not that I’ll be watching TV. I’ll be here.”

“All night?”

“Yeah, I repacked my overnight bag when I stopped home to see Lucky.”

“Because I never told you I’d made sure he was all right. I’m sorry. I messed up.” I rubbed my eyes. “Going out isn’t easy for me. And sometimes I forget all the steps...”

“I talked to Mrs. Fields. She told me what you did. I forgot to give you the combination for Lucky’s food canister.” He laughed. “My little larcenist.”

He’d just rolled over my admission and I let him, because I so didn’t want to get into that now. He was far too busy to deal with my issues at the moment. “Not so little. But he gives great hugs.”

“Wow, he let you hug him? Did you tie him up? Slather yourself in tuna juice?”

“I didn’t give him a lot of choice, but he didn’t fight me off.”

“Maybe it’s time we try introducing him to Princess again. A bit more of a coordinated effort this time.” His amused tone had me halfway to smiling again before I remembered it would probably be better if we didn’t see each other right away.

I needed to get some clarity back. And that wasn’t going to happen with him around.

Or on the phone.

Or in my texts.

Or hell, even in my very confused brain.

“Clint, I’m not sure about Thanksgiving—”

Someone called him, and I heard an impatient bark. “Dammit, I’m sorry. I have to go. Can I call you later?” He paused. “And can you actually answer?”

“Sure. Go. I hope it’s not too awful. I...” I bit my lip. “Call anytime you want.”

He let out a relieved breath. “Thanks. You don’t know how good it is to hear your voice.”

“Because I sound like a phone sex operator?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that...” Then he laughed. “It doesn’t hurt. Talk to you later, sweetheart.”



Then he clicked off as if men casually referred to me that way all the time.

Sure, right.

I hung up and went to make more cookies. He'd taken most of them to work. After the day he had in store, he deserved them. Maybe he'd want more when he got done with work...

Yeah, I was not thinking that way.

But I still made two dozen and settled in to check my work email with a plate of them still hot from the oven beside me.

Mag hadn't emailed. Hadn't texted. I supposed that was on me. Well, not entirely. But as a recovering people pleaser, I blamed myself for not recognizing the cues that sending someone you weren't having sex with a sex toy meant...well, the obvious meaning. No matter how they explained it away.

I'd completely missed that Magnus wanted to have sex with me. Whoa.

What was I supposed to do now? I wished I could talk to Clint about it even if he was probably the last one I should tell.

How could he be jealous or possessive over me when he barely knew me?

*Same way you're baking him all the cookies and replaying him saying the word sweetheart in his low, gravelly voice.*

Man, I wished I had *Love's Torrid Embrace* already. Waiting a week to receive the book sucked. I wanted to stroke that cover...

Possibly while I stroked myself.

Always the safest sex anyone could have, especially emotionally.

But then I thought of the bullet that I couldn't use anymore without suspecting there was more to Mag's thought process in giving it to me. And I could not and would not ask him.

So I was going to have to say goodbye to the damn thing—in a way that properly befit its place of honor in my life until

its tainted origins had rendered it useless to me.

Still, it was good to be able to take care of yourself. I would not be beholden to a man for my orgasms.

*Tell that to Clint.*

I would. Maybe. If the conversation became necessary.

In the meantime, I'd back up my thoughts with actions and order my own damn bullet off Amazon.

Holy cannoli was that an education. My bullet was clearly a low-grade model. It only did a few things. Granted, it did them well, but wow, I was missing out.

My silver AMEX was smoking within minutes. Also, I would need a bigger Bible. Mine would not accommodate the three so-not-bullets I'd purchased.

I'd worry about that later once I made sure I liked them. Not that they could be returned.

I picked up my now empty cookie plate—I hadn't meant to eat them all—and washed it in the kitchen before I gave in to my desire to wrap up the rest of the cookies in Christmas paper.

Because I was a sap and I knew Clint would be exhausted after work and he was such a good guy, he deserved someone who baked cookies for him.

And gave him blowjobs every single day with happy endings with no requirement for something in return.

Something I hadn't done last night.

*Now you may never get the chance. You know he's just messing around with you so you can be his stand-in girlfriend to impress his parents.*

Impress, ha. More like get them off his back. Not sure him showing up with me would do that but I'd let him have his delusions—unless I could convince him it was all a big mistake to ask me to play the part.

I yawned and refilled Princess's bowl of dry food before I changed into a pair of fuzzy pajamas and curled into bed. Last

night's decided lack of sleep was catching up to me, and I didn't know when Clint would be calling.

In the meantime, I'd just take a short nap in sheets that smelled deliciously of cinnamon and crisp, clean, masculine soap.

I snuggled in, yanked my spare pillow against my chest and smiled my way into sleep.

And woke in the dark with a hard, heavy body behind me and soft, warm lips against my neck. Even as I jerked awake, my heartbeat slamming in my ears, his familiar scent and touch and voice wrapped around me.

"A neighbor buzzed me up and you left the door unlocked. But I missed you. I hope it's okay I'm here. I just need you." He buried his face in my hair, his cold nose rubbing against my neck and making me shiver.

Then I realized he was shaking against me. Around me. Until I turned over and tried to wrap his big body in my arms and my legs around his so that I could transfer my warmth.

"It was awful. I don't want to put this...any of this...on you. I handle it. I always handle it. But so many babies dead or dying, and the ones we have, will they all survive? I don't know. I just don't fucking know."

My usual inclination to back away, to retreat to safety, didn't seem to apply here. All I wanted to do was offer comfort.

"*Shh. Shh.*" I didn't know what to say, so I kept trying to shush him into sleep or some kind of relief while he shook against me and pressed his cold face into my chest, right above my heart.

Rain pattered on the window and left silvery tracks on the glass in the moonlight. That was what I felt against my skin. He'd just been outside in the cool, damp night.

It had to just be rain.

In time, he slept. When I was sure that his breathing was utterly steady and his face was as relaxed as I could hope for, I

swallowed hard and gently kissed his damp lips.

My chest ached. Simply ached.

“I love you,” I whispered, and this time, some part of me hoped he heard. That he understood in the place inside of him that didn’t need words.

I loved him for his heart and that he cared for all those left behind. And I loved him because he faced the demons I’d run from.

Was still running from.

Most of all, I loved him because *I* was his choice to come home to. Just as he was mine. Even if it didn’t last between us, if it couldn’t, I’d found a home not in a place but a person. Somehow he was safety and pleasure and a respite, all in one.

Temporary or not, this mattered. *We* mattered.

I only hoped I could give him back a fraction of what he’d already given me.

## FIFTEEN



I FORCED MYSELF OUT OF BED FOUR HOURS LATER TO DIG through my pile of clothes on the floor beside the bed. I was late. I had to get back.

“No.”

The sleepy voice turned sharp as I continued dressing, tugging on my pants and shirt. I needed a shower but there wasn't time for it.

Not today.

I was the first one who could get there. Most of the rest of them had families. Wives, husbands, kids. Reasons they couldn't be on call day and night. I didn't. I had my job and my cat.

And a family I spent time running from so I couldn't disappoint them with my presence and the proof I wasn't what they wanted.

That was all I had.

I bent to grab my tie and Kitty rolled out of bed to try to yank it out of my hand. “I said no.”

I held fast. “I have to go to work.”

“No. Do you understand English?” She yanked on my tie hard enough, I was surprised the fabric didn't rip. “No, Clint.”

I turned around and fumbled on the nightstand in the dark for my phone and my watch. I slid the phone in my pocket and put on the watch. “I'll just get my spare from my bag,” I

muttered as if her grip on my tie was simply due to a fashion choice.

“No.” She shoved me when I tried to go around her. Shoved me again when I just kept moving, finally angling her body and simply mowing me down until I fell back on the bed.

She climbed on top of me, a shadow wraith in the dark with that wild witchy hair flowing around her shoulders and her dark eyes an unholy gleam in the night.

It wasn't sexual intent driving her, but something even more potent.

“You can't go back right now. Do you hear me? You. Can't. Go. Back. Right. Now.” She braced her hands flat on my chest and bore down against me, her thin pajamas no match for her curves and the frustration leaking through her pores.

She was warm and wriggling against me in the best ways. Even though I was irritated and confused and tired as hell, my body was already responding.

I'd respond to her even if I was unconscious.

“What the hell are you saying? I'm a vet, goddammit. Of course I can go back. I *have* to go back. They need me.”

“What if I need you? What then?” She ripped open the buttons on her pajama top, revealing all the curves that scrambled my brain when I could just feel them against me.

Seeing them again was a whole other level.

I tried to mount a defense. This was absolutely the last thing I had time for. I knew Grant would be coming in early today and dropping off his young daughter at school ahead of time so he could make it work. I couldn't shirk my responsibilities. There were still so many animals that needed care.

Yet Kitty's dark gaze was my touchstone. The very thing I needed to take the next breath.

I reared up to wrap my arms around her as I slanted my mouth over hers and drew in her energy like oxygen. My own

was so low, my spirit so depleted, that she felt like a live wire in my embrace, sparking to life the almost burned-out embers inside me.

Her fingers drove through my hair, her nails dragging against my scalp and creating little frissons of pain that overrode the exhaustion threatening to drown me. Hungrily, we kissed, our breaths already sobbing out to fill the air with sound and need.

I filled my hands with her breasts, working the tight tips while I sucked on her tongue and hoped to God I wasn't being too rough. There was no checking the strength inside me. No place for patience. I had to have her. She'd tossed me a lifeline and I couldn't do anything other than hang the hell on.

She whispered something I didn't quite understand as she drew back and dragged her hands down my torso, exploring every part of me she could reach. She used her nails on my skin there, too, and I dropped my head back, letting the heat from her touch slip into all the cold pockets inside me. Then she was undoing my belt and yanking down the zipper, scooping me out before I could even think to voice a protest.

I was almost positive it had been a while for her before we'd come together, and I didn't want her to feel like she had to do this for me—

“Christ, Kitty,” I gasped as she slithered down the bed to run her tongue over my hot, hard length.

She lifted her head, those witchy eyes riveted on mine. “Call me Katherine.”

*Katherine?* Now she didn't want me to use Kitty?

“Holy shit.” She was sucking on the head of my cock with a strength that verged on painful while she kneaded the bunched, tight muscles of my thigh.

I would've called her anything she wanted me to if she just promised to never ever stop.

Threading my fingers through her hair, I prayed to hold on while I recited the twelve times table in my head. I only started over about five times before she twisted around to lick my sac

and there weren't enough numbers in the universe to stave off my release.

“Kitty, Katherine, I'm going to—” I tried to formulate words but her teeth lightly grazed my flesh and fuck it, I was a goner.

My hips rocked upward as I fisted her hair and let everything go. Instead of the ache inside me subsiding, it seemed to go on and on as I poured myself between her giving lips. And hell, I could hear her swallowing me. That shouldn't have been so arousing but it was—and I kept giving her more.

I finally unclenched my fingers from her hair and threw my arm over my face as I dragged in huge gulps of air. My heart was a jackhammer and I couldn't hear myself think over the frantic thud.

When I managed to drop my arm to the bed, she was kneeling beside me, her hair a wild tumble around her shoulders as she licked her lips and rubbed my stomach as if to soothe me. I swallowed hard, feeling strangely awkward. Almost...shy.

God, what was this woman doing to me?

“Katherine,” I managed.

She nodded. “Kitty Armor is my editing name.” Her voice was a raw-sounding whisper. “I'm really Katherine Armitage. What you heard the other day on the phone was the truth.”

Rather than speak, I rolled over to lay my head on her thighs. She stroked my hair, over and over. Lulling me to relax so that it felt completely natural to just doze off in her lap.

Then I cocked one eye open and saw that her pajama pants were covered in random cat faces. Some were smiling, some doing crazy eyes, some looking downright pissed off.

Me...I was drifting on a post-orgasmic cloud of, well, not bliss. I was too keyed up for that. But momentary peace.

She'd given me the biggest gift of all.

I shifted my head and angled up to kiss her belly and then traveled upward to her still hard nipples. I clasped one



between my teeth as I met her gaze. Her lips trembled open on a moan and I couldn't stop myself from peeling down the waistband of her pajamas to find her hot and so very wet.

“You don't have to—I wanted to do this for—God, your fingers.”

My lips curved and I took more of her breast into my mouth as my fingers delved deeper.

The sweet scent of her need filled my head, replacing all the chaos from earlier. The panicked cries from the animals, the sharply barked orders from the techs and the other vets, and the shrill rings from the phones that never stopped ringing.

It all fuzzed into white noise.

*She* was my reality right now.

“I want you to come in my mouth now,” I said, peppering her flesh with wet kisses and tiny bites that made her clench around my fingers.

Before she knew what was coming, I flipped her on her back and pinned her beneath me, ranging my body over hers to both hold her down and to remind her that I wasn't going to be denied—unless she had a damn good reason for me not to make her come with my tongue.

When she simply whimpered and writhed, I figured she didn't. I slid down her body, dragging her pajama bottoms with me as I kissed every patch of skin I exposed.

This time, she didn't shy away for even a second from my mouth exploring her pussy. She just canted her hips upward, seized hold of my hair and savored, her lush body straining as her legs wrapped around me to keep me right where I was.

I wasn't going anywhere. Not until she poured over my tongue.

Her heels beat into my back as I opened her up for my fingers. One would never be enough. Her tight hot walls rippled as I sucked on her clit and then used one of my fingers to go down a bit farther and explore her there too. “Okay?” I asked against her thigh when I paused to take a breath.

She didn't say anything, just moaned, so I kept going, pushing my lubricated finger that much deeper. She was so turned on that wetness wasn't a factor right now. I went back to eating her, jerking my now swollen cock against the mattress every time she yanked on my hair.

Fuck, I could come again. Now. Spilling myself all over her pretty sheets like the mindless animal she made me.

"Katherine," I murmured against her, trying out the name. Seeing if it fit the woman who wrung me out and put me back together again so easily.

She arched and clung to me, her legs tightening along with her strong fingers in my hair as her hips went wild and her orgasm soaked my lips and tongue.

"Katherine," I said again a moment later when I could catch my breath.

A breathless laugh spilled out of her. "Do you think that's a magic 'make her come' trick?"

"No, but I like the idea of it. May keep trying." I moved up her body and laced my fingers into her hair. "Kiss me. Let me taste us together."

She lifted her face to mine and somehow a kiss that should've been dirty in all the best ways started out fast and frantic but soon shifted into slow and unhurried. We turned onto our sides, hands wandering, arching against each other as the moment spun out so sweetly.

I pressed myself against her, my cock finding her heat unerringly. Tipping closer as I strained toward her without conscious thought. I grabbed her leg and lifted it over mine, angling upward to push inside.

All I wanted was to be inside her.

My eyes flew open as she pressed a piece of latex against my chest.

Better safe than sorry. At least she was thinking even if I wasn't—and even if I regretted missing that chance to go bareback.

Quickly, I put on the condom and lined us up. The sigh that left her as I stroked into her echoed deep inside me. I couldn't make a sound, couldn't do anything but drive into her again and again. She let out a moan and I knew she needed more.

Just as I did.

I shifted our positions until she was on top. She bit her lip and rolled her hips against mine tentatively, pulling a groan from my throat.

“God. Ride me. Ride me, baby.”

Her hesitant movements only made my cock harden more. The moonlight and the silvery rain on the windows somehow gilded her breasts and hips and hair. I couldn't stop staring at her even as I rocked into her. My muscles quivered and my hands weren't steady as I cupped her breasts, bringing them to my mouth for hot, hungry kisses that ratcheted up the need between us.

My body was on fire and my thrusts were as desperate as if I'd never come. I wished I could rip off the condom and drain myself into her giving pussy just as I'd done with her throat.

I wanted to simply melt into her in every way possible.

“Clint,” she whispered. “Rub my clit. I need you to. Please.”

I did as she asked, wishing I'd thought of it myself. That I'd been capable of doing anything other than fucking her wildly. I was obsessed with her breasts. And her pussy. And every other part of her.

She rewarded me by lifting her arms behind her head, linking her hands like some kind of nymph while her hips rode me so beautifully. Taking my cock inside her as if she'd been born to do nothing else.

“You're so gorgeous.” I reared up to wrap my arm around her, my hips still on autopilot as I pounded into her. “I want to fuck you forever.”

Not exactly poetry but I was nearly crazed. It was a miracle I could still speak.

“You’re like a goddamn wet dream except I’m awake.” I kissed her mouth, her neck, her shoulders—my lips a fever against her skin while my fingers circled and circled her proud little clit. “Soak me. I need to feel it.”

She reached down to grip my shoulders, her movements jerky. Wild. Desperate like her kisses as she fumbled for my mouth. And when she finally stilled, her pussy tightening around me one last time, she made no sound at all as she threw back her head.

I lifted her and pushed her down into the mattress, yanking her legs onto my shoulders so I could surge into her hard and fast. My thumb found her clit somehow in the midst of my strokes but I wasn’t even sure if she wanted it there because my balls were clenched so hard I was mindless.

Then I snapped my hips back and forward one last time, a roar leaving my throat as I came, filling the condom though I wished like hell I was filling her.

I dropped my head to her chest, panting as if I’d run for my life. And in a way I had. Every moment I spent with her felt utterly...vital.

Weakly, she curled her arms around me and kissed my sweaty cheek when I finally lifted my head to make sure she was still alive. I pressed my nose into her damp throat, drawing in her lavender scent until finally my system started to settle.

“I guess I really needed that.”

“We both did.” She cuddled into me and let out a snort. “Are you serious?”

Following her gaze, I turned my head to find Princess Goldenrod sitting on the headboard, watching us fuck like maniacs with a faint sense of disdain.

Then she lifted a paw and started to wash.

Correction—the disdain was definitely not faint.

“I think she’s unimpressed.”

“She might be, but I’m not.” Kitty traced a fingertip over my biceps and rocked against me, stirring my momentarily spent cock. “Do you think it’s possible to actually fuck to death?”

I groaned. “I wish I could stay here all day to try it and see.”

“Me too.” She reached up to run her fingertip under my eye. “You’re so tired. I just couldn’t let you leave yet. Not without trying to give you something to take back with you.” She leaned up to capture my lips. “You’re such a good man it makes me horny.”

I had to laugh. There simply was no other option. “And you’re such a bad girl that I wish I could live inside your cunt.”

Her dark eyes flared wide. “You know, I never understood why some of the writers I edit use that word. It’s so crude. How could anyone possibly find it arousing?”

“And?”

“And I learned something new today.” She wound her fingers thoughtfully through my hair. “Have you ever thought of narrating audio books? I might have a job for you.”

“Make me an offer I can’t refuse and we can talk.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Pay scale is negotiable. I might be undergoing a change in...my company structure soon.”

I didn’t understand the sudden tenseness of her body underneath mine, but I knew how to make her pliant again. “I actually know a bit more about romance books than you can imagine.”

She waved a hand. “Yeah, yeah, I ordered one of your books, Lee. You could’ve just told me you let women ogle you for money.” She ran her hands over my torso while I gaped at her. “Lucky me, I get to do it for free.”

“Wait, you know? How do you know?”

“Ever heard of Google?” She caught the tip of her tongue between her teeth. “You have many fans. Many salacious things have been said about your sin lines online.”

I frowned while she skimmed her fingernails over my hips.

God, were we ever a pair. Both of us using different names than our own. Well, Lee was my middle name, and I supposed Kitty could be a nickname for Katherine. But Armor?

I kissed her shoulder and steeped myself in her floral scent. She’d dropped so much of her armor with me.

It was about time I do the same. And I would.

Just not now.

“You bought a book with me on it?”

“Yeah. You’re a little bit hot.”

It was easier now to relax into this dance between us. I’d hidden some things, yeah, but it was a relief she’d found out about my not exactly illicit past. I was hiding other things too—about my family and what my future would be if my parents got their way.

But one thing I wasn’t hiding was my feelings for her. They felt like they were on the verge of just exploding out of me.

And that wasn’t a damn euphemism either.

“*You’re* a lot hot.” I tucked her sweaty curls behind her ear. “How do you feel about my sister and I having Thanksgiving here with you?”

“Huh?”

“My little sister is pregnant. She’s not ready to face all of the family yet. So I suggested we eat here.”

“Is this because you’re addicted to my cookies? I can’t cook a turkey with my special vanilla,” she said slowly, the wheels clearly turning in her beautiful head. “At least I wouldn’t think so. Though you’d be surprised all the uses for it.”

Since I was currently thinking of some very naughty uses indeed, I covered her lips with my finger. “I can pick up a turkey breast.”

I hoped. Maybe. Though I didn’t have much time to place an order now, just two days before the holiday.

I’d figure it out. Turkey breasts were the least of my problems.

Thunder growled outside the window and she jerked. Lightning flashed into the room just long enough for me to catch a glimpse of her naked and sprawled beneath me.

I was not supposed to be here right now.

With a groan, I slid out of her and removed the condom. Very carefully. Then I rose and took it to the bathroom to dispose of it.

With a wince, I flipped on the light and looked at my back. I had an assortment of scratches and maybe even a bruise I didn’t quite recall.

Sexual war wounds. Even now, I wanted her again.

She followed me into the bathroom and gasped at the sight of my back. “Did I do that?”

“Yes.” I pulled her against me and gave her a kiss to stave off her turkey-based questions. “I really have to shower now. I can’t go to work smelling like we just fucked. Though I really wish I could.” I filled my palm with her breast. “Can I wash your hair?”

“Yes.” She bit her lip. “Does your sister know I’m weird?”

“She knows I’m weird, so she wouldn’t expect any less.” Gently, I kissed her. “You saved me tonight. Do you know that?”

She didn’t say anything.

I eased back and tipped up her chin. “My job...I left it once. I had to for my sanity. Same reason I came back. Some things are hard and awful sometimes but they’re part of you. Part of me. I need to do what I do, but I’ve never found a place

of peace.” Thunder seemed to shake the building. “You’re my peace, Kitty. And I can’t imagine letting you go.”

She swallowed deeply. “I really don’t want you to let me go, so if I try to run, don’t let me.”

“I think that’s considered kidnapping in some jurisdictions? Or unlawful imprisonment.”

“Sounds kinky.” She sucked in air between her teeth. “I want to give you a key so you can just come in when you want to and not have to rely on my neighbors to let you in.” She bit her lip. “How do you feel about that?”

I tucked her curls behind her ears. “I feel like I want you to keep my key too. But I didn’t bring it with me.”

“Tomorrow,” she said quietly. “This is moving fast.”

“Seems right on pace to me.”

And if that made me crazy, so be it.

She leaned up on her tiptoes to press her forehead to mine. “How do you feel about turducken?”

I had no clue what turducken was, but I was learning to appreciate new experiences. “Sounds heavenly.”



## SIXTEEN

# Katherine

CLINT WAS VERY LATE TO WORK.

But it wasn't entirely the fault of my magic pussy, so named by him during round two? Three? I didn't know for sure, just that my magic was currently sore as hell.

His boss Grant had called and insisted—no, ordered—that Clint take the morning off. They'd sent some of the rescued animals to a regional emergency vet, making the situation at Thorny Paw a little less dire.

Clint's chat with his boss had evened him out to the point he'd even laughed a bit on the phone. And he'd grinned when I'd sent him off to work with his jacket pockets full of cookies.

I'd never been the domestic sort before, and certainly not for a man, but it made me feel all warm inside to bake for him and plan the dinner we'd have when he got off work—assuming it was before midnight.

Even if it wasn't, I planned to have a roast waiting for him in the Crockpot I'd just gotten delivered via my shopping app. Naturally I had no clue how to make a roast but I'd researched it online and the smell coming from my kitchen made my stomach growl all day while I cleaned up the apartment.

Funny how even vacuuming cat hair could be enjoyable when you were also doing it for someone else to see, not just you. Princess ran so fast from the vacuum that she nearly gouged material out of the couch cushions during her flight from the room, but otherwise, the afternoon went well enough that I decided to not only deliver another Christmas-paper-

wrapped sub to Clint, I also stopped by his place afterward to pick up the key he'd left for me in his mailbox.

No pressure, he'd said, but I wanted to check on Lucky. I also had a surprise in mind for Clint involving his cat and the baby gate I'd taken out of the closet and stretched across my bedroom doorway. When I returned from my lunchtime errands with a dubious Lucky—who'd only tolerated me catnapping him from his home due to my extra-large pouch of fishy treats—Princess was on my bed, staring at the gate with obvious disgust. She could've leaped over it but Lucky and his bulk wasn't as sure of a bet. I hoped.

You could never be sure with cats though. They were wily.

Princess's gold eyes narrowed as she spotted who was in my arms. Lucky looked up at me for another treat and I gave it to him, thinking erroneously I was buying his cooperation.

Wrong. A moment later, he twisted out of my arms and went sailing through the air right onto the bed, landing about a half inch from Princess. She let out a screech designed to raise the dead and then the fur was flying in every direction as I hurried to move the baby gate so I could get in the room to break up the fight.

*Save me, Jackson Galaxy!*

I rushed in to separate the cats, flinging fishy treats in all directions while trying not to yell since Jackson said distractions were the way to end disputes, not using a loud voice. Except neither of them seemed to care about the treats. Princess booked out of the room and Lucky pursued at top speed, leaving me no choice but to follow.

I thought I heard the squawk of my speaker from the lobby but I was too busy dodging and running and trying to block their paths with the vacuum and the broom and anything I could think of to slow down their flight so I could grab one of them in an attempt to try separating. Then my door slowly inched open just as Princess approached, and I shrieked. I had no clue who was trying to come in, but the door only opened wider.

I stopped dead at the sight of Magnus, managing to squawk out to watch for the cat just as Princess aimed for freedom. Mag bent to snatch her mid-flight, and Lucky took that opportunity to race through Mag's legs and down the hall.

"Dammit, what are you doing here?" I yelled, scaring Princess enough that she pressed herself to Mag's chest and peered out at me from under the flap of his snow-dusted jacket.

"Here I half thought when you didn't answer the speaker, I'd come up here to you naked in bed with your vet. Instead, it's like kitties gone wild in here."

"I wish I was naked in bed with my vet," I muttered as Mag's eyes flashed.

Ugh.

I shoved my hands through my now-disordered topknot and moved to take my cat from Mag.

Princess jumped out of his arms and ran from me to the bathroom. If she could've slammed the door, she would have.

Fuck, I had to get Lucky. Please God, let him still be on this floor.

I ran past Mag and out into the hall, then down the stairs when I didn't see Lucky anywhere around. My throat tightened and my eyes watered as I tried to snuffle back my tears as I called his name in as pleasant a voice as possible considering I was seconds from letting out my tears of frustration and worry.

Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs behind me, and I stopped on the landing to whirl around and point at Magnus.

"Why are you here? Why are you being so weird? What happened to my easygoing, non-problematic friend?" There was no keeping the accusation out of my voice as I propped my hands on my hips.

"I'm being weird? You hooked up with some random guy off the net when last I knew, you were barely even leaving your apartment."

“Can you keep your voice down please?”

“Why don’t you try it?”

“Why are you here?” I repeated, my voice inadvertently rising to match his. “You weren’t invited.”

Dammit, I hadn’t meant to say that. Inwardly, I winced as his jaw locked and I noticed he’d shaved off the light scruff he used to have.

“Look, I’m sorry.”

“I can tell you’re thrilled to see me. I have a feeling whatever you have cooking in there wasn’t for me, since you didn’t know I was coming even though I’d tried to tell you.”

“What? You did not. When?” He didn’t answer me, so I shoved him back a step. “When exactly did you try to tell me?”

“The old Kitty would’ve paid attention. But then again, I never had to fight to rate your attention before.”

I shut my eyes. “Look, I need to find Lucky before he escapes outside. I’m not even supposed to have him. I mean, I took him as a surprise, and I don’t want the surprise to be ‘I lost your cat!’”

“Oh, this is new guy’s cat. No wonder you’re so frantic.”

I let out a long breath. “Will you please help me find him? After I go turn down the Crockpot?” I hurried upstairs back to my apartment before Mag could answer.

I hoped the roast survived this adjustment—but I wasn’t comfortable just leaving an electrical appliance on while I wasn’t home to monitor it. Even if the thing was built exactly for that express purpose.

Bracing, I entered my apartment, prepared to see just about anything at this point—except Lucky and Princess sitting side by side on my sofa, the bag of fishy treats upended between them as if it was a Halloween Trick or Treat sack.

I was so happy to see Lucky, I didn’t even wonder how the treats had gotten out of my pocket or if they’d eat themselves

sick. I just rushed over to give them both hugs and kisses, so relieved I couldn't keep the tears from escaping.

“And you're getting along too? Clint will be so shocked —” I'd barely said the words before Lucky hissed at Princess and streaked away with a mouthful of treats puffing up his cheeks.

She gave me a cross look as if to say *men*.

As I had one to deal with in the hall, I understood completely.

I rose to go outside to summon Mag when my phone buzzed with a text.

From Clint, of course.

CLINT

Guess what? I got your lunch delivery—thank you—but I can take an actual lunch break to stop by and see you. On my way.

“Oh no no no noooooo,” I moaned to my empty apartment.

Magnus took the stairs obviously two at a time and was at my door in seconds flat. “The cat is in the hallway ripping apart a bag of food.”

Of course he was. Alas, I had another concern at the moment.

“Look, Clint is coming home for lunch so can I trust you not to make this awkward?”

Judging from the near growl that left his mouth, I was pretty sure that answer was no.

“Clint? What kind of name is that?”

“Is it any worse than Magnus?” Before he could answer, I brushed by him and went into the hall to see where Lucky had found a bag of food.

Turned out it wasn't actually the bag, just the spoils he'd absconded with.

I crouched to run my fingers over the carpet to try to get his attention. Lucky swiped out as I grabbed for him, and I let out a shocked screech as I fell back on my ass.

Magnus blew out a breath and set down his carry-on bag to offer me a hand. “C’mon, let me help you up.”

“I’m okay.” I blew out a disgruntled breath and took his hand to get to my feet. “Just make sure Princess doesn’t dart by you.”

“Oh, am I allowed to stay? I thought you were about to tell me to get a hotel room so you could shack up with your gigolo.”

*Gigolo?* Was he serious?

I didn’t respond. I simply didn’t have the energy to deal with him right now.

Feet thundered on the stairs and I braced, expecting Clint. Just in case, I snatched up a flailing Lucky and tucked him against my hip like a radioactive football with claws.

The mailman charged up the last flight, his hand extended with a wrapped package. “Oh, Ms. Armitage, this is for you.” The mailman passed the box to me while looking curiously at Mag. “What a cute kitty,” he said, instead of addressing Mag, holding out his fingers for Lucky to bite.

To his credit, the mailman only sucked in a breath as he backed up. “He’s had all his shots, don’t worry,” I said as I hustled Lucky toward my apartment. I didn’t know that for sure, but I had to assume he had, considering Clint’s profession.

I carried a now subdued Lucky and my wrapped package into the apartment. The vacuum still sat in the center of the room because I hadn’t put it away yet, but Lucky must’ve thought it could animate at any moment because he ran past it and did a flying leap onto Princess’s rarely used cat tree, crash-landing on the top level hard enough to send the cat tree onto its side.

With a sigh, I put away the rest of the treats, put a note on my refrigerator grocery list to get more the next time I

ordered, and tore into my package with absolutely no chill. Princess wound between my legs, obviously unconcerned Lucky had come in like a wrecking ball and knocked over her kitty furniture. He was now sharpening his massive paws on the side of my couch while Mag watched the chaos unfold with a bemused expression.

And I did not care. I wanted to see what I'd received. Chaos be damned.

I tore off the brown paper wrap and swallowed hard as Clint's glossy abs wavered in my vision. The book was thick. And man, that rush shipping had been worth it.

"You ordered a book?" Mag plucked it out of my hands before I could even properly stroke—err, *appreciate* the cover. "Do you like this author?" He frowned and turned it over. "Since when do you read pirate romance?"

"Since her guy is on the cover."

I blinked, then blinked again as Clint crossed the apartment. So much for remembering to close the door, which he did with far more force than necessary. "Remembered to bring you my key," he added, dropping it with a ping on the table by the door.

## SEVENTEEN



SOMEHOW I HAD COME TO KITTY'S FOR LUNCH AND STEPPED solidly into a love triangle. Or some bizarre approximation.

And I'd put the key on the table needlessly, since I'd left my spare key in the mailbox today. But Magnus looked appropriately annoyed, so checkmate.

I just hoped I remembered to take it back with me, since it was my only other copy.

Kitty said nothing as I eyed the man who must be Magnus up and down speculatively. I had a couple inches on him and a good thirty pounds of muscle but he was whip-lean and scrappy in a way that told me he probably had speed on his side. Behind his specs, his dark eyes were shrewd and the look he aimed my way indicated I was about two levels below pond scum.

"So the book arrived already?" I asked nonchalantly, reaching for the book from Kitty's boneless fingers.

She made no effort to hold onto it and it took all my concentration to hopefully not flush as red as Kitty was at this moment. Just what had I interrupted?

Couldn't have been much, since Magnus was still wearing his coat and his bright blue winter hat with plaid flaps over his ears.

"Let me guess. Vet by day, cover model by night? Interesting sideline." Magnus dropped his bag an inch from my boot.



“I took this photo years ago while I was on a leave of absence.” God, I’d forgotten the eye patch. Yep, I was blushing now. No avoiding it.

“Your...sword is impressive.” Magnus crossed his arms. “How much did you charge?”

“For my pictures?”

He stared at me then glanced at Kitty with a press of his lips. Something wordless passed between them and I found myself fisting my hands.

“Don’t answer that,” Kitty snapped, snatching back the book and clutching it to her chest. “He’s making totally inappropriate insinuations about the nature of our relationship, and you shouldn’t dignify the question with a response.”

“Like what?”

“Like I paid you for sex.”

I lifted a brow and barked out a laugh. “You crazy, man? I’d pay *her*. I mean, I didn’t and I wouldn’t, but if it came to—whatever, no money changed hands.” I shook my head and moved toward her.

Her pupils flared wide and she gave me an almost imperceptible head shake, but I would not be deterred.

Hell, she should consider herself lucky I hadn’t scented the air and peed in a circle around her to mark her as mine.

I leaned in to kiss her softly. “Forgot to say hi the proper way.”

Instead of pushing me away as I feared, she reached up to cup my cheek. “How did the morning go?”

“Seriously?” Magnus huffed out a breath and yanked out his phone. “Just let me make other arrangements since there’s clearly no room for me here.”

“Mag, cripes, he’s been dealing with a hoarding case and you are being so ridiculous right now, it’s like I don’t even know you.”

“Yeah, well, ditto, Kitty. Fucking ditto.” He turned his back on us and hit a button on his phone.

“I’m sorry,” she mouthed as I shook my head.

“Wait. Magnus, is it? You can stay at my place.”

Staying at my place meant he wouldn’t be staying here. And yeah, I didn’t know the dude so I had no clue if I could trust him, but he was someone Kitty cared about. He was clearly jealous over my presence in her life, but I wasn’t going anywhere. Neither was he.

The sooner we could get over this awkwardness, the better for Kitty’s sake since she didn’t have many people she could count on. She had to be feeling awful about all of this, and whether or not Magnus was being a dick, I wanted to do what was best for the woman I—

My woman. Period.

He didn’t look back at me. “I’ll pass.”

Kitty’s mouth dropped open. “What? Where will you go, Clint?”

So I supposed I was going with the peeing thing after all, just in my own way.

“If Magnus takes me up on my offer, I’ll stay here.” I gave her a hard kiss on the mouth before lifting my head to take a deep breath. “What smells so damn good?”

Following my nose, I walked to the counter and lifted the lid on the Crockpot. The combined scents of simmering meats and vegetables in some kind of fragrant gravy made me groan. “You have to marry me. There’s just no other option.”

My response was dead silence.

Mag was talking in a low voice, clearly inquiring about a hotel room for the next week. Kitty was alternately thumping her hand on his back and stomping on his foot and yanking on his earflaps, to no avail.

My first marriage proposal had gone down like a lead balloon. Didn’t it just figure?

“Mag, don’t be stupid. You don’t have to get a hotel room. There’s space here. You can take the couch.”

“We’ll be using the couch.” I shrugged at Kitty’s narrowed-eyed look. “Location makes a difference. Plus, if my sister wants to stay over—”

“Shit, how many more people can we fit in this apartment?” Kitty shoved her hands through her voluminous hair as Lucky—Lucky?—appeared from behind the sofa, likely lured by the scent of cooking meat just as I had been.

Like father, like son.

“Hey buddy, what are you doing here?”

“Playdate,” Kitty said through gritted teeth over her shoulder.

“Aww, that’s nice.” I bent to motion him closer and he pranced over, tail head high and crumbs from an unknown source dangling from his chin. “Are you guys getting along now?”

“He stole more than his share of fishy treats.”

Magnus coughed. “Gee, there’s a surprise.”

I scooped up Lucky and nuzzled his crumb-laden cheek. “Survival of the fittest, right?”

“How can you tell who’s the fittest when both models haven’t been tested?”

As much as I appreciated confirmation Kitty had never tested Magnus’s model, I didn’t like his attitude. At all. And neither did she, judging from the way her cheeks had bloomed so rosily that every freckle of hers seemed highlighted.

Her freckles were damn cute though.

I frowned. “Get off the phone.”

“Make me.”

“Magnus—” she warned as I set down my cat and stepped toward him.

“If you insist,” I said cheerfully, flexing my fingers.

“Oh my God, I hate men. Maybe I’ll sleep with your sister instead.” Kitty stomped off toward her bedroom, picking up Princess on the way from beside the sofa. She’d inched out from behind it at the mention of fishy treats.

Magnus frowned once she’d slammed her bedroom door shut. “Sister?”

“I have several. The one in question is pregnant and also currently sick of men.” I went back to the Crockpot for another hit of scent. “Look, can we just level with each other?”

“I’d rather not deal with you at all.”

“Oh, I’m sure. But Kitty clearly doesn’t understand why you’re acting like a royal prick, and she’s really hurt right now. I know you don’t want to hurt her.”

“Because of course you’re an expert on her already. Forget her friend who’s cared about her for a long time. You just sweep in and play Superman, right?”

“I didn’t sweep in. You think I was looking for her? I was just doing my job. Sometimes there’s kismet.”

“Oh, Jesus, now he’s on about kismet.”

“Hang up. You can stay in my place. Free. Much more economical.”

“Right, so you can fuck her in peace.”

I leaned back on the counter. “Just so you know, I’d do that with you on the other side of the wall. I’m thinking of you, dude, not me.” When Magnus locked his jaw, I rotated my neck and tried to dial back my aggression. This was Kitty’s friend and business partner. She was important to him, and from what I’d heard, she hadn’t had been put in that position often enough from the men in her life. Or from people, period.

This wasn’t about me.

“Look, I know every bit of this has been awkward. You care about her, and she deserves that and more. I don’t want to mess with your friendship. I’m being a jealous fucker and there’s no room for that here.”

“Because you know you and your abs have it all sewn up, right?” He cast a look of disgust toward the book with my cover on the coffee table, where Kitty had tossed it during my posturing.

“No. You know as well as I do that there is no such thing as all sewn up with Kitty.”

His lips curved slightly. “First smart thing you’ve said.”

“I think we both want what’s best for her. And I know she thinks very highly of you.”

“Are you trying to twist the knife or does your hand just keep slipping?” Magnus shook his head. “I mean, yeah, it’s on me that I didn’t spell it out. But I sent her a vibrator, for God’s sake. How could she not get my meaning?”

“She doesn’t always get subtext.” *But I sure did.*

He laughed. “No kidding.”

“I didn’t realize how dangerously low I was until she came into my life. The career I’ve chosen is hard, physically and mentally, and if I hadn’t had her in those moments...” I exhaled. “She saved me in a very real way from the first night.”

“And you probably saved her.” Magnus unzipped his coat and tossed it onto the couch behind him, nearly clocking Lucky, who glared at him in the feline equivalent of the middle finger.

“Kismet,” I said lightly as Magnus narrowed his eyes.

“Damn romance novels. I manage not to read them as I format and do covers but it’s hard. Christ, did I ever put you on a cover?”

I jerked a shoulder. “No idea. A lot of authors stockpile old stock photos, so any of mine that haven’t been used are probably still circulating.”

Magnus sat down heavily on the sofa beside Lucky, who had already made himself at home on his jacket and peeked out from his sleeve. “I shouldn’t have come. I just thought if we spoke in person, she’d realize that rushing into something

with a stranger is the last thing she should be doing. It's been so long since she could get out and meet someone..."

"Why?" I sat beside him, a careful distance away.

"She didn't tell you?" He shook his head. "Not my story to tell. Just...be careful with her, okay?"

"I will."

He forced out a breath. "Look, maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I know I acted like a possessive jerk, but I really care about her. To be honest, I took it for granted that maybe we could make a go of it. Once she realized my intentions, anyway." One side of his mouth lifted. "We're so compatible. On paper, we're perfect."

"And the field was wide open."

"Not so much." He scratched the back of his neck. "She's absolutely incredible. If you hurt her, I'm not responsible for my actions, just saying."

Before I could respond, he jerked to his feet. "I'm gonna go. She can text me if she wants to talk, but this isn't my place to be here. She's made her choice."

Lucky crawled away from Magnus's jacket and spread out on a couch cushion.

"Magnus, wait. I'm serious about you staying at my place. I've been here a lot lately and there's more room for you there. We can keep Lucky here so you won't even have to feed this rugrat."

Lucky let out a human-sounding snore and rolled over then promptly dozed again.

"Why would you do that? I called you a gigolo."

"I've been called worse." I laughed drily. "Like I said, you're important to Kitty. Besides, now that you're here, you have to come to Thanksgiving."

"You're having Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah, seems like our misfit holiday is growing by the hour."

More and more, I liked the idea of that. Being part of an us and having our own holiday with our own choice of guests, no matter how they might not work together to the outside world. But that just meant they fit *us* even more.

Lucky shot awake and decided to heave himself atop the toppled cat tree and tried to stretch out although he couldn't.

Cat dad to the rescue.

As soon as I righted the tree, Lucky flung himself on the uppermost seat, but he stared up toward the ceiling as if he wanted a vantage point even higher. Knowing his preference for sitting atop the refrigerator at my place, I wasn't surprised. I'd have to pick up a shelving kit to catify the place à la Jackson Galaxy if Kitty's landlord was okay with it.

And if Kitty was too, since hello, not my apartment.

"You aren't pissed that I came here with every intention of getting Kitty away from you?"

I frowned at Magnus, trying to get back into the conversation while cat-climbing units filled my head. "Did you?"

"Well, yeah. For the better part of two years, I was almost her only link to the outside world."

My frown grew. I'd gathered some of that from her, but I was obviously missing a large part of the story. Last thing I wanted to do was pressure her. She'd tell me when she was ready.

"Then I owe you a gratitude of thanks."

Mag took off his glasses to shine them on his shirt then put them back on. "Yep, still here. For a second, I thought I was imagining you. You're really thanking me for coming here to possibly kick your ass?"

I kept my face as composed as possible. "Yeah. Because she deserves a friend like that and a hell of a lot more."

"Well, yeah, she does. And I know she's smart. If she wants something to do with you, there must be a good reason."

He sent a derisive look toward the book on the coffee table. “Other than the abs.”

“Those abs take many hours on the rowing machine, pal. I’ve been slacking off lately.”

He snorted. “Right.”

“Busy season at work. Though every season is busy season.” I stared down the hall at the closed bedroom door. She’d done something for me last night no one ever had—and I wasn’t talking about the stupendous blowjob, although I couldn’t fault that kind of solace in the least. “It’s one less thing for me to worry about if she’s not worried, you know? So just do me a favor and stay at my place. You’ll get a free meal of turducken and whatever sides I can order or con her into making.”

“You’re an odd dude.”

I let out a half laugh and turned to clap him on the back. “So I’ve been told.”



## EIGHTEEN

# Katherine

SOMEHOW THOSE FREAKING MEN WERE OUT THERE *BONDING*.

Because of course they were. Having a penis somehow smoothed over any possible friction from them both wanting to possess...*me*?

I wasn't used to being treated as a juicy piece of meat by two attractive men. I didn't know what to make of it. I just wanted Magnus to stop focusing on what was in his pants and go back to being my friend.

Unless he'd now decided being Clint's friend was more fun.

A knock sounded at my bedroom door. "Sweetheart, I have to get back to work."

Why did Clint's melted-honey voice unwind me so easily? His expertly wielded endearments didn't hurt either.

"Come in."

He did as requested, his expression softening as he took in the sight of me lying on my side on the bed with Princess curled up against me, paw on my arm protectively. Or possessively. Maybe whatever pheromones had suddenly made me catnip to the opposite sex were also working on my cat.

Anything was possible.

"I didn't know when he bought me a vibrator he was signaling he wanted intercourse," I said miserably, then wanted to saw off my own tongue.

Clint's laughter as he shook his head made me frown.

"You think it's funny?"

"Kind of, yeah. Now. At first my reaction was very different." He came to sit beside me on the bed, holding out his fingers for Princess to sniff. She tucked her head into his hand with a look of adoration similar to the one I often wore in his direction.

Hopefully, he hadn't noticed.

"You thought I was hoeing around?"

His brows rose. "No. I thought you were hopelessly oblivious to your own appeal."

"My dad said he made a mistake in calling me Muffintop as a kid."

Clint's brow pinched and gently, he nudged Princess aside so he could roll up my sweater. There was no hiding the pudge above my jeans at this angle, and I fought not to shift to try to make it go away. He bent to kiss me, right above my navel. My eyes prickled as I scooped my fingers through his soft, thick hair, wondering what I'd done to deserve him and how long it would be before I screwed up somehow and drove him away.

"I buried the bullet beside my parking space," I said hoarsely.

His eyes crinkled and mirth filled them before he wrapped his arm around me to cuddle me closer. He pressed a flood of kisses to my stomach while his shoulders shook with laughter. Before I knew it, I was laughing too, and Princess stared coolly at both of us before jumping down and streaking out the open bedroom door.

"Should we hear screeching any minute now?"

"They were getting along pretty good this morning but I think they were both full of fishy treats. You're not wondering why I brought him over here?"

"Well, you did want to continue our rental agreement last I knew, so..." He walked his fingers up my bare stomach and

hissed out a breath a fraction of an inch from the lacy cups of my bra. I did have a couple of cuter ones so I'd banished my more serviceable lingerie to the back of the drawer. "My lunch break is over. I spent too much time smoothing Magnus's feathers when I should've kept my eye on the prize."

"Like actually eating your lunch?"

"That too." He was still unabashedly staring at my bra.

"Does he hate me?" My voice sounded so small. The last thing I should've done was hide out in here while these two men who didn't even know each other discussed me or...God knows what.

But that was what I did. I ran and I ignored and I checked out to avoid the hard stuff.

"Hardly. More like he hates me, but I doubt it'll stick." He shook his head. "You really had no clue how he felt about you?"

"No. I thought we were friends." I sat up in bed and shoved my hands through my hair. "He knew I was basically a hermit who stayed inside all day editing racy books and playing with cats and basically dropping out of life. What part of that is sexy to him?"

Clint intertwined his fingers with mine. "We all drop out of life sometimes."

I scoffed. "Yeah, right. Like you ever would."

"I did. I left my job and followed an ad to a romance book convention and got a job doing the absolute opposite thing to what I'd trained for, because the stress and the death and the heartbreak got to me. I thought I could take it. That I had to, because I was needed. But it turned out the best thing I could do was to walk away so I could regroup and come back, if not stronger, at least a little wiser about filling my cup before I completely broke the thing in half trying to help others. I learned that term in a book, by the way. Thought the cup thing was New Agey until mine was in pieces." He smiled grimly. "Never truly managed to fill it before though," he said lightly, rubbing his thumb over the back of my hand. "Until you."

I turned my hand over to clutch his. “I have agoraphobia. Not just a little touch of anxiety, like the real deal. It waxes and wanes but it hit its peak when Muffin was sick. I didn’t even know what was happening at first, just that I couldn’t breathe whenever I got behind the wheel of my car. I got to the point that I couldn’t go out to take him to his vet appointments.” I tried to swallow over the boulder in my throat. “He got sicker and sicker. I did everything I could to get him to eat, special foods and treats and all kinds of things, but he still died. And if I hadn’t been such a horrific mess...”

“I’m so sorry, honey.” He wrapped his arm around me, pressing his hip against mine so that I could lean on him if I needed to. “What was wrong with your boy?”

“Cancer.” The word tasted bitter. “In his head. Among other things but that was the worst of it.”

“Then you have to know that even if you had taken him to the best vet in the world every single day, all you probably would’ve done was buy him some time. Look at me,” he said gently, lifting up my chin so his greener-than-green eyes were all I could see. “Likely not all that much time even with the best treatments.” He tipped his head against mine. “I know how hard that is for you to hear, and we always think we should’ve done more, but sometimes loving them is the only thing you can do. And I know you were the very best at that.”

I sniffled. “If I’d known you then, maybe you could have helped him. Maybe you could’ve made him feel better at least.” I covered my mouth to hold in my sobs. “You would’ve made me feel better, too.”

“I’d like to think I could’ve helped, but maybe it happened how it was meant. Not his illness, but maybe the fact you didn’t put him through experimental treatments that probably couldn’t have done much more than prolong things was what was best for him in that moment.”

I let out a slow breath, allowing the tears to come no matter how much I hated them. “Magnus talked me through some of my worst moments. I didn’t want to blur the lines between professionalism and our personal lives, but I had to

lean on someone. God knows my father wasn't around much." I rubbed the back of my hand under my nose. "Afterward, I closed down even more. I don't know how many days I spent in bed, just getting up to feed Princess and take care of her. If I hadn't had her, I would've been even worse."

Clint stroked his hand down my hair in even strokes, over and over, rhythmically lulling me into a state of almost relaxation. Somehow. Magic hands.

Magic everything when it came to this man. Especially when it came to healing my heart.

"We all do the very best we can at the moment we're in. Doesn't mean we're perfect. But no one is. If we're lucky, we get to get up and try again another day. I just know without a doubt you adored your Muffin, and I guarantee he knew it. Love is the strongest magic there is, Kitty Armor."

He smiled down at me, and I didn't hear angels sing or harps play but for an instant, the pain I'd carried so long over my mistakes faded away.

The load got just a bit lighter.

I couldn't ask for anything more. Except one tiny thing.

"Don't let me run," I whispered, clutching his hand and holding it to my chest.

My heart was beating so fast I would've sworn he could see it outside my body. I'd mentioned running to him before but just in case he didn't realize how deadly serious I was, it bore repeating.

"I don't want to ruin this, and when I get scared, I lock myself down. Go underground. I really don't want to this time. Don't let me."

He swallowed deeply, his gaze fixated on our joined hands. "I've been running too."

"You mean about your job?"

"In the past, yeah, but not this time. I've stuck there. I'm in for the long haul—as long as I can."

“Then how?” I pursed my lips, steeling myself to hear something I might not like. “From who?”

“My family. My dad wants me to be mayor of Clintondale when he retires. It’s just expected.”

“Mayor. Wow. How big is Clintondale? *Where* is Clintondale?”

“A few hours from here. Last I knew the population was around 600 people. My relatives make up a good chunk of that.” He laughed drily. “Our forefathers have been mayor as long as the town existed. Since, you know, I’m even named after it. Like my father and grandfather.”

“And you don’t feel like mayor material?” I guessed, my mind reeling. I’d wondered if he had some secret woman in his past he was avoiding or something.

Not a political dynasty—of sorts.

“Me?” He laughed. “Do you see me with a proper political wife and two-point-five well-groomed children?”

I frowned. “Your cat is well-groomed.”

His laughter rolled out of him until he fell back onto the bed.

I shifted to lay beside him, resting my head on his chest and sneaking my fingers between the flaps of his button-down shirt so I could stroke his warm, hair-roughened skin. “I have a lot saved up. You can quit your job and I’ll pay you to be my love slave.”

“Shit, I’d do that for free. I mean, shows the kind of lackluster gigolo I am but...” He turned his thousand-watt smile on me. “I invited Mag to our turducken feast, by the way. Hope that’s okay.”

“You invited him to our Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah, I figured you wouldn’t want him to be alone. He could always go home but I didn’t think he’d want to just turn around and fly back without having some kind of vacation. Then while he’s here, maybe you guys can talk.”

I lifted my hand to his forehead. “No fever. And you’re an actual flesh-and-blood man, so not a figment of my imagination.”

Clint gripped my hand and spread out my fingers to kiss the tip of each one. “I figure being worthy of being your guy is a healthy first step to actually, you know, being your guy.”

I squeezed my eyes shut before they could flood yet again. “What if I’m not worthy of you?”

“Not possible.”

“Oh, it’s very possible. You’re so strong and brave and you save so many little souls, and me, I’m afraid of ordering a deli sandwich if I can’t do it on my computer in my safe apartment.”

I heard his sharp intake of breath but I didn’t meet his gaze. I couldn’t. “Yet you did it, didn’t you? You brought it to my work and left it at the desk for me, and you did it again today.”

“I did. It was easier today but that might’ve been because I was so thoroughly fucked last night I couldn’t think to panic. Though I usually don’t have to think for it to happen. Most of the time it’s an automatic response.”

“If I had my way, you’d be thoroughly fucked every damn day.” He went back to kissing my fingertips, lulling me again so naturally that I didn’t even notice right away the tension rolling out of my body. “Another reason I sent Mag on his way. Not that I mind an audience but I thought I should feel you out on that score before I took the leap.”

“What—huh? You sent him on his way? Did he manage to get a hotel room? I mean, I’m glad he’s not still waiting in the living room, because holy awkward.”

“No hotel room. Remember how I told him to stay at my place since I’ll be staying here?”

“And he ended up agreeing?”

“Eventually.”

“So you’re staying here, hmm?”

“Assuming that’s okay with you.” Clint gave me his most endearing expression and not laughing wasn’t possible.

“I can probably be convinced.” I rolled on top of him and crossed my arms over his chest.

“Good.” He leaned up to give me a quick, thorough kiss. “I very much like coming home to you, Katherine Kitty Armor Armitage. Add in a full Crockpot and let’s just say I’m ready to commit for life.” His teasing tone didn’t match the seriousness on his face, but it didn’t matter because my heart was ready to agree to anything he asked.

*Because you already love him. You’re already in love with him.*

“I’m not mayor’s wife material,” I muttered.

“Handy, since I’m not mayor material.” He rolled us over until he could brace his hands on either side of my head. “I’m going to go home this weekend.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, absorbing the body blow of him not being here for even a couple of days. I honestly wasn’t sure I wouldn’t need detox.

I was already seriously addicted to this man, and I didn’t want to go into recovery anytime soon.

“I’d like you to come with me. Not for the big dinner, since we’ll be here having our own. Our first one, so it has to be special.”

“Yeah.” I tried to not stiffen up and instead, leaned forward to press a kiss to one of his dimples.

“But on Friday, maybe you’d come with me while I tell my parents I don’t want to be mayor and also I don’t need to be matched with anyone named Musselbottom or anything else because I’ve already found my perfect match?”

I blinked at him. “Forget Tinder, try Kitten Around’s classified section instead?”

“There’s a tagline for the site.” He grinned. “I can adjust the wording if you want to play it low-key.”



“What part of any of this have we played low-key? The very first night I met you in person, I propositioned you for sex sans latex.”

“And that I couldn’t take you up on your offer will forever remain one of my biggest regrets.” He looked down at me so seriously I had no choice but to laugh—and to keep on laughing when Lucky toddled into the room and stretched up on the side of the bed, staring straight at me as he started to sharpen his claws.

“Lucky! You know better!”

He kept right on scratching.

“Worse than a toddler,” Clint muttered, leaning over to tuck Lucky under his arm like an overfilled football and hoist him onto the bed.

Where upon he promptly pounced on my belly and decided to try a new place to scratch.

“Do you have any manners at all?” Clint scolded him as he flounced off to sit on my pillow. Those sheets would be getting changed tonight.

“I think he was kneading on me? Maybe?”

“If that makes you feel better, keep on thinking that.”

It was so much easier to laugh when he was here. Him and Lucky. I wasn’t sure if Princess agreed, but they filled this apartment with so much happiness.

Or maybe it was me who was happy. Even in the midst of my ongoing grief and panic and confusion. Happiness could exist beside all of those things, if I allowed myself to have it.

To think I deserved it.

“I’ll bring some scratchers in here,” I said absently. “Princess pretty much only uses her living room ramp so the extra ones I had for Muffin I put away after...” I exhaled.

“Yeah. That reminds me. You said you watched some of Jackson’s videos?”

I nodded silently.

“I’d like to put up some shelving units on the upper part of the living room wall because Lucky is a climber. Better to find constructive ways to let him climb before he makes a home on top of your bathroom cabinet. They have really easy kits where you just attach them with hinges, not even sure I’ll have to use many nails—” When I didn’t reply, he shook his head with a laugh. “Sorry. Probably rushing things. Invite a guy over a couple of times and next thing you know, he’s trying to catify your apartment.”

“Do you always rush into things?”

“No. Never.”

Somehow I believed him, since I’d never been a rush-into-things sort of person before the last few weeks myself. “So why now?”

He reached down to re-button the button I’d undone in my endless quest to touch more of him. Then he frowned. “Well, the food is a draw.”

“Still thinking about what’s in the Crockpot, hmm?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed my thigh. “I saw a shirt once that said stay near people who feel like sunshine. At the time, I thought it was hokey as hell, but then most of the people I knew at the time reminded me more of crowded subway cars that couldn’t stay on one track.”

“I feel like sunshine to you?” I whispered—and then he immediately shook his head.

“You’re not so predictable as that. You’re sunshine for sure, but then your sun is behind a cloud and it’s pouring but before I can get an umbrella, the sun is back and it’s blinding. You challenge me and make me think and make me laugh and you’re never, ever boring.” He bit his distractingly full lower lip. “And in case you missed it, I can’t keep my fucking hands off you.”

I sat up and fisted his shirt, drawing him closer so I could drag in a deep enough breath of his cinnamon and soap scent to last me until later. “Tell me more.”

“Or my mouth,” he continued, his gaze locked on mine. “Even now I’m thinking about peeling down your jeans and slipping two fingers into you before I flip you over and do you twice as hard as Sven did Rina—and that was only chapter six.” A quick flash of teeth. “I think.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny. Also, you’re very fixated on Sven and Rina. I’ve finished the first-round edits on that one and returned the manuscript to the author. Do you want me to tag you on any future revisions?” Before he could answer, I held up a hand. “That can’t happen. Client confidentiality. Once it’s for sale I’ll direct you to a buy link.”

“I’ll be waiting. I’m curious how it turns out for them. I assume they have a happily ever after?”

“Why would you assume that?”

“Well, romance. Aren’t HEAs sacrosanct?”

“You know too much for your own good, Lee Hauser. But some books that are romance-adjacent end with a happy-for-now.”

“Eh, those aren’t as good.”

“They aren’t?”

“No. If I’m reading a story to feel good, I want to know they’re gonna stay together. Not stay together til chapter twenty-five then see how it goes.”

“Clintondale Lee, you’re a romantic. I never guessed. Other than the random sweetheart endearments now and then.”

The tips of his ears turned faintly adorably pink. “I’m just saying. It’s no different than a mystery. If the killer gets away, then what am I reading fiction for? I can get depressed by the news, thanks.”

“So you think there’s only one path to happiness. Just enjoying some good sex and see ya would be depressing for Rina and Sven.”

“Well, wouldn’t it?”

“Definitely a romantic,” I murmured. “How do you feel about the stories where a person falls in love with someone in, like, no time at all?”

I really hoped my face wasn't actually on fire though it sure felt as if it was.

His forehead furrowed. “I think it's possible.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah.”

“And do you think they can stay together for years and years? Or is it just a flash in the pan type of situation?”

He lifted my hand and kissed my fingertips, one by one, while my heartbeat rampaged in my ears. “If I had my way, it'd definitely be a years and years type of deal. Until they're old and gray and racing in rocking chairs on the front porch of the retirement home, but not too fast so they don't hurt any furry paws running about.”

I smiled. “Maybe we should write that book. See if we can make a mint.”

He leaned in to take my mouth, kissing me slow and sweet. “Can it include some dirty pictures?”

“Not if you want to sell it on Amazon, cabin-candy guy.”

“Aww, haven't heard that nickname since the very first night.” He laughed richly. “I've got to get back to work. I really want to eat what's in that Crockpot but I don't know how many hours you can leave it on low, and I bargained with an earlier night by taking lunch.”

“If I have to take it out before you're home—I mean, back,” I amended quickly, “there's always leftovers.”

He brightened momentarily. “Yeah.”

“So Magnus went to your place?”

His brows knitted together. “Are you going to go talk to him?”

“I should. We’re business partners. Though our friendship comes first and I bungled it.”

“Not unfixably. I have faith in you, Kitty Armor.” He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead. “Well, use that key I gave you and go talk some sense into him.” He frowned. “Or just call if it’s easier. Because you need to worry about you first.”

I smiled and cupped his beardy cheek. More dark scruff seemed to be growing in by the hour. “You’re not worried about us being alone together? I mean, if I can manage to make it there?”

“No. I’m smart enough to know if I have anything to worry about, it’ll happen without anyone else in the room with you.”

I sucked in a shaky breath. “You know me altogether too well already. It’s a little freaky.”

“Ditto. Keep those Crockpot fires burning for me, baby.” He tossed me a grin that so didn’t match the heaviness in his eyes. He rose then bent to brush a kiss over the top of a snoozing Lucky’s head.

“Hey, one last question. Did you really bury your bullet?” he asked on his way out the door, leaving me laughing in spite of myself.

No, but the thought had dramatic impact.

## NINETEEN

# Katherine

CLINT DIDN'T COME HOME THAT NIGHT. AT ALL.

Even though I'd kind of expected it from the way he had talked, watching the hours wind down as morning approached still made me apprehensive. Almost the same way I felt while waiting for my father to do a no-show. And that wasn't the least bit fair. The two men could not have been more different if they tried.

I wondered if he was catching an hour or two's rest at his desk. Or dealing with untold emergencies. I kept checking my phone, my heart in my throat, but he didn't call or text—and at this hour, he wouldn't, for fear of waking me up. I should've told him to call at any hour. But maybe he just couldn't. He was like a doctor that way, and he *was* a doctor, just for tiny helpless creatures instead of humans.

Lucky didn't seem to sleep much at night. More than once I opened my eyes from trying to sleep to find him sitting on my pillow beside my head—no, I hadn't changed the sheets yet—staring down at me as if he wasn't quite sure what I was doing there.

Or what *he* was doing there.

Me, I wasn't sure of anything—except that I finally closed the bedroom door in the hopes of getting some rest.

Sometime around seven a.m., I couldn't just pretend to sleep any longer. I didn't immediately get up. Instead, I grabbed my phone and worked on some German lessons for a while, hoping in the back of my mind Clint would arrive

anytime now. Surely he would get some kind of break to come home? Okay, come to my place, if he had enough energy to do so. I had his cat.

Speaking of, neither one of the felines had scratched on my door. I hoped they hadn't killed each other in a fit of pique.

Or hangry-induced rage.

I recited German for another couple minutes and then forced myself up to take a quick shower. I fished a giant hoodie and jeans from the clean laundry basket then dressed before turning to look for the furry miscreants.

I didn't have to look far. They had both crept into the bedroom after me and were now on my bed, one furry butt to a pillow.

"Princess," I chided. "You're hanging with a bad crowd. You never sit up there."

She turned her back on me to wash said butt.

I sighed. Suppose it was good I hadn't done more laundry yet.

After I fed them both in side-by-side bowls—then across-the-room bowls when Lucky tried to steal Princess's food three times—I hurried out to my car. I didn't have to get out anywhere. I could just see if Clint's truck was parked at Thorny Paw. I only knew what he drove from catching a glimpse of it out the window when he left the other day.

"You're stalking the guy," I muttered as I waited for my frigid car to warm up enough for my windshield to defrost. Naturally, it had snowed overnight.

What else was new?

I debated getting out to clean off the windshield then put the heat on high and waited, still hoping Clint would text and save me the trip.

Didn't happen. And his vehicle wasn't at Thorny Paw when I drove by either. Hmm. Had he gone home? He must have.

Immediately, nightmare scenarios started forming in my mind, the kind of which only someone who edited books for a living and dealt with severe anxiety could manufacture. His truck mangled and crumpled at the bottom of a ravine. Mind you, there were no ravines between the clinic and my place or his, on any route he would take, but I still imagined it. Clint getting held up by gun-toting felons escaped from the county jail when he stumbled bleary-eyed out to his truck in the early morning hours. Clint heading outside to investigate the lights in the sky at night and being abducted by little blue men who wanted to study our kind.

At least the last scenario was more funny than scary.

At a loss, I swung by my parking lot just in case we'd somehow missed each other. Nada. That left me with only one more place to check—Clint's own apartment, which meant I'd run into Magnus, assuming he'd stayed there after Clint's offer.

I should've swung through a drive-thru for coffee. A large one.

The snow started again as I drove to Clint's, squinting as I drove past choppy Crescent Lake. I had my wipers on high to combat the snow and it still made me nervous enough to clutch the wheel. I drove into the parking lot for his building, snagging the first spot I found.

*Just checking on a friend. No big deal. Not going to come upon a murder/suicide or some other grisly thing. Besides, Clint may not even be here.*

I hadn't seen his truck but I hadn't checked the wraparound lot, since, now that I was here, I had to talk to Magnus. Even a coward like me couldn't escape now.

It took me five minutes to gather my wits about me enough to go out into the storm and brave the wind blowing snow directly in my eyes while I trudged up the walkway to Clint's building. My heart was racing and my breath chugged out in a frosty plume, but I kept moving.

*You can do this.*



I gripped the key in my pocket between my shaking fingers as I rode the elevator upstairs and hurried down the hall. I knocked twice, waited an appropriate amount of time, then used my key to go inside—and made it approximately two steps inside Clint’s foyer before the sounds of loud, explicit moaning made me stop dead and stare.

All the lights were off in the apartment except for the tea light candles burning low on the coffee table. Down the hall toward the rooms in the back of the apartment, I heard vague sounds of jazz beneath the panting and creative dirty talk—from the woman, not the man.

“Oh, yeah, you know I like it, Daddy. Give it to me just like that. Use more fingers.”

I couldn’t breathe. What was I hearing? It was like one of the books I edited. That couldn’t be Clint in there with her. He’d never indicated he was into the Daddy thing, but we were new...

Maybe we hadn’t reached that level yet. Maybe working all night was a cover.

And he’d dared to act like he trusted me with Magnus when he was really a cheating dog!

But why would he give me a key? Did he want to be caught? And where the hell was Magnus?

I pressed a hand to my spinning head. What was happening right now?

A key turned in the lock behind me, and panicked, I dove into the corner of Clint’s foyer. A large, voluminous fern on the tall plant stand I wedged myself behind provided very little cover, but I was now at the level of pregnancy-level panting and had to grab the base of the plant for support. Dots swam in my vision. I gripped the ornate stand and sucked in air while very familiar broad shoulders filled the doorway, blocking the light from the outer hallway and providing confirmation that Clint was not into such stuff.

Or if he was, he wasn’t displaying it at this very moment. Which meant—

Oh, God.

Clint's head swung sharply toward the corner I'd crouched in but before he could spot me in my ninja black hoodie, the loudest moan yet rang out from the back of the apartment, followed by more.

Dear God, more.

“Close the blinds! That neighbor is gonna see my tits!”

“Let 'em, baby. They're spectacular.”

That exchange was the one that sent Clint over the edge. Something black and small streaked into the darkness a second before his voice roared out and he ran toward the back rooms at full tilt. “Felicia!”

I buried my face in my hands, my mortification so complete that I couldn't even panic. Or more accurately, I couldn't tell if my hissing breaths were from that or from the personal misery that my supposed closest friend, who'd supposedly had the hots for me yesterday was now enjoying spirited foreplay—at the very least—with some woman who Clint called Felicia.

*Felicia.* I sure wished she'd said bye before I'd said hello.

Better yet, I wished I'd stayed home and taken a sleeping pill.

Things moved very fast after that. The apartment's living room mood lighting was replaced with curtains being opened up to reveal the morning sun and many lights being turned on. All the lights. I saw a brief glimpse of Felicia's bare tits as she charged out of the back room, and even in my stupor, I had to acknowledge Magnus had been right about their quality.

But then I saw a flash of Magnus's bare ass while he yanked up his boxers and khakis as he streaked by into the living room, and I so didn't want to see that because I had to work with the guy.

Dully, my functioning-on-no-sleep brain realized that Clint was yelling one question over and over as he rushed after Magnus.

“How could you fuck my sister? Seriously, how could you fuck my sister?”

In my head, I answered the question for him.

*She's damn hot.*

I swallowed over and over again until I started to gain control of myself. I counted backward from twenty in my head, having to start over several times when I lost count, usually when some colorful swear word erupted into the silence, some from Clint, some from Felicia, who was arguing heatedly with her brother while wrestling with her misbuttoned shirt. None from Magnus, who'd gone strangely silent.

Poor guy. He suffered from anxiety, too, and growing up as an awkward nerd who preferred books to humans made him go stoically silent in times of crisis. I felt for him. It wasn't as if I didn't understand the effect of sudden lust after a long drought. I certainly did.

Current conditions indicated I understood far too well.

Also, since all the lights were now on and full daylight had arrived, it was just pure luck no one in the apartment had looked into the foyer and spotted me hiding behind the overlarge fern yet. I touched one of the droopy leaves and frowned. How often did Clint remember to water this thing? Obviously not often enough.

*Not important now, Kitty.*

The downstairs buzzer sounded and Felicia threw up her hands, grabbing a throw from the recliner. Her shirt was still misbuttoned but apparently she'd given up on fixing it. She also hadn't noticed how her skirt was tucked into her underwear but the throw gave her a modicum of modesty.

And I was now fucked, because I was not able to make myself dematerialize enough not to be noticed. Instead, I decided to own my cowardice and step out from behind the plant with a large smile. “I'll get it!”

The three people in the living room stared at me. Magnus was fully dressed. Felicia was now entirely covered other than

the large vine tattoo that climbed up her calf and disappeared under the draped material she clutched against her ample bosom. Clint looked ready to murder—and he was wearing a small black cat as an accessory over his shoulder.

He took a step toward me and stopped, cocking his head. “Kitty? What are you doing here?”

“Spying on me?” Magnus asked dubiously as the buzzer rang yet again.

“I was looking for you, Clint. You never called.” I tried hard to keep the accusation out of my voice. I wasn’t feeling very accusatory in light of recent events.

More like...confused and deflated and buzzing with the leftovers from my panic hangover.

“Honeymoon’s already over,” Magnus muttered while Felicia tapped her chin.

“You do have good taste,” she said to my business partner out of the side of her mouth. “She’s cute.”

I smiled. “Thank you. I admired your breasts.”

It was a toss-up between who reacted more strongly—Magnus or Clint. Clint choked and Mag stared at me as if horns had sprouted from the bee’s nest atop my head that kept falling out of its scrunchie.

I really needed to stop skipping the conditioner when I showered, but before recently, I hadn’t worried about ever seeing much of anyone but Princess.

Now I was answering doors to strangers—or I would’ve been, if Clint hadn’t neatly cut me off at the pass.

“Ask who it is first,” he reminded me gently before doing the honors himself.

I had a tendency to forget that step.

“Who is it?” Clint said into the speaker.

“Clintondale, it’s your father. I’m coming up.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.” Clint whirled toward me, his green eyes wilder than I’d ever seen them. “Fee, go fix your skirt. And your shirt. Lose the throw. Hurry. Look presentable.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Why is that buzzkill Dad here? Can’t a girl get some in peace once in a while? Did Em rat me out that I was escaping here? I’m gonna kill her.”

“The father?” Mag’s voice sounded strangled. “I gotta go.”

Clint threw out a large beefy arm to block my best friend’s flight from justice. “You have nowhere to go, remember? You did the crime, now you’ll do the time.” Clint swallowed audibly. “Me too. Fuck. I haven’t even had any sleep. And my sweetheart needs to eat.”

“Oh, I had an English muffin on my way out the door—” Silence descended as I realized he was cooing to the cat on his shoulder. “Oh, right. Gotcha.”

“We’ll talk.” Clint’s eyes softened as our gazes locked. “After I get rid of my father.”

“Yeah, get rid of him,” Felicia called, hurrying up the hall toward the rooms in the back of the apartment. “Tell him Em’s pregnant. That’ll get him off our backs.”

Magnus tucked his fists under his arms. “Who’s Em?”

“Another sister.”

“Jesus, how many do you have?”

“More than you can sleep with, you horndog.” Clint shifted “his sweetheart” cat to his other shoulder where she began gnawing on his hair and peering out at me between his curls, her bright yellow eyes aglow.

“Dad, I’m releasing the door,” Clint said into the speaker. “Come on up.” Then he lifted his finger from the button and lightly but repeatedly thumped his forehead against the door. “I’m never getting any sleep. Or peace. Or a meal not from a vending machine. I ate the sub,” he added before I could ask. “It was one of the few bright spots in my shitty day. That and Charise. Stop getting my hair gooey, you rugrat.”

She didn't stop.

A moment later, Clint's father opened the door and stepped into Clint's apartment, all six-foot-six inches of him, complete with thick salt-and-pepper hair and a booming voice that made me think he could give speeches to his constituents without needing a microphone.

I immediately shrank behind the not very concealing plant as his overwhelming energy filled the apartment. No wonder Clint didn't know how to say no to the man. Holy crap.

"What's this about you not coming to dinner, Clintondale, and breaking your mother's heart?"

So much for easing into things.

"Dad, you came all this way to ask that?"

"Yes. And to ask why Felicia felt the need to leave home right before the holidays."

Felicia was already heading back down the hallway to the foyer. "I didn't leave home, Dad. I just needed a break. I can't stand any more togetherness, okay?"

The loud voices startled the kitten. Clint tried to adjust her on his shoulder, and she flailed and jumped out of his arms, landing awkwardly on the floor.

I expected her to shake it off and run away like a kitten usually would, but she stayed sprawled for an extra half minute and then found her way to her feet before toppling over again.

"Oh no, what's wrong, sweetheart?" I shot out from my lame hiding place and crouched to lift her into my arms. She didn't fight me and tears of relief sprang into my eyes. "Were you just knocked off balance? You'll be okay. We'll make sure of it. Yes, we will, you pretty little thing."

Belatedly, I realized the place had gone deathly silent. I struggled to my feet, trying to keep the kitten steady in my hold, and Clint steadied me by placing his big hands on my arms. Then he gripped my elbows, tugged me up to my tiptoes

and kissed me thoroughly enough to have me seeing stars—and this time, panic had nothing to do with it.

He eased back, slung an arm around my shoulders, and turned us toward his father as a united, if dazed, front. “Dad, I want you to meet Katherine Armitage. I call her Kitty. She wraps my sandwiches in Christmas paper and makes one hell of a roast, even though I haven’t gotten to eat it yet. But her cookies are spectacular.”

“Jeez, keep it clean,” Magnus said in an undertone from the other room, but I only had eyes for Clint.

“She makes me happier than any woman ever has. I want her to be the mother of my,” his gaze dipped to Charise, “cats.”

“Yes,” I whispered. “I hear, well, not church bells—but bells. Oh, her collar has one.” I fingered the pink bell around Charise’s tiny neck.

“Me too, baby.”

“Wait, don’t start kissing again,” Clint’s father instructed, holding up a hand as Clint swept toward me to do just that. “I need to know more about this woman.” He pointed at me. “Who, exactly, is she? Is she why you’re refusing to spend time with your family?” His mouth tightened. “You have so many responsibilities that you can’t neglect.”

I felt Clint brace and shifted more tightly into his side. I was so focused on being the support he needed that I forgot to be cowed by this towering man before me with his glacial blue eyes and unflagging strength.

Clint’s strength was pretty unflagging too. Right now, I would siphon some of it so I could give it right back to him.

“All you need to know is she means everything to me.” Clint’s hold on my shoulders tightened, which was handy because I swayed and might’ve pitched over if he hadn’t.

Hearing those words out loud—in front of his father and sister and Magnus—was staggering.

“Hope that clears this up.” Clint’s voice softened as he spoke to his father but never looked anywhere else but into my eyes. “Any other questions?”



## TWENTY



“AWW, MY BIG BROTHER IS IN LOVE!” FELICIA RAN FORWARD to grab both of us from behind. She kissed both of us heartily though she planted one hell of one on an obviously shell-shocked Kitty. “You picked well. She’ll make pretty babies.”

“Huh? What? Babies? No way. Cats. Not humans.”

I echoed Kitty’s sentiments exactly, although now that my sister had put that idea into my very exhausted brain, she was right. Kitty *would* make pretty babies. And in my addled state, now I kept imagining baby-cat hybrids with big kind dark eyes and wild hair.

I needed sleep. Desperately.

“Felicia.” My father’s eyes narrowed. “What’s that mark on your neck?”

She slapped a hand over the obvious hickey. “Never mind that. Please tell me mom isn’t in the car. Or any of the rest of them. I intended to come back.” She cleared her throat. “Eventually.”

“Why are you here?” I wasn’t sure if I was asking my father or my sister—or Kitty, for that matter, though I vaguely remembered her saying she’d wanted to check on me after I didn’t call.

Which I should have. But I wanted to wear her down about Charise and I didn’t trust my capabilities of speech right now. What I needed was rest, not deep, emotional conversations about very real concerns and grief and anxiety and all that came with those things.

I got she had issues. I did too. But I needed to have my wits about myself to be able to discuss them in the proper way. And in the meantime, Charise had come from that awful hoarding situation and she was special needs. She needed help.

She needed me. *Us*. Because already it felt like in a very real way, there was no me without Kitty. Not one worthy to mention.

And maybe that was crazy. It was too soon. We were both jagged cookies and two halves didn't make a whole.

But what if it did? And what if I still thought the same damn way after eight hours of sleep? Then what?

*Then you'll hopefully be lucky enough to build a life with her. And Princess Goldenrod and Lucky and Charise.*

Lord, we were already building a pack of felines, and we hadn't even said the three big words yet.

Maybe she wouldn't even say them. Maybe I was just her hot vet she liked to fuck. Maybe I really needed to sleep. Possibly right here in the foyer.

Felicia sighed heavily, reminding me I'd asked a question. I was so tired my thoughts were in a loop. "I'm here because I needed some quiet time without all the family in my face. Dad is here because Em tried to tell him she wasn't coming to Thanksgiving and neither were you and Mom had a meltdown that the family was falling apart."

"Mom did not have a meltdown."

"Yeah, okay, Dad. Whatever you say."

"I'm sorry to say I'm not up for entertaining." My voice sounded extremely polite considering I should've been slurring my words by that point.

"Hey, you look fried. Crispy fried. Magnus!" Kitty called, and I realized she was calling him to help deal with me.

"I'm fine." I made myself stand up straighter. "Really. I'm good. Hey, do you have a gem preference?" I was just asking for the far-off future. Not now.

Someone gasped. It wasn't me, that was the only thing I could be certain of.

Then I was being hustled down the hall to my bedroom and I didn't argue because, hey, if it got me out of explaining my delirious rambles to Kitty, and also why I'd brought home a cat, then hey, cool beans. I was still trying to navigate that whole thing of not being quite on my own anymore, so decisions were always joint. But c'mon, Charise was so adorably sweet and Kitty had already taken to her. She was a natural mothering soul.

Proving it, somehow I was now in bed in just my shorts and she was murmuring soothing things to me as she tucked my covers around me and then placed the now-purring kitten on my chest.

"We'll talk about all of this," she waved wildly and bit her lip, "later. And then we'll have monkey sex because after listening to Mag and your sister, sorry to say I think we have to bump it up a notch. At least on weekends."

I groaned and threw an arm over my eyes. "We've only been doing it a few weeks and you're already telling me I'm lackluster? What ever happened to easing in? Also, you listened to them having sex? My God."

"They didn't actually have sex, I don't think. On the way. I didn't hear anything untoward. Well, not really." Kitty sat on the edge of the bed and stroked Charise, who tilted her head precariously to get more petting. Her condition was just one more thing we'd have to discuss.

Later. Much later.

"Can you get in bed with me?" I asked huskily, lowering my arm to meet her eyes.

Such gorgeous, compassionate eyes.

She blinked. "You have many guests. I assumed you'd want me to try to...entertain them." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not good at that. I told your sister she had nice breasts."

"Yeah, I heard."

“So I can’t curl up with you and our new—your new—I’m not ready for a new baby.” She took a shaky breath and brushed her knuckles over Charise’s downy cheek. “I hope she’s not hurt from the fall.”

The worry in her voice had me reaching up to cup Kitty’s jaw. “She’s not hurt but she does have a condition. Just trust me that she’ll be okay. She just needs us.”

Her dark brows beetled together. “A condition? But she’s just a baby. She was from that terrible hoarding case?”

I nodded silently. “Just trust me to explain it all later. I know you’re wary and still missing Muffin. I won’t push you if you’re not ready.”

Her lips curved although I didn’t miss how the light reflected off the sheen of tears in her eyes. “You’re so patient. I imagine you’re a great vet.”

I ducked my head. “I do okay. But Grant isn’t going to let you switch Princess so don’t try it.”

She laughed loudly enough to startle Charise. The kitten soon settled in again, shifting to knead my belly for a moment before placing her tiny head on her paws and falling right back to sleep.

I was very jealous.

“Grant’s a great vet. I’m way behind on Princess’s checkups...” Kitty trailed off and quickly wiped her eyes. “We can talk later. I’ll manage to entertain your father. Somehow. I hope.”

“Felicia’s out there. She can handle him while we take a little nap. You look just as exhausted as I am.” I patted the mattress beside me. “Please?”

“You’re a cheater. A very cute one.” But she snuggled into the curve of my arm as I eased onto my side to make more room for her. Charise took up the position on my hip as if she’d done it many times before.

We fit. All three of us. Plus our other two felines who were probably wreaking havoc I didn’t want to contemplate in our

absence.

That was a for-later problem.

I tucked my chin against her head and wrapped her tight, hoping I wasn't smothering her. Instead, we both sighed in unison, and I had to bury my face in her thick lavender-scented hair to keep from waking the kitten yet again.

"Clint," she murmured, rubbing the back of my hand currently covering her belly. "Did you hear me the other night? What I said after the first time we...you know."

"No." I rubbed my nose against her hair. "What'd I miss?"

"Nothing. I'm the one who missed out on so much." She laced her fingers with mine. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being you and for getting me. Thank you." She let out a shuddering breath. "I don't feel so alone anymore."

I kissed her ear, already drifting. "Me either, my Kitty."

The scent of bacon lured me from sleep an undetermined amount of time later, as did the tail flicking my nose and making it itch. I opened my eyes and took stock, realizing I felt much better. Almost clear-headed, thank Jesus. These all-night shifts were getting harder to take, but at least I didn't have to go in until later.

Post bacon. Kitty was clearly my soul mate.

With a smile, I scooped up Charise off my chest and prepared to roll out of bed, only to see my father sitting on the end of it.

Shit. I should've known better than to assume a good day was ahead.

More like I was still hazy about the events of this morning. They were all coming back to me now though.

"I like your young lady," my father said slowly, as if confounded by this state of events.

I held up Charise to give her kisses, which I'd discovered she really enjoyed. The jackpot round was what she patted my beardy jaw with her tiny paws, spaghetti claws extended.

Ouch.

“Good. I'm glad. She's a good person.”

“How long have you known her?”

“Long enough. You really came here because Mom was freaking out about Thanksgiving? I know how busy you are this time of year.” All times of year, really. “With the big dinner tomorrow, I can't imagine you'd have time for a trip out here.”

“You're my oldest boy. I always have time for you. Mom didn't have a meltdown but she was concerned when Em informed us you both aren't coming to dinner. And that she is staying here in town for a while rather than returning to Clintondale. Rented an apartment right in the Cove for the winter.”

I shifted Charise to tuck her against my shoulder. Her claws happily found a new patch of skin to explore. “She didn't tell me that.”

Em had never fully explained her impromptu visit to tell me about Pierre. If I hadn't been so full of Kitty and so exhausted from work, I would've pressed for details. Even someone as young as she was didn't pop off on a fairly long drive just on the spur of the moment.

So her missing Thanksgiving must not have been that spur, either. Somehow she'd decided she liked where I lived enough to stay. At least for a while.

I knew the breakup and baby had her scrambling, but she had a life in Clintondale. Her university was located just about between Crescent Cove and Clintondale, and prior to this, she'd commuted from home to the university, so I supposed it wasn't that far while school was in session.

“Seems like two of my children have been shutting their parents out.”

“Felicia too?” Come to think of it, why was *she* here, other than needing quiet time, whatever that meant?

I would’ve asked for more details had I not been confronted with her hastily put-on clothes and Magnus’s bare behind upon stumbling blearily into my apartment. Felicia had a key but she hadn’t used it in a long time.

Of course she’d had to pick just the right night...

“Felicia has also elected not to come to dinner.” My father folded his hands over his lap. “I don’t think I have to explain to you what not having three of her children at dinner will do to your mother. At least Felicia and Em, she sees often.”

“Yeah, meltdown city.”

“She didn’t have a meltdown.” My dad shook his head. “She’s just worried. We both are.”

I frowned and righted Charise as her head tipped over, then carefully cradled her to make sure she was fully supported. Sometimes I forgot she wasn’t an ordinary kitten. Extra special, she was, and that meant treating her very carefully.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been home,” I acknowledged. “I know. I’ve been busy, but that’s no excuse.”

“Your mother is getting older, you know.”

I sucked in air between my teeth. “Yeah. As are you.”

“I’ve been holding on to being mayor because it was familiar and brings me joy. I’ve brought up at meetings the possibility of putting term limits back in place.” My father rubbed his clean-shaven jaw. I’d never seen my father with so much as a single errant whisker. “That was stricken from the bylaws so many years ago that no one even considers it anymore, but it could be done.”

“Seriously? You want term limits? Since when?”

“I can change, Clint.”

I lifted my eyebrows and said nothing. With my hour of reckoning at hand, I no longer had much at all to say.

But I could still smell the bacon cooking. And oddly enough, I heard no fighting outside the bedroom. Maybe peace had been restored temporarily across the land.

Hopefully that detente included clothes for all.

“The fact remains, no one will run because they believe Hausers have led Clintondale as it should be led since the beginning. The constituents appreciate that continuity in leadership. But if my choice is being selfish and not allowing my son to take his rightful spot—if the public finds him worthy, that is—then the answer is clear.”

Must be I was not yet clear-headed after all. “It is?”

“Yes. I will step down so you can stop running yourself ragged in service to pets. Instead, you can serve the good people of Clintondale.”

Guess just a few hours’ sleep wasn’t enough to be lucid. Got it.

“Oh. Right. How did I miss that?” I set Charise beside me on the bed. She immediately toddled to the edge and would have tumbled off if I hadn’t quickly blocked her in with pillows.

Then I faced my father squarely. Time to rip off the Band-Aid once and for all.

“Dad, I don’t want to be mayor. I never wanted to be mayor. I would be the world’s worst mayor and would tarnish your sterling legacy beyond repair.” I blew out a breath. “I’m sorry.”

He turned toward me and raked a hand through his hair. “Since when?”

“Since always.”

“But you never said. Whenever I brought the subject up, you always nodded and agreed with me. I thought you were just biding time until I stepped back.”

“I moved away, Dad. I’m a vet. Does that seem like biding time to you?”



“But you left the profession for a while. I almost stepped down then but you assured me it was fine to take my time—” He shut his eyes. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me? You’ve never beat around the bush in any other area of your life, why with something so important?”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you.” I dug the heels of my hands into my gritty eyes. “I knew you had this big eldest-son-carrying-on-the-tradition fantasy going, and I didn’t want to have to tell you it was never going to happen.”

“So you just let me believe it. Meanwhile, you distanced yourself from me and your mother.”

“I was a coward.”

“Son, I may not always agree with you and your choices, but the last thing you are is a coward. You looked the worst I’ve ever seen you this morning, and Kitty tells me this isn’t unusual for you, that you keep a bag in your car so you can sleep at the clinic if need be. So don’t you dare refer to my son as a coward.” He reached forward and dragged me in for a tight hug it took me a long moment to reciprocate.

Then he clapped me on the back and eased away. “Thank you for your honesty. How do you feel about Theo moving up in the line?”

“What line?” I felt as if I was losing IQ points by the second. What was happening?

I looked down at myself. And was I really having this big discussion with my father I’d stressed over for years in my boxers?

Why, yes, I was.

Evidently I needed more sleep, but that wasn’t going to happen until after tonight’s short shift. But bacon and hot coffee in the meantime would get me through.

Then my head snapped back. “Wait, Theo? *Theodore*?”

My father nodded somberly. “I had concerns, I’ll admit. But he’s shown a lot of initiative lately. He’s taken interest in many town events, he’s dating a nice, stable local girl—”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I didn’t put up my fists but it was a close thing.

If he was taking a sly dig at Kitty...

“I just mean he’s settling down and he’s happy in his hometown. It even seems like he might want to start a family soon.”

“Good for him. He hasn’t called me.”

“Have you called him?”

“No. I’ve been busy.” Hearing myself, I shut my eyes. “I will. I’ll check in with everybody. Also, just so you know, there are all kinds of family. Some people don’t get married or have kids. Some people’s picture looks different. And that’s okay. Not everyone has to fall in line and do the same thing and live the same way.”

In the back of my head, a little voice was arguing with me.

*But you do want a family. Firmly slotted in the someday column but you know you want a wife and kids. That was always the problem with the women you dated. Forever didn’t make sense.*

Now just maybe it was starting to.

“I understand that. Your mother and I considered the possibility that you might still be single because you preferred a kind of relationship other than the average.” He braced the tips of his fingers together. “Which would be fine, by the way. Love is love. You know we believe that.”

If my brows had climbed any higher, they would’ve flown off my head. “I’m glad to hear it, but as you saw from my girlfriend, I prefer women. I just don’t prefer *any* woman. I prefer her. I prefer every damn thing about her, just as she is. She’s not local to Clintondale and she’s not average, which to me is a code word for ordinary. And why the hell would I *ever* want that?”

“Clint.”

Kitty stood in the doorway, her features soft, her voluminous hair down and flowing every which way, her beloved hands holding a platter full of steaming hot, perfectly crisped bacon. My mouth watered, and I honestly wasn't sure if it was from the bacon or from her.

Probably both. And my father really needed to leave because every part of me was waking up, especially the one below my waist.

“I told you I loved you the first night we slept together. You were asleep.”

While I was processing that tidbit, her gaze veered to my father. “Sorry. Not appropriate timing. I do that a lot, just open my mouth and blurt out inappropriate stuff. But I think it's important to tell the truth.” She bit her lip. “It was kind of killing me, keeping this inside. I know I should. My father always told me you don't get guys to stick around if you seem too needy or desperate. But I never loved anyone before you.”

She took a deep breath and turned to go. “I'll go make more bacon. Magnus is on thirds already.”

“Wait.” I pushed myself to my feet and picked up Charise, who was trying unsuccessfully to climb over her pillow blockade.

I tucked her against my chest and moved toward Kitty, letting out a laugh when Charise moved faster than I'd ever seen her to thrust her neck toward the bacon. Kitty offered her a tiny piece and the kitten nipped it from her fingers as I leaned down to take a sample of my own—just of Kitty's warm, lush mouth instead.

She tasted of maple syrup and bacon and coffee and my forever happiness, all wrapped up in one delicious bundle.

“Turns out this guy wants very much to stick around for as long as you'll have him.” My heart was beating way too fast as our gazes connected. The hope in her dark, depthless eyes nearly stole my breath. “Since he just happens to love you too.”

## TWENTY-ONE

# Katherine

IF I'D BEEN EDITING THIS MARVELOUSLY ROMANTIC STORY that had somehow become my life, I would assume the next chapter would include at least four rounds of sex—some doggy style, some missionary for variety, then dealer's choice on the rest—and possibly erotic acts using bacon as garnish.

That did not occur.

What did occur was Clint and I got to celebrate our loving each other exceedingly fast but still somehow very much by opening his door again and again to members of his enormous family.

A few more showed up while Clint had gone to retrieve our cats from my apartment, not realizing that many members of the Hausers had agreed to meet at his place.

I didn't know how they'd coordinated their arrival—or if they just somehow shared one hive mind that didn't require conversation—but they just kept coming.

If Clint wasn't going home for Thanksgiving, evidently they'd agreed en masse to bring Thanksgiving to him a little early. Including the bird, which was currently defrosting.

So much for our turducken.

Word had spread like wildfire through the lot of them that he was in love with some stranger who “wasn't even from Clintondale” and “probably going to live with her in a van in Sedona.”

Not sure where that part had come from. It sounded kind of cool, if I wasn't prone to heat rashes in too-hot climates. Too many years spent in the frozen East, I guess.

Also, he was a vet. He had a job and needed to be in town to do it. Not that he couldn't move somewhere else, but neither of us had mentioned that.

Gossip was a weird thing.

Handily, once many of them had congregated in Clint's large apartment, Felicia's sexcapades with my business partner took precedence over the nervous woman who had somehow "snagged" Clint.

And shagged him too, lucky me.

I almost told one of his sisters that it was through tantric sex, then decided I didn't want to have to hear about that for the next decade.

Assuming we lasted. And dear God, I promised to do untold good deeds for the rest of my life if I could just keep Clint. That was all I was asking for.

Well, along with our now three babies, too, of course.

He still hadn't fully explained Charise's condition but other than seeming quite wobbly and not being the best climber, along with the occasional head tremor, she seemed normal-ish. That being a relative term.

I hoped whatever her condition was, it wasn't too awful and wouldn't get any worse. I also hoped she would integrate well with Princess and Lucky.

Somehow I was becoming part of a blended family. It was kind of blowing my mind.

I was hiding from all the noise, chaos, and family members by chopping green beans in the kitchen for the quick stir-fry I didn't think had a clue of feeding all the people we had on hand. That wasn't even the whole crew yet.

By my count, at least a couple more siblings and significant others, Clint's mother, some relative called Aunt Erma, and heaven knows who else were still due to arrive.

My stir-fries were going to have to be done in shifts at this point. I didn't consider myself much of a cook, so I wasn't sure I could even adjust recipes for this volume of people.

Worst of all, Clint was going to have to go back to work tonight. I'd already started a festive takeout bag for him. He'd barely have time to see his family before he left.

Maybe I could go with him and spend time comforting the pets in the kennel area. That would be a million times better than talking to a crowd of very loud people I didn't even know.

I really didn't want to somehow end my relationship with Clint before I'd even gotten to bask in him loving me.

He. Loved. Me.

He hadn't said I was a neurotic freak for falling in love with him after having sex one time. Not that he needed to, because I'd covered that angle quite well in my own head.

Then again, maybe he was used to women riding his meat stick and declaring lifelong adoration. I mean, look at the guy. And what he had on the inside was somehow even better than his packaging.

And package.

I rubbed my stomach in between chopping. I was handling all of this just fine. Yep, I was. I wasn't panic-breathing every time I went to the bathroom. A few belly flutters were no big deal.

How many beans was an appropriate number to feed a massive amount of people? And onions and peppers? Oh, God, I'd been chopping long enough that my wrists were already sore. Should I poll the group to see if anyone was allergic to anything? I'd have to make another Instacart order.

Shoot, I needed to feed Charise. I didn't even know where she was in this zoo. Did she have special food?

I had absolutely no control of this situation and it was making my head spin.

*Get ready for life with the Hausers.*

For all I knew, Clint might be heading off to his hometown soon to become mayor. He didn't want to, but I had no idea if he'd conveyed that to his father yet. The elder Hauser didn't seem really willing to listen to dissenting opinions, although he'd actually been pretty nice to me during our brief conversation after Clint had gone to sleep.

He was just naturally...authoritative. He wore power like a cloak he was well used to.

Not that Clintondale was like DC or something. There weren't even that many people there.

My cell went off in the pocket of my hoodie and I dragged it out, expecting Clint. Instead it was Thorny Paw Clinic.

*Uh-oh.*

“Hello?”

“I'm looking for Katherine Armitage.”

I swallowed hard. I recognized the warm, heavily accented tones of Clint's boss at the clinic, Grant Thorn, immediately. He was from Ireland and his low voice curled around me like one of those thick, comfortable sweaters the country was known for. “It's me. I mean, I'm she. Hi Grant, I'm sorry about Princess. It's been too long. I'll bring her in for her yearly soon, I promise.”

I was going to look into online therapy about my ongoing grief, along with the agoraphobia and my panic attacks in general. I'd been making progress lately, but I had so far to go yet. So many more steps to climb.

But I had all the motivation in the world to keep taking the stairs.

“Easy does it, Katherine, whenever you're ready, we'll fit you and sweet Princess in. I'm not about to let Clint steal you away, although I expect he'll continue to try.”

I frowned and narrowed my eyes at the phone as I held it away from my ear. What exactly did he mean by that? We'd never had anything but a professional relationship.

My God, was I just pumping out male-attracting pheromones lately or something? No one had paid me any mind for a really long time. Now my very existence seemed to be drawing all the boys to the yard for a taste of my very bottled-up milkshake.

What the hell was going on?

“I’m committed to Clint,” I said matter-of-factly as Magnus chose that moment to stroll into the room, cuddling my kitten.

Or Clint’s kitten. *Ours?* It was all so confusing.

Mag’s brow furrowed as if he was about to speak and then he fell silent as he seemingly noticed the phone in my hand. I held up a finger, indicating he should stay, before I pointed to the microwave cart and the colorful stacks of canned can food on the bottom shelf.

He heaved out a breath but dutifully went to pick out a can. “Kitten food,” I mouthed as he looked back at me and resumed checking labels.

“Are you now? Good to hear. I have seen the change in him in just a short time. This profession is hard to deal with. It takes a lot out of you. Hard to see the beloved pets you care so much for sick or hurting. Holding their life in your hands is a weight, you understand.”

“I do.” So Grant *didn’t* want to have sex with me? That was a relief.

I truly didn’t understand male-female relations. Or human relations, period.

“The rewards are so huge too, but you can only reap them if you manage to contend with all the rest. Clint has a big heart. He needs someone he can turn to. I had my wife.”

“Oh, good.” Whew. Belatedly, I realized he’d said *had*. “I’m so sorry, whatever happened.”

“Thank you.” For a moment, his Irish lilt grew. “I’ve lost so much, but I have Poppy. Poppy is my everything. My daughter,” he added, while I bit my lip and wondered if I’d go



to hell if the line mysteriously disconnected while I repeated *I'm sorry* over and over.

It wasn't that I didn't feel for him. I truly did. I just didn't know how to deal with all the personalities and emotions in this apartment already without getting overwhelmed. My head felt full to bursting.

I didn't hang up. I listened. In fact, I listened so hard I nearly missed his question.

“So you'll convince Clint not to come in tonight?”

“I will?”

“I have faith you have ways of persuading him,” he cleared his throat, “that I certainly do not.”

Could kneecaps blush? If so, I was fairly certain it was happening at this moment.

“You don't need him at work?”

“We always need him, but he's been running himself ragged. He's no good to us if he makes himself sick. And when we lost him before... I just want him to be here and whole and healthy.”

“Me too,” I murmured, thinking of the book with his cover I'd tucked away carefully in my bedside bookshelf. I didn't want him to reach that point of needing to leave his job again if it could be helped. “I'll talk to him. His family is in town and, well, I'd appreciate him being home. And I think maybe he needs it, too. If you're sure the clinic will be okay.”

“We'll be okay. He took home that sweet kitten with cerebellar hyperplasia today when we simply ran out of room.”

“Will she be okay? She's so sweet.”

“Yes, I can send you some information about her condition, but essentially yes, she will be like any other kitten other than some special considerations. Luckily her case appears to be very mild.”

“Oh, thank God.” I let out a long, slow breath and let some of the tension seep out of my muscles.

“Not to mention his friend Dex, who adopted Bob the pug here after the poor lad hurt his paw.”

I smiled, my eyes dampening no matter how fast I tried to blink them away. “Aww, he did? The pug was hurt the first night we...” *stop speaking NOW, Kitty*, “became friendly,” I finished, inordinately proud of myself for keeping it appropriate with Clint’s boss.

Until I finished it up with, “He turned me down for sex then but we’re good now.”

Behind me, Magnus groaned and the spoon he was using to scoop food into a shallow dish for Charise fell to the counter with a clatter.

“Anyway,” I said, rushing ahead, “he should be home anytime now. I’ll be sure he stays here. Not through any special means, because there are many people here.”

Grant coughed out a laugh. “However you manage it, Katherine, you’ll be in my debt. Call Alice when you’re ready to make that appointment for Princess, okay?”

“Okay.” I hunched my shoulders and tried not to tense up again at the thought of bringing her into the vet. I hated all the old feelings that invariably came up when I thought about those past trips to the vet and my sweet Muffin’s downfall. But this wasn’t that circumstance, and God, I was so tired of being afraid. “You’re not going to try to lure me away from Clint, are you?”

Naturally that was when Clint appeared in the kitchen doorway.

I hadn’t even heard the front door open and close, but who could have with all the ruckus in the living room?

Working on my timing was definitely going to be one of my New Year’s resolutions.

“I’ll try to control myself. I’m happy for the two of you, Katherine. Have a lovely holiday.” He clicked off while the

word holiday struck cold dread in my heart.

Clint strode over to me, the shoulders of his leather jacket dusted with snow, and with a carrier in each hand. Princess was peering out in a bored fashion as if to say *now what?*

I knew the feeling.

Lucky, however, was not holding in his displeasure. The little bugger actually hissed as Clint set down his carrier next to Princess's on the floor and leaned in to give me a resounding kiss.

“Who's going to get my wrath?” He kissed me again while I tried to figure out the meaning of words.

Wrath? Path? Eh, whatever.

“Kitty?” He cupped my elbows and tugged me against him to demonstrate the cold had not affected any of his bodily functions, particularly below the waist. “Who were you talking to?”

“Your boss. Can you just keep kissing me? It has a pleasant brain-neutralizing effect I've found I enjoy.” When he paused to gawk at me, I gripped his cold cheeks in my hands and yanked him right back down to me again.

The swinging kitchen door slammed shut and I winced. *Sorry, Magnus.*

I was possibly the most insensitive friend on the planet. If we were even still friends and business partners. But hell, he'd gotten to at least fondle a damn fine pair of breasts today. More than I'd gotten on this particular day.

Not that I wanted breasts, per se.

Dammit, Clint had stopped kissing me to stare down at me. “My boss?” he repeated slowly.

“He doesn't want me. I think he just was teasing about you trying to get Princess off his roster so you can be her vet. You're not, are you? Though I would be more comfortable with you. Not that I'm not comfortable with Grant.” I groaned and pressed my forehead into Clint's chest. “Can we go back to just talking through instant messenger? I'm not cut out for

all this interpersonal relating. My mouth moves way faster than my brain.”

“Your mouth moves at exactly the perfect Kitty speed.” Clint wove his cold fingers through my hair. Already I knew he had a tendency to forget to wear his gloves outside. “Babe, your dad is here.”

“Here?” I peered over his shoulder at the closed kitchen door. “How would he know to come here?”

“He didn’t. He was waiting for you at your place. Let himself in with a key and was playing with the cats. Although when I used my key to let myself in,” he rubbed the back of his neck, “let’s just say your dad has some moves.”

I covered my mouth. “Oh, no. Oh, God. He’s not still doing that damn karate stuff.”

“I would say yes, he is, and no, I didn’t appreciate being a test dummy though I like his dedication to his craft.”

“Are you okay? Do you need to go to urgent care?” I nudged his hand away to massage the back of his neck while he made altogether inappropriate noises that explained why his sister charged into the room.

“Seriously, with a full house in here? If I can’t get any, you’re damn not sure getting freaky deaky on my watch—” Felicia stopped short then let out a laugh that sounded more like a hiccup. Guess someone had been into the mini bar already.

Not that I could blame her. What a day.

“Hey Kitty, your dad is looking very awkward out there. You may want to come talk to him.”

“Do I have to?” I squared my shoulders and jumped back as Lucky took a swipe at my ankle from his carrier. “Should I let them out?”

“Probably. Little monster broke his carrier mobile so he’s acting pissy. Where’s Charise?”

We both looked around and found her eating the wet food in the bowl Magnus had left for her before high-tailing it out

of the room. She looked up, food stuck in her whiskers, then promptly teetered forward into the bowl.

She just kept eating.

“Grant mentioned she has cerebella hyperplasia,” I said quietly, holding up a hand. “We’ll talk later. I’ll deal with my dad. You deal with my beans for the stir-fry.”

“What about the fur kids?” Felicia asked, grabbing a bean from the platter and taking a loud chomp. “You’re just going to let them run wild in here?”

“They’re cats, Fee, not a herd of buffalo. I’ve got them.” Clint gave me a quick kiss and said under his breath, “Better them than my family before work.”

“Oh, wait.” I grabbed a fistful of his shirt. “That was why Grant called. I’m supposed to keep you from going in tonight by any means necessary.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about. Though how you’ll manage that with every flat surface in this place taken up with bodies—” Felicia chomped another bean. “At least we’re going home soon. Well, the family is.”

Clint exhaled heavily. “Praise Jesus, my prayers have been answered!”

“Smart ass.” Felicia whacked him on the back. “Dad told Mom to stay home, that everything was under control here, no family breakup seemed imminent, so turkey fest is back on. Apparently, your table doesn’t have enough extra leaves.” She shrugged.

“You’re just going home?” Clint asked dubiously.

“Mom has summoned everyone back. So you know Dad won’t refuse her. But I’m not going home. Even the most succulent turkey isn’t worth all that insanity with Theo’s imminent coronation. He’s about to bust his suspenders.” She rolled her eyes. “Magnus is trying to get a hotel room but it’s just not happening with the holiday. So we might just crash here once the fam clears out. You cool with that? We can be discreet, I swear.”

After this morning's display, I had my doubts.

“Crash anywhere you want. We'll just go back to Kitty's and barricade the doors and windows.” Clint rubbed his temple as he slid me a glance. “Change of plans. You go talk to your dad, and I'll find the Advil.” He gave me a grim smile. “And the bourbon.”

## TWENTY-TWO

# Katherine

FELICIA HADN'T BEEN LYING ABOUT THE HAUSERS INTENDING to clear out almost as fast as they'd blown in.

Not that they'd left yet but the man in charge had made it clear they would be disembarking to head back to Clintondale soon—probably as soon as the last green beans were dumped in the garbage disposal. They were slightly over-caramelized.

Hey, sue me, I was new to this whole cooking for a crowd deal.

Truly, the length of trip they'd all put in didn't seem to warrant the shortness of the visit, but the accommodations were really not able to handle all of them—and it wasn't even all of them, because some of them had wisely decided to turn around before they'd even arrived.

It was for the best, really. Especially when it came to my mental health. I could not deal with meeting this many people at once—important people to Clint, no less—with so little prep.

Or maybe no time to worry beforehand was better because my tendency to overthink myself into the ground was part and parcel of my anxiety. Either way, I was looking forward to them going home. As nice as they all seemed.

And they really did. Even my father was being unnaturally sweet, or maybe that was his guilt talking.

Before we sat down to dinner, Clint and I spent a few minutes making small talk with my father. Somehow Christmas came up, and my dad had mentioned how perhaps

we could get together with his new gal pal. In my head, I'd screamed that it was too soon to consider it, what if Clint and I just didn't last that long, but that wasn't what came out of my mouth. Instead, I'd retold my least favorite Christmas story ever.

How when I was ten, Dad had claimed he was out all Christmas Eve looking for the special doll I wanted—the one that had been all over the news for being sold out since the month before.

*Christmas ruined for thousands of desperate kids.*

“But I wanted to believe him. I wanted it to be my own Christmas miracle.” I glanced at Clint and bit my lower lip, wishing I'd never gone down this path at all. Would I ever learn?

“And he didn't get it?”

“No, I didn't get it,” my father answered. “I really tried. But every other parent had gotten there first. So I got the closest knockoff, even though it wasn't signed like the real one, so I tried to sign it myself and well, that was a mistake.”

I sighed at the memory. “I burst into tears because I knew it was a fake. And because I'd waited for him all night long for a doll that wasn't even what I wanted.”

My father's face was bright red.

“I was seeing a new woman and she was freaked out I had a ten-year-old kid. She didn't want to be a mom.”

“So you left your child alone on Christmas Eve?” Clint fisted his hands on the counter beside the plate he'd just filled with a couple pieces of pizza.

I tried not to salivate, but I was starving.

We'd ordered out for many pizzas after I fully came to terms with the fact I didn't have a clue how to make enough stir-fry for an advancing army.

“She was a self-sufficient child, always had been.” My dad's voice was defensive as he grabbed a slice for himself..



“The operative word was child, and you left her alone on a holiday meant for family. I’ve had my issues with mine,” he said in an undertone, “but I’ll tell you this, my parents would never have left any of us alone on Christmas. And if somehow they had, we had each other. Probably we’d fight through every minute, but we were *never* alone. What did Katherine have? She didn’t even have the doll she wanted. Jesus.”

Swallowing deeply, I reached up to rub Clint’s shoulders. His family was milling about, most of them grabbing slices and sides and dispersing to whatever open seating they could find. “It wasn’t that bad, really. I got over it. It was just a doll.” I couldn’t seem to talk fast enough to dispel the awkwardness hanging thickly in the air like fog. “But I said some not nice stuff to his girlfriend when they finally did show up near midnight.”

“Near midnight?” Clint practically roared it then dialed down his voice when some of his siblings glanced back at him with alarm on their way out of the kitchen. “A ten-year-old child. On Christmas Eve. No wonder she hates the holidays.”

“Now wait a second,” my dad began before I cut him off.

I really did not want to get into a big dramatic scene in front of Clint’s family. Anything but that. Even if I was the one who’d driven down this road.

“That was when I started saying inappropriate stuff,” I continued hurriedly. “At first, I did it to get attention. Anything to be noticed. And then the habit stuck. Now I’m just incapable of not being inappropriate, I guess.”

Exhibit A, right here and now.

“You’re the wrong sort to be a mayor’s wife,” Em said pointedly as she passed by, toasting us with her glass of fizzy water. “Thank God for that, because one Mary Sue is enough around here.”

“Emmaline,” Clint’s father snapped as he scooped salad into a clear bowl from the spread on the very crowded counter. “She and Theo are right in the next room.”

“So? She’s even *named* Mary Sue, for pity’s sake. If that’s not made for being political, I don’t know what is.”

“Keep your voice down. We’re going to make the official family mayoral announcement tomorrow while your aunt Erma is in attendance. Not everyone here knows yet.”

Clint’s triplet siblings looked at each other with identical bored expressions from where they were sprawled on stools to guard the spread. “Dad, all of us know. Theo has been crowing for months that Clint was gonna cry when he found out he’d been replaced.” Fletcher shrugged at Clint’s snort. “He’s your brother. Don’t blame me that he’s an ass.”

Inwardly, I swallowed a sigh. I’d tossed my father to the wolves, yes, but his embarrassment was blessedly brief.

A bunch of us moved into Clint’s formal dining room and filled the seats at the long table—that was not nearly long enough. More chairs were found and dragged in, and laughter and holiday cheer filled the room.

The Hausers changed topics quickly and most of them centered around Clintondale in some way or another.

The big holiday market

The upcoming town meeting.

The last town meeting.

Gossip about who was getting married in town.

Or who was pregnant.

But Emmaline definitely took the cake in that department when she stood up and announced she had to hurl. Then she proceeded to do so all over Aunt Erma’s precious Irish linen tablecloth that Clint had brought out of storage for this auspicious meal of pizza, green beans, wilted peppers, onion petals, and Cobb salad.

My father proved he was maybe not as big of a jerk as he’d once been by helping Em rush to the bathroom while whispering kind, comforting things to her.

Her own father seemed shocked into inaction. I couldn't imagine that happened often.

Felicia leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You don't think your father is interested in her, do you?"

"Are you serious?" Clint asked his sister.

She shrugged and elbowed Magnus, who'd said virtually nothing this entire meal. I couldn't say I blamed him. We were in the presence of vocal champions. "Love blossoms in unusual places." She smiled brightly. "Or at least the dollar store version."

Before anyone could address *that*, Mr. Hauser spoke in a decidedly stilted tone. "Does anyone know what's wrong with Emmaline?"

Another of Clint's sisters—pretty sure now that her name was Melodie—hurried to help clean up the mess. She ripped the tablecloth off the table, along with all of the plates. Thank God they were paper.

I started to stand to help but Clint stayed me with a hand on my shoulder. I dropped back down and resisted the urge to fidget.

With this family, sitting motionlessly was just asking to be a target.

Fletcher kicked back in his chair. "A French puppet knocked up Em." He groaned as Felicia leaned over Magnus to knock her brother in the ribs. "*Ow*, now what? Or did you say poppet? You know I don't know that stupid language." Then he smirked. "An older man, no less. Named Pierre."

"Hey, he's not that much older than Clint." Felicia popped a pepperoni in her mouth, raising her eyebrows innocently when Clint pointed at her. "Just saying."

"Were you or were you not indisposed in my bedroom with Kitty's, uh, friend this morning?"

"Point? That doesn't change you being just about Pierre's age if you're throwing stones. We all live in glass cases of emotion here, pal."

Despite being amused at the Will Farrell reference, I tried to shrink down in my chair in futile hope that Felicia might not notice me beside her. No such luck. Her piercing green eyes zeroed in on me. “How old are you again?”

“Twenty-five in a few days,” my father announced as he swept back into the room.

“How’s Emmaline?” I asked loudly, hoping no one had heard about my birthday.

Especially Clint. I hated fuss at my birthday. Worse, I hated getting up my expectations and then getting them crushed. It was just easier all around for no one to know, period.

“She’s just fine.” Em strolled in and refastened her hair into a ponytail then cupped her stomach protectively. “Daddy, I’m pregnant. Sorry you found out this way. Leave it to your grandkid to make an entrance. First time I’ve actually been sick.” She smiled sheepishly.

“Sweetheart.” Clint’s father stood and went to her, speaking softly while my belly quivered with both sympathy and longing.

Not for a baby. God, no. Charise was enough of a child for me.

But what would it be like to have a father who clearly loved his daughter so much?

Clint’s dad wouldn’t lie to escape spending Christmas Eve with his daughter because he’d gotten a better offer. He just would not.

Clint wouldn’t either. Already I knew he’d be the very best parent to his son or daughter someday. I slid him a look out of the corner of my eye. Maybe one of each.

“Are you okay?” Clint asked quietly. “Only a bit longer and they’ll hit the road, I promise. They might make questionable decisions, but at least they course correct fast.”

I nodded quickly. “I’m fine. They’re nice.”

He snorted. “Sure, honey. Despite what Dad said about tomorrow, I’m going to make sure the family in the other room knows the mayor thing is not happening. At least for me. That should send them on their way, if Em’s reveal wasn’t enough. If Dad and Theo want to make some big official announcement at home tomorrow, that’s their deal.”

I nodded as if my heart wasn’t racing at the thought of being in the spotlight with him, even for just a few moments.

“Might as well make Theo’s year, though he was ready to tap dance his way over me in any case.” Clint shook his head with a wry smile. “Crazy to think the kid who got busted for throwing water balloons in the teachers’ lounge in high school is now gunning to be mayor.”

I bit my lip. “Maybe I should go check on Charise and the others in the bedroom first.” The kitten was blocked in with pillows on the bed and more on the floor, so she didn’t fall and get hurt. We were taking turns checking on her, but it had been a bit.

Jackson Galaxy would never be impressed with our cat introductions, but we tried hard. Chaos just seemed to follow us everywhere.

Clint’s expression softened. “If you need a break, go ahead.”

*He might need you.*

I forced myself to smile as Em and her father came back to the table and Melodie finished cleaning up. “I want to be here for you.”

“Kat, can I have a word?” My father came to a stop behind my chair. “I’ll be brief, I promise.”

Clint nodded at me that it was okay, so I followed my dad into the relative peace and quiet of the hallway.

“I’m sorry I told that story,” I began. “Not sorry I told it,” I amended, “but sorry I didn’t say it in a less awkward way. No reason to air our dirty laundry here.”

He waved that off. “Clint is important to you. He deserves to know the parts of your past you feel comfortable sharing with him. I like that you called me out for it.”

I frowned. “You do?”

“For so long, you used your lack of filter for armor. You always tried to hold people at arm’s length. I’m sure that was all my fault. But I don’t want you to push away your happiness because your old man royally messed you up.”

Yeah, I didn’t have much to say to that one.

“Clint told me he loves you.”

“He did?” I reached up to rub my throat, hoping I could help the right words to find their way out. “I mean, I know he does, I feel it, but he told you?”

“It’s pretty easy to see. He always seeks you out in every room he comes into. He’s always touching you.” When I ducked my head, my father laughed. “Not like that. In a caring way. It’s nice to see.” He huffed out a breath as he tucked his hands into his pockets. “I never met any of your boyfriends. I wasn’t sure you had any. Or if they were girlfriends.”

“No, they were definitely boys. Not that I had many that lasted long. Clint’s already the longest and it’s been such a short time. It’s all gone so fast.” I fisted my hands in the front pocket of my hoodie. “I hurt Magnus. I didn’t mean to, but I’m so clueless about all of this. I didn’t want to hurt him, I swear.”

“None of us know what we’re doing, sweetie.”

My head jerked up at the endearment. Over the years, my father had rarely used them with me. With his girlfriends, he’d always tossed them around like party favors.

“It’s not just me?”

“It’s definitely not just you.” He pulled me in for a hug. “I’m glad you’ve found family. I never did a very good job at giving that to you, but I’m not giving up. This Christmas, you won’t have to wonder where I am. We’ll spend it together. That’s a promise.” He kissed my forehead. “Happy Thanksgiving,” he murmured before he headed to the hall tree

to grab his jacket and cap. With a salute, he slipped out the door.

All I could do was stare after him.

“Kitty?”

I swallowed hard at Magnus’s soft question. I shifted to look at him, twisting my fingers together in my front pocket. “Hi.”

“Hi.” He shifted from foot to foot. “I shouldn’t have come here without making sure you’d be okay with it. I mean to New York. My grand gesture just...sucked.”

I let out a weak laugh. “I shouldn’t have missed that sending someone a sex toy means you might...want to have sex with them. Ugh.” I pulled out my hands and covered my face. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to talk about this with you without wanting to hide.”

He laughed and some of the tension in my shoulders ebbed away. *Some*. “I know you had no idea. I don’t blame you. Actually, I blame those fucking romance novels.”

I dropped my hands. “Huh?”

“You know how those stories usually go. Guy has unrequited crush on the heroine, who doesn’t realize how absolutely beautiful and smart and perfect she is, but *he* knows. He sees all the good in her, and when she’s at her lowest, he swoops in and tells her he loves her and she’s everything to him and hell, maybe he even gives her a ring.” His ears burned pink at the tips. “I gave you a sex toy. So Clint swept in and got the girl.”

I couldn’t speak. Was he saying he...loved me? Or had loved me?

“I’m the opposite of perfect, Mag. I’m a trying-to-recover agoraphobic, too-blunt chick,” I had to pause to take a breath, “who thinks haute couture is a terrycloth robe with sex kitten heels. And an array of sweater vests and holiday-themed turtlenecks.”

“You love with your whole heart and only give that love to the very best people. People like you.” He smiled at me gently. “People like Clint. He deserves you. And maybe my saying that doesn’t fit the romance novel ending, but we’ve never been typical, have we?”

“No.” I sniffled out a laugh. “We haven’t. Can I have a hug?”

His eyebrows lifted before he pulled me into a quick embrace. “Clint is a good guy, but he’d love to kick my ass so I’ll just say it felt better than I expected. Hugging you.” He grinned and released me.

“What about *hugging* his sister?” I coughed.

“Yeah, well, that feels awesome.” His grin turned sly. “Guess the Hauser family is the gift that keeps on giving for a couple of nerds like us, huh? Though I fully anticipate she’s going to eat me up and toss me aside like yesterday’s boxer shorts.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

He shrugged. “Fuck no. It’s good—great—while it lasts, right?”

Maybe that was the attitude I needed to adopt. The present moment was all that mattered. Tomorrow was in the future. Worrying about it was a waste of what I had right now.

Right now was pretty damn awesome, even if I was still scared to death.

“Yeah. You’re right. So, ah, we’re good? The business, our friendship, it’s all still good?”

“Are you kidding me? Of course it is. We’ve got a great thing going. Nothing is going to change that.”

“I’m so glad.” I leaned in again to give him one more quick hug, then looked up to see Clint standing just inside the dining room. His family was gathered behind him and they all seemed to be waiting, collectively holding their breath.

They were waiting for him to let them all down gently about being mayor, whether or not they already knew. But they



were giving him that space to tell his story the way he wanted to.

And he was waiting for *me*.

I grinned and slipped out of Mag's arms to go into Clint's. I knew now wasn't the moment to kiss him. Absolutely not.

But I was stupidly in love with him and perhaps it was time for me to start adding unseemly gestures to my repertoire to go along with the inappropriate comments.

I leaned up on my tiptoes, linked my arms around his neck, and kissed him like no one was watching, even as cheers broke out around us.

And he kissed me right back.



# EPILOGUE

BOXES SURROUNDED ME IN MY BEDROOM. LUCKY WASN'T HERE because tomorrow was moving day.

Phase one of a new life for us both.

So I couldn't recreate this night exactly from a year ago, but I'd do my best to hit the high points.

I sat back against my headboard, my heartbeat a strong thud in my ears as I reread my words.

---

*Desperately Seeking Kitty*

*Looking for Kitty for long-term relationship, preferably with dark hair and dark eyes and the perfect curves to keep me warm on these cold winter nights. She'll be smart and have a way with a Crockpot and knows the preferred dictionary meaning for pussy. Chocolate milkshake at midnight? Pictures provided upon request.*

---

Oh, I hoped I could provide pictures.

Taking a deep breath, I hit send and uploaded the post to Kitten Around's classified ad page.

Not two minutes later, my first response arrived, and I smiled.

Must be my girl was on the ball tonight.

I clicked it open with a smile.

CATMAMA1987

Listen, sicko, I don't know what kind of cat parent you are, but chocolate is toxic to cats! So you should stop looking for your weirdo fetish cat and learn how to really take care of your pet. Now get off this site!

I laughed so hard I almost sprained something. Just like a year ago tonight, someone was getting chided on Kitten Around's classified page—except this time it was me. There was a fine irony to that.

For almost an hour, I cycled through my many mostly disparaging replies. Then the one I was waiting for finally arrived. That I'd had to text her to tell her she might need to see something in Kitten Around's classified section was hardly the point.

She'd replied.

PRGLDNROD

Desperately seeking Clitty

Aren't you supposed to be helping me pack, not searching for pieces of hot kitten @ss online? Don't tell me you're one of those men.

P.S. Where are these supposed pictures?

With a laugh, I searched through the photos I'd taken earlier after my shower and sent over a few that only hinted at naughty things. The more personal variety would be sent through instant messenger so Theresa at Kitten Around didn't have access to them. I had some scruples.

Enough that I quickly moved this conversation off Kitten Around's server to text Kitty the pictures where I'd skipped the towel entirely and showed off my tattoos with only water droplets to obscure them...or other things.

I obviously couldn't hear her shriek when she clicked open the image, but I could imagine it. The formerly non-noise-

making Kitty had turned into a screamer in bed and a shrieker when she found things funny or scandalous or sexy.

That photo was all three.

My cell went off a minute later and I answered right away.

“Seriously? I’m covered in dust and have fur all over my pants from crawling around trying to clean up the baseboards and you’re sending me dick pics? Nice palm fronds, by the way.”

She so loved my palm fronds tattoos. Though I think she’d hoped for a better explanation for why I’d gotten them than “one night I was drunk and sick of cold weather, so I was thinking of being on a beach.”

“I missed my chance to send you a dick pic last year, so I didn’t want to miss another anniversary of you looking for pussy.”

“If I’m looking for pussy, why are you sending me dick?”

“Look, I’m harder than hell right now, save the puzzlers for after I’ve had your mouth on me.”

“Now you want me to stop cleaning just to sexually service you?”

“Yes.”

“Then where the hell are you? And where’s my milkshake?”

She had a point.

I looked at the time. “It’s not midnight yet.”

“Oh. Forgot you’re adhering strictly to your wicked little plan, though we didn’t meet around midnight that first night.”

“Because you clicked off on me and didn’t contact me again for days.”

“Oh, now it’s all my fault. Whatever. I need to run out anyway. We’re out of condoms.”

I was so busy smiling over the fact that she could now run down to the convenience store without thinking twice—at

least most of the time—that I almost skipped over the word condoms.

Which showed how much I adored this woman.

“Uh-uh. We don’t need those.”

“We don’t?”

“Nope.”

We’d kept using them to be super careful since Kensington Square wasn’t far from Crescent Cove, the source of far too much local pregnancy lore, and neither of us had been looking to have any babies other than those of the feline variety.

We were currently full up on cats too.

But now that our first home and marriage were hopefully a thing, I was starting to get itchy about the whole family deal. I didn’t want to rush her. But maybe we could put it on the table.

“Have to rectify my mistake from last year.”

“What mistake?”

“When you so considerately offered me bareback sex the first night we met in person, but I said no because I was too tired to be more than a half-a-pump chump.”

Her giggle made me grin so widely that I probably looked like a moronic, lovesick idiot.

Because I was.

“Really?”

“Really. Might as well take all the steps at once, right? I mean, if you’re okay with it.”

“I’m still on the Pill.”

“Good enough.” For now. Maybe soon she could ditch that, too.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Other than suffering from severe dick constriction, I’m just fine. Why?”

“Well, you’re one of seven kids.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know, what if you repeat familial patterns with sperm counts or something?”

I laughed. “I don’t think it works that way, honey. I’m going to get dressed and get your milkshake now. See you in a bit.”

My hands were shaking as I dressed. As I did up my buttons on my dress shirt. As I jerked up the zipper on my jeans. Hell, even as I dragged a comb through my wet hair. I wasn’t nervous about the step I was taking.

I just couldn’t believe we were here. Honestly, I was still shocked I’d managed to wait until now. I’d debated with doing it on her birthday but another couple weeks was more than I could stand.

*So why not try to plant a baby in her too to celebrate? Always gotta be an overachiever, don’t you?*

I wasn’t in a big hurry on the baby planting—and the Pill would make it much more of a challenge—but whatever happened, happened. I just wanted to get our lives started. New house on the lake with an entire cat-dedicated play area—though we’d lived together for the entire past year, despite keeping two residences because apparently we liked to waste money—lots of condomless sex, and hopefully tonight we’d get engaged.

Our three cats were all healthy and mostly sweet and non-destructive except for when Lucky showed Charise how to destroy the maximum amount of toilet paper. She couldn’t quite manage to balance enough to do it but she kept trying.

I’d even gotten Kitty’s father’s permission to ask for her hand. He’d said yes so fast that I had no doubt he thought I was good for his daughter.

His daughter was *very* good for me.

I still hadn’t managed to wheedle her and Princess off Grant’s client list though. In truth, all three of our cats were on

Grant's list now. I didn't want to miss something vital just in case.

I swung into the McDonald's drive-thru just as my buddy Dex called. I clicked to accept the call on the in-dash screen.

"Hey, man, can you come out tomorrow night with me and Jimmy? We're doing a bar crawl to end all bar crawls. Jimmy was just promoted to full-time on the force in the Cove."

"Oh, wow, good for him. That's awesome. Pass along my congratulations but I can't make it tomorrow. Gonna be holed up."

"Oh, jeez, not again. You are gonna get dick rot, dude. You can't have that much sex and not suffer physically. Also, your friends are starting to hate you."

"You really should hate me. I'm asking her to marry me tonight."

"Oh, fuck, we were taking bets on when that would happen after you bought your lakeside love shack. Congratulations, man. And if I can't make the festivities, don't take it personally. Bob doesn't like weddings."

"He doesn't, does he? Well, since he's not your emotional support pet, you can leave him home. She hasn't said yes, by the way."

"Leave Bob home? I won't tell him you said that. He'd be crushed his uncle Clint, the very one who brought us together, is now trying to shut him out. At least we got him neutered." He *tsked*. "No hope for you, my man."

I rolled my eyes and told Dex to hold while I placed and picked up my order—two large chocolate milkshakes, two large fries, and two Big Macs.

My stomach growled. Food to get engaged with.

"Listen, man, congratulations. You're setting quite the example for me and Jimmy, though neither of us will pay any attention because we're both strapping, dangerously good-looking men who can't be tied down by the love of one woman."



“Just you wait and see.”

“I don’t even like cats. Well, Bob doesn’t like cats. I love everyone and everything. Sometimes a little too much.”

Especially those of the female variety. Dex’s reputation definitely preceded him there.

“Bob got along fine with cats when we brought him in. What are you doing to him over there in that den of iniquity?”

“He’s a happy dog, and that’s all you need to know. Good luck, man. I’m thrilled for you. I really am.”

“Thanks. Hopefully there will be something to be happy about, since I haven’t asked yet.”

“Aww, he’s nervous.”

“Kinda goes with the territory.”

“Just means you’re putting it all on the line. That’s a good thing.”

“Yeah. Have fun with Jimmy. Later.” I clicked off and stole a fry then decided I’d wait to eat after I was an engaged man—or hopelessly drowning my sorrows in salt and beef.

I parked the car at the curb near her building and grabbed the shakes and bag of food to rush up to her apartment. I had energy to burn, mostly of the anxious variety. I didn’t think she’d say no. But she might just freak out.

Freaking out was always on the table. Especially once she saw the ring.

I took the stairs two at a time then juggled cups and bags to get the damn door open. I’d made it a couple steps into the dim apartment before I realized the nearly empty living room—save for stacks of boxes—was lit only by the line of flickering candles on the counter.

What happened to cleaning? How was she doing it, by penlight?

Then I imagined her crawling around wearing next to nothing and my jeans situation quickly became uncomfortable again.

I set down our meal on the coffee table, one of the few remaining pieces of furniture before the movers came. “Kitty?”

She walked down the hall as my eyes adjusted to the near dark. She was wearing a slinky red dress that ended mid-shapely thigh—with her editing heels, yet her computer was nowhere in sight.

“Hi. That smells good. I did something yesterday while you were on that overnight shift at work. And you better appreciate it because oh my God, it hurt.”

I cocked my head. Already this wasn’t going as planned, but when did it ever with Kitty? “Okay.”

Quickly, she shed her super sexy dress and revealed what she *wasn’t* wearing underneath. No bra, just the tiniest pair of panties I’d ever seen.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, they were see-through.

I swallowed, and she pointed between her legs as if I somehow hadn’t noticed her new grooming job. “I screamed even more than I do with you. You can’t imagine the horror. So you better enjoy it now because we’re going back to the national forestry association as soon as it grows back in. Sorry.” She held up her hands palms out. “My love only goes so far.”

Caught between laughter and a groan, I framed her face in my hands and kissed her until we were both breathless. “I’m going to make the best goddamn husband you could ever imagine. Even better than Sven when he rubbed cocoa butter all over Rina’s pregnant belly. Which shouldn’t have been as hot as it was.”

Kitty cocked her head. “Are you developing a breeding kink?”

“I think it’s just a you kink in general. Your body is a wonderland.” One I couldn’t stop running my hands over. If I spent one hundred years devoted to the task, I wouldn’t be able to properly explore and kiss and worship all of her glorious curves.

I was ready to give it my best shot.

“Did you just quote John Mayer to me?” She tipped her head to mine with a laugh. “Also, what’s with this husband stuff?”

Before I got distracted with thoroughly ravaging her—that was a romance novel word that just wasn’t used enough in polite society—I dropped to one knee, realized my dick had nearly suffered a traumatic injury due to the sudden movement in tight jeans, and quickly switched to regular kneeling.

Then I fished out the ring box, held it up to her, and entirely forgot what I was supposed to say because holy shit, Kitty cast in just flickering candlelight literally took my breath away.

“Clint.” Her voice sounded thick. “We can just live in sin.”

That didn’t help my sudden inability to speak.

She dropped to her knees and wrapped her hand around mine holding the ring box open. “Never mind. Forget I said that. I want to marry you. I don’t want to settle for just some lettuce and sour cream when I can get the whole damn taco boat. Ask already, or I’ll just take the ring and put it on my damn self. Oh my gosh, it’s beautiful. Look at those swirls of green. Like your eyes.” She batted her lashes dramatically.

I laughed, the logjam in my chest breaking open. “I love you. Will you marry me? Please? So I can get up off my knees and get out of these damn jeans?”

“I love you too. Yes. Yes. Oh, and yes. Now put the ring on me.” She wiggled her fingers, then she lifted her fist to her mouth. “If it doesn’t fit...”

She barely had to flex her fingers for me to slip it on. I’d made sure to get it sized perfectly through nefarious means—like stealing one of her other rings.

I deepened my voice. “I’ll make it fit, baby, don’t you worry.”

She hit me with the back of her hand then turned her fingers over to admire the ring. “You’re not reading any more

of my books. I don't care how much you beg."

"You like it when I beg." I let my gaze travel down her body. "And trust me, I'm ready to beg tonight."

As if she hadn't even heard me, she studied the ring. "Is this...is this cat's eye?"

"It is. Rare and in a vintage setting. I wanted you to have a stone that was significant to us. And diamonds to cushion it, of course. But this stone signifies protection. You're the most precious thing in the world to me." I lifted my head and glanced around the surprisingly calm apartment. With three fur babies, chaos was a permanent condition. "Hey, where are the cats?"

She laughed breathlessly and pressed her hand to my chest. "Safely locked away in the bedroom watching Cat TV. So did I mention how much pain and suffering this whole Brazilian thing caused me? Never mind the emotional trauma of letting a strange woman see parts of me I can't even see without the aid of a lighted hand mirror."

"I missed this chapter in Rina and Sven."

She grinned and pulled me down with her onto the rug. "Time to write our own new chapter, hot vet."

*Not ready to let our peeps go just yet?*

*Kitty and Clint find out forever includes kitties, babies and...  
shamrocks?*

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Preston

# HIS TEMPORARY ASSISTANT

JUST WHEN I THOUGHT MY DAY—WEEK, MONTH, LIFE—couldn't get any worse, my assistant said she was taking a vacation.

In a week.

Not a year.

Not a month.

A week.

“Look, sir, I'm really sorry. I never expected to get this opportunity. My grandmother was supposed to go to Fiji on her honeymoon, but they broke up, and Biff is taking the Tahoe so she's taking the vacation.”

I pressed a fingertip to my aching temple. “Biff? Your grandmother? Fiji?”

“He's taking the Tahoe,” my assistant April repeated slowly, leaning forward. Her blond hair fell down around her shoulders, escaping whatever pinned-up thing she'd done in the back. Unless that was the style.

Must be. April Finley was never anything but perfectly put together.

Before today, she'd also never been late. Or taken a vacation beyond a standard and reasonable long weekend. She'd called in sick precisely twice and worked from home.

“We had an agreement.” My voice remained even. “I hired you on the spot approximately eighteen months ago on the

condition you realized this was not a position that afforded you—”

“What, I can’t take some time for myself?” Unlike my own, her voice rose in pitch to match the lifting asymmetrical hem of her dress. Not to indecent levels, mind you, because April was always proper.

Yet somehow my lack of sleep and brewing tension headache was bringing to mind ocean waters creeping higher on the Titanic.

The dress was sea blue too. Or hmm, was that more of a blue-green? I never did get why women had so many colors for things.

Look at my closet. I had black and navy suits. More navy than black because it was less severe for court. My tie collection was more colorful, but I certainly didn’t know the names for the damn shades. Who had time for all that nonsense?

Not me. I didn’t even have time to complete the work on my plate. I also didn’t have time to further engage in this conversation.

April was still blathering on about mud masks and self-care and did I realize how long it had been since she’d even slept in?

No, I could honestly say I didn’t.

“What exactly does that mean? I rise every day at precisely four.”

She stopped mid-tirade and stared. “You what—why?” She tapped a glossy pale nail against her mouth. “Actually, that’s better than I assumed. Rising means you sleep.”

“Not necessarily,” I said under my breath.

That certainly wasn’t the case this month. My father was on the verge of retirement, which meant we would be looking to hire a new partner soon, and my brother and I were overloaded with work. Well, I was overloaded. Dex was



strictly a nine-to-fiver—sometimes a ten-to-twoer if the water looked good. In the winter, he was all about the slopes.

I wasn't just talking about skiing. He made just as good use of the lodge as he did the hills. The guy dated more women in a year than I had in my entire life.

I was too busy working. And that was when I'd had an assistant.

Dear God, how was I going to get through a week without April? She kept my life running smoothly. Or at least it was less bumpy than it could've been without her.

“You remind me to eat,” I said accusingly.

She frowned. “No, I don't. You just saw me with a donut or a sandwich a few times.”

“Right, but seeing you with food reminds me I haven't eaten.”

“Sir, your growling stomach should do that without my help.”

As if I paid attention to such physical cues.

I would soon find out exactly how good I'd had it before.

Before vacations.

Before retirements.

Before I'd succumbed to a life of no meals and no sleep.

I grunted. “This is not enough notice. How am I supposed to hire a temp in,” I consulted my Apple watch, “six days, eighteen hours, and eleven minutes?”

“I know it's short notice.”

“Short? Try minuscule.”

“But I have the perfect solution.”

My shoulders unknotted for the first time since she'd walked into my office. “You've decided to cancel?”

April scowled. Until today, I'd never seen anything but a serene, unruffled expression on my assistant's face. That was

one reason I appreciated her so much. She wasn't prone to mood swings.

Mood swings were a good part of why I was single. My mother had enough of them to change the weather from across town.

I didn't need any additional stress in my life. The calmer a woman was, the better. That went for men too, although that was a different dynamic because I didn't get naked with them.

For that matter, I didn't get naked with women much recently either.

Moving on.

"I can't cancel. My grandmother needs me. She and Biff were together for two years."

It took everything I possessed not to give a mock shudder. "I'm grievously sorry for her loss, but why does her misfortune have to become mine?"

April huffed out a breath. "Biff isn't dead. Have you been listening at all?"

"Of course I have." I adjusted my cuff links. "You're cruising to Alaska?"

"Seriously?"

"Look, I have back-to-back meetings this afternoon." Normally, at this point in a conversation I did not want to have, I would text my assistant to call me with a made-up appointment. That was hard to do when she was the one seated across from me.

One more reason I hated unplanned, unnecessary vacations.

"Not according to your Daytimer."

"There were a few last minute additions."

"Mmm-hmm. You know, I'm beginning to rethink my backup plan."

Hope bloomed inside me like a daisy in spring. "You are?"

“I always thought you were a fair, equitable boss who didn’t play power games.”

“I do not. Ever.”

“You never so much as pinched my ass—rump,” she corrected, thereby putting the image of an ass-rump in my head—luckily, not hers.

I had never so much as glimpsed her backside. I wasn’t that sort of employer.

“Of course not.”

“You don’t take advantage of your position, and you see everyone as equals.”

I couldn’t help preening. Slightly. “I am careful to do exactly that.”

“So, naturally, I figured Ryan would be the perfect choice to assist you while I’m away. I would never introduce you to a friend if I didn’t believe you were fair-minded. Some look at having an assistant as an opportunity to lord their elevated status over them.”

Why did it sound as if she was lecturing me? “I have never done such and I never will.”

She rose. “Good. It’s settled. Ryan will start for you next Monday at nine. Possibly nine-fifteen. No more than nine-thirty. Mornings are iffy.” She crossed the office to the door. “Oh, and thanks! I’ll bring you back a souvenir.”

The door clicked shut on my curses.

I stalked over to the coffeemaker and discovered I was down to five pods—inhumane considering my current level of tension.

I popped one in the brewer and returned to my desk to stab the intercom button on the phone.

“Yes?”

“I’m almost out of coffee. Can you kindly place an order before your vacation?” The question held the same level of wrath as a death threat.

Preston Michael Shaw was not someone to tangle with without his caffeine.

“Already taken care of two days ago. Tracking says it should arrive by Monday afternoon. Your preferred flavor of Columbian coconut-caramel was backordered.”

“Of course.” I had no reason to feel ashamed I enjoyed coconut and caramel. Those were extremely manly flavors.

And Monday afternoon meant I would have to deal with April’s friend who was “iffy about mornings” without the benefit of my early morning pick-me-up unless I grabbed one on the way in. My own kitchen at home was stocked with an assortment of possibilities that I rarely took time to actually make there, other than my restorative Friday night meal. For the most part, I only used my place to shower and sleep.

“I actually paid for rushed shipping.”

“Why, does Ryan enjoy coffee too?” There was no keeping the edge of sarcasm out of my voice.

“Hardly. Tea is much more Ryan’s speed. Coffee is a dangerous stimulant and can lead to hallucinations.”

“Such as fantasizing about murdering someone when you don’t have any?”

“You have five pods left,” April said crisply. “Ration.”

She hung up before I could reply.

In the old days before vacation, April never hung up without making sure I had everything I needed. Now she seemed dismissive. Perhaps this was her way of weaning me off the teat of capable assistantship before she took her leave.

It was hard to imagine Ryan, with his inconsistent start times and love of tea, could measure up.

Maybe I was being unfairly judgmental. Usually, water seeking its own level was a factor in friendships, but I had no idea if this was a former ex of April’s or someone she merely had an acquaintance with. Many people today called everyone their friend, from the mailman to the barista who made their latte. I was far more selective.

My old school buddy, Bishop, counted as a close friend. I also had numerous acquaintances. I wasn't looking to add to the roster.

I grabbed my coffee from the brewer and disposed of the pod before sitting at my desk. I slipped on my glasses then typed a missive to April.

---

**Memo: Ryan Moon**

**Ms. Finley,**

**Upon further reflection, while your effort to provide someone in your stead while you are vacationing is commendable, I need more information before I blindly accept someone into my employ, even temporarily. Does this individual have a CV? A work history? Applicable skills? References? I will need to see these materials before I hire anyone.**

**Yours,**

**Preston Michael Shaw, Esquire**

---

Addressing her as Ms. Finley was a bit much, as was signing my full name and using Esquire. I was annoyed on multiple levels and needed an outlet.

I didn't believe in gyms—communal sweating had never been my kink—so I'd be going for a nice long run tonight to get out my frustrations. God knows I didn't have any other healthy outlets, other than playing Mario Kart on my ancient Super Nintendo system.

Vintage. Not ancient. I needed to learn the lingo so I didn't sound like someone caught in the past.

I drank a mouthful of hot coffee and flicked through screens until I came to my notes about one of my biggest cases, Terrance vs. Yorn, a multi-million dollar divorce with drama worthy of *Judge Judy*. I did not do drama. I also didn't relish reviewing notes that amounted to little more than a record of personal attacks rather than anything based on legal precedent.

I had pulled up my email program to dash off another email, this time to Donald Terrance, when said program dinged.

I frowned. I had turned off all notifications. How had one gotten through?

The frown grew as the most recent email in my box seemed to loom larger than all of the others. The sender? Ryan Moon.

*Mental note: tell Ms. Finley not to share my email address with outsiders before asking.*

Narrowing my eyes, I clicked it open.

---

**To whom it may concern:**

**I have attached my resume. References are at the bottom. The first one is the person who got me this gig.**

**Sincerely,**

**Ryan G. Moon**

---

I cocked a brow. *Gig?* That was a new one.

Rather than reply to Ryan G. Moon, I opened my email to send another memo to April.

---

**Ms. Finley,**

**I just received correspondence from one Ryan G. Moon. Kindly do not share my email with strangers in the future. Also, did you make clear what sort of position this is? Your friend referred to it as a “gig.”**

**Yours,**

**Preston Michael Shaw, Esquire**

---

I'd barely hit send and sat back to drink smugly from my rapidly disappearing coffee when my email dinged.

Yet again it had bypassed my no notifications setting. How was this happening? I did not want unanticipated noises interrupting my blessed silence.

---

To whom it may concern:

I am well aware what kind of position this is, as April (Ms. Finley to you) has told me all about her job many, many times. I am also well-versed in the likes of you.

Sincerely,

Ryan G. Moon

---

I set my coffee mug down with a snap. My gaze narrowed on the jaunty saying on the side of the cup, a gift from my last secretary right before I'd fired her.

*Lawyers do it in their briefs.*

She'd laughed uproariously upon handing me this item at the company Christmas party. Then she'd pinched my ass. I'd been quite certain she'd dipped into the punch, but I couldn't have the other employees thinking I'd crossed a line.

As if I'd willingly have sex with a woman with nails as long as tongue depressors.

I begun to type again. Forget Ms. Finley. Evidently, Ryan G. Moon and I were meant to communicate solely with each other.

---

Ryan G. Moon,

What do you mean by 'the likes of me'? If you have formed a bias against me due to Ms. Finley's description of her workplace, perhaps you would like to seek employment elsewhere. Ms. Finley should also discuss any concerns she may have with me herself rather than through a questionable intermediary.

With all due respect,

I wasn't even surprised when the reply came through before I'd managed to finish even half my email to Donald. At this point, the resulting ding was also anticlimactic.

Clearly, my notifications setting had gone as rogue as my obviously displeased assistant.

---

To whom it may concern:

April actually loves her job. I find it hard to believe, since my interactions with lawyers over the years haven't led to a feeling warmer than luke at best, but she is more generous than I. She has no concerns. I just read between the lines.

So, have you checked out my resume or what?

Sincerely,

Ryan G. Moon

---

What kind of feeling was *luke*? The word lukewarm was not meant to be split as if the first half counted as an adjective on its own.

I rubbed the knot in my forehead. If this was an example of Ryan's grammatical skills, I was nearly giddy with anticipation.

Also, I had forgotten to download Ryan's résumé. But I had one other salient point to attend to first.

---

Ryan G. Moon,

The word is *resumé* with the accent mark over the e. Without it, the word is simply *resume*. Which the dictionary defines as: to take up or go on with again after interruption; continue. Example: to resume a journey.

Sincerely,

Preston Michael Shaw, Esquire

---



Her response took all of three-point-five minutes.

---

To whom it may concern:

You forgot the accent mark on the first e. It should be résumé.

Insincerely,

Ryan G. Moon

---

This time, I did not answer the missive. Instead, I summoned Ms. Finley via the phone's intercom. "My office, please."

That *please* constricted my throat.

She knocked and appeared in my doorway, without seeming the slightest bit contrite. "Yes?"

"Sit."

She sat. Waited. Blinked innocently.

"Do you have some rapid-fire system that allows you to forward my emails to your friend in an instant? I've never seen anyone reply so quickly."

April's lips twitched. "She's very conscientious."

Now there was no doubting my throat was tight. "She?"

"Why, yes. Didn't you realize? Ryan is a woman." Now she did smile, widely. "She can't wait to meet you."

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# ABOUT TARYN QUINN

*USA Today* bestselling author, **TARYN QUINN**, is the sexy and funny alter ego of bestselling authors Taryn Elliott & Cari Quinn. We've been writing together for years, but we have decided to pull the trigger on a combo name just for fun.

And so...Taryn Quinn was born!

Do you like ultra sexy small town romance full of shenanigans? Quirky office romances full of steam? Okay, look...we pretty much just love writing steamy stories. If you're all about that, we're your girls!

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