



FRIENDSGIVING GETAWAY

Liz Lincoln

friendsgiving getaway

A SNOWED-IN, FRIENDS-TO-LOVERS ROMANCE

RENTAL RENDEZVOUS

BOOK 11

LIZ LINCOLN

For my Family

about the author

Liz Lincoln has been concocting stories as long as she can remember, and from the beginning they involved two people falling in love. When she's not writing, she spends her time rooting for the UW Badgers and the Green Bay Packers (or yearning for the return of football season), watching the US women's soccer team, stitching sassy sayings, and drinking too much Diet Coke. Or reading one of the many romance novels in her TBR pile. She also works part time as a psychotherapist. Liz lives in Milwaukee, WI, with her husband, two kids, three cats, and a turtle.

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tuesday

ANNIE

I couldn't see a damn thing. Or, to be more precise, all I could see was snow. Which wasn't ideal considering I was driving along a narrow, winding mountain road. If I squinted hard enough, I could just make out the side of the road so I didn't crash into the wall of mountain on my left or the steep drop to my right. So I'd given myself a mild headache from holding my facial muscles in a squished position.

Another half mile of white-knuckling at ten miles per hour and I reached what better be the driveway I wanted. Well, I was looking for 48903, and the placard read *<snow blob>903*. So I hoped for the best and slowly turned my Audi onto the snowy drive.

The driveway was narrow and tree lined, keeping me again from veering too far off my path. It was a Thanksgiving miracle!

Whose dumb idea had a cabin in the middle of nowhere for our annual Friendsgiving get-together been, anyway? Oh, right, Chris's. Of course it was Chris's.

I was not letting my mind wander to thoughts of Chris Wexler. Way too distracting.

I went another mile through the blinding snow until the vague shape of a house loomed out of the whiteness. It was a log cabin, which gave my heart a little skip, with a dot of red against it. As I pulled to a stop, I realized the red dot was the jacket of the man himself.

Chris.

My heart gave another skip as my stomach squeezed. The same reaction I had every time I'd seen him since we met fourteen years ago. And whether to not it killed me, this week I was finally going to do something about it. What was the worst that could happen from telling my close friend and the man I co-owned a large company with, along with two other friends, that I was in love with him and wanted to have wild animal sex with him?

Sure, he could laugh in my face, speak to me only when required for business, and slowly push me out of Red Rocks Technologies. But that seemed an extreme reaction out of character for him.

Hopefully.

Now my heart was sprinting, not just skipping. I took a slow breath as I killed the engine and got out of the car.

He raised his shovel at me in greeting as I moved to the trunk to get my bag. Shoveling while the snow was still pelting down on us seemed futile, but I wasn't going to question him.

The snow muffled sounds, so I didn't hear him approach until he was at my elbow.

"I can get that."

I startled, hand flying to my throat.

A chuckle rumbled up from his chest, deep and soft. And I couldn't help it. I yearned. I yearned so much. For so much. I was too busy yearning to insist I could carry my own bag, so he reached into my trunk and pulled it out. Before I knew it, he was carrying it through the snow to the front steps.

I had no choice but to close my trunk, lock the car out of habit even though we were miles from anyone else, and follow. As I reached the top of the three steps, a faint sound caught my ear.

“Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” He paused with his free hand on the doorknob. Under the cover of the porch roof, I could finally see him clearly. He wore loose jeans that skimmed his thighs and heavy boots, with a red down jacket on top. A black wool hat covered his sandy blond hair. And his blue, blue eyes sparkled with his usual good humor.

I heard it again, something between a *squeak* and a *peep*. It was coming from around the corner. “That.” I followed the sound along the wrap-around porch and around the side of the house. Snow had blown up onto the boards and against the siding, clinging to the logs.

And there, shivering against the wall, was a tiny puff of white fur, camouflaged by the snow.

A kitten.

“Oh my god, Chris. There's a kitten out here.”

His boots clomped on the floorboards behind me. “Holy shit. What's that doing here?”

I hurried to the poor thing and scooped it up against my wool coat. It let out a *meep*. With gloved fingers, I stroked its tiny head. It couldn't be more than a couple months old, still

with that newborn kitten feature where its fur stuck out in all directions like it had put its paw in a light socket.

“That explains why I found dry cat food in the pantry when I was putting away groceries last night,” Chris said. He stood right at my shoulder and reached around to scratch the kitten behind the ears.

“Who leaves a cat outside in the snow at a rental house?” I asked, resisting the urge to lean back against his chest. He was so close I could smell the fresh air on him. I couldn’t have explained how it was different from the fresh air surrounding us; it just was. It mingled with the scent unique to Chris.

“I don’t know. Let’s get it inside and I can call the owner. See if she knows anything.”

Balancing the kitten in one palm—that’s how small it was—I put the fingers of my other glove between my teeth and pulled my hand out. The cold air nipped at my skin, so I scratched the kitten under its chin to keep us both warm.

Inside the house, I used my butt to shut the door behind me. Chris had kicked off his boots already, leaving them next to my suitcase at the bottom of the stairs, and was halfway up. I maneuvered the kitten so I could take my other glove off, left them on my suitcase, and took the kitten upstairs. It rearranged itself to get closer to me, so I opened my coat and wrapped the lapel around the tiny floof.

On the main floor, Chris leaned against the breakfast bar, staring at his phone. Something in my belly fluttered, seeing him in socks. We usually hung out outside our homes, so we wore shoes. Our annual Friendsgiving week-long vacation with our two other co-owners, and now their two wives, was the only time I really saw Chris in stocking feet. For whatever

reason, the intimacy of it punched me in the gut every year. I pressed my free hand against my belly to ease the sensation.

“No signal,” he said. “Storm must be messing with it. I’ll have to call later.”

I rubbed my cheek against the kitten’s downy head. “Are you hungry, little one? You want some food?” Lifting my gaze to Chris’s, I said, “There’s food in my car, including some canned tuna. We could give it some of that as a treat for being stuck in the cold.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up in a smile that made my breath catch and, not gonna lie, my pussy clench. His half-smile was too damn sexy. “There’s dry food in there.” He gestured to the pantry door. “Milk in the fridge. I’ll go get the stuff from your car and we can spoil it with tuna for dessert.”

I smiled back at him. “Sounds good. And thanks for getting the groceries.”

He winked and my skeleton dissolved. “Anything for you, Annie.” And he disappeared down the stairs.

I set the kitten on the floor and moved to the cabinets to find a bowl for the food. Maybe when Chris came back inside, I should just get it over with and present my proposition.



CHRIS

I strung all six grocery bags onto my arms and headed back inside. The others weren’t due until tomorrow, so hopefully the storm would pass in time for me and Annie to shovel out a path for them and for the roads to get cleared. Not

that spending the entire week with just Annie would be the slightest hardship.

Scorching images of how we could spend all that time trapped inside flashed through my head as I kicked off my boots. Not enough to make me hard. I'd learned years ago to keep my body's reaction to Annie under control enough that I didn't spend every moment around her with an erection. It had been a real danger the first year or so I'd known her. But eventually I got used enough to her presence to simply feel awareness in that region when we were together. It still felt disrespectful, but I couldn't help being in love with her.

I'd sure as hell tried not to be. But every other person I met had the same flaw I couldn't get over: they weren't Annie. Apparently that was all it took, because I'd dated some really amazing people with just that one flaw.

Still, I had fourteen years of practice at keeping my feelings and hands to myself. This was our twelfth annual Friendsgiving trip. So I should have no problem getting through another week in close quarters with her. Then it was just a few weeks until our offices shut down for two weeks over the new year and Annie went back to Wisconsin to spend Christmas with her dad and brothers. And I got to breathe for two weeks.

Never mind I spent almost the entire time missing her.

Spreading the bags out on the spacious kitchen island, I forced the thoughts from my head. Right now, I needed to focus on unpacking the groceries and not on Annie.

Except she was standing at the edge of the kitchen, bent in half, petting the tiny ball of fur she'd found outside. Leaving her lush, gorgeous ass sticking up in the air, pointing right in my direction.

My mouth watered. Awareness tickled my balls. I had to close my eyes and suck in air through my teeth to keep my reaction there. But I couldn't stop a pained sound from slipping out of my mouth.

Annie straightened swiftly, her dark hair swirling loose around her shoulders. It was silky soft, I knew, and my fingers itched to tangle in it. Instead I busied them unpacking the reusable canvas bags.

"I think it's a girl," Annie said.

I frowned at her, her meaning not registering.

"The kitten. She seems to be lacking the obvious male parts, so process of elimination..."

I lifted one corner of my mouth. "You an expert in determining cat sex now?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "We always had cats around growing up. My brothers loved to bring home stray everything. So we didn't take all of them to the vet, and therefore not all were spayed or neutered. I know what an un-fixed male cat looks like. This is a female cat."

I opened the refrigerator to load it up with all the produce she'd brought. It was her year to bring food to make lunches. I brought all the food for our big Thanksgiving meal on Thursday, Scott and Tina would buy breakfast foods, and Evan and Julia were in charge of dinners. It rotated every year.

"I'll take your word for it."

"She needs a name." Annie pulled out a stool at the breakfast bar and sat. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, as was the tip of her freckled nose.

I fucking adored her freckles.

“Fluffy?” While I liked animals, I’d never had one of my own, so no need to come up with a name for one. My parents were staunchly anti-pet—along with being anti- everything else a kid might enjoy—and as an adult, I worked way too much to care for another creature. “Snowball? Blizzard?”

She made a humorless sound. “You suck at this.”

I shrugged as I put the loaves of various types of bread in a cabinet. Tina, my younger sister who was married to Scott, hated having things left out on the counters. “Sweetie? That’s what you’ll end up calling it half the time anyway, right? Or Baby? Cutie?”

“You can’t actually name it that.” She sounded exasperated.

“You can name it Fuckface if you want. There are no rules.”

Annie rolled her eyes but was smiling. I loved her smile even more than I loved her ass and her freckles.

“Thanksgiving?”

“And what, call it Thanksey? No, too long.”

“You’re really picky.”

“I know! Cranberry. Since it’s my favorite Thanksgiving dish.”

Which was so weird. Who liked the cranberry best?

“That’s as long as Thanksgiving. Both are three syllables.”

“OK, Mr. Grammar. But Cran or Berry isn’t as weird as Thanks.”

“You make no sense.” Still, I couldn’t help laughing, even as something ached in my chest. I loved bantering with her

like this and it took a hell of a lot of willpower to resist grabbing her wrist and spinning her into my arms so I could kiss her.

I wanted her almost as much as I loved her.

Shoving the thoughts aside, I went for practicalities. “We should hunt around and see if there’s a litter box. Considering someone left cat food, and presumably the cat, maybe they left that too.”

“Good thinking.” She leaned down to scoop up the kitten and cradle it to her chest.

“We also at some point need to discuss the, uh, the bed situation.” I couldn’t let myself think about that right now. It was too tempting to propose she share the king bed I had claimed last night when I came up alone.

She frowned at me, wrinkles creasing her forehead. I shoved my hands in my pockets so I wouldn’t reach out to smooth them away.

Every moment in her presence was an exercise in restraint. In my head was a constant subtext of *I want you*.

It was ridiculous and pathetic, really. Fourteen years was far too long for unrequited love. But I’d tried everything I could think of to get over her and nothing worked. So here we were. The only other choice I could see would be to cut her out of my life, and that wasn’t happening. Ever.

My phone stopped me from explaining what I meant by the *bed situation*. “Cry Little Sister” played in my back pocket, indicating a call from Tina.

I held up a finger to Annie and swiped my phone with the other hand. “Hey, Tee. What’s up?”

“Road’s closed,” she said. “We got a motel for the night so we won’t be until tomorrow, provided this storm passes.”

My heart tripped over itself as it accelerated. Annie and I had the whole place to ourselves for the night? I ran my fingers through my hair. That was both wonderful and terrible.

“That sucks,” I said, only sort of meaning it. It did suck for my sister and my best friend.

“Tell me about it. Scott is scouring the place for roaches and mice. It’s almost embarrassing.” Her tone was full of dry affection.

I could perfectly imagine her husband, who had been my best friend since grade school, half under the motel bed, trying to find any critters that might be lurking.

“Thanks for letting us know. We’ll survive somehow without you. And subsist on toast for breakfast until you get here.” My voice was equally dry but affectionate. My sister was the only blood relative I had who I could stand. There was a reason we both opted to spend every holiday with friends instead of family.

Once upon a time it had been just the two of us for holidays, until college when we started the Friendsgiving tradition. And Scott’s family had always included us for Christmas. It had been how the two of them started hanging out and eventually dating.

Annie had wandered out of the room, presumably in search of a litter box, or possibly to check out the bedrooms. Maybe I should take the shitty bed and she could have my room. It was certainly the gentlemanly thing to do.

But damn, that bed was comfortable. I really didn’t want to give it up.

I could sleep in the same bed as her and not give in to the urge to jump her, couldn't I?

No, probably not.

“Give me a call in the morning and let me know if you can get out. Otherwise, we'll figure something out, I guess.” If they couldn't get here, or Evan and Julia, then Annie and I would be cooking the Thanksgiving meal early and subsisting on the leftovers. And toast, because she'd brought a metric fuck ton of bread.

I ended the call with Tina and went in search of Annie. Sure enough, I found her and Cranberry on the lower level, standing in the doorway of the fourth bedroom. As the married couples, the others got the two large bedrooms with attached bathrooms. Downstairs were two additional bedrooms, and they were not exactly what the rental listing had promised. One bedroom was turned into an office, with a brown leather sofa that didn't pull out into a sofa bed. I'd checked.

In the open area outside the basement bedrooms stood a bunk bed. The metal kind with a pancake-thin mattress. The kind I'd had at summer camp the one year my parents let me go. Three of the springs that held up the mattress were missing. I'd laid down on it yesterday and in just thirty seconds it had made my lower back ache.

Far be it from me to tell Annie what she should do; if she wanted to sleep on that shitty of a bed, that was her choice. But I couldn't imagine she would.

“So I don't have a bedroom.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, you do.” Chivalry got the better of me. “You can sleep in there. I'll sleep out here.” My back yelled at me as I

gestured toward the bedroom I'd slept in last night. The soft, cozy bed that was almost as comfortable as mine at home. I had to swallow a whimper.

She glanced at the bedroom, looked at me, looked back at the bedroom, back to me. She had the crease between her brows that said she was thinking. But she couldn't possibly be thinking what I had.

"What if..." She looked at the bedroom again, not meeting my gaze as she spoke.

My stomach somersaulted.

"What if... we share?" She sounded not at all sure of herself, which was unlike Annie.

Now my stomach was on a free-for-all of flips. It was basically Simone Biles in there.

"Like, one of us could sleep on top of the quilt and use a different blanket. And... we're friends. It wouldn't be weird."

"No, not weird at all." My voice came out choked. But technically it wasn't a lie. It wouldn't be weird, just hella hard. In both the difficult sense and in the sense that it was entirely likely I'd have to lie on my side facing away from her so she wouldn't know my dick was hard. Just thinking about it had me tingling in that vicinity.

"I'll go find some other blankets." She flashed a glance at me, then hurried for the stairs.

And like I did every single time, I watched her superb ass as she walked away from me.



ANNIE

So Chris and I would be sharing a bed. Cool. Cool cool cool cool cool.

But actually, it was kind of. If I was going to take this week as my chance to finally tell him how I felt and fuck his brains out, there was no better opening than when we were in bed together.

Hot images of us entwined in lazy morning sex filled my head, making need pulse between my legs as I climbed the stairs to the second floor. Could I do it tonight? It made sense since we were alone and there was a good possibility the others could still make it tomorrow.

I found a fleece blanket and a quilt in a closet outside the second-floor master bedroom. Trying to sort out the logistics of my seduction, I headed back to the basement. To a scene that made me practically cream my pants while my knees got weak and my heart melted.

Chris sat on the floor of the rec room area playing with Cranberry. She was on her back, her tiny paws trying to wrestle his big hand. I stood at the bottom of the stairs, taking it in while I waited for my chest to unclench, then tossed the blankets on the pool table and crouched next to them.

“I didn’t know you liked cats so much.” I dropped onto the floor next to him, Cranberry rolling around between us.

“Not sure I’d say I like them. I’ve never really been around them.”

I knew his home growing up had been a sterile, child-unfriendly place and while he’d never specifically said he didn’t have pets, he’d never mentioned having them either.

Whereas I knew both Evan and Scott had grown up with animals like I did.

“Kittens love playing like this.” I smiled at them, probably a goofy, lovesick smile. Because the scene made my heart ache a little too much, I looked out the sliding glass doors to the snowy patio. Since I’d arrived, twilight had rapidly faded to darkness, the way it did this time of year. A quick check of my smartwatch said it was after five o’clock.

“You hungry?” I asked him. “I could eat soon.” Tonight was definitely my best chance to advance my seduction plans. If ever there was a sign from the universe that it was time to act on my feelings, this was it.

An image of us naked and entwined upstairs in the living room, on the floor in front of the fireplace, flashed through my head. My pulse tripped over itself as my pussy throbbed. We couldn’t do that the rest of the week, but we could do it tonight.

I could start right now. All I had to do was scoot a little closer and I’d be in touching range. I’d be close enough to lean in and say *kiss me. I need you to kiss me right now.*

I imagined doing it and my heart pounded so hard I could barely breathe. I found myself leaning in, but at the last second, the words refused to come out of my mouth.

Chris gave me a puzzled look. “You ok?”

Dammit, Annie. Nice job. “Fine. Just hungry.” I leaned away from him, ensuring my plan wasn’t being implemented right now. “I’m gonna go change, then I’ll make something.”

“You don’t have to cook.” He looked down at Cranberry and spoke in a tone I’d never heard him use. “Does she, Cranny? She doesn’t have to cook.”

It was like he was talking to a baby. I had trouble getting myself to stand, what with my heart being a big ol' melted puddle on the floor. But I managed somehow. "Be right back."

In our shared room, I changed into a t-shirt that was a little sheer and complemented my figure. Not overtly sexy—yet—but subtle. It gave me a confidence boost. I traded my jeans for yoga pants that made my ass look amazing. Then I headed to the bathroom to indulge my one makeup vanity.

My mascara had smudged a little under my brown eyes, so I wiped that away. Then I got out my favorite plum-colored lipstick. I could afford much fancier stuff that probably required less reapplication. But I couldn't give up my Revlon Super Lustrous. The waxy scent of it smelled like my mom and I was terrified if I switched brands, my memories of her would fade more than they already had.

It had been more than twenty-five years since that day when my dad, brothers, and I crowded around her bed as she drifted away. Leaving me to be one of the guys. I'd had to let go of most of her that day, but I could at least keep her smell.

After slicking it over my lips, I shook off the sad thoughts and faced myself in the mirror. Squared my shoulders. I was really going to do this. No more chickening out.

When I got upstairs, I found Chris had changed into gray sweatpants that clung just right. Everywhere. I paused at the top of the steps to imagine biting my knuckle and fanning myself. Chris in sweats was my favorite sight.

Soon to be replaced, hopefully, by naked Chris.

"I brought some tomato soup, and I've got ingredients for grilled cheese." I headed toward the kitchen area. The whole

main floor was an open space with high ceilings above the living room area.

“Sounds great,” he said from where he sat on the hearth. “Perfect snowstorm meal.”

“That was my thought.” I opened the refrigerator to get what I needed.

I’d brought crusty sourdough bread that would be perfect for the sandwiches. I slathered that with butter as I heated the griddle I found in a lower cabinet. The kitchen was huge and well apportioned, which almost made up for the sleeping situation.

A situation I would use to my favor.

Once the pan was hot, I put two slices of bread on it, then stacked cheddar, parmesan, thin apple slices, and goat cheese on them. The remaining bread went on top. Hopefully Chris would like the crispness the apple added and the sharpness of the goat cheese. It was my favorite combination.

While the sandwiches cooked, I poured the soup into a large bowl to microwave. Within minutes, it was done and I poured it into bowls and sprinkled it with parmesan and a few croutons.

By the time I plated the sandwiches, my mouth was watering. Balancing the bowls on our plates, I took the food to the fireplace, where Chris had gotten a fire going. It was cozy as hell and perfect for seduction.

I set the plates on the coffee table and sat on the floor next to it. Eating here seemed more intimate than at the large dining table. “Where’s Cranberry?” I asked as Chris lowered himself from the couch to the floor.

He nodded at the recliner. She was curled into a tiny ball of white fluff. It was so cute, it made my chest squeeze.

We ate in silence for a few minutes, the clank of spoons against bowls, the crackle of the fire, and the wind whistling outside the only sounds. It was comfortable, the way hanging out with Chris always was. But with that ever-present hum of attraction underscoring everything.

“So why grilled cheese and pudding?” He asked as he started on the second half of his sandwich. His soup was nearly gone. “You make it every Thanksgiving Eve.”

“Not a fan of pudding?” I dipped a bite of crust in the soup, then popped it in my mouth.

“I don’t mind it. It’s just an odd combo. And we have it every year.”

“I’ve never told you this story?”

“Nope.” He shook his head, firelight dancing over his features.

“Hard to believe there’s a story I haven’t already told you.” Especially a Thanksgiving story, considering we spent every year together.

“No time like the present.” He gestured for me to keep talking.

“It was the year I was, I think, eleven. We were supposed to be packing to go to my grandparents.”

“Because you went there every year as a kid. With your dad’s whole big family,” Chris supplied.

“Right.” My dad was one of seven kids, my grandparents being good Midwestern Catholics. So Thanksgiving and Christmas at my grandparents’ big farmhouse in the country

had been a chaotic gathering of aunts, uncles, and several dozen cousins. Now my grandparents were gone and each family did their own thing, now that most of my cousins were married with kids. One of my aunts, a widow, was engaged, so the following summer would be the next huge Lang family gathering.

Would I get to take Chris as my date? As my boyfriend, even? My stomach contracted at the mental picture of the two of us dancing together at the reception.

“Ryan and I were packing, like we were supposed to be.” Ryan was my oldest, extremely responsible brother. “John, Charlie, and Freddie were screwing around outside, as usual.” Even though they were all older, somehow I’d walked the line between running wild with the three of them and doing the responsible thing with Ryan. I always loved Thanksgiving at my grandparents’ so I’d chosen responsible that night.

Chris grinned as he took a bite of his sandwich. “Admit it. You were with them.”

I chuckled. “No, I really was packing. I couldn’t wait to hang out with my cousin Kelley.”

“That’s the one you’re close to?” he asked.

I nodded, taking a drink of my wine. It was going down a little too easy tonight. It soothed my jitters over propositioning Chris after dinner. But for now, I would bask in his attention as I told one of the few childhood stories he didn’t know.

“Long story short—”

“Too late,” he joked with a smile.

I rolled my eyes at him with my own smile. “Charlie fell out of the tree in our back yard and broke his leg.”

“Yikes.” Chris grimaced.

“My dad was so pissed, but Charlie was in a lot of pain so he hid it a little. But he went off on Freddie and John for screwing around.”

“So I’m guessing packing got derailed.”

“Yeah, Dad and Freddie took Charlie to the ER and John and Ryan were put in charge of packing and feeding me.”

Chris nodded knowingly. “And let me guess, they made grilled cheese, tomato soup, and chocolate pudding?”

“You guess correctly.” I scooped up the last of my soup.

“So did it become a tradition in your family after that? Or did you revive it just for us?”

“It’s tradition for all of us. I bet if I called any of my brothers right now, they’d tell me they had the same dinner with their families.” Longing tugged at my chest. Three of my brothers still lived in Milwaukee, with Charlie an hour away in Madison. I was the only one in a different time zone. All four were married and all but Ryan had kids. My dad, recently retired, was loving being a grandpa.

And I missed them all.

“You ever wish you went home for Thanksgiving instead of hanging out with the people you see every day?”

“Not once.” Despite missing my family, I wouldn’t trade our annual Friendsgiving for anything. I told Chris as much.

He reached over and squeezed my thigh. Goose bumps rippled over my skin at his touch. “I’m glad.”

“I get to see them at Christmas, and every summer.”

It wasn't quite enough, but my life was in Colorado now. So I had to make it enough.

Having friends like Evan and Scott and their wives made it bearable. Having Chris was everything.



CHRIS

She was beautiful in the firelight. I couldn't stop staring at her as she told me about her brothers. The cabin had an open floor plan, and the only light was filtering in from the kitchen where she'd left it on. As she faced me, it left her right side in shadows behind the curtain of her soft brown hair. The fire illuminated her right side, light flickering over her features. I wanted to reach out and touch the spot right next to her lip where the fire danced.

"Anyway, that's why I always make grilled cheese when we're here." She gave me a half smile. The half in the firelight. Everything in me strained, desperate to lean forward and kiss her.

"And it explains your odd love of chocolate pudding." I returned her smile. I didn't smile much, except when she was around. Did she realize she was my safe space?

"Chocolate pudding is delicious," she said, giving my thigh a little slap.

Only if I'm licking it off your body.

My libido was not getting the message tonight that Annie was off limits. Besides the obvious, that getting involved with a friend or a coworker was dicey because of potential fallout,

there was also the fact that she deserved so much more than I could ever give a person.

My parents and grandparents had done so much damage to my psyche and soul, it was a wonder I could even have friends. But as my friend, and because I loved her on so many levels, I knew Annie deserved a life partner who could give her everything. If she were ever foolish enough to be with me, I could give her material things, but she didn't need that. And I would—I did—absolutely love her with everything in me. But I was too broken inside to give her the support and vulnerability she deserved.

She deserved everything, and I could never give her more than something.

She poked the arm I'd rested on the couch. My body turned in to face her. "Where'd you go?"

I mentally shook off the thoughts. "Lost in my own Thanksgiving memories. Sorry."

Her face softened, eyes warm. "I'm sorry."

I forced a smile. "No big deal. It's already gone."

She of course knew my family, knew my history. She'd had the unfortunate luck to meet my parents and grandfather at a few charity events. I was pretty good at only going to ones for causes I knew my family wouldn't support—environmental groups, LGBTQ+ groups, the sort of thing that occasionally gave Grandfather hives—but I miscalculated on occasion, thinking he didn't care about supporting things like the Denver Zoo.

"I like hearing about your family," I said. It was nice to know there were families out there who loved each other. Sure, I loved my sister, but that was it. Hearing about

nurturing parents, like Annie had, was such a novelty. It was like hearing a fantasy bedtime story.

Like I needed more fantasies surrounding Annie.

She launched into another story about her and her older brothers, and we laughed and drank too much wine. Her voice was like wrapping myself in a warm blanket. Or maybe that was the wine and the fire.

I drank in her stories like I drank the wine. My own childhood had been so lonely, so cold and devoid of affection. It wasn't until later in life that Tina and I grew close; as kids, we'd been like typical siblings, fighting some and getting along some.

As much as Annie's stories absorbed me, ones I'd heard before, I got absorbed in her voice. Her sweet, gentle-yet-powerful voice. I imagined how it would sound whispering in my ear.

Between my legs, my cock started to pay attention. Which was no good. As increasingly difficult as it was to resist Annie, I had to keep doing it. She deserved so much better than a man who was emotionally dead inside like I was. I loved her, yes, but not the way she deserved. I would only hurt her.

The truth of it was, I simply wasn't good enough for her. The writing was on the wall; someday I would turn into my father, as he'd turned into his father. It was all but certain. And I could not bring Annie with me on that dark journey.

But God, what I wouldn't give for just one kiss. One night. One chance to know what it was like to both make love to her and fuck the living daylights out of her.

Shit. This wasn't doing anything to curb my growing hard on.

The Broncos were having a decent season. Maybe they'd make the playoffs. What were some of the quarterback's stats I could go over in my head to cool the lust pulsing through me?

"So yeah," Annie said, pulling me out of my football musings. "That's how my brother got the nickname Gonzo."

I chuckled, because I'd heard the story before and it was amusing.

A lock of hair had fallen over her cheek and even as I told myself not to, I reached out and smoothed it back, fingers trailing over her temple. I tucked it behind her ear, then traced my index finger over the shell of her ear.

Her gaze met mine, hot and needy, and maybe a little buzzed from the wine. Each breath felt like eternity as we stared at each other. Somehow my hand found its way down to cup her jaw.

"Chris," she exhaled. My gaze shot to her lips just in time to see her slick her tongue over her bottom lip, then pull it between her teeth.

"I like hearing your stories about your family," I said, desperately trying to ignore the longing I could swear was in her voice. In her expression. "It reminds me that there are actually families out there that love each other."

This time, she reached out and cupped my cheek. "You have lots of people who love you," she murmured.

Did she mean her? No, she couldn't love me. Not like that, anyway. She cared for me as a friend, that was all.

Still, the way she was looking at me cancelled out all the progress I'd made thinking about football. My cock was fully hard now, hot and heavy as it pushed against my sweatpants. And I couldn't miss her gaze flicking down to it, then back to meet mine.

It all happened so fast, I couldn't say who moved first. Suddenly her lips were on mine and I was reaching out my arm to haul her against me. My other hand slid into her silky hair as her lips parted for me.

With a groan, I licked into her mouth, my tongue tracing her lower lip before moving forward to find her own. Her hand fisted in my shirt and somehow that, more than anything else, made heat surge to my groin, hardening my cock even further.

The kiss went on and on, and my head started spinning. Not just because it was the most amazing kiss I'd ever had in my 32 years of life—thought it was—but because it was Annie. After so many years of wanting her yet getting nothing more than friendly kisses on the cheek, I had her breasts pressed to my chest and her tongue tangled with mine.

She tasted like grilled cheese and wine and desire and dreams come true. She tasted like everything I'd ever wanted and everything I hadn't known to want. How could I go back to life as it was, now that I knew what it was like to have Annie's mouth on my own?

I shoved that thought aside. That was Future Chris's problem. I needed to focus on Present Chris.

Annie made soft little sounds at the back of her throat, and they made me impossibly harder. My hips shifted of their own volition, seeking friction. Seeking touch.

Without my having to ask, Annie's hand was there.

Oh fuck. Praise the angels, hallelujah. Annie was touching my cock. Annie Lang was wrapping her long, perfect fingers around my straining, sweatpants-covered cock, squeezing it like she wanted more.

I was basically panting into her mouth at this point and had to rip myself away to catch my breath. “Fuck, Annie,” I managed.

“Chris,” she whispered across my ear.

Hadn’t I just been wondering what that would be like? Now I knew it was hot and sexy and made me want to come in my sweatpants.

I dropped my head back against the couch as she nibbled her way down the side of my neck. “Annie.”

She pressed her palm against my cock, pressing it into my stomach and sliding up and down, giving me the friction I craved. And then, for some stupid reason, I opened my eyes for a second. And they landed on the empty wine bottle. And our almost-empty glasses.

And the second bottle, more than half drunk.

Shit.

Her hand slid down and cupped my balls, and my eyes rolled back in my head. It would be so easy to yank my sweats down and pull her onto my lap. Or maybe she would bend over me and take me in her sweet, delicious—

Fuck fuck shit fuck.

I threaded one hand into her hair and gently tugged her head up while my other hand wrapped around her wrist, stopping her. But not before she got in one more squeeze of

my balls, sending pleasure straight up my spine and nearly short circuiting my brain.

“Annie,” I said, a lot less forcefully than I wanted.

“Umm?” Her murmur was lazy and sexy and dammit, why did I have to have morals? If I was going to be an asshole like my dad, couldn't I just embrace it and be an all-out asshole instead of just sometimes?

“Annie, honey, we need to stop.”

She lifted her head and looked up at me with drowsy brown eyes. I wanted to believe they looked that way purely out of lust, but the truth was, there was wine involved too. As much as I loved her and wanted to bury my cock inside her for hours on end, it was because I loved her that I needed to stop this.

She followed my gaze to the coffee table and the wine. In a flash, her expression went from soft and lusty to sharp and horrified. “Oh, fuck.” She dropped her face into her hands. “This was so stupid of me. I'm so sorry.”

For a moment, I lost my breath. She was sorry.

Of course she was. We were just friends, despite that amazing kiss. She was sorry because she didn't really want this. She wasn't in love with me like I was with her. Hell, she barely even dated men lately. Her last several partners had been women or nonbinary femmes.

To me, this kiss was everything. But to her, it was a drunken mistake.

I scrubbed my hand over my face, trying to wipe away any traces of emotion. I probably didn't succeed. “Don't be sorry. It was just a silly mistake because we had too much wine.”

She wouldn't meet my eyes as she nodded vigorously. "Right. Wine. And it's just been a long time for me. That's all."

I didn't admit it had been a long time for me too. For a while, other people had filled some of the void in my heart that belonged to Annie. Enough to keep me content. But the past year or two, it hadn't been enough. And it seemed unfair to get involved with someone when my heart would never belong to them. Even though it was absurd, it felt disloyal to Annie when I was with another person.

She scooted away from me, instantly leaving me cold. Something inside me seemed to strain toward her, wanting to beg her to come back to my arms. But I didn't, I couldn't give it voice.

"So we both had too much wine and got caught up in a moment." Her tone was all business. The voice she'd use to deliver a report to our executive group.

"Right," I muttered.

"We're adults." She didn't look at me as she spoke, instead staring into the fireplace.

"Right," I said again. Because what else could I possibly say? There was a non-zero chance I'd do something dumb like beg her to come to bed with me if I let myself speak.

Bed. Oh, shit. We were sharing a bed. That had been a precarious solution to begin with, but now it seemed impossible. How was I expected to sleep on the same mattress as this woman, under the same quilts, and not wrap her in my arms and beg her to ride me?

Great, now that image was in my head. I scrubbed my hand over my face, willing the images away and willing my

cock to pipe down. My eyes snagged on the cuckoo clock on the mantel. Almost ten o'clock. I usually stayed up later, but it was late enough I could make an excuse about going to bed.

Before I could, Annie popped to her feet. "I didn't realize it was so late. I think I'm going to head to bed."

She still didn't look at me. Was she really that horrified at what happened?

"Sure," I said, still not trusting myself with more words.

"You come down whenever. I'm a heavy sleeper, so don't worry about waking me."

Her subtext was clear. She expected me to stay up longer; we would not be going to bed together. A wise plan, really.

I refused to watch as she walked across the room toward the stairs.

"Good night, Chris," she said, so softly I almost missed it.

"Night, Annie." I dropped my head back and stared at the ceiling. *I love you.*

As her footsteps disappeared down the stairs, I tried to decide how pathetic it would be if I showered before bed just so I could jerk off. No amount of football stats would cool my lust, and there was no way I could get in bed with her in this state. Sighing, and mindful of my hyper-aroused state, I got to my feet.

Shower it was.

wednesday

ANNIE

My head was a jumbled, confused mess today. I was avoiding Chris, puttering in the kitchen under the guise of prepping food for tomorrow's Thanksgiving meal. But he had to know it was an excuse to avoid talking to him.

After a night of explicitly sexy dreams about him, I'd woken up sweaty and horny. And in the same bed as him. Though he'd found a spare quilt and instead of getting under the covers with me, he'd slept on top of my quilt and used the spare on top of him. Making him much more gentlemanly than I wanted him to be.

It had taken so much courage, and obviously too much wine, to work up to kissing him last night. And it had been amazing. Fresh heat washed through me as I took a moment to remember our kiss. The solid feel of his cock under his sweats. How soft yet firm his lips were against mine. How delicious he tasted.

Most of all, how not-weird it was to kiss him. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

But how did I find the guts to approach him again, in broad daylight and without alcoholic assistance, before the others got there? Both couples had called this morning and said the roads

were cleared and they were on their way. By my estimation, we had about an hour.

Which left little time to explain my proposition to Chris—convoluted as it was—him to agree, us to have sex, and us to put ourselves back together before our friends arrived.

I put down the knife I was using to chop celery, ran my other hand through my hair, and muttered, “damn.”

“What’s the matter?”

His low voice washed over me and I closed my eyes for just a second to savor it, even as my pulse started pounding in my chest and between my legs. This was it. This was my chance.

I had given presentations the world over about aerospace technology. I had testified before Congress. I could ask one man to have sex with me.

Oh god.

I cast a sideways glance at him and found him watching me, his eyes intent. He was wearing a royal blue Henley that made his eyes an unreal shade of blue. The sleeves were pushed to his elbows, showing off his toned forearms.

“Do we need to talk about last night?” he asked, voice wary. He clearly didn’t want to.

I did, but not for the reason he thought. He’d given me the perfect opening.

I would never be able to get the words out if I didn’t have something to do with my hands, so I moved to the sink and turned it on. “Actually, about that.” Damn, I was really going to do this. After so many years of pining, I was going to proposition him.

He shifted restlessly and cleared his throat. I tried not to get distracted by the way his sweats—the same ones from yesterday—clung to his thighs, or the vague outline of his cock. But I'd be lying if I said my mouth didn't water a little at the thought of that cock.

Done washing my hands, I turned off the water and made myself turn to face him. "I think we should sleep together."

There. I said it. Now it was his turn to respond.

Except he didn't. The words hung there between us, and the longer he didn't say anything, the more I wanted to squirm.

"Obviously we have chemistry." I rushed in to cover the silence. "And as we both said last night, it's been a long time for us both. And, well"—here was where things got a little weird, my plan a little unusual, but I was pretty sure it would work—"I haven't been with a man in a long time, and there's someone I'm kind of into. And I thought it might be a good idea to... I don't know... practice with another man before I do anything with him."

I stared at my feet as I spoke, but when he still remained silent, I forced myself to look at him. I'm not sure what reaction I expected, but it wasn't the confusion I saw on his face.

"So you want to practice with me, so you can be at pique level for some other guy?" His tone gave nothing away.

It sounded horrible when he said it out loud. It had seemed like a good idea when I came up with it. Better than outright admitting I was in love with him and having him crush me with a rejection. This way, he'd see how good we could be together. And maybe start to fall in love with me a little too. Then I could tell him that *he* was the man I was into.

But none of that could happen if I scared him away with my convoluted, ridiculous plan. I'd have to think of something else.

Stomach sinking, I waved him away. "Never mind, it was a silly idea. It's fi—oh!"

He grabbed my arm and spun me into his. His mouth crashed down over mine and with no warning, his tongue invaded my mouth.

He commanded the kiss as I melted into him. My hand was trapped between us and my fingers immediately wrapped around a handful of his soft shirt, pressing against the solid muscle beneath. Muscle I wanted to kiss and lick every inch of.

He released my arm to wrap his around my waist, pinning me between him and the kitchen island. The edge of the counter dug into my back but I didn't care because his hard cock pressed against my front. More parts of him I wanted to kiss and lick.

A mental picture of me on my knees, sucking that hot, fat cock flashed in my head, sending my temperature spiking. *Not now*, I told myself. We'd get there. For now, I wanted to enjoy the taste of his kiss, the way he licked into all corners of my mouth, exploring, learning me. As I did the same to him.

He dragged his lips across the side of my face, down my neck, to the base of my throat. "Chris," I exhaled. His hot breath on my skin made me shiver, his teeth scraping the sensitive point where my neck met my shoulder. I was already wet, ready for him.

Suddenly he went still against me. "Tell me you planned on this and brought condoms. Because I definitely didn't plan

ahead for this.”

I took a nibble of his ear before answering. “I did. But also, if you’re, um, recently tested and in the clear, I, um, I am too. And I’ve got an IUD.”

Had I taken a screenshot of my last STI screening results just so I could prove this to him? Of course I had. This plan had been brewing in my head for several months.

He made a sound akin to a snarl and sucked on me. I shuddered. “Fuck, Annie. You’re gonna make me come in my pants thinking about that.”

“So that’s a yes?”

“Tested in September. Everything negative. Haven’t been with anyone since.” He lifted his head and looked down at me. His hair stuck out in all directions, his eyes dark and glassy.

My stomach bottomed out. I’d never seen him look sexier, and I was the one who’d done that to him. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe, looking into his face.

“Fuck, Annie.” He took my mouth in a rough, frantic kiss. His hand worked down the back of my lounge pants and squeezed my ass, pulling me tight against him.

Then, before I could process what he was doing, his other hand was down the front of my pants and his fingers were sliding between my legs.

“So wet,” he murmured.

That, as much as how he was touching me, sent desire spiraling through me.

He dragged his teeth over my lower lip as a long finger slid inside me. My breath caught and held, my pulse racing wildly. “Gonna make you come.”

“Yes,” I gasped. I couldn’t think to speak any more. I was nothing but nerve endings and sensations and instinct. And so much pent-up desire. Years of it.

Our tongues parried in our mouths as he slid another finger inside me and began thrusting. Each stroke had the base of his palm dragging over my clit, making stars dance behind my eyelids. I was so close.

“Hello!”

Somewhere in the lusty fog in my brain, a bang registered. Like a door closing.

“Chris! Annie!”

“Shit.” Chris snatched his hand away, tugged up my pants, and jerked away from me. Dazed and throbbing, I rearranged my clothes and tried to figure out what the hell was happening.

“Upstairs!” Chris’s voice came out horse and a little breathless.

“Up in a minute.” Tina called.

Tina. His sister. Well shit. So much for a quick fuck before our friends got there.

I hazarded a glance at Chris. His breath came in deep gulps as he leaned against the counter across from me. “Your hair,” I whisper yelled.

“Yours too.” He combed his fingers over his head.

I sifted my fingers through my strands, then pulled it into a messy bun and secured it with the hair tie I had on my wrist. Still flustered and turned on, I spun back to the counter and picked up the chef’s knife with an unsteady hand.

Well that was no good. I'd cut myself, and we had to be miles from an urgent care.

A hand at the small of my back made me jump. "Breathe," came Chris's soft voice from behind me.

I did as he said, pulling in a long, slow breath, then letting it out. This time when I picked up the knife, my hand didn't shake. I resumed chopping vegetables as I heard his footsteps moving down the stairs.

A few minutes later, Tina popped into the room. She was smiling, but there was tension around her eyes.

I paused in my chopping. "What's up? Something wrong?" I of course knew her brother and husband, Scott, better than I knew her. I'd met Scott the first week of college, then met Chris and Evan through him. We'd all been close since that first semester. But in the years since we moved to Denver and started our company, I'd gotten to know Tina fairly well. She was the only family Chris talked to. And since she and Scott started dating three years ago, I'd gotten even closer with her.

She scrubbed a hand over her freckled face. "The roads are terrible. About halfway here, it started snowing again. I honestly didn't think we'd make it."

I glanced out the windows. Sure enough, it was snowing again, a thick snowfall. My car was probably buried by now.

My stomach teeter tottered when I thought of Evan and Julia in that.

My worry must have shown on my face, because Tina said, "Exactly. I'm worried they won't make it too."

Again, I had to remind myself to breathe. We were all safe where we were. The house had a generator, and I was pretty sure Chris had stocked up on firewood the previous night, just

in case. The instructions the homeowner sent us had included where to find flashlights and batteries if we needed them. As for Evan and Julia, well, nothing we could do but hope they'd get here safely.

"I'm sure they'll be fine," I lied, trying to reassure both of us.

"I don't—what is that?" Tina bent over and disappeared from my view behind the kitchen island. When she popped back up, she was holding Cranberry in one hand, using the other to stroke her fluffy fur.

"Who is this?" she asked, nuzzling Cranberry's head with her cheek.

"That's Cranberry." I quickly explained how we'd come to have her in the house.

"Can you imagine just abandoning this little sweetheart?"

I might have been mistaken, but it looked almost like Tina was tearing up. Which wasn't like her. She was pretty no-nonsense, practical. Not someone who cried over sappy movies or tearjerker books. Or abandoned kittens.

"I think you and Scott are in the bedroom on this floor, and we'll have Evan and Julia upstairs," I said to take the subject off Cranberry's abandonment.

She nodded, still cradling the kitten to her chest. Cranberry purred so loudly, I could hear it over the sound of my chopping.

"I saw that awful bunkbed downstairs. Please say you're making my brother sleep there." Tina settled herself onto one of the tall chairs at the breakfast bar, arranging Cranberry in her lap.

“I, uh, I think so.” What did Chris want to tell everyone about our sleeping arrangements? Did he want our friends to know we were sharing a bed but not like that? Except now maybe it was like that. Or were we letting them think he was sleeping on the bunkbed?

And what even were we doing now? Were we still planning to have sex? If so, would we try to sneak away from the group? Or were we waiting for bedtime? If at bedtime, did that mean we were sleeping together in a sex sense, but also sleeping together in a nightly slumber sense? Or would he still sleep on top of the blanket?

How could I be more confused now than I had been an hour ago? After he’d had his tongue in my mouth and his hand down my pants.

Oh god, he’d had his hand down my pants. He’d been inside me.

Heat flashed through my body, throbbing between my legs and washing over my face. And here I’d just gotten myself calmed down.

“You OK?”

My eyes flew up to Tina, who was frowning at me. “You look flushed.” Her brown eyes widened. “Please say you’re not getting sick. I cannot get sick right now.”

Right now? Weird way to phrase it, but whatever. “No, I feel fine.” I made a show of pushing up the sleeves of my sweatshirt. “Just a little warm. I probably overdressed.” I did have a long-sleeved t-shirt under my sweatshirt, but the multiple layers weren’t why I was overheated.

But like I was going to confess to making out with her brother. We didn’t need to tell anyone about our potential

weekend fling. A fling that, if I had my way, would turn into something more.



CHRIS

Scott and I brought in their luggage, no easy task in the snowfall that was rapidly turning into a blizzard.

“Started about halfway here,” Scott said as we kicked off our snowy boots.

“You hear from Evan and Julia?” I asked. Julia had called Annie early this morning before they left. As far as I knew, she hadn’t heard from them since, and I told Scott as much.

He shook his head. “Nope, not since this morning either.”

I checked my watch. Eleven thirty. They’d left after Scott and Tina, so it made sense they weren’t here yet. But given how fast the snow was coming down, and how bad Scott had said the driving conditions were, I was worried.

Not to mention, Evan had grown up in Atlanta. Even after several years in Denver, he wasn’t used to driving in snow. More often than not, he hired a car.

Still, this gave me the opportunity I’d been looking for to talk to Annie and Scott without Evan around. So I’d count it in the win column. For now.

I headed up the stairs to the main floor, Scott’s heavy footfalls behind me.

Annie was still chopping veggies, Tina sitting at the island chatting with her. Cranberry was curled up in my sister’s lap.

“I hear you two are heroes,” Tina said by way of greeting.

I rolled my eyes as I walked over to give her a side hug. “You know me. A regular caped crusader.”

She explained to Scott how we acquired the tiny kitten.

Tina leaned toward Annie. “You know my brother hates cats.”

“I do not!” I protested. I wasn’t a cat lover, but I didn’t hate them. My feelings about cats, and pets in general, were rather neutral. “Just because I don’t have a pet doesn’t mean I hate animals.”

Tina grinned her annoying-little-sister grin. It was almost impressive how little it had changed in more than thirty years.

I couldn’t stop myself from moving to the kitchen area, leaning against the island within arm’s reach of Annie. Not that I was going to touch her in front of my friends. I didn’t know if she wanted us to be open about whatever was happening between us. But given that her intent was to use the experience to date someone else, I couldn’t imagine she would want anyone else knowing.

My stomach burned at the idea of her with someone else. I didn’t even know who the guy was and I hated him. She was supposed to be with me.

Except that couldn’t happen. Not for real, not after this vacation fling. Annie was sweet and kind and light and didn’t deserve someone with so much darkness and potential for destruction in him.

But somehow, telling myself that for over a decade hadn’t made me love her any less. Dating other people, her dating other people, that hadn’t worked either. Maybe if she got serious with this new guy she liked, maybe if they got married

like the rest of our group had done, maybe then my heart and my dick would get the point.

Annie was not for us.

Shaking off the thoughts, I focused on my friends. “There’s actually something I wanted to bring up before Evan gets here.” I glanced at my sister. “Sorry, Tee, this is work stuff, but it won’t take long.” Our general rule for Friendsgiving was to keep conversation about work at a minimum. It was nearly impossible to eliminate it completely, considering four of us owned a company together.

Sighing, Tina rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Cranberry and I will go check out our room.” She gathered the kitten to her chest, slid off the stool, and headed down the hall.

Scott dropped down on her vacated seat. “What’s up?” His pale forehead was creased in a frown.

Beside me, Annie put down the knife, turned toward me, and crossed her arms over her chest.

And I definitely wasn’t noticing how that seemed to offer up her breasts to me. Now was not the time.

“Have you guys noticed Evan acting...” What word did I want? “Odd?”

“Odd how?” Annie asked.

How did I explain the out-of-character behavior I’d been noticing in our friend? It was so vague, but still off. “I’m not sure I can explain it exactly. But we’ve known each other for so long, I just know when one of you is acting different.” I was fucking this up royally.

“He has been sort of evasive,” Annie said. “Avoiding answering direct questions.”

Thank god I wasn't the only one who'd noticed. I wasn't losing it. And of the three of us, Annie was probably closest to Evan.

"He was kind of cagey when I asked him about going to Atlanta for Christmas." Scott rubbed his eyebrows, a sign he was thinking hard. "Now that you mention it, it is kind of weird."

"So what do you think is going on?" Annie asked.

I flashed back to the extremely weird conversation with Evan I'd had last week, the one that had convinced me I was right. "I think he's going to leave the company," I blurted.

"What?" Annie nearly shrieked while Scott said, "No fucking way."

Silence hung over us, tense and heavy. I could hear a clock ticking somewhere, and the vague whistle of the wind outside.

"He can't fucking do that," Scott said.

"I mean, legally, he absolutely can. With the right paperwork." Annie, practical as ever. "But why would he? Do you think he's unhappy?"

Might as well drop the bomb. "I caught him on the phone with a recruiter in Atlanta. He didn't hear me come into his office."

"Oh shit."

"No, no he wouldn't."

Scott and Annie, respectively.

"That was my reaction, at first." I propped both fists on the counter and leaned on my arms, hanging my head to think.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. Why else would he talk to a recruiter?”

“And his whole family’s in Atlanta,” Annie added. She put her hand between my shoulder blades and rubbed small circles, soothing me. And, despite the topic at hand, a fission of desire snaked down my spine.

Right now, I wanted to pull her into my arms and bury my face in her hair and just hold her. Our company had been my idea, born in my imagination and built in the dilapidated living room of the house we’d all shared in college after meeting in the dorms. It was our baby, together. Just because I’d had the idea didn’t mean it was any more mine than the three of theirs.

And without Evan, how would it work?

“We’d have to hire an outsider to be on the executive committee,” Scott said, voicing one of my many concerns.

“Screw that,” Annie said. “We can run the company without him. But our *friend* wants to leave us, and he hasn’t said a thing about it.”

Leave it to Annie to get right to the main issue. Evan was unhappy and hadn’t confided in any of us. He was making plans that affected us, without us. Sure, I hadn’t known him since grade school like I had Scott. And I wasn’t in love with him like I was with Annie. But he was still Evan. Still 25 percent of our company. The head of communications, the face of the company.

Annie’s hand fell away and my back felt cold. “He’s keeping secrets from us. I hate when people keep secrets.”

She sounded so sad, I again wanted to hold her. Soothe her and let her do the same for me. The best I could do with Scott

around was reach out and squeeze her shoulder. She flashed a weak smile but didn't look over at me.

“So, what do we do?” Scott asked. “Do we say something?”

“I feel like we need some sort of evidence,” I said.

“What about you overhearing his phone call?” Annie said.

“He doesn't know about that. I was so shocked and angry, I left.” Betrayed, really, was how I'd felt. But I didn't say it.

“So what, we snoop around looking for proof?” Scott said.

“I mean, we could.”

Now Annie smacked me on the shoulder. “You don't mean that.”

“I absolutely do.” If our friend was going to keep secrets that affected our company, we had a right to know what was going on.

“He's not careless enough to bring evidence with him anyway. What's he going to have, buyout papers with him for each of us to sign? He couldn't be that far in the process without us knowing. Too many lawyers involved.” Annie being logical again.

“I don't know,” I said, still too irritated to be placated. It was ridiculous, but yes, I did want to snoop a little. What I really wanted was evidence I was wrong. But again, I didn't say that aloud.

I could feel Annie watching me. Then she laughed, a dry, nearly humorless sound. “You don't want to find proof to confront him. You want to find proof you're wrong.”

I slanted a sideways glare at her. “Maybe.” She knew me too well.

“You’re so predictable,” Scott said.

“Shut up,” I mumbled.

“Safe to come out yet?” Tina called from around the corner. “Boring work talk done?”

As if Tina never talked about her job as a nurse practitioner in a sexual health clinic. “Yeah, we’re good!” I called back to her. Lowering my voice, I said, “Just... keep an eye and an ear out. See if Julia’s the same way or something. I don’t know.”

Until Evan came clean, I would not be able to shake the lurking sensation that everything we’d built was about to fall apart.



ANNIE

Evan and Julia didn’t get there until almost six-thirty. It was long past dark and we hadn’t been able to reach them on their cellphones all day. We were just about to eat when they stumbled up the stairs, snowy and shivering.

“Car... got... stuck,” Julia managed to get out through chattering teeth.

“We walked... at least three... hours,” Evan added. He wasn’t merely shivering, but shaking.

And Nurse Practitioner Tina immediately got to work. “Go, start a warm, but not too hot, shower.” She shoved her husband in the direction of the freezing couple’s bedroom with

an en suite bath. “Towels and blankets,” she ordered Chris. He disappeared up the stairs.

She grabbed my wrist. “Help me get them out of their cold, wet clothes.” She tugged me in front of Julia, then she started working on the zipper of Evan’s coat.

I helped a stiff but cooperative Julia out of her icy outerwear and her wet clothes. Averting my eyes, I led her up the stairs, through her and Evan’s room, and into the bathroom.

With his eyes closed, Scott held back the shower curtain, and I helped Julia in. She let out a long sigh as the warm water hit her skin. “Can’t you make it... hotter?”

Tina came in with a naked Evan in tow. I looked at the ceiling. Just because we’d all gone skinny dipping once in college didn’t mean I wanted to see his bare ass. Chris was the only one I wanted to see without clothes.

“Nope, gotta start with warm,” Tina said. “Too big a shock to your system if you go from freezing to burning.”

Evan stepped into the shower, and Scott released the curtain. I craned my neck back down.

“I’ll have Chris put the towels on the sink,” Tina said, all business. I’d of course seen the guys work, but it was sort of neat to see Tina in NP mode.

Scott tilted his head toward the door, and I nodded. We crept out. “Very gradually you can increase the water temperature,” Tina said, following us.

As soon as Chris deposited the linens and we were all back in the main room, Tina reached for Scott’s hand. She laced their fingers and held his between both of hers. “That could’ve been us.”

Scott maneuvered his free arm around her shoulder and led her over to the couch. They snuggled together, voices low enough I couldn't hear them.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me it was now after seven and we hadn't eaten. "You hungry?" I murmured to Chris.

The look he gave me in return left no doubt as to the nature of his hunger. "I could eat." His voice was low and rough and sent both heat and chills through me.

Cheeks flaming, I ducked my head so my hair covered my face, hiding my blush from him. "Chris," I hissed.

His low chuckle rumbled over my skin. "Dinner's served when you're ready," he said in Scott and Tina's direction.

Scott lifted his arm and gave a thumbs up, but the couple didn't move.

Chris caught my gaze and shrugged. "Guess we eat without them. I am actually starved."

We went about serving up dinner, which was a spinach lasagna with garlic bread and salad. I wasn't hungry for all of it, since I'd nibbled on both bread and salad while cooking. But I was definitely ready to dig into the lasagna.

Chris and I took our plates to the eight-person table in the dining area. We sat at the end, across from each other, and ate largely in silence. Every time I dared look up at him, I caught him watching me, and quickly looked away.

After the fourth or fifth time it happened, he cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. "You change your mind?"

"About what?" Why was I playing dumb? I knew exactly what he was asking.

He made a frustrated noise. “You’re a lot of things, Annie, but dumb isn’t one of them.”

I set down my fork and ran my fingers through my hair. Closed my eyes to say, “No, I haven’t changed my mind.” I pulled in a deep breath for courage. “Have you?”

His response started before I even finished. “Of course not.”

Heat flooded my chest as my stomach see-sawed. I flicked my gaze to his, then down to my half-eaten lasagna. “OK.”

His voice was soft and deep as he said, “Maybe it’s been a stressful day, worrying about Evan and Julia. They’ll probably go to bed early anyway. And Scott and my sister are in their own world. No one will care if you go to bed early too. Doubt they’ll even notice if I go check on you. If we stay downstairs for the rest of the night.”

Fire licked along my skin.

“Unless you decided you don’t want this, I have every intention of wearing you out before I let you go to sleep.”

I slid down a little in my chair as my skeleton melted. “That sounds... good.”

Good. What a completely inadequate word.

He flashed a smile before shoving a bite of lasagna in his mouth. “Oh, it’ll be damn good.”

Voices on the other side of the room interrupted the heat bubble surrounding us. Evan and Julia were out of the shower. Tina rushed to help them, while Scott made himself a plate and joined Chris and me at the table.

Heat bubble burst.

As Tina tended to her temporary patients in their room, the three of us resumed our earlier conversation like several hours hadn't passed.

"I've been thinking about what you said," Scott said as he took the seat next to me. "Now that you said something," he nodded at Chris, "I think I've noticed it a little bit too. Like I was talking about the executive spring retreat. And he got all weird."

Senior management from every division in our company spent a week at a retreat every April. It was ostensibly about work, but in reality we made it about twenty percent work and eighty percent play and relaxation. Our way of showing our senior staff how much we valued them.

Staff lower in rank got a paid week off in May, a quarter of each department at a time. We wanted our employees at every level to know they were integral to our company's success.

"See?" Chris said.

"What do you think, Annie?" Scott asked.

I looked at my almost-empty plate. Of the three of us, I probably knew Evan the best. And Chris's curiosity hadn't been far from my mind all afternoon. I'd given the problem more thought than it probably warranted.

I set my fork down and propped my elbows on the table. Chin in hands, I sighed. "I don't know what to think. On one hand, I've done the same as you, Scott. I've realized a bunch of times that in hindsight, I realize he was acting weird. On the other hand, I can't imagine him deciding something as huge as leaving our company without talking to us first."

"Maybe he hasn't decided yet. Maybe he isn't at the talking to us stage yet." Scott pointed his fork at me before

taking another bite.

I'd considered that. "Maybe. But I still think he'd talk to us before he got to the point where it makes him act weird around us."

"Then why is he acting weird?" Chris asked.

I shrugged. "Maybe he and Julia are having problems? Or maybe Julia's pregnant?"

Scott made a snorting-cough noise, then shoveled a huge bite of salad into his mouth.

Chris gave me a confused look, then turned it on our friend. "You OK?"

Scott swallowed and cleared his throat. "Yeah. Fine. Something just went down wrong."

I stood and picked up my empty plate. "I think we see how the week unfolds and go from there. We can't exactly confront him and say, what? 'Hey, why you acting mostly normal but occasionally weird in ways too vague for me to explain'? I don't think that'll go over well."

"Damn you for being logical," Chris muttered.

"You love my logic." I rolled my eyes at him.

Instead of joking back like he usually would, his gaze flew up to mine. "I do," he said, voice low and serious.

Heat seemed to crackle in the air between us. My breath caught in my chest and my skin tingled. I had to force myself to look away. Blinking hard to clear my head, I took my plate to the kitchen.

Chris and Scott's voices drifted over, continuing our conversation, but I tuned them out. I was still flushed, my

cheeks warm, from whatever had just sparked between me and Chris.

Had Scott noticed? It wasn't like I actively wanted to keep secrets from our friends. But since our fling might not end the way I hoped, it was best to keep it quiet.

For now.



CHRIS

By ten o'clock, I was antsy as fuck. My skin was hyper-aware of every sensation and my cock was screaming at me to drag Annie downstairs and get to the fucking.

Her body had felt so right pressed against mine. And her pussy, fuck, it had been so hot and wet and needy, I could hardly stand waiting to feast on it.

And her lips. My god, her lips. So soft and sweet and delicious. They were heaven in a kiss. How had I waited so many years without tasting Annie's perfect lips?

And why the hell was I sitting on the couch next to my sister instead of downstairs tasting those lips yet again?

"I'm ready to make an accusation," Julia said from the other side of the coffee table. She sat on a cushion on the floor, wrapped in a blanket. Other than being chilly, she and Evan seemed to have escaped their ordeal no worse off.

After they ate, we'd settled in to play several games of the board game Clue. Which was an enjoyable game, and a tradition for us. But I was done. *Please be right*, I silently pleaded with Julia.

I could claim fatigue and go to bed early, after this. If they all thought it was weird, well, that was their problem. Evan was acting weird, and I'd noticed something strange going on with my sister and Scott. Acting weird was apparently the theme of the vacation.

Julia took the *case file* envelope and held it near her chest. "It was Colonel Mustard, in the library, with the rope." She threw down each card as she said it.

"Nice job, babe." Evan leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

Something in my chest squeezed. It was too bad I couldn't be openly affectionate with Annie like that. Just for one weekend. I wouldn't ever inflict myself on someone for the long haul. Especially not someone I loved as much as Annie. But it would've been nice to put my arm around her shoulder and snuggle her while we watched a movie, or something like that.

Sitting in the armchair with Cranberry in her lap, Annie yawned and stretched. "I'm really beat, you guys. I don't think I have it in me to stay up drinking and talking tonight."

"Gettin' old?" Evan teased.

"Younger than you," she shot back.

"By two months."

She pushed to her feet with a shrug. "Night, everyone."

"I think I'm going to bed too," Tina said, glancing at her husband.

In the next few minutes, Scott agreed to go to bed with Tina, and Evan and Julia also decided to head to bed and get warm under the quilts.

Which just left me and Annie. She still stood in front of the chair, Cranberry now snuggled in her arms. Against her breasts. Right where I wanted my face.

An image of her sprawled in the chair while I knelt between her legs flashed in my head.

“We need to go downstairs now, before I kiss you right here where everyone might come out and see.” My voice came out low and rougher than I meant.

She didn't seem to mind. She set the kitten on the chair, gave her head a scratch, then headed for the stairs. I tried not to run like an eager puppy as I followed.

Downstairs, I shut our bedroom door behind us and turned to face her. She turned on the lamp on the bedside table, casting the room in a low, warm glow. Her skin looked golden, like a rare gift.

The fact she was about to give herself to me was exactly that, a rare gift.

Leaning back against the door, I asked, “You still want this?”

Her gaze zeroed in on my lips. “Yes.” She took slow, deliberate steps toward me.

Once she was in reach, I grabbed her wrist and pulled her against me. Her body was soft and lush against me, and a long sigh escaped my throat. “Annie.” My other hand slid into her dark hair, thumb stroking her cheek.

“Kiss me. Please,” she whispered, voice full of yearning.

An answering yearning pulled at my chest as I lowered my lips to hers.

The first brush was like fire in my veins. She opened to me immediately, a soft cry in the back of her throat. Her tongue was spice against mine, teasing and enticing me.

I lost myself in the heat of her mouth, the joy of finally having her in my arms after years of longing. Maybe it couldn't last, but this week we would make enough memories to get me through the lonely years ahead.

Gasping for breath, I finally tore my mouth away and buried my face in her neck. She smelled like tomato sauce and heat and desire and perfection. I was painfully hard against her belly, my sweatpants doing nothing to contain my erection.

My tongue traced the line of her neck, and she shuddered against me. "Chris."

Need shivered down my spine. "Say that again."

"Chris," she repeated, both softer and hotter.

"Fuck, Annie." I scraped my teeth over the pulse at the base of her throat.

"Yes. Do that now. Fuck Annie."

I huffed out a strangled sound that was part humor, all hunger. "We'll get to that. But I have other plans for you first."

A strangled sound came out of her throat.

My hands found the hem of her sweatshirt and slid under it. She had a t-shirt under that—the house was cozy but a little chilly—and I burrowed under that too until I felt bare skin. I could have gone slow and teased, but we'd had all day to build the anticipation.

Hell, I'd had years.

Her skin was softer and smoother and more perfect than I'd imagined. I slid my palms up her back, then tugged her shirts up and off. I fumbled with her bra clasp, then that came off too.

Before I could enjoy them, she pulled out of my arms, backing away from me. My brain shorted out for a moment at the sight of her small, round breasts. With nipples just begging for my mouth.

She pulled the covers back and lay down on the bed. "It's freezing down here. Come keep me warm."

I stalked toward her, ridding myself of my own sweatshirt as I did. I paused next to the bed as her gaze roamed my chest. I tried not to preen like a peacock, but I loved how it felt for her to drink me up with that lustful look.

She slid to the center of the bed and reached a hand out to me. I practically dove on top of her and tugged the quilts around us. Propping myself on my elbows, I looked down at her. Her brown eyes were still full of lust, but there was more there too. Something I'd never seen with any other person I'd been with. A warmth and kindness and affection that came from years of friendship.

Damn, I loved her so much. It was going to kill me to go back to reality next week and have to pretend I'd never been inside her.

Shoving those thoughts aside, I smoothed her hair off her forehead. "You OK?"

Her smile was soft and maybe even loving. Not the kind of love I had for her, but love nonetheless. It was all a little weird and made me feel off balance.

“Better than OK.” She widened her legs, cradling me between them.

My eyes rolled back in my head as my cock pressed against her. Several layers of fabric separated us, and it was already so good.

It was entirely possible I wouldn’t last long. Which sucked, because I wanted tonight to last forever.

She slid her hands down the back of my pants and my second thought—after *holy shit that’s good*—was *Annie Lang’s hands are on my bare ass*. And I had to kiss her again. Again and again and again. The flame between us created an inferno in our little basement bedroom. I was burning up, and it had nothing to do with the two quilts on top of me.

I dragged my lips down the side of her neck, tasting the slope of her shoulder, then lower. I nuzzled the swell of her breast, then drew a circle around her nipple with my tongue.

Beneath me, she squirmed. “Yes.” It was an exhalation more than speech. It made my balls tighten with need.

I scraped her sensitive skin with my teeth, then went back to circles. Teeth, circles, over and over until she was panting and arched against me.

“Please.”

“Please what?” I murmured into her skin. Of course I knew what she wanted, but I wanted—needed—to hear her say it.

“Suck me,” she said, voice a breathy moan.

Those simple but arousing words from her mouth seared through me as I did as she asked. I was rewarded with a whimper.

She stroked her hips against my cock, the friction torturing us both. With her breast still in my mouth, I moaned.

She started tugging at my sweats, and I finally released her nipple to help. Fumbling awkwardly, we eventually got the waistband past my knees.

“Good enough.” I rose up on my knees and went to work on her own pants. I needed to feel her pussy again. Needed the heat and warmth of her. And it wasn’t going to be much longer before I needed that heat and warmth on my cock.

More awkward fumbling, and then we were naked. Wonderfully, beautifully naked.

And she started giggling.

Well shit. No one wants that reaction the first time someone sees them without clothes.

“I’m glad you find the sight of my cock comical.” I tried to sound like I was joking.

“Your cock is perfect.” She wrapped it in her fist and my spine sagged. Her hand was perfect. “It’s just the idea that I’m naked with you. It’s... weird.”

I dropped my face into the crook of her neck but stopped myself from nibbling at the soft skin there. “Bad weird?”

She squeezed my cock, then resumed the stroking she was torturing me with. “Very good weird.”

I pressed my lips to her neck. “Thank fuck.”

We spent the next several minutes—hours maybe? I had no idea—stroking and teasing and exploring. I kissed down her belly, fully intent on tasting her, but she tugged me back over her.

“Later.” She gave me the sexiest smile I’d seen in my life. “I need you inside me so much. I can’t wait anymore.”

Well fuck. I could hardly resist that. I kissed her hard, letting her guide me into position. And I started to slowly slide inside.

The whole time, besides thinking how amazing she felt, I couldn’t stop the repeated thought of *holy shit, I’m inside Annie.*



ANNIE

Holy shit, Chris was inside me.

My chest felt so full, I couldn’t breathe. The sex itself felt amazing, and he entered me in a pattern of thrusts and retreats, each time coming a little farther inside. But the overwhelming knowledge that this was Chris—*Chris*—was almost too much to bear.

I’d wanted this for so long, and now all I could think about was how wonderful it was to be doing this with him. I was so in my head, I could barely enjoy the actual sex.

“Stop thinking,” he murmured, swiping his lips across my cheek. He was almost fully inside me, and the anticipation he was building with his agonizingly slow entry was killing me. In the best way.

“Sorry,” I said. “Part of me still can’t believe we’re doing this. That it’s you. Us. You know?”

He nodded, face tight. “Second thoughts?”

I shook my head before he even finished his words. “No, not at all. You?”

He slid all the way in with a groan. “Not even a little.”

I squeezed his sides with my thighs and wrapped my legs around him, pulling him just a little deeper. We both moaned.

“You feel so fucking good, Annabelle.”

I palmed his cheek and moved his face so he was looking at me. “Annabelle? No one calls me that.”

He grinned his charming, adorable grin. The one I, and dozens of people like me, had fallen for. The one that had kept me hooked all these years. “It just came out. Feels right.” He nudged my nose with his, forehead resting on mine.

“Something that’s just ours.”

I sucked in a deep breath. This intimacy was going to break me. It was too much; I could feel it in every cell in my body. So I pressed my mouth to his, licking his lower lip. “So fuck me already.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He winked at me, and it was so corny, I couldn’t stop a laugh.

How did he do that? How could he have me more turned on than I’d been in my life, with his cock buried inside me, and still make me laugh?

Despite his vow, he started off with long, slow thrusts. Rolling his hips in a way that maximized my pleasure. I lifted to meet him, trying to guide him to speed up, but he couldn’t be pushed.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he bit out, face buried in my neck, lips teasing my skin.

I palmed his ass and squeezed. “You too.” I was already losing my mind in pleasure. I couldn’t form thoughts anymore. Nothing but *yes* and *so good* and *fuck me harder*.

“It’s like your pussy was made for me.”

The pussy in question throbbed around him. If only. If I could just convince him of this, convince him that he didn’t want to sleep with another person ever. Then my goal would be fulfilled. I just needed the sex to be better than any he’d had before. It already was for me. Nothing compared to finally having the man I loved between my thighs.

“So does your cock,” I made myself say. I wasn’t good at talking dirty, but he seemed to be into it. And I wanted to please him. More than I’d ever wanted to please a lover. “Harder.”

He increased his speed, still not as hard or as fast as I wanted, but faster. Still with the incredible hip rolls that made me arch into him and my eyes roll back in my head.

He lowered his head and pulled my nipple into his mouth. “You taste so fucking good.”

And that was it. I didn’t need hard fucking. The orgasm took me by surprise, but suddenly I was pulsing around him, trembling as pure joy flowed through me. I tried to fully experience the way my toes tingled and my earlobes throbbed with ecstasy, while at the same time, I tried to memorize this moment. My first orgasm with Chris.

Hopefully, the first of a lifetime. But if my plan failed and he didn’t want to be with me, this memory would have to get me through the lonely years ahead.

He fucked me through the orgasm, and each time his pubic bone caught my clit, it sent fresh waves through me. It was the

single most powerful orgasm I'd ever had.

Was that what love did to sex? Or was Chris simply that good a lover? And did I really want to know the answer?

Did it matter?

Panting, I eventually floated back to the bed with him.

“I don't think I've ever experienced anything hotter than you coming on my cock, Annabelle.”

I shuddered as he again used my full name. The name no one but telemarketers used.

I smoothed my hands up his muscular back, the muscles maintained by his daily swimming habit. He swam for an hour in his condo's pool every day he was in town, and many times in hotel pools wherever he was traveling. And it did incredible things for his chest, his back, his ass. His whole body. Not that I loved him for his body. Maybe that first day back in college, I might have been initially drawn to his handsome face, cute butt, and charming smile.

But it was Chris, the person I'd fallen in love with. Smart, funny, clever, kind, so many other little things.

I blinked to get out of my head once again. Chris was still inside me, saying dirty things to me, and saying my name like it was the most precious thing he'd ever said.

I framed his face between my hands, his stubble teasing my palms. “I really like coming on your cock.” My already racing heart beat a little harder, pulling these unfamiliar phrases out of my mouth. I'd never been with someone who talked dirty, and every time he said something, it shot a thrill through my belly.

“I really like you coming on my cock too.” He focused his flame-blue gaze on me, his eyes burning bright with arousal. He was still thrusting as he spoke. How did he do that in the middle of sex?

“How about we try it again?” He took my lips in a deep kiss, his tongue tangling with mine, soon thrusting in rhythm with his cock.

I managed to murmur my assent into the kiss, but I was lost. In his mouth, in his body. In everything.

He ripped his mouth from mine, sucking in a deep breath. “I could kiss you all day. Every day.”

A completely non-sexual thrill burst inside me. Yes. Every day. For the rest of our lives. Didn't matter if it included marriage and kids as long as it was us together. All I could do was gasp something resembling “yes” because he was finally picking up the pace, taking us from slow, lazy lovemaking to fucking.

Arousal quickly built as his hips crashed into mine. We became frantic, racing desperately toward the conclusion. He rested his forehead against mine, his gaze capturing mine. A calm anchor inside the storm of our sex.

Sensation layered on sensation, building to a crescendo that broke with me arching and shaking in his arms. I could hear him saying, “Yes, Annabelle, that's it. Come for me,” but it seemed far away. I was fully in my body, in the moment.

The pleasure was greater than the first time, the height higher, the waves deeper. I'd never known bliss like this. Did I cry his name? Or was I just crying?

And as I started to drift back down, he slammed his cock into me frantically, his rhythm lost.

“Fuck, Annie,” he grunted as his body went stiff, shaking in my arms. He came with a long groan, pressing me into the bed as I pulsed the muscles of my pussy to increase his pleasure.

Burying his face into my sweat-slicked neck, he groaned again and collapsed on top of me. Given I was already breathless, his weight made it a little difficult to breathe. But who cared? I’d just had the best sex of my life with the man I’d loved for more than a decade, and now we were recovering in each other’s arms.

thursday

CHRIS

Waking up in Annie's arms automatically made this Thanksgiving the best day of my life. Or was that yesterday, when I first had sex with Annie? Except we'd undoubtedly—hopefully—have sex again today, so that made today an improvement over yesterday.

And yesterday, and the wee hours of this morning, was already pretty amazing.

Well hell, we did already have sex today. Around two a.m., she'd climbed on top of me, waking me, and then she'd ridden me to ecstasy. After she'd fallen asleep sprawled across my chest. Not long after that, I woke her so I could lick her pussy until she came on my face.

Sometime during the night, we'd shifted positions so we were now spooned together, her perfect ass pressed against my morning erection. And if that wasn't the perfect way to start the day, I didn't know what was.

Annie. And me. It may only be for the week, but memories of last night alone would sustain me for years to come.

I shifted my hips, subtly rubbing my cock against her soft skin. Arousal spiked through me and I couldn't hold back a

groan in her ear. Our heads were on the same pillow, her hair tickling my nose.

I slid my arm tighter around her, pulling her back flush to my chest. It was tempting to palm one of her breasts, but I wasn't going to molest her in her sleep. I needed her awake and willing.

"Annabelle," I murmured. I couldn't have explained why I had the urge to use her full name when in bed together. It had just come out last night, and it worked. Annie was the woman I'd been in love with all these years, but Annabelle was a sexy-as-fuck lover who blew my mind with pleasure.

Against me, she started to shift. Her legs stroked against mine, setting my skin on fire.

"Annabelle, wake up for me." I nosed her hair out of the way and tugged her earlobe with my teeth.

"Chris," she exhaled, her voice breathy and sleepy. She was so warm and soft in my arms. This might be my favorite version of Annie that I'd ever experienced.

I stroked her again with my cock, letting it slide in the gentle crease between her ass cheeks. "Happy Thanksgiving," I whispered, then pressed a kiss behind her ear.

She shuddered, creating more friction between our bodies. "So much to be thankful for."

"I know how I could be even more thankful." It was so corny and I didn't care.

Without a word, she lifted her leg back and over my hip. Opening herself to me.

"I think I can help with that."

Damn, she was perfect. I reached down to adjust my erection, sliding between her legs so her wetness could coat me. We both moaned.

She shifted her shoulders and turned her face toward me. When I leaned toward her, I could just capture her lips in a messy kiss. I swung my hips so my tip caught her clit, and she gasped into my mouth.

“Now,” she said into me.

I didn't waste any time working my way inside her. She was so hot and wet and felt like heaven. Better than heaven.

When I was seated all the way inside, I simply held there, enjoying the feel of her pussy gripping my cock. She flexed around me and I had to tear my mouth away from hers to gasp for breath.

“That's so good.”

She did it again, and I was seeing stars. Already I could feel the orgasm building, pleasure a pressure on the root of my cock. I wouldn't last long.

“I'm going to fuck you so hard, you'll be walking funny all day,” I growled into her ear as I started to thrust.

“Promises, promises,” she said, her voice breathless.

“Damn right.” I nipped at her earlobe. At the same time, I wrapped my arm around her and palmed her breast. Her nipple was hard against my palm.

The room was silent except for the sounds of bodies slapping together and sheets rustling. She reached her arm back over my shoulder, cupping the back of my neck. Arching her breast deeper into my hand.

It was so good. Too good. I couldn't last.

“Touch yourself.”

She gasped, but didn't otherwise respond.

“I'm too close. I need you to make yourself come, Annabelle.” She'd get there faster if she did it than if I did. I didn't know her body intimately enough yet to know exactly where to touch her, how to touch her, to bring her to rapid orgasm.

I probably never would get a chance to know her that well.

I made a strangled sound at that idea; hopefully she took it as one of immense pleasure. Because other than the fleeting thought, I felt nothing but bliss. My hips moved faster and faster, chasing the orgasm. I could feel the subtle movement of her arm as she worked her clit.

“That's it, Annabelle. Come for me.”

And she did. She arched her back and gave a strangled cry as her pussy started pulsing around me. She shook in my arms, her nails digging into my shoulder.

I wanted to take a moment to savor it, I really did. But the contractions around my cock were too much. “Fuck, Annabelle.” I shoved as deep as I could get, and came. My cock pulsed, spurt after spurt pouring into her. My teeth grazed her shoulder, her skin muffling my deep groan.

Pleasure shook me, threw me, startling in its intensity, in its more-ness. But of course it was intense. Of course it was more. Everything with Annie was more.

Eventually we both went limp. Her leg slipped off my hip, her nails retracted from my shoulder, her head lolled back against my chest. My arm around her was a boneless weight, though I did still palm her breast. Because breast.

“I think you might be right. I will be walking funny.” Her words were breathy as she panted, still not recovered.

I might never recover from this sex. From being with Annie.

Maybe there was a way we—

Nope. She deserved someone better than me. Plus, she’d said herself that this was her way of getting back on the proverbial horse—literal cock—before making a move for the guy she really wanted. It was an odd sort of plan, in my opinion. But I wasn’t going to look this incredibly sexy gift horse in her delicious mouth.

“We’re not telling anyone, right? This is just between us?” Mostly I wanted it that way. Keeping it secret made it just a little more fun. A little naughtier. But part of me wanted to strut around like a proud peacock and let everyone know I’d claimed her.

That neanderthal part of me needed to pipe down.

She rolled onto her back and looked up at me. Her soft brown hair was a wild mess on the pillow beneath her. She had a smudge of mascara beneath her left eye, and her lower lip was swollen from where she’d been biting it while we fucked.

I had never seen her sexier.

“I think it’s best if we do.” Her eyebrows came together in a V, and she sank her teeth into that plump bottom lip of hers.

When she released her lip, I couldn’t stop myself from leaning in to take my own nibble. I felt her smile against me. “Sounds good. It’ll only make my sister insufferable if I try to explain it’s just for this long weekend, and... what?”

She'd rolled her eyes as I said it. I made a face at her and she grinned.

"You know I adore Tina."

"I know," she murmured, pressing a kiss to the dip between my collarbones.

If we spent a little time making out first, I could probably be up for a second round. Fourth round since we got into bed the night before.

But before I could decide if I wanted that, she rolled away and sat up, swinging her legs out of bed. "You want to shower first or should I?"

"We can't shower together?" I smiled at the mental picture of me taking her from behind as she leaned against the tile wall.

She stood and I got a prime view of her gorgeous ass. As she walked to her suitcase, she tossed a glance at me over her shoulder. "Shower sex is never as good as you think it's going to be. There isn't enough room for two people and if you do anything frisky, you worry you're going to slip and get hurt."

The shower in my condo back in Denver had more than enough room for two people, but we'd never get to try it out together. A deep sadness rolled through me, but I ignored it. I was good at ignoring my feelings. And no sense being sad while we were still together.

I'd have plenty of time for that next week.



I hadn't actually had sex with a man since I got my IUD. I'd gotten it 3 years ago after a broken condom led to an abortion, wanting more protection the next time. It had simply worked out that the next few people I dated were women and one nonbinary person with the same genitals I had.

So I was unfamiliar with the way three rounds of sex when Chris came inside me left his cum dripping out into my panties. It was a little gross and a little uncomfortable, but also a little sexy. A secret reminder of what we'd done.

Unfortunately, because I didn't get my period, thanks to the IUD, I didn't have any supplies with me. And I really could've used a pantyliner.

As Tina and I stood at the wide kitchen island, her prepping the asparagus and me slicing cranberries in half, I leaned toward her and asked softly, "You don't happen to have a pantyliner I could use, do you?" Hell, I'd probably have this problem more than just today. Hopefully I would. "Maybe a few?"

She looked over with a weird, almost pained expression. Did she figure out why I needed them? No, she couldn't.

"I'm early," I added, just in case.

She looked away and concentrated on the asparagus. "No, sorry. I, uh, just had mine."

"OK, thanks. I'll ask Julia." Worst-case scenario, I could either let my panties get full of cum—not preferable—or I could use folded up toilet paper. Something any person who got a period had done at some point in their life.

I abandoned the cranberries, but scooped Cranberry off the sofa as I made my way over to where Julia and Evan sat at the dining room table, drinking coffee. I was already on my

second mug. Waking up in the middle of the night for an hour of vigorous activity wasn't exactly restful.

Totally worth it.

Julia luckily had supplies with her, so after a remark from Evan about how gross it was, which earned him a scolding from both of us and Julia promising him a lecture later, she got me a handful of pantyliners, plus a few full-sized pads. "Just in case it gets heavier." I didn't bother to tell her I didn't think we'd be able to work four rounds into one night, so it probably wouldn't.

That taken care of, I settled on the couch with Cranberry purring on my chest. The berries could wait.

She nuzzled right under my chin and fell back to sleep and it made my chest ache, it was so sweet. I actually felt tears burning the backs of my eyes, which was ridiculous. Why would I cry about a kitten snuggling me? I was probably just on emotion overload because of Chris.

As I sat there, I closed my eyes, and my mind wandered back to the previous night. And this morning. The way he touched me. The way he set me on fire. The way his kiss turned me inside out and right side in again.

And the way he'd looked at me with so much passion, so much emotion. I could almost believe he loved me too. Which gave me hope my plan would work and he could fall in love with me. Or at least be far enough along the path to give us a real chance.

But that was for next week, when we were back to reality. This week was all about showing him how good we would be.

"Hey." His deep voice rumbled over me.

I opened my eyes to see him standing at the other end of the couch, smiling at me. A smile more tender and affectionate than any he'd given me before. My chest swelled, the emotions inside me growing too big to contain.

He wore the gray sweatpants again, and I could see the faint outline of his cock. In that moment I decided I would taste it tonight. I wanted that for him. I wanted it for me.

On top he wore a waffle-knit maroon Henley, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. Besides a really nice three-piece suit, there was no sexier outfit a man could wear. My mouth watered. I wanted to suck him right now. Those pants provided such nice, easy access.

My pulse started to throb between my legs, and I shoved the sexy thoughts aside. I didn't need to get all worked up again. Not when I couldn't kiss him the way I wanted.

"There's coffee," I said. I tried, I really did, not to remember him rising above me as he thrust into me. But the image seemed to be superimposed over him. Was he thinking the same thing?

"Thanks." He ran his hand over his short, damp hair. He nodded at me. "She's too god damn adorable."

I grinned, scratching her neck. "You want her? I should get back to cranberries."

He grabbed the remote from the coffee table and sat down at the other end of the couch. "Sure." Looking toward the dining table, he said, "Hey, get over here and watch the Macy's Parade with me."

Julia and Evan groaned, but slowly rose from the table. Every year Chris insisted on watching the parade and every year the rest of us were reluctant participants.

I popped up, balancing Cranberry until I could give her to Chris. I set her on his thighs and couldn't resist teasing my fingers over him just a little. His gaze snapped to mine, a mixture of heat and warning. I grinned.

“That’s definitely my cue to head back to the kitchen,” I said. I actually didn’t mind the parade. I’d watched it most years with my brothers as a kid, and now with Chris as an adult. But I enjoyed harassing him more than I enjoyed the parade.

Plus, I enjoyed cooking.

Tina was done with the asparagus and had moved on to cooking sausage and eggs, which I assumed was for breakfast.

“Smells good. You want me to cut up some pepper or onion for the eggs?”

Her rosy cheeks went pale. “Definitely no onion.”

I didn’t recall her disliking onions, but maybe I was mistaken. “Peppers? I brought green and red ones.”

“Red would be good.”

I set to work dicing a pepper and tossed it into the pan as she scrambled. I was washing the pepper off my hands and about to return to the berries when Julia yell-shrieked, “Are you fucking joking right now?”

I turned off the water and stared over at her. She was at the edge of her seat, glaring at her husband.

Uh oh. I wanted no part of a couple’s marital drama.

Tina leaned toward me. “What do you think he did? Insulted her favorite cartoon balloon?”

I tried to hold in a laugh, but a small snort escaped. Which made Tina giggle.

Julia shoved her hands into her hair. “You fucking ruined Thanksgiving!”

How did he do that?

She shot her furious gaze over to me and Tina. “He left the turkey on the porch last night.”

Oh... *oh*.

Shit. That meant it was frozen solid.

“Where the hell else am I supposed to put it?” Evan held up his hands in a gesture of innocence.

Everyone, myself included, glared at him. For someone so smart, you’d think he’d never been at Thanksgiving before.

“There isn’t room in the fridge.” He glared back at his wife.

I did some quick mental calculations. There was another way to thaw a turkey, which was the way we usually did it at my dad’s house. The 13-pound turkey would take roughly six hours to thaw if we submerged it in water, then needed another three hours to cook. Add in time to prep the bird and margin for error, and we’d need about ten hours.

We typically ate late afternoon, four or five.

“If we push dinner back to about seven, we’re good,” I said, raising my voice so Julia and Evan would hear me over their bickering. “But the sink will be out of commission for about six hours.”

I sent Scott out to get the turkey and started filling the sink with water.

Tina rolled her eyes. “Duh. I do this all the time with meat at home. I just never thought of doing it for Thanksgiving.”

“Smart thinking, Annie,” Chris said. When I looked over at him, he had a knowing smile as he tapped his temple with his index finger.

I stuck my tongue out at him but was smiling the whole time.

“Everyone good now? Can I watch the parade, please?” Chris settled back into the couch, Cranberry now curled up in his lap. “Annie, come watch with us. Tina and Scott can take care of the turkey, then they can watch too.”

I had zero interest in watching a televised parade that wasn't even live. “I'm good, thanks.”

He looked over his shoulder at me. “Come on.”

“What's your obsession with the parade?” He was always the one who pushed us to watch it, but he'd never been this into it before. Usually he was happy if even one other person watched too.

“I just want everyone to have a good time. Hardly a crime.”

“And you assume I would have a good time watching a parade? And therein lies the flaw in your plan.”

Not that I really had anything else to do. We'd gotten most of the prep done already, and it wasn't like I could go for a walk or something. The wind still howled past the windows, snow swirling behind the glass.

But if I had to sit on the couch and watch oversized balloons, I at least wanted to be able to snuggle up with Chris.

Soon.

Maybe.

Sighing, I said, “OK, but if you’re going to force me to sit and pretend to watch the parade, at least let me get my book.”

He wrinkled his nose at me, and somehow he made even that look sexy. I rolled my eyes again and headed downstairs to get the book.



CHRIS

“Everyone get enough for lunch?” Tina asked as she got up from the chair.

I eyed her as she took her and Scott’s plates to the kitchen. Something was up with her too. I knew my sister and I could guarantee with 99.943 percent certainty that she was hiding something. The only part I didn’t know was whether she was hiding it from Scott too.

Well, that, and I didn’t know what the actual secret was. Everyone had secrets this weekend. Which was a good reminder I needed to find a time to slip away and see if I could figure out what was going on with Evan and Julia.

“Jules, you bring those brownies?” Evan asked.

“Ooh, yeah. They’re in my duffel in our room. Go get them.”

“Do we need dessert?” Annie asked. “I made three pies. I kind of want to save room for those.”

Scott waved her concern away. “That’s hours away. We have several football games to get through before that.”

“I need a nap,” Tina added.

“Aren’t you supposed to sleep after you eat the huge meal?” I teased her. But seriously, something was definitely going on. Tina never napped.

Hell, maybe she did now. It wasn’t like I’d lived with her recently. We were far from old, but we were definitely getting older.

I was probably just being paranoid because I was suspicious about Evan. And because I knew Annie and I had a secret.

Images from last night and this morning whizzed through my head. What an amazing secret.

Evan returned with a plastic container full of brownies. “Have at it.”

Everyone except Tina, who was still in the kitchen, helped themselves.

“You made these, Julia?” I asked as I chewed my first bite. They were delicious. The perfect balance of cakey and chewy.

“Why, you think I can’t cook or something?”

“Did I say that?” I was actually surprised. The first year she joined us for Friendsgiving, she burned the stuffing and the cranberry sauce. She’d been permanently banned from the kitchen.

“I mean, OK, so they’re a box mix. So what?”

“They’re delicious,” Annie added. She sat next to me at the table, and it was mild torture to have her so close and not be able to reach out and touch her. It always had been, but even more so now that I’d touched her everywhere. Been inside her.

Heat pooled in my belly, and I quickly reviewed a few economic theories in my head to prevent springing a boner at the table.

Tina wandered over and leaned in to inspect the dessert. “I’m not a huge fan of brownies, but I suppose I can try one.” She picked one out.

She had it halfway to her mouth when Julia said, “Oh shit!”

We all froze, including Tina’s brownie hand.

“Babe, was that the container with the purple lid or the red one?”

Evan frowned at her. “There was a red one?”

“Oh fuck.” Julia put her hand to her forehead.

“Oh fuck, what?” Tina still held the brownie suspended in front of her face.

“These are the pot brownies I made.” She covered her face with both hands. “I was thinking we could eat them and play Cards Against Humanity some night. I did not plan for us to get high for Thanksgiving lunch.”

I set the last small piece of my brownie on my plate. Super. I had nothing against marijuana. I used it on occasion to relax after an extra stressful day. But like Julia had said, maybe not for lunch on a Thursday. Even if that day was Thanksgiving.

“Oh, like I need the munchies while we wait for Thanksgiving dinner,” Scott grumbled.

“Are we in high school?” I asked. “Pot *brownies*?”

“What’s wrong with brownies?” Evan’s tone was defensive.

“You know we have dispensaries all over the place, right?”

“And that’s where I got the marijuana for the brownies,” Julia said, shoving the rest of her dessert in her mouth.

She couldn’t just get an already-made edible like everyone else?

“Those edibles are expensive,” Evan said, still defensive.

“You’re rich as fuck,” Scott replied.

Tina, looking a little pale, put her brownie back in the container. “I think one of us should stay sober and monitor the food. I barely trust you idiots to handle knives in the best of circumstances.” She glanced at Annie. “Not you.”

“Thank you?”

“We might as well accept Julia drugged us,” Scott said, his tone more joking than condemning.

“Hey, you can fuck off.” Evan apparently took it as condemning.

“Can you just chill the hell out?” Annie put her arms out between them, as if cutting off their argument. “We had some marijuana. We’ve all had it before. The cooking is mostly on hold for several hours, none of us had that much, and Tina didn’t have any. We’ll. Be. Fine.”

God damn, it was sexy when she took charge like that. Pot made me horny, always had. And with Annie acting extra sexy, it would be a miracle if I could keep my hands to myself. Maybe I could lure her downstairs for a quickie.

My cock started to swell at the idea, so I went back to economic theories until it calmed down.

“OK, Mom,” Scott mumbled.

“I’m not anyone’s mom. If anyone’s the mom here, it’s your wife.”

Tina made a choking sound. “I am no one’s mom.” She shot an anxious glance at Scott.

Like me, Tina had serious issues with the idea of having kids and continuing our awful genetic line. It made sense she’d be offended.

I pushed away from the table, picking up my plate. “Not much can make a Cowboys game tolerable, but maybe this will.”

Tina and Annie both followed me to the kitchen. Which was no good, because I really needed to talk to Annie alone. But if I said that, Tina would get suspicious. I really didn’t want my sister to know about me and Annie. She’d long ago figured out how I felt and would smother me with sympathy in the following weeks if she knew I had Annie and was stupid enough to let her go to some other guy.

Because, while my sister and I may agree on the topic of kids, we disagreed on whether or not our family was cut out for love. Then again, Tina was a much better person than I was. She’d managed to find love with a great guy, despite our wretched family.

I, on the other hand, had my father in my core. It was inevitable I would turn into him over time, just as he’d turned into my grandfather. Dad had been an OK man once, when we were very little. But bit by bit, money and greed and power dug their claws in and turned him into the same heartless bastard his father was.

And it was only a matter of time before it happened to me too.



ANNIE

“What the hell are you doing in here?”

Chris had disappeared almost a half hour ago, shortly after the Cowboys game started, and after a while I’d come in search of him. I found him upstairs in Evan and Julia’s bedroom. Opening dresser drawers.

“Looking for evidence,” Chris whisper-yelled in the way high people did when they thought they were being sneaky.

“What the fuck, Chris? You can’t just go through their things.” I stepped farther into the room. A creepy-crawly sensation tickled over my neck.

“I’m not. Just what’s in plain sight.” He opened another dresser drawer.

“That’s not plain sight.” The brownies hadn’t affected me as much as they clearly had Chris. I just felt a little relaxed. He was clearly out of his damn mind, snooping in our friends’ belongings.

“I’m not digging through their stuff. And there’s nothing in these drawers anyway. They must be those weird people who just live out of suitcases.”

While I was with Chris on preferring to unpack into hotel and vacation rental dressers, that wasn’t the point. “You can’t go through their stuff.”

He straightened and came toward me. Backing me toward the wall with a wicked sparkle in his eyes. My stomach dipped and rolled. He’d gotten that same look last night.

“You going to stop me?” His smile turned predatory. It started up a pulse between my legs.

But we couldn't dare. Not with everyone just downstairs, and the door wide open. Plus, it was another couple's bedroom.

My back hit the wall, and his front pressed against mine. He was half hard when he rolled his hips into me, making my breath catch and my pulse race. How could he make me need him so quickly?

He dipped his head into my neck, breath ghosting over my skin. “What if I fuck you right against this wall? Think you could stay quiet so no one would know?”

I absolutely could not. It was all I could do right now to keep from letting out a long moan.

He laced our fingers together and lifted them above my head. “It is unbelievable how much I want you.” He lifted his head, and that sparkle was still in his eyes. In his wicked smile. “I can't think about anything but getting inside you again.”

My only response was a needy sound escaping from the back of my throat. He'd taken my ability to speak.

His lips were achingly gentle when they brushed mine. I wanted more of it, over and over, endlessly. But I also wanted more. I wanted rough kisses and gentle kisses and passionate kisses and sweet kisses and dirty kisses and every other kind of kiss. With Chris, I wanted everything.

And he gave me more. His tongue swept across my lips, and when I parted them, he slid inside. As he kissed me, he continued to grind his erection into me so firmly, I was already

close to coming. I spread my stance so he could catch me even more powerfully.

“Think I can make you come before anyone catches us?” he mumbled into my mouth.

“Yes.” It was a gasp and a plea.

“You have to be quiet, Annabelle.” Somehow he made my full name the most deliciously naughty word ever spoken.

“Yes,” I gasped again.

He tightened his grip on my hands as he continued to grind and stroke me between my legs. Each thrust caught my clit, and my damp underwear added extra friction. And through it all, he kissed me. Swallowing my cries, knowing what I would beg for before the words could form in my mind.

He pulled his mouth from mine and leaned back enough to look into my eyes. “You’re going to come for me, Annabelle. And you’re going to be very quiet when you do. And I’m going to watch your gorgeous face.”

My heart soared as he called me gorgeous, even if it was just lust talking. I had plenty of proof he was attracted to me. The hard cock riding me, the way he commanded my body with his, that was plenty of proof. It didn’t mean he was in love with me.

But he would be, dammit, if I could make my plan work.

The pleasure built, higher and higher, my whole body heavy and aching for more touch. I moved frantically against him, needing just a little bit more.

He pressed against me hard and rolled his hips in a circle, and that was all I needed. My pussy throbbed as the climax broke and my mouth opened on a silent groan.

“That’s it, Annabelle,” he murmured. When I managed to pry my eyelids open as I soared, he was looking right back at me. Part of me wanted to snap my eyes shut again, the intense vulnerability of holding eye contact during an orgasm almost too much to bear. But he captivated me. Held me to him even as I flew free.

“You’re so fucking beautiful when you come, Annabelle,” he whispered. A real whisper this time, not a loud whisper like before.

His words sent a fresh wave of pulsing shivers through me. He was as magical with his words as he was with his body.

As my body settled, I had an overwhelming need to kiss him again. I plastered my lips to his and shoved my tongue into his mouth. It was sloppy and inelegant, but it satisfied whatever need still burned inside me.

He dragged his mouth across my cheek and down the side of my neck. My skin was still so sensitive, I shuddered.

“We need to stop before someone comes in,” he murmured.

“I know.”

“I wish I could take you downstairs and spend all day fucking you. I’d be damn thankful for that.”

I giggled. “Me too.”

He lifted his head and again held my gaze with his own. “It’s going to be damn hard to stop wanting more of this weekend is over.”

I was counting on it.

“Harder than I am right now.” He pressed his thick, hard cock against my belly, making me giggle again. I liked that I

could feel light and giggly with him.

“Me too.”

Finally he pushed away from me. My body felt cold without the warm weight of him.

He leaned in and brushed his lips over my cheek. “Make me stop.”

“Don’t wanna.”

He chuckled as he straightened. His expression shifted, and he started looking around the room again.

It looked like a typical vacation room, two suitcases open with clothes spilling out. A paperback on one nightstand, glasses on the other. A stack of folders and papers on the small table.

Chris paused next to the table and looked the papers over. Suddenly his face lit up. “Bingo!”

I moved to his side. “What is it?”

He pulled an eight-by-eleven booklet out from between two folders. “It’s a realtor’s brochure.”

“OK, so they’re thinking of moving.” I reached for the brochure.

“It’s from a realtor in Atlanta.”



CHRIS

“Go get Scott.” My voice was surprisingly steady considering I felt like I’d been punched in both the stomach and solar plexus. How could Evan do this to us? We’d started

this company together, the four of us. In that shitty little house we'd rented in Cambridge our senior year.

Sure, it had been my trust fund that gave us the startup funds, but that didn't make it any more my company than it was the other three. Legally and procedurally, it was 25 percent mine and 25 percent Evan's.

And he wanted out.

Annie hadn't moved. She just stood there holding the booklet, staring. Like she couldn't make sense of it.

"Occam's razor. The simplest explanation is usually the right one." Every lingering effect from the brownies we'd had at lunch was gone. I was way too damn sober. Evan was leaving us. It felt like the worst kind of betrayal. The only thing I could imagine hurting more was Annie with another man.

Which would be happening soon. Spectacular.

"Go get Scott," I repeated.

She tucked the brochure back where it had been and took my arm, tugging me toward the door. "We'll challenge Scott to a pool competition. Evan and Julia would rather watch the game and Tina is hovering over the turkey. We can talk to him downstairs. But we cannot stay in this room."

She was right, so I let her tug me through the door and down the stairs. Even in my mental panic, I enjoyed the simple feel of her hand on my arm.

But she let go of me before we reached the bottom. Before anyone could see us. Because we were a secret, one no one but the two of us would ever know.

Which felt like yet another gut punch. Fuck, next week was going to suck so much.

Sure enough, Evan and Julia were engrossed in the football game. Scott hovered in the kitchen while Tina snapped at him to get out of her way.

Which was a good reminder that something was up with her too. She never snapped at Scott. At least not in front of us.

“Scott, you wanna get out of my sister’s hair and play some pool with us?”

He looked back and forth between the two of us. “Three of us? Sure.”

Cranberry followed us down, telling us something in her squeaky little voice. “Yeah, baby?” Tina said, scooping the tiny fluff ball into her arms.

I was instantly jealous of a cat that weighed less than the turkey in the oven.

Scott and I set up the table and he broke. After we each took a few turns, I said, “Evan’s definitely thinking about moving to Atlanta.”

Scott straightened from the shot he was about to take. “Wait, what? How do you know that?”

“I caught him *snooping*”—Annie glared at me as she said it—”in their room.”

“Shit, man, that’s not cool.” Scott bent over the table and lined up his shot.

“Maybe not, but ditching our company is even less cool.” Where would we ever find a new CCO? No one would blend into our group as seamlessly as someone who’d been there from the start.

Annie quickly explained about what we'd found. "It's pretty solid evidence he's planning to move. What other logical explanation is there?"

Scott sunk a ball and moved to find a new shot. "It doesn't look good, I agree. They definitely weren't vacation homes or anything?"

"Looked pretty residential to me." My jaw started hurting from clenching so hard, but I couldn't seem to relax it. All I wanted was a fun getaway with my friends. That was all I ever wanted out of our Friendsgiving week. We lived high-stress, busy lives the other 51 weeks of the year. Just once, I wanted to chill and not worry.

Fucking Evan, ruining it. Maybe it was a dick move, but I'd probably never forgive him if he really was leaving.

I voiced my next thought aloud. "Friendsgiving will never be the same."

Annie gave me a harsh look. "They are still welcome, even if they move away."

"No, they're not." Scott said it before I could.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Stop being such children. He's still our friend. If he's leaving, he has a damn good reason."

"There is no good reason." I absently chalked the end of my cue.

Annie rubbed her cheek against the top of Cranberry's head. Seeing it softened the hardness inside me, just a little. Annie always had that effect on me. And a damn adorable kitten didn't hurt any.

"Maybe one of her family members is really sick, so she needs to move back to be near them." Annie was entirely too

reasonable.

“Then Evan can work from Atlanta. Or take a sabbatical. Doesn't mean he has to leave the entire company.”

“We don't know that he is!” she snapped.

“Occam's razor,” Scott said.

“That's what I said.”

“You're both a pair of assholes, doubting your friend. If you're going to throw a pity party about it, just grow a spine and ask him.” She started toward the stairs.

“Are you doing that?” I spun to watch her. “You can't tell him we were snooping.”

She tossed another eyeroll over her shoulder. “Right, that would make you look like a dumbass.”

“Where are you going?” Scott asked.

She sighed. “I don't want to listen to you two verbally crucify our friend who isn't here to tell us what's actually going on. Until we know, I'm done speculating.”

“If all he wants is a sabbatical, he should just say that,” Scott protested.

“And you two should grow up. This is a business. It's not always about our friendships, even if that's what we want.” She stomped up the stairs.

It was my turn, but I no longer felt like going through the motions of pretending I cared about pool. I propped my elbows on the table and put my face in my hands.

“She's not wrong,” Scott said, sounding miserable. “We should just ask him.”

“I know.” My voice was muffled. “Just... not today.”



ANNIE

I managed to avoid Scott and Chris for the rest of the evening, helping Tina in the kitchen. They came upstairs not long after I did and spent the rest of the time watching football. Chris had a sullen pout on his face, and I had zero desire to comfort him.

Did it hurt that Evan was clearly planning something behind our backs? Of course. And it was entirely possible that Chris was right, that Evan would leave our company. But there were other possible explanations, and I was going to wait until he was ready to talk to us about it before I made judgments about the future.

And, whatever it meant for our company, it didn't change that we'd been friends for a long time. Even across the country and working for a different company, Evan would remain my friend.

"Careful, you want to just peel the skin and leave a little potato left, huh?" Tina's voice cut into my thoughts.

I looked down at the potato I was peeling. That was now about half as big as it had been. Whoops. Apparently I'd taken my aggression out on the poor spud and sliced away at it.

"Sorry, just lost in thought," I mumbled as I put it in the bowl with the other peeled potatoes. I selected a new one and forced myself to stay mindful of what I was doing.

"I'm putting on some music," Tina said. She pulled her phone from her pocket and scrolled and tapped until a Taylor Swift song came on.

It wasn't long until the two of us were dancing and she started humming as we worked. She stirred cranberries on the stove and I peeled.

A few songs in, Taylor started singing about how since yesterday, everything had changed. My stomach hollowed out. Like the singer, I had butterflies in my stomach thinking about everything I knew today that I didn't before.

A day's worth of sexy memories flipped through my head, and I was lost in entirely new thoughts.

Was I going to ruin everything with my ridiculous plan? I knew how he felt about love, about how he thought he'd turn into his father and grandfather and wasn't good enough for a long-term relationship. Otherwise I would have told him years ago how in love I was.

But what if the plan didn't work either? Sex was a language Chris spoke, as was friendship. But were the two together enough to convince him to change his mind? To give us a real shot?

Maybe I should just tell him. Tell him there was no other man, that he was the one I was hoping to make fall for me.

Except every time I thought of doing that, I felt like I couldn't breathe. Just imagining sitting on the bed in our room with him and trying to say the words "I love you, Chris" had my hands shaking so badly, I had to stop peeling to take a few slow, steadying breaths. Finally I relaxed enough to return to the potatoes.

For the next hour, Tina and I cooked and prepped, and finally, at almost seven-thirty, dinner was ready. Chris came in to help us carry food to the table, and for a moment, we found ourselves alone in the kitchen.

“Are we good?” he asked, frowning, as he picked up the dish of stuffing.

I sighed. “If you promise to leave it alone until he’s ready to tell us something, we’re good.”

His jaw tightened, then relaxed. He nodded stiffly.

I gave him a soft smile. “Then we’re definitely good.”

His face relaxed. “Yeah we are.”

That earned him an eyeroll as I picked up the steaming mashed potatoes. “Just go serve your stuffing.”

He laughed as he started for the table. “That sounds like a euphemism.”

It did a little. “No it doesn’t. You just have a dirty mind.”

“And proud of it.”

Chris and I sat on one side of the table, facing Evan and Julia. Tina and Scott took the heads of the rectangular table. The turkey sat in front of Scott, who was the only one of us who had a clue how to carve one.

“Everything looks and smells amazing,” Evan said.

“Thanks, y’all,” Julia added.

We passed our plates around the table, everyone in charge of serving the dish closest to them. It was easier than passing hot food.

“So, think we’ll actually be able to get outside tomorrow and enjoy all this snow Mother Nature dumped on us?” Tina asked as she scooped green beans onto a plate.

“It’s supposed to keep storming through tomorrow,” Chris said. “But maybe we can start digging out on Saturday. Do a few snow angels.”

“Have you ever gotten snowed in before like this?” Julia asked. This was only her third Thanksgiving with us.

Five people simultaneously shook our heads. “Nope,” Evan added.

Chris, sitting on my left, handed me the wine bottle that was following the plates around. I poured a small amount. I no longer needed the liquid courage to proposition him, and I wanted my memories of the weekend to be razor sharp, just in case he turned me down and wasn’t willing to give us a long-term shot.

My stomach see-sawed. I shoved the thoughts away. I’d worry about that if it happened.

Once everyone had their food and wine, Scott held up his glass. “To Friendsgiving. And to loyal friendships.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the second part and instead flicked a glance at Evan, who seemed to have no reaction. We all raised our glasses and repeated Scott’s toast. Glasses *clinked* over the center of the table.

When I tapped my glass against Chris’s, I caught his gaze. It was warm and sweet, a hint of a smile on his lips. Not the friendly grin I was used to nor the heated smolder I might’ve expected this weekend. This look made everything inside me go soft.

The urge to take his hand and lace our fingers together was powerful. I needed to touch him in some small way. But of course, I couldn’t.

Then under the table, something bumped against my foot. His foot, no doubt. He hooked his ankle around mine, entwining our lower legs. I forced myself not to look over at him as warmth spread through me.

Turkey. Cranberry. Potatoes. *Focus on your food.*

“Everything is delicious,” Tina said. “If I do say so myself. Nice job, co-chef Annie.”

I hadn’t taken a single bite yet, but grinned and said, “Excellent job, co-chef Tina.”

Everyone else stated their agreement as I took my first few bites. And yep, definitely excellent. We’d timed things perfectly so that no food got cold, except the cranberry sauce, which was supposed to be. It was all perfectly seasoned and buttered, the turkey wasn’t dry, the gravy wasn’t lumpy.

“Hot damn,” I said after I’d tried everything. “We really did do a fucking amazing job.”

“Especially considering someone left the turkey outside overnight.” Julia shot a glare at her husband. He made a face at her, and she laughed.

Conversations went on around me, but I couldn’t seem to focus on anything but the food and the feel of Chris’s foot and calf pressed to mine. Which was absurd, considering all we’d done in the past 24 hours. Playing footsie was nothing.

Maybe it was the anticipation of another night of holding nothing back with him. Well, almost nothing. There was that one pesky sentence I couldn’t say.

I love you so damn much, Christopher DeMornay.

Like he could hear my thoughts, he leaned toward me. “You’re awfully quiet.”

“Stuck in thoughts,” I said.

“As usual,” Scott teased.

He wasn't wrong. It was just that I usually had engineering problems running through my head when I drifted off. Or at least they all assumed that, and it was true about 85 percent of the time. The other 15 percent I had no intention of telling them were about Chris.

Maybe I could tell Chris that. After I told him how I felt, and how long I'd felt that way.

"Y'all have been doing this since college, right?" Julia asked.

"Have we not told you how Friendsgiving started?" Evan looked shocked.

"Apparently there's a lot you tend to leave out," Chris muttered, low enough that only I heard him.

I untangled my leg long enough to kick him, then re-twined it with his. He shot me a sideways glare.

"Go ahead, Evan. Tell her about our first Friendsgiving," Chris said, his voice almost challenging.

I stuffed down the urge to kick him again. If Chris wasn't careful, he was going to say something Evan did hear. And that we might all end up regretting.



CHRIS

My pulse sped up as I waited for Evan to respond. Because, logical or not, I was pissed at him. And telling his wife about our first Thanksgiving together would lead to telling other stories. I wasn't sure I could sit at this table and hear him talk about our company, knowing what he was planning.

All I really wanted was to go downstairs with Annie and spend another night drowning in her gorgeous body. Her sweet, sexy smile.

Annabelle.

That was what I wanted. But we were just starting to make a dent in the food, and there were still pies. Annie said she brought apple, pumpkin, and chocolate-pecan. Enough to last all weekend.

It all sounded delicious, but not nearly as delicious as Annie herself.

“It was our senior year at MIT,” Evan said. “You already know we had a house together junior and senior years, and that year, none of us could go home for the break. We were too broke.” He gestured to himself and Annie.

“I was doing an internship and only got Thanksgiving day off, so I couldn’t go home,” Scott added.

“And you”—Julia nodded at me—“don’t talk to your family, except Tina.”

Tina and I nodded.

Under the table, Annie’s foot stroked the side of mine. It soothed a little of the irritation inside me.

“OK, I get it. You all had to stay on campus and called it Friendsgiving.” Julia swung her gaze around the table, taking us each in.

“Exactly.” Evan stretched his arm over and slung it on the back of his wife’s chair. “And the next year we were in Denver and struggling to get the company off the ground, so Chris decided we should get away just for two days for Thanksgiving, thus creating the annual tradition.”

Julia grinned. “That’s so nice. I don’t have friends I do stuff like that with.”

Annie cleared her throat. “And we’re chopped liver?”

Julia had the grace to blush. “No, I didn’t mean... of course you guys. But let’s be real, I don’t know any of you all that well. And you were Evan’s friends first. I just meant.”

Now Annie grinned, and it made my heart trip over itself. “I’m kidding. I get it.”

“You didn’t tell her what else happened that fateful Thanksgiving day senior year,” Scott cut in. There was an edge to his voice that I fully agreed with.

Julia turned to Scott. “Yeah, what else? You burn the house down or something?”

“I proposed the four of us pool our talents and knowledge and start our company.” My voice came out with the same edge as Scott’s. But if Evan noticed, he gave no indication.

“Wait, so you, like, founded the company that day?”

“We didn’t find it that day,” Evan said. “But that’s when the idea was born.”

“It was born well before that,” I said. “I’d been brainstorming the idea for months.” And I’d taken that idea and shared it with my three best friends. Three of only four people in the world I loved. Trusted.

And now Evan was going to destroy that. Sure, we could find a new head of communications, but it wouldn’t be the same. They wouldn’t be part of this group.

“Right,” Evan said, waving away my comment. Which made my gut burn.

I shoved away from the table, accidentally kicking Annie in the process. Damn it. “I’ll get the pies.” I grabbed whichever side dish was closest to me—the dregs of the mashed potatoes—and stalked to the kitchen.

As I set the potatoes on the counter, I heard Annie say, “I’ll help him. Get the whipped cream and all.”

A moment later, she was at my side, setting down the stuffing bowl. “Chris. You have to let this go,” she said, voice low. She sounded so sexy when she talked like that.

Even lower, I said, “After dinner, when everyone else watches whatever movie Scott picked, I’m taking you downstairs and fucking you until neither one of us can think.”

Her features went soft, and I could see a small shudder run through her. Blood pooled in my groin, my balls feeling too heavy. Her lips parted, and I instantly pictured shoving my cock between them.

Fuck. We needed to do that tonight too.

Even as her eyes flamed with hunger, she said, “Please, for me, can you let it go?”

I didn’t want to answer her. I wanted to kiss her. I could probably give up sex with Annie after this weekend, but it was going to be the never kissing her again part that killed me. I loved kissing other people, but no one I’d dated in the past came close to what it was like to kiss Annie. She fit perfectly with me, her lips completed me.

Gaze locked on hers, desperately trying not to stare at her lips, I said, “Only for you.”

Her lips twitched like she wanted to smile. But she didn’t. She simply mouthed, “Thank you.”

We stood like that for a long, hot moment, staring into each other's eyes. One perfect moment. One moment that made me consider breaking all my rules and telling her what was really in my heart.

“Annie...”

She blinked, breaking the spell surrounding us. “We should get the pie.” Her voice was back to normal, none of her low, seductive tones now.

I mentally shook off my thoughts. Of course I couldn't tell Annie I loved her. She deserved so much better than me. I was too broken inside to love her the way she deserved. Annie deserved everything.

“Right, pie.”

We busied ourselves getting out and slicing the three pies. She pulled a stack of clean plates out of the cabinet.

“OK, everyone, scrape your plates into the trash and put the dishes in the sink,” she called. She did this every year, took charge. It was apparent she came from a family with several brothers. Evan and Julia were both only children, Tina and I had mostly raised ourselves, and Scott had one older sister. Annie had the biggest family out of all of us.

Everyone followed her directions, then filed over to where she stood by the pies, scooping out pieces for them to take back to the table. We ate the pie largely in silence; it was all too damn good to do anything but eat. Annie had smartly had us cut very small slices so everyone could have a little of each pie.

“Everyone up for a movie?” Scott asked, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head.

“I have a lot of dishes to get started on,” Annie said, pointedly not looking at me.

“I can help you with that. I’ve already seen *John Wick* several times.” If they thought we were both in the kitchen, they’d likely not notice when we snuck downstairs.

“So the four of us.” Scott smiled across the table at Tina.

“I think I’m going to head to bed early. Long day.” Tina emphasized her point with a large yawn.

Tina was a night owl. Hell, she worked second shift. But I could only handle one mystery at a time. As long as she wasn’t seriously ill or something, I could handle whatever she was dealing with. And if she’d gotten some horrid diagnosis, she would’ve told me right away.

Then again, a few days ago, I would’ve said the same thing about Evan moving to Atlanta.

Shit, there was too much going on. And all I really wanted to think about was getting Annie naked again.



ANNIE

As I thoughtlessly scrubbed the baking pan, I let my mind wander to last night. To Chris’s mouth on my skin. On my lips. Between my legs.

I was instantly wet, and not from the dishwasher.

Hands settled on my waist, startling me. My pulse rocketed into subspace. I dropped the pan with a splash and now I *was* wet from the dishwasher. My abdomen was drenched. But those

hands slid around me and settled over the wet fabric. A chin rested on my shoulder, my hair brushed to the side.

“The others are watching a movie.” Chris’s low voice rumbled over my ear.

I knew what he was implying, and my pussy throbbed in response. He pressed his lips to where my pulse pounded in my neck, and my nipples went hard.

He must have noticed, because his hands slid up my damp skin, under my shirt, and pinched those hard nipples through my bra. Desire flooded my system. One hand continued to play with me through the fabric while the other shoved down the cup and held me, testing the weight of my breast.

He pressed his extremely evident arousal into the small of my back and I had to lean against him for support, my head dropping to his shoulder. My hands were still in the soapy water, the only thing grounding me.

“I can’t get the taste of you out of my mind,” he murmured, tongue sliding over the shell of my ear and leaving a blaze in its path. “Come downstairs.”

Small explosions set off in my bloodstream. If he didn’t have his arms wrapped around me, I would’ve collapsed. Melted from the searing heat of his words. The beauty of his promises.

But the others will know a small part of me wanted to protest.

But it didn’t matter. They’d known for years that I was in love with him. Evan and Scott telling me to go for it was a constant in our lives. Still, that small part of me that embarrassed easily hated the idea that our colleagues, our friends would know we’re downstairs fucking.

But we'd be downstairs having sex. Did I really care if they suspected?

"Go down. Let me at least finish this pan." I needed a moment alone to compose myself or else I'd come just from the sensation of my clothes sliding off.

"You better scrub fast." He pinched my nipples to punctuate his words; I choked on a moan. Then his hands were gone and he stepped back. Taking his heat and strength with him.

It was all I could do not to sag against the edge of the sink. I listened to his steps as he left the kitchen, then resumed my scrubbing. My fingers were clumsy, my thoughts anywhere but on getting crusted mashed potatoes off the ceramic. I closed my eyes and remembered the heavy, heated look in his eyes last night as he looked up at me from between my legs. The best way I've ever been woken in my life.

My panties were pretty much ruined at this point.

Dish clean, I stacked it with the others, pulled the drain, and rinsed my arms. I barely took time to turn off the faucet before my feet wanted to start moving toward the stairs.

I took them two at a time, unhooking my bra as I went. I didn't want to waste any time before I could feel his skin, his lips on my body. I had years of want to fit into one weekend. Five measly days to cram in enough sex with Chris to last a lifetime.

When I got to our room, I barely noticed he was stretched out on the bed. I was too busy yanking off my top, dropping my bra, shutting the door and locking it. Then, half undressed, I took a moment to lean on the door and drink in the sight of his glorious naked body. He was pale—it was winter, after all

—and toned. But the pink flush on his chest gave away his arousal.

As did his cock. He was so hard.

My mouth watered, staring at the beautiful cock that rose above his belly. I licked my lips, anticipating. The salty taste of him was imprinted on my memory.

“Annie,” he said, a command in his voice.

A shudder ran through me, electric tingles in its wake.

“What?” I asked.

“Don’t look at me like that unless you’re going to come over here and make good on your promise.”

“What promise?” I pushed off the door and took slow steps toward the bed. My pulse was in orbit now, on a course for deep space.

He raised his eyebrows, propped up on pillows with his hands behind his head, watching me. His gaze was a physical caress, a sizzle across my skin, lingering on my breasts before dragging back to my face. When our eyes met, it was the familiar sensation of a shock pulsing through me. I’d had the same reaction since the day we met.

“The promise that says you’re going to suck me off until I come down your throat.” His voice was calm, giving no indication of his state of arousal. We could have been discussing the quarterly financials.

Somehow, that made me hotter. I shoved down my pants and underwear, my skin so aroused the sensation sent a wave of hunger crashing through me. I reached the bed and used it to steady myself as I tugged off my socks, never breaking eye contact. The air around us felt thick, charged.

“Maybe later,” I said. How did he do it? I wasn’t someone who bantered in bed. Hell, I didn’t banter anywhere. But with Chris, like this, he brought something alive in me. Something deep and hidden. “I believe you said something about tasting my pussy.”

I had never said *pussy* aloud to a lover before.

Holy shit, Chris and I were lovers. Fresh moisture ran between my legs, my pussy throbbing and ready. I could have climbed on the bed and sunk down on him right then and ridden him until we both screamed.

But that wasn’t what I wanted. No one had eaten my pussy the way he did early this morning. Like he was worshiping it, like he was made to do nothing but eat my pussy for the rest of our lives.

Which was ridiculous. I knew it wasn’t just me. He’d become an oral sex maestro from lots of practice. But just for the weekend, I’d let myself pretend it was me. That it was us. Together. That that was what made us so good.

I climbed on the bed and stretched out next to him. Mouth quirked in the slightest smirk, like he knew all my secret desires, he pulled me to him until our bodies were flush. Joke was on him, though. Last night he found out my most secret desire: him.

His thigh slid between mine, gliding across my wetness. I moaned, and before I could lean my head back to enjoy it, he kissed me.

Like everything else he did, Chris was a master kisser. He may have ruined me for all others because no one else could possibly kiss me so thoroughly, like a promise and a gift. Like

an artist, and I his muse. Like he had been longing for this for years.

No, that would've been me.

His hand went to my breast and in mere seconds I was grinding against his thigh, crying out into his kiss, teetering just on the edge. My blood was molten, my body as hot as the surface of the sun.

“You need this, don't you?” he asked my mouth.

“Yes,” I panted.

“Then come. Come all over my thigh, Annabelle. Now.”

I was helpless but to obey. The peak slammed into me, arching my back and ripping an animalistic sound from my throat. It would have scared me if I wasn't so engulfed in the rapturous orgasm only Chris could bring me.

Well, Chris and my very favorite vibrator. But no other human had done that to me.

He gripped my ass, pulling me tighter to his thigh, sending a fresh wave of shudders through me. I flew free of my body, yet I had never been so awake and aware of the sensation blazing through me.

“Yes, use me,” he growled into my mouth, still kissing me. His tongue tugged at mine, and I felt it in my pulsing clit.

Finally the orgasm ebbed, and I sank back into the mountain of pillows. I was drained, spent, yet still wanting.

Rather than let me rest, let me recover, his mouth was at my breast. “More,” he rumbled before he sucked the hard tip into his mouth.

Fresh sensation clawed through me, sharper and more intense this time. My nails scraped across the back of his head, scratching over the short hairs there. He murmured his approval into my skin, and the vibrations heightened everything.

His hand slid around and found my pussy; immediately my thighs fell apart for him. He slid one finger through my folds, then two. My hips rose to meet him, and I managed to brush my clit just barely over the heel of his palm.

I audibly gulped in air, overwhelmed by the sensations he evoked in me. Overwhelmed by the emotions. For him it might have been just hot sex, a nice pastime while we were trapped in the mountains. But for me, this was something I'd longed for since I was eighteen. This was dream fulfillment, this was destiny.

This was lovemaking.

That thought alone sent hunger flooding through me. I pressed myself harder into his hand as he teased my opening.

Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with a need to be filled. To have him fuck me so I could no longer think these thoughts about how much I loved him, how much I didn't ever want this weekend to end.

"Now, please," I gasped. I was filled with desire, drowning in it. Only he could rescue me.

He looked up at me with a wolfish smile, eyes heavy lidded and glassy. He was beautiful. He was perfect like this. I took a mental picture so I could come back to this moment and cherish it in my memory. If only I'd had my phone and could take a real picture.

He dropped a kiss to my breastbone, then trailed down my belly.

“No.” I grabbed for his shoulders, his armpits. Dragged him up and over me. “I need you.”

His gaze sobered, searching mine. “I thought you wanted...”

I shook my head. His cock pressed against my clit and he was subtly rocking against me, making it nearly impossible to form a sentence through the lust-fog in my brain. “No, I need you. Now. Please. I can’t wait.”

He groaned and pressed harder into me. My breath caught on a soft cry. I was so close to coming. I could taste the orgasm, thick and sweet, at the back of my throat.

“I want to come on your cock.” I somehow found the breath to say the words.

“Fuck, Annabelle.” He pressed his lips to my throat. “I love your filthy little mouth.”

Love. My brain and heart clung to that word, the traitorous organs confused about what it meant.

“And I love your cock inside me.”

With a tweak to my nipple that had me arching into him, he shifted his hips. “Put me in,” he said.

I reached down and took his thick, heavy cock in my hand. I couldn’t stop myself from stroking him a few times.

A groan rumbled up from deep in his throat, and I felt its vibrations everywhere.

I gripped him in my fist and lined his head up. It was silly, but I loved that we could have the extra intimacy of not using

a barrier. I loved that I was the only person he'd been with this way. Even after all this was over, I could retain that status.

His gaze snagged on mine as he started the slow slide in. The blue in his eyes had turned to flame and it consumed me.

“Chris!” I gasped as his root caught my clit. The fire in my blood grew. He gave a few more shallow thrusts, dragging against my clit each time, and I writhed beneath him.

And still he refused to release my gaze. I couldn't have looked away even if I wanted, and the intensity swamped me. Overwhelmed me. I was drowning in him, in his flame-blue eyes, in the way it felt like he could see inside me.

“You're so fucking wet.” With that, he shoved in to the hilt on a groan. “Jesus, Annabelle, you feel incredible.”

“You too,” I panted. He gave another series of shallow thrusts, his pelvic bone hitting my clit, pressing into me with the perfect amount of friction and pressure.

That orgasm took me by surprise, fast and sharp and tossing me high. My eyes fell shut as I convulsed around him, and my cries filled the cozy bedroom. I was flying even as I was bound to him.

“Yes, oh fuck, Annabelle, yes. That's so good.” He continued thrusting through it, prolonging my pleasure so the pulses went on and on and on. I left nail marks on his shoulders, but he didn't seem to care as he continued murmuring encouragement into my ear.

Finally the sensations ebbed away and I still beneath him.

“You're beautiful when you come,” he said, and I shuddered deep inside. Somewhere close to my soul. He was thrusting slow and deep now, already dragging me back up the slope. I had never come three times with a lover before, only

with my battery-operated friends, but here Chris was, delivering orgasms all over the place.

Apparently we were on the same page. “Again. I’m going to fuck you so hard, and this time, you’re going to scream my name.” He lifted my legs over his arms, stretching me wide. Giving him a view of my naked body laid out for him. A view he raked his gaze across in a palpable caress, silken flames on my skin.

I briefly thought of our friends, in the living room watching their movie, hearing me as I yelled Chris’s name. But I wanted it too much to care.

Giving him as big a smile as I could muster, I looked deep into the flames of his eyes. “Again.”

friday

CHRIS

“Fucking hell, this weekend is going to kill me.” Skeleton obliterated by the best orgasm of my life—each one with Annie was the best, and the next even better than the last—I collapsed on the bed next to her.

“At least we’ll go out happy.” She curled into my chest, and I wrapped one arm around her, holding her close.

I nosed at her hair, kissed the top of her head. I could get used to having her with me every morning when I woke, just like this.

“Me too.”

I smiled. Then her words registered. Did I slip and say that out loud? Shit. Shit shit shit.

“Annie, uh...”

“I know it’s just this weekend.” She patted my chest patiently. “Don’t worry.”

The tightness in my chest eased a little, but not completely. Because what the fuck would I do if Annie started getting ideas? What if she started having non-sex romantic feelings for me? That was a clusterfuck I had zero interest in dealing with.

Because I wouldn't be able to resist her.

“So tell me about this other guy.” Why were words continually coming out of my mouth without my permission? I didn't want to know about the guy she was actually interested in.

“What other guy?”

“The one we're doing this for. You said there's someone you're interested in... remember?” I wouldn't flatter myself that I was so great at sex, I made her forget all others. But it didn't exactly hurt my ego.

“Oh, him. He's amazing.”

“So how come you're not already with him?” The squeeze around my chest returned. Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut? Better yet, get out of bed, go shower, and take the alone time to get my shit straight.

“It's complicated.” She sighed, absently stroking my chest. It felt so fucking good.

This weekend, this arrangement was probably the worst thing I could have done for myself. I was going to completely fall apart on Monday.

I shoved those thoughts aside. If there was ever a time to stay in the present moment, this was it. “Complicated how?” I combed my fingers through the ends of her hair, trailing my fingertips down her back.

“He has a lot of baggage. I've got some. So I have to move carefully.”

She might as well have been describing me. Talk about baggage. “Baggage can be unpacked and handled.” Maybe not mine. But other people's could.

She pressed a soft kiss to my nipple. “It can. I just hope he realizes that soon.”

“If a woman like you is on the line, he’d be a damn fool not to.” I couldn’t help the slight catch in my voice. This other man having her would mean I couldn’t. Not that I could anyway. But every time she was with someone else, she felt farther away.

And now, after touching and kissing every inch of her body, it would undoubtedly feel farther.

Time to end this conversation before I did something awful like beg her to be with me even though I could never give her what she deserved.

“We should get up.”

She made a noncommittal sound.

I twisted and stretched my neck to see my phone on the nightstand. “It’s after eight. Someone’s gonna come looking for us if we don’t get up soon.”

She sighed, a full-body sigh that moved her against me. Heat moved through my entire body. As if I hadn’t come three times in the past 12 hours.

Then she rolled away from me and swung her legs out of bed. I missed her instantly.

I let her shower first, then showered myself. By the time I got upstairs, I was the last one ready.

“Snow finally stopped,” Evan said as I poured a mug of coffee.

“Nice. We should work on digging out so we can still go to the hot spring tonight.” I sat across from him at the dining table.

Every year on Friday night, we found a hot spring in the area and went. The natural pools were hot enough to soak in, even in winter. Like Mother Nature's rocky hot tubs. The one Tina had found for this year was bathing suit optional. It was going to be torture keeping my hands to myself around Annie. Also kind of weird to go skinny dipping with my sister and her husband, so for both our sakes, we'd agreed to keep our suits on.

But Annie might not. And hell, even in a bathing suit, I'd be picturing her naked. Picturing her straddling my lap and riding me as the water sloshed around us.

And now I was picturing that at the breakfast table and starting to get hard. Which was impossible to hide in my sweatpants.

Quick, economic theories. I made myself go over all the reasons trickle-down economics was bullshit policy, and took a scalding gulp of coffee. My tongue screamed at me, but it did the trick. My cock settled down.

Annie came to the table with a platter of delicious-smelling, gooey-looking cinnamon rolls. The cinnamon-y aroma made my mouth water.

"Tina made these," she said, setting them down.

Scott beat me to grabbing the first one, but I got the second and immediately took a bite. The dough was just a tiny bit crisp on the edges, but still soft and chewy. The cinnamon glaze and icing coated my tongue, creamy with just the tiniest kick from the spice.

"These are perfection," I said with my mouth still full.

"Amazing, babe," Scott added. "Come sit down and have one."

“I’m still cooking,” she protested. I looked over to see her at the stove, stirring something in a frying pan.

“Babe, we’re fine. Rest a minute.”

“I said I’m cooking,” Tina snapped.

We all went silent. My sister had the patience of a saint and the goddess of patience combined. She didn’t snap at people.

Scott dropped his gaze to the table and took a huge bite of his roll. I exchanged confused glances with Evan, who made a shrugging expression. When I looked to Annie, she shook her head.

I’d have to pull Tina aside and talk to her before we left. Something was definitely up.

After breakfast, Annie, Scott, and I went outside to shovel. My muscles were pleasantly sore from the workout Annie was giving them, and it actually felt good to move them.

We’d gotten close to two feet, plus more ice than I’d realized. It took the three of us until almost lunchtime to clear the driveway and dig out our three cars.

“At some point, we have to get on the road and go back to get Julia and Evan’s car,” Scott reminded us.

I stood at the end of the driveway with the shovel. Someone had come through with a plow on the road, but there was still a good inch of snow. But if we were going to the hot spring, we planned to use the road. If we could do that, we could get to Evan’s car.

“You should take Julia,” I said to Annie.

Even from several feet away with a hat and scarf on, I could feel her frown. “Why?”

“Neither one of us can be alone with them right now,” Scott said. I nodded as Annie looked between us.

Again, I didn’t so much see as feel her eyeroll. “I can be alone with him just fine. And you two seriously need to get over yourselves. Either let it go or talk to him.”

She turned and started stomping through the snow toward the house.

“Where are you going?” I didn’t need her mad at me again. I was trying to let the Evan thing go. But it stung, and sitting alone in a car with him would just make me say something I’d inevitably end up regretting.

“We’re done shoveling and I’m starving,” she called over her shoulder. A moment later, she disappeared in the side door that led to the mudroom. Or snowroom, in this case.

Scott looked at me.

“I could eat,” I said.

“Let’s eat.”



ANNIE

Sometime around one o’clock, the power went out.

I was sitting on one end of the couch reading. Chris did the same at the other end, Cranberry sleeping on his lap. Tina was napping, Evan was doing something on his phone, and Scott and Julia played cards at the table.

“What the fuck?” Evan said, voicing my thoughts.

The room took on an eerie cast. Being surrounded by trees, not much natural light came in from outside. But the light that

did filter through the windows was reflected off the bright white snow. The effect was long shadows and bright patches.

It suddenly felt like the part in a horror movie when the unsuspecting vacationers got a visit from the deranged killer. I wanted to crawl across the couch and snuggle up to Chris for comfort.

I checked the act through the filter I'd been using the last few days. Would Past Annie have done this?

Unfortunately, Past Annie wouldn't have done any more than scoot closer to him and maybe take his hand. No full-on snuggles.

So I did that much.

He squeezed my hand tightly and stroked his thumb along the side of mine. I laced my fingers through his for a little more intimacy.

"Come here," he murmured, pulling me closer and detangling our fingers so he could wrap his arm around me. I settled against his chest, much like I did when we were in bed together.

A pulse fluttered between my legs. Emboldened by it, by everything this weekend, I stretched my head up so I could whisper in his ear. "Think they'd notice if we slipped downstairs?" I couldn't stop myself from flicking his earlobe with my tongue.

His breath caught. He squeezed my shoulder. "Don't tempt me like that," he whispered back.

I let my imagination wander. There were no windows in our room, so it would be pitch black. Maybe we could use the light from one of our cellphones, but that would just waste battery and who knew how long we'd be without power?

We'd have to fumble through the dark, only touch guiding us. The mental picture made me wet and hungry. "I really want you."

He made a soft, needy sound and glanced over at Evan. Except he was gone. I scanned the room and found him at the table with Scott and Julia.

Feeling bold, I ran my hand down his chest to the waistband of his sweatpants. What was it about a man in gray sweats that was so fucking hot? Easy access? Or was it that I could faintly see the outline of his hardening cock? Even in the dim light, it was visible.

"I could suck you and they'd never even know it," I said, lips pressed to his ear.

Another of those needy sounds. "You have a very dirty mouth, Annabelle," he murmured.

"And you want it on your cock." I had no idea where this was all coming from. I didn't talk dirty. Maybe it was the need for Chris to see how incredible we were together, for him to see that I could give him everything he didn't know he wanted.

"I am going to fuck you so damn hard tonight. You won't be able to walk tomorrow."

Desire shuddered through me. I wanted that now. But the anticipation was delicious too.

"Chris, where's the circuit breaker in this place?" Scott called over.

"Why would I know that?" Chris muttered. Louder, he said, "Not sure. Annie and I will go look for it."

“We will?” I rather liked our horny little cocoon on the couch.

Chris gently set Cranberry aside, rose, and tugged me up with him. “Probably in the basement,” he said, heading for the stairs. He tossed a wink over his shoulder at me.

And I understood.

He turned on his phone’s flashlight and led the way down the steps. As soon as I reached the bottom, he grabbed my wrist and spun me against the wall. Before I could think, his mouth was on mine, his hand in my hair, body pressed against me from thigh to mouth.

I moaned into him as his tongue wrapped around mine. Need spiked through me, making me dizzy.

His hand skimmed under my sweatshirt and up to my bare breast. As his thumb flicked my nipple, he said, “You should never wear a bra so I can always do this.” Then he shoved my shirt to my armpit and sucked my nipple into his mouth.

The pleasure was so intense, I had to bite down on my lips to keep from crying out.

“Fuck, you taste amazing. Everywhere. But especially here.” He cupped me between the legs, the heel of his palm teasing me where I needed him most.

I dropped my face down to kiss the top of his head. “Chris.” It came out a whimper.

Abruptly he dropped my breast and stood, hazy eyes staring down at me, barely visible in the dim light. “Say that again.”

The faintest smile tugged at my cheeks. “Chris,” I said softly, gently. Infusing it with as much love and desire as I

possibly could.

He searched my face for endless moments, gaze holding mine, dropping to my lips, back to my eyes. Time stood still, just the two of us alone in the basement. He was all I wanted. It was on the tip of my tongue to say the words, to hell with my plan.

Then he kissed me, hard and possessive and delicious. And brief. He took a step back. “We should find that circuit breaker. See if that’s why the power went out.” He took my hand and led me toward the utility room door.

In the eerie, jumping light of his phone, I could clearly make out the jut of his erection.

Yeah, that was why sweatpants were so hot. They didn’t do terrible things for his ass either.

In the utility room, I quickly located the circuit breaker. Chris held the light while I inspected it. But nothing was out of place.

“So that’s not it. Why would the power go out *after* the storm is over?” Chris wondered.

“Maybe the power line finally had too much ice or snow on it and eventually that pulled it down?”

“There was a lot of ice out there. That could be it.”

I sighed. “Wonderful. We could have hours of this.”

His fingers skimmed my jaw. “I could think of a few ways to occupy ourselves.”

My already-aroused body went scorching hot. “We should at least tell them what we found first.” My words came out funny as he stroked my bottom lip with his thumb.

“Alright.” I could hear the pout in his voice. “But after that, we say we’re taking a nap. Then we see how many times I can make you come.”



CHRIS

Hot springs were on my top five favorite things in the world. I couldn’t wait to slip into the steaming rock pool and soothe muscles sore from the sexual workout I was giving them. Whether it was a swimming pool, a lake, the ocean, or a hot spring, water was my happy place. Along with Annie. So in water with Annie was about as happy as I could get.

Besides sex with Annie.

Could we combine my three favorite things? Because sex with Annie in water would probably blow up my happiness meter.

The springs we’d picked this time were a dozen small pools spread out along a rocky path. The lighting was just enough to see without falling, but still dim enough to cast everything mostly in darkness. Given that we’d chosen to wait until nine o’clock at night to head out and it was about ten degrees out, there were only a handful of people there with us.

Which meant Evan and Julia chose the farthest pool for themselves. I had no desire to join our friends when I could be alone with Annie. For some reason that was probably tied up in whatever weirdness was going on with my sister, she’d decided she didn’t want to come this year, and Scott had stayed back with her.

Annie and I decided on one of the smaller pools, hiding right in the shadow of the rocky cliff that bordered one side of the springs. It was almost completely dark, with just barely enough light to see our way. I turned on the flashlight on my phone so I could have a better look at the ground. I didn't need to faceplant into a rock. Or worse, into the spring in my clothes.

I cast a quick glance down the path to make sure Julia and Evan had disappeared. Once I was sure, I snaked my arm around Annie's waist and pulled her against me. "Tell me you're wearing a bathing suit that will drive me wild."

She tilted her head to the side as I nosed her hair out of the way and pressed kisses along her temple. "I guess you'll have to let me show you. But briefly, because it's fucking cold out here and I want to get in the water."

Grinning, I let her go. "Sounds good."

We quickly stripped down to our swimming suits and I caught the briefest flash of pale skin in a dark bikini before she submerged herself in the water. She'd twisted her hair up under her knit cap, which she left on her head. She looked fucking adorable.

I kept my own beanie on as I slipped in next to her. She immediately slid next to me, her wet skin pressed to mine.

"So, what are we going to do while we sit here?" she asked in a low, husky tone.

"I could see how many times I can make you come?" It was a new favorite hobby.

She made a dismissive noise. "We did that this afternoon. How about if I make you come instead. Since you didn't get to do that earlier."

I was instantly hard. “What did you have in mind?” I asked, impressed with my ability to speak normally.

“Sex seems like a bad idea,” she said, hand trailing up the inside of my thigh.

My cock strained against my swim trunks, reaching toward her.

“There’s no way we can keep everything below the water’s surface if we do that. And it’s too fucking cold to expose wet skin.”

I could only nod as her fingers slid under my shorts and teased closer to where I needed her.

“And I can’t exactly give you a blow job here.”

The image of her doing exactly that flashed in my head. Somehow we’d gotten this far without her sucking my cock; I was always so desperate to get inside her incredible pussy. But we definitely needed to do that before we headed back to reality.

She shrugged casually as her fingernail grazed my balls. “I guess that leaves a hand job.”

I couldn’t take her teasing mouth a second longer. I gripped the back of her neck and pulled her in for a rough, hungry kiss. As my tongue stroked along hers, her fingers teased my aching balls.

Because I couldn’t help it, my hand went to her breast, pinching her hard nipple through her bikini top. She grunted into the kiss.

“This is about you,” she mumbled, lips still pressed to mine.

“And I want to touch you.” To make my point, I slid my hand inside her top and palmed her right breast. I loved holding her like this. Her breasts were perfection.

She was perfection.

Except she pulled her hand out of my shorts, leaving my cock and balls screaming for attention. That wasn't so much perfection.

Then those same fingers tickled my abdomen, just above my waistband. I sighed into the kiss as my cock strained toward her. “I want to be inside you so bad right now.” The words escaped me as I trailed my lips over her cheek.

“Tell me what you're going to do to me when we get back to the house.” Her hand slid inside the waist of my swim trunks. When her fingertip grazed the head of my cock, I let out a long, low groan. Pleasure shot through me, scorching me from the inside out. If I got any hotter, the spring would start to boil.

Her fingers were light at first, her movement constrained by my clothes.

“Pull them down.”

I lifted my ass, and she helped me slide the suit past my hips. I worked it down and off and slid it under me so I wouldn't be sitting on rock with my bare skin.

She immediately fisted me at the root and I moaned again. “Fuck, Annabelle.”

“Is that what you're going to do later? Fuck Annabelle?” Her lips were at my ear, her voice low and sultry and turning me on almost as much as her slowly stroking hand.

“I’m going to fuck Annabelle so good.” *I’m going to ruin her for any other person.* But I didn’t say that part. I couldn’t keep her, and she deserved to find happiness with someone. Even if I would quietly hate them for having Annie.

“What else are you going to do to me?” Her strokes were slow and teasing, not using as much pressure as I wanted.

“First, it’s what you’re going to do to me.” As I spoke, the image unfolded in my imagination. “You’re going to kneel for me and suck my cock until I come down your throat.”

Her moan indicated she liked this plan.

“Or maybe I’ll come all over your gorgeous tits.” I pinched her nipple. “You want that?”

Her teeth grazed my earlobe, making my cock jump in her hand. Slowly, every-so-gradually, she was holding me just a little tighter. Moving her hand just a little faster. It still wasn’t to a point where she could get me to come; rather, she built my need slowly, keeping me in a state of arousal I could happily live in forever. Every cell in my body strained toward her. I’d never felt like this with any previous partner.

And of course it was Annie who knew just exactly how to touch me. How to take me to new heights.

“Yes,” she whispered. Her thumb swiped over my head, and I shuddered.

“Then I’m going to bury my face in your pussy and eat you until you come in my mouth.”

“Yes.” Her voice was more breathless than the last time.

“Then I’m going to fuck you hard and fast until you come on my cock. And after we recover from that, I’m going to fuck you slow and easy.” *I’m going to make love to you.*

“I’m going to come so hard for you.” She was stroking faster now, jerking me almost the same way I had to myself so many times, thinking of her.

“Tighter.” I claimed her mouth again, needing her more than I needed the water surrounding us. More than I needed the air in my lungs. I could feel the orgasm building, hot and powerful.

“Come for me.” She nipped at my lower lip. Maybe it was that, maybe it was her command.

I obeyed. The orgasm rolled up from my toes, in from my fingertips, down from my skull. Not a single inch of me wasn’t bathed in the explosion of pleasure.

“Fuck, Annabelle.” I jerked and pulsed in her hand, coming and coming endlessly.

“Yes. That’s so good, babe.”

Something registered deep in my brain, but I was too blissed out to notice. Shudders ran through me, shaking me. I got jabbed in the ass by some rock piece, but even that felt good.

Everything felt good with Annie. My sexy Annabelle.

When I finally came down, I framed her face in my hands, ignoring the cold, and kissed her. Long and deep, pouring every bit of my love for her into it. I couldn’t tell her with words, could never confirm it aloud. But I would show her, just this one week, how much I loved her.



How many times had I fantasized about kneeling naked in front of Chris? And now, here we were. He leaned against the door to our room, naked, hard cock jutting out in front of him. I knelt at his feet.

After getting back from the hot spring, we'd bundled up on the couch with hot cider and talked as a group for over an hour. I'd been antsy the whole time, Chris's promises running through my head on repeat. Finally, at almost midnight, we'd been able to get away and hide out in our room.

And now here we were.

"Fuck, Annabelle." He slid his fingers into my hair, which I'd taken down from its clip when we got home.

I tilted my chin up so I could look at him. All my imaginings hadn't come close to preparing me for what I saw in his face.

The raw lust was a given. But the faint smile that seemed almost tender, that I'd never allowed myself to dream of, took my breath away. "Chris." I tried to speak, but the word got stuck in my throat, which felt closed off.

My heart pounded and I could barely breathe. The emotions swirling through me, the hope in my chest were too much.

So I forced a saucy grin, then leaned forward, tongue out, and licked him from root to tip.

He sagged back against the door with a long groan.

Because the pulse pounding in my chest was too much, I focused on the one throbbing between my legs. I didn't necessarily miss blow jobs when I was with partners who didn't have a cock, but I enjoyed giving them to my partners who did.

And Chris's thighs were already trembling. We might have only been together a few days, but I'd already learned that was one sign he was close. Even though he'd come just a few hours ago at the springs.

No time to waste, then.

I wrapped one fist around his base and lowered my mouth over as much of him as I could take. His hand in my hair tightened as the head of his cock hit the back of my mouth. The sting on my scalp made my nipples painfully hard.

I swirled my tongue around and around his head, licking up the pre-cum. The salty tang made me wetter than I already was.

“Jesus, Annabelle. It's so good.”

And I hadn't even really started sucking yet. Not with any amount of power.

So I did. I drew in my breath and pulled as hard as my cheeks could stand.

“Fuuuuuuck.”

Within a few seconds, I was bobbing my head up and down and his hips rocked gently toward my face.

“Not... gonna... last.” Each word was a grunt timed to his thrusts. And they only made me suck harder.

True to his word, not a minute later, his body quaked, thighs trembling next to my face, and he came. His cock pulsed against my tongue as warm liquid filled my throat. I relaxed my sucking but didn't stop entirely, tongue swirling round and round him to catch every drop of his cum.

The moment seemed to last forever, the smell and sound and feel of sex powerful in the air. Gradually his breathing

slowed, and he went soft in my mouth. I released him and sat back, his limp hand falling from my head.

He slid down the door and joined me on the floor. His hand reached for mine. I wove our fingers together, and he tugged me toward him.

“I don’t... I can’t even always come from a blow job.” His voice still held a breathless quality. “Never that fast. Ever.”

Warmth spread in my chest at the idea that I’d given him something no one else had. His free hand went back into my hair and pulled me in for a kiss. His tongue danced with mine in a lazy exploration.

Then a chill washed over me and I shivered. I wasn’t cold, exactly, but my skin was very aware of being naked in a basement bedroom in winter.

Chris pulled back, grinning. “Maybe we should get you over to the bed. Get you all hot and bothered.”

“Oh, I’m hot and bothered.” Still, I didn’t resist when he stood, then reached down to pull me to my feet.

“Then lets get you hotter and more bothered.” He pulled back the quilts and gestured for me to get under them. “It does seem colder in here tonight.”

“All the more reason to keep doing what we’re doing.” I slid onto the soft flannel sheet and scooted over to make room for him.

He climbed in next to me, arranged the blankets over us, and pulled me against him.

“Let’s see,” he said, lips trailing down the side of my neck. “I believe I said next I was going to eat your pussy, didn’t I?”

He said it as casually as if we were discussing quarterly financials.

But quarterly financials didn't make moisture rush between my legs or make my clit throb. They didn't make my breasts heavy with need. "I believe you did." They didn't make my voice breathless, like it was now.

His mouth trailed over my shoulder and down my arm, and his head started disappearing below the quilts. Once he was out of sight, he continued kissing his way down my body, stopping long enough at my breast to have me squirming. He maneuvered his thigh between my legs and I ground shamelessly against it, desperate for release. The hand job at the hot springs and blow job just now had me so worked up, it wouldn't take much for me to come.

The shape beneath the covers eventually moved farther down my body until he was positioned between my legs. My hands found his head and held him, his short hairs tickling my palms.

The first pass of his finger between my lips had me arching my back on a soundless cry.

"So damn wet for me," came his muffled voice.

"Always," I whispered. He probably didn't hear me, and that was for the best. He didn't need to know I'd spent years getting wet for him. Not now, anyway. He could know soon.

He slipped two fingers inside me, his thumb pressing just above my clit. The pleasure exploded through me, hurtling me up to the edge. And holding me there.

He stroked slowly, almost gently, his thumb remaining still. My hips arched toward him, seeking more pressure. Seeking release.

But he used his cheek to press me back to the bed.
“There’s no rush,” came his muffled words.

Easy for him to say. He’d already gotten to come twice.

OK, fine, he’d gotten me off twice during the blackout—we never did figure out what caused it—once with his hand and once with his incredible mouth.

I’m so in love with your mouth, Christopher.

Christopher. I liked the way it sounded in my head. Maybe I could call him that when we were together, the way he used my full name.

I tried it out. “So good, Christopher.” It was a struggle to get the words out.

The lightest flick of his tongue to my clit made me cry out. But it still wasn’t enough.

“Please,” I whimpered. The ecstasy was pure agony.

“Say my name again.” His voice was raspy but demanding.

“Christopher.” I said it on a moan. “I need to come, Christopher.”

“Fuck that’s sexy.”

He pressed down hard on my clit, then rolled it in circles as he continued to thrust his fingers into me. My pleasure climbed higher and higher until it broke in a tidal wave of glorious orgasm. It flooded me.

And before I could come down, his mouth latched onto my clit and sucked hard. My pleasure soared impossibly higher, the next orgasm building before this one could end. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t process anything but the mouth suctioned to my pussy.

Each pull sent sharp sensation up my back and down my legs. I gripped his head and held him to me, never wanting to let him go. My hips rocked into each thrust.

The second orgasm was sharper, more concentrated than the first. But still just as pleasurable. It still had me whimpering and shaking and panting his name.

I was still trembling when Chris crawled up my body. He claimed my mouth in a feverish kiss. "Need you," he mumbled, pulling my thigh high around his hip.

His hard cock teased my entrance, and I shifted my hips, taking just the tip inside. We both groaned.

I lifted my other leg, hooking both feet behind him to rest on his ass.

"Shit. How is that so hot?" He kissed me again, sucking on my tongue the way he'd sucked my clit moments earlier. My clit reacted almost as powerfully to the tongue sucking.

"Now," I managed to say against his lips.

He reached between us to better angle himself as he started to move deeper inside me. The back of his hand brushed my clit, and I jerked my hips, pulling him deeper still.

Then he removed his hand and slid all the way home.

Home. That's what it felt like to have Chris inside me. Love and tenderness swelled my chest so intensely I could hardly hold it in.

I framed his face with my hands and lifted him to look at me. His shining gaze met mine, and he smiled.

"It's so good." He looked awed by that.

All I could do was nod. It was better than I'd ever let myself hope it would be. Better than it had ever been with anyone else. Was it just chemistry? Sexual compatibility? Or was it because I loved him?

I didn't dare hope it was because we loved each other. But with time, despite what he thought, I believed in my soul that he could love me in return. He just needed to give it a chance.

saturday

CHRIS

I stood under the shower spray, soaping my body. It annoyed me that it was washing away the evidence of Annie's kisses. Of the lazy sex we'd shared a few minutes ago. But I also didn't need to walk around smelling like sex around our friends.

For the third morning in a row, I'd woken with the woman of my dreams in my arms. Worshiped her body and made love to her. Whether she knew it or not, every time we were together was a little bit fucking and a little bit lovemaking.

I was doing my best not to think about how tomorrow would be my last chance. The last time I could wake up with her dark hair tangled over my face, her arm draped over my hip. Her body soft and ready for mine.

It was going to be torture tomorrow, going back to my empty condo. Alone. Pretending nothing was different when everything had changed.

She'd start dating this other guy. Maybe he'd be her One True Love. And he'd come to Friendsgiving next year. And if it wasn't him, it would be someone. Annie was too incredible a woman not to find a lifelong partner.

And I'd still be alone.

Because I wanted it that way. It had to be that way. My family—my father, specifically—had done too good a job fucking me up and ensuring my heart was too shredded to ever really give to someone.

Besides, there was no one else I could possibly love the way I loved Annie. My sweet Annie and my sexy Annabelle. My brilliant-as-fuck coworker.

The absolute love of my life, the endgame for me. I was too fucked up to be with her, and I was too fucked up and too in love with Annie to be with anyone else.

So I was alone.

I scrubbed my hands over my face, definitely only wiping away water and not a stray tear or two. I turned off the faucet and scrubbed myself dry with a towel. I was not going to ruin my last day with her by being melancholy. We went home to our separate houses, so I could do that tomorrow night.

Maybe Annie would even call this guy tomorrow night. Our weekend was surely igniting her physical needs. Once I wasn't sating them anymore, she'd need him. Which was her goal all along.

I shoved my towel back on the rod and jerked it into place with more force than I needed to. Dammit, I would not sulk. Today was our last day, and I wasn't going to dwell on Evan's secret or my sister's general weirdness or having only one more day with Annie.

We were going to have fun, if it killed me.

Two hours later, that's exactly what we were doing. All six of us were bundled into our cold-weather gear, had strapped snowshoes to our boots, and were taking a slow, awkward

walk through the sparse woods around the cabin. The owner claimed the surrounding fifteen acres all belonged to him and said we should use it all.

Twice we reached forks in the path, and each time one of the married couples chose to go on their own. So after 20 minutes, Annie and I were alone. Which I didn't mind at all.

Once I was sure I was out of earshot of our friends, I said one of the more dumbass things I could've come up with. "Think we can make out in these things?" I lifted my left foot and wiggled it.

Which threw me off balance and I flailed around, trying not to fall. I just barely succeeded.

"Based on that impressive display, I'm going to guess no," Annie said dryly.

I stopped and shuffled in a circle to face her. "I feel like that's a challenge." I grinned, though who knew if she could even tell, with my hat pulled down to my eyebrows and my scarf up over my nose. It was a bright, cloudless day, but that didn't mean it wasn't cold as fuck.

"It's really not," Annie said.

I made a face at her, but again, she probably had no idea. "Fine, have it your way. We'll get exercise and have fun and shit."

"Perfect."

We plodded along for a while in silence.

"Ugh, fine," Annie eventually groaned behind me. "You win."

I glanced over my shoulder at her. The space between trees wasn't wide enough for us to walk side-by-side. "I win what? I

love winning.”

Enough of her face was exposed that I could see her eyeroll.

“I accept the challenge. Let’s see if we can make out in snowshoes.”

I turned again, then went over to her. She carefully spread her legs, and I moved my right leg between them, and her right leg between mine.

Grinning, I tugged down my scarf, then hers. “Hi.”

She wasn’t grinning, but she was definitely smiling. “Hi.”

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

“By all means, please do.”

“I’m kissing you.”

“You said that.”

“Right n—”

She pressed her lips to mine, the cold contact sending a chill through me. But the heat of her mouth soon opened against me, and when she stroked it along mine, her tongue was warm. I moaned into her as I slid my arm around her waist.

We stood like that for endless cold-but-perfect moments. The wind burned my cheeks, but Annie’s mouth burned my lips. I nipped at her, pulling a cry from deep in her throat. She wrapped her tongue around mine and for a moment, stars danced on the backs of my eyelids.

I never want this to end. And I would not ruin this perfect kiss with thoughts of how it was going to all too soon.

Then she sucked on my tongue, hard, the same way she'd sucked my cock, and that particular appendage started to wake up. Needing even slight pressure on it, I shifted closer to her, my arm tightening around her jacket.

I barely processed the few instants we were falling before we were on the ground, our snowshoes *clanking* together as we fell. She landed on her back, me sprawled half on top of her.

“Shit. Are you OK?” I tried to push my weight off her but couldn't seem to maneuver very far. My snow pants and down coat didn't make for fast movements. And our legs were tangled together, the snowshoes jutting out at odd angles.

She dropped her head back into the snow and started to laugh. Beneath me, her body shook as the laughter grew harder, and soon I started laughing too. I leaned into the warmth of her neck and laughed harder than I had in a long time. My abs contracted and my shoulders shook, Annie doing the same beneath me.

As the laughter died out, she lifted her gloved hand and cupped my cheek. A wide smile still curved her gorgeous lips. I couldn't stop myself from bending down and stealing a quick nip.

“Fuck, I—” I bit off the sentence before I could say the words that had been about to escape my mouth. *Fuck, I love you.*

“You what?” Her sparkling gaze searched my face.

“I'm just having a good time with you.” *Coward*, my brain or conscience or alter ego or whatever that voice in my head was screamed at me.

Yeah, I was a coward. But I was also protecting Annie. I kept my feelings to myself because I loved her. Though with every kiss, it got harder and harder to remember why I did that.

Good thing the kisses would end tomorrow.

“I’m having a good time too,” she said.

I pressed my forehead to hers—well, pressed the brim of my hat to hers—and nudged her nose with mine. “I suppose we should get up.”

“Yeah, probably time to head back and start making lunch.” Her gaze remained searching my face, like she was trying to memorize me. Her dark eyes seemed almost crystalline in the sunlight, and I couldn’t look away from her.

Emotion swelled in my chest, growing bigger and deeper until I almost couldn’t breathe. I was utterly lost in her, lost in this one perfect moment with her. This was better than sex, beyond sex. This was connection.

Except I didn’t do connection.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pushed my chest off her. With a little maneuvering, I untangled our legs so I could get on my knees, then to my feet. I leaned over to help pull her up, avoiding making eye contact.

The zing of our connection still burned through me, warming me even in the cold. I tried to ignore it as we started silently hiking back toward the house, but it was impossible.

Usually when I was hung up on emotional thoughts about Annie, I would make myself think of sex. Remind myself that I wasn’t available for anything but casual hookups. But now, when I thought of sex, I thought of Annie. I thought of her soft brown hair spread around her on the pillow, of her naked body

rising over mine as she rode me, of the delicious taste of her skin. Of her pussy. The heat of her lips and the sounds she made as I sucked on her clit and of—

I forced the memories away. I could wallow in them later. And I would have to come up with a new trick to put Annie and my extremely inconvenient feelings for her out of my mind.

Evan. The traitor who wanted to leave our company. That got me hot in a totally different way. Damn Evan. Damn him and his real estate brochures.

“We still have to figure out what’s up with Evan and Julia,” I said over my shoulder.

“Then ask him.”

Maybe I was imagining it, but her voice sounded tight. I’d forgotten that was a touchy subject with us.

“Sorry, shouldn’t have brought it up.”

Great, now we were both grumpy. I didn’t know how to smooth things over, so we didn’t talk as we headed back to the house.



ANNIE

After a weirdly tense lunch—Evan seemed to know something was up with Scott and Chris, and he and Julia were having silent conversations with their eyes, Tina was acting strange and barely eating, which was rare for her, Chris and I were trying not to act like a couple—I decided I wanted to get out of the house again and take another snowshoe walk. Only Evan was interested in coming with me.

We bundled up and headed for a different trail this time, to the north of the house rather than the west. We shuffled through the snow in silence, except for the crunch of our snowshoes on the snow and an occasional whistle of wind.

After about twenty minutes, we got to a wide clearing and could walk side-by-side. My mind flashed back to Chris and my conversation earlier. *Then ask him.* Except Chris was a stubborn ass, as was Scott. They wouldn't ask.

Fuck it. "So, what's going on with you?"

"What do you mean?" Evan asked, tone evasive. "I'm having a good week. Have barely thought about work for like three days. Possibly a record."

"Yeah, but you've been acting weird around the three of us for like a month now."

The only reply was the crunch of snow.

"We're not dumb, Evan. We know something's going on. Chris and Scott think you're planning to leave Denver and the company."

"Wait, what?" Evan stopped walking so he could stare at me. "You guys have talked about this."

"Of course we have." I leaned my head back to look up at the over-bright sky. "It's possible Chris was a complete dumbass and snooped in your room and found your Atlanta real estate brochure," I mumbled.

"He did what?" Evan's voice rose in pitch.

I lowered my chin to look my friend in the face. Or, the eyes at least, since the rest of our faces were covered. "I'm definitely not defending him. It was a jackass thing to do when

he should've just asked you what's up. But be straight with me. Are you and Julia moving to Atlanta?"

"I'm not leaving our company. It's *my* company too. I was there when we started it."

"You didn't answer my question."

He started walking away from me. "It's not that simple. But yes, in a nutshell, we want to move back to be near her family. You know I don't have anyone else, and we'd like to have kids soon and raise them around grandparents and cousins. Who all live in Georgia."

"Seems pretty straightforward to me, then. 'Are you moving to Atlanta, Evan?' 'Yes I am, Annie.'"

"We're not positive yet. It's something we've been talking about, and I'm trying to figure out the details of how it would work. But I want to open an office in Atlanta."

Now it was my turn to stop. "You what?"

"We're a global corporation. We should have offices in lots of places."

"So you want to what? Move the communications department to Georgia?" My mind was spinning. It was actually a good idea. We were running out of space in our Denver offices and had talked about expanding our physical space yet again. Who said, in the twenty-first century, we could only expand in the Denver metro area?

"Communication, maybe other divisions."

I started walking again, processing everything he'd told me. "R and D stays in Denver." I couldn't move away from Chris. I just couldn't. And he'd never move away from Denver. He may hate most of his family, but he loved the city

where they'd raised him. And Tina would never leave either, which meant Scott stayed.

"Maybe we start with communications, slowly expand down there. I don't know yet. I'm still sorting details out in my head, which is why I didn't tell any of you yet."

"Should've acted like yourself around us, then," I snapped. It wasn't logical, but I was mad at him. His reasoning made sense. And he wasn't being disloyal to the company the four of us had built. But he was still planning to leave us.

To leave me.

Evan was probably my best friend. I had women friends, and of course there were Chris and Scott. But things were... different with Chris, to say the least. And I was closer to Evan than Scott.

Before I could think better of it, I reached over and punched him in the shoulder.

"Hey!" He rubbed his glove over his arm, the nylon fabrics squeaking against each other.

"That didn't hurt."

"No, but you still hit me."

"Because I'm mad at you."

"Didn't your parents ever teach you that violence never solves anything?" he asked.

"I have a bunch of older brothers. Violence solved a lot in our house." I'd been the only one who didn't typically fix problems by beating on one of my brothers. Largely because they were all older and bigger than me.

“Why are you mad at me?” Evan asked, his voice overly patient.

“Because you’re leaving! Maybe not the company, but you’re still not going to be at the office every day. Who am I supposed to talk to when Chris has his head up his ass? Or when Scott is being... Scott?”

“By the way, what’s up with you and Chris this weekend?”

My cheeks heated. Fortunately, they were inevitably already bright red from cold, so Evan wouldn’t be able to tell. They were also mostly hidden by my scarf.

“We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about you. And how you’re leaving me. Alone. With Scott and Chris.” It was a struggle not to put a little extra softness into how I said Chris’s name.

“Annie, you know I love you to pieces. And it’s not like Denver is the moon. I can come back a lot.”

“But poker night.” Every Friday after work, except Thanksgiving weekend, the four of us played poker in the executive lounge. Sometimes we opened it up to other employees, but usually it was just the four of us. No significant others, no acceptable reasons to miss unless we were out of town.

But there was no way he could come back every Friday. And we couldn’t exactly play poker over a video call.

He shuffled sideways and put his arm around me. “I know. Inevitably, I’ll have to come back at least once a month. And we had to know it was going to change, eventually. I can’t imagine Julia being happy with me staying out every Friday until after midnight once we have kids.”

I leaned my head on his shoulder. “No, I suppose not. Or Tina, if they have kids.”

“And I still hold out hope that one of these days, you and Chris are going to figure out your shit and be together. And what if you have kids?”

Behind my scarf, I smiled at the idea of Chris as a father. Despite what he thought about himself, I was pretty sure he’d be an excellent dad.

“Is now the right time to ask what’s going on with you two?”

“No.” Maybe I’d tell him about it eventually. It all depended on how things worked out with my plan. Chris didn’t know it yet, but our meeting on Wednesday wasn’t about work. I had a proposition for him, but not a business one.

I felt the weight of Evan’s head leaning against mine. “For what it’s worth, I’m rooting for you.”

I slid my arm around his waist and squeezed. “Thanks. Me too.”



CHRIS

It was going to feel really fucking good to nail Evan with a snowball.

While he and Annie were off on their second snowshoe hike, Scott, Julia, and I built a snow wall and stocked it with a few dozen snowballs. Tina had elected to stay inside and nap. When I asked Scott what was up, he’d been as cagey as Evan had been lately.

Everyone and their damn secrets. Too bad I had no leg to stand on since Annie and I had our own secret. It was too much for one weekend.

I was packing yet another snowball when I heard Annie's laughter coming from the trees.

"They're coming," Julia whisper-yelled. "Get down."

All three of us crouched behind our wall, a snowball in each hand. I peered through the small hole I'd dug through the wall so I could see them approach.

Silently, I held up one finger. Then two. "Three!" I yelled.

As one, Julia, Scott, and I jumped to our feet and started whipping snowballs across the driveway at Annie and Evan. Well, at Evan. At least I was throwing them at Evan. Scott probably was too. But maybe Julia was aiming for Annie and not her husband.

"What the fuck?"

"Oh, hell no!"

Annie jumped behind Evan, using him as a shield.

"Hey!" He turned to look at her and my snowball caught him on the cheek. His head whipped around to glare at me.

"Hey!"

We just kept slinging snow.

When one burst on my chest, leaving snow clinging to my jacket, I dropped back down behind the wall.

"Behind Chris's car," Annie said. I almost protested, but decided I didn't care.

The next fifteen minutes passed in a blur of shouts, laughter, and snow. By the time Annie and Evan surrendered

—yeah they did!—I could barely catch my breath, I was laughing so hard.

Laughing and talking, we all clomped back to the house and undressed, leaving our winter gear in piles by the door. When Evan grabbed Julia's hand and pulled her in for a kiss, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to do the same to Annie. So I had to reel myself in quickly after grabbing her hand. I ended up awkwardly jerking her, and she stumbled toward me.

“What?” She frowned at me.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Sorry. Wasn't thinking.”

Something in her eyes went soft and hot at the same time. Like she knew what I'd been thinking. The corners of her lips twitched, but she didn't smile.

Then she grinned and patted me on the chest. “We're used to that.” She practically danced off to the stairs.

“Hey!” Laughing, I followed her up the stairs. With a perfect view of her perfect ass.

Tina was in the kitchen, cooking something, and within the hour, we were all sitting around the table, eating burgers.

My good mood improved when Tina leaned over to whisper something to me. Anytime she was close was good by me. And while I wasn't letting myself dwell on it, I was definitely aware in the back of my mind that we had less than 24 hours left together.

“I talked to Evan,” she murmured, her chin brushing my shoulder.

It was an effort not to sit up straighter, my body trying to go on hyper-alert. I forced myself to stay relaxed. “And?”

“And you can be a grownup and ask him yourself.” She leaned away and picked up her burger.

I couldn't help it; I glared at her. She was just going to leave it like that? When she knew how stressed out it had me? Irritation flared in my chest as I bit down on my burger harder than I needed to.

And bit my tongue.

Dammit.

I must've made a nose, because everyone paused their conversations to look at me. “Bit my tongue.”

Tina gave me a pitying look, but everyone else went back to what they were doing. Then Scott got her attention and she looked away. I studied her for a moment longer. What was going on with her? I should know my own sister well enough to have some idea why she was acting strange.

At least I could be relatively certain she wasn't planning on betraying me by leaving the company.

Still looking across the table at Scott, she nodded.

“Can we have your attention for a minute?” Scott said.

Julia and Evan stopped whatever they had been talking about, and we all turned to look at our friend.

“We've been back and forth on when to tell everyone this, and we were going to wait longer. But we're just so fucking excited, we have to tell you.” Scott got the goofiest grin on his face.

I'd seen that look on his face exactly once before. As he watched Tina walk down the aisle at their wedding.

Tired. Not eating. And when I gave it more than passing thought, I was pretty sure she hadn't been drinking this weekend either.

My sister was pregnant.

"I'm pregnant!" Tina bubbled. That was the only way to describe how she spoke the words.

Meanwhile, something dropped in my gut. Something akin to a lead weight. The size of a hippo.

But I forced my feelings aside. I had plenty of practice at that. And I forced a grin. "Tina, that's amazing." I was out of my chair and hugging her before I realized what I was doing.

"You're going to be the coolest uncle," she said as she squeezed me back.

We abandoned our food temporarily to give rounds of hugs and handshakes and the word "congratulations" was said at least two dozen times. And I moved through it, doing and saying all the right things. But after the initial heavy dread, I felt numb.

More proof of how fucked up I was. I should be almost as ecstatic as they were. My little sister was having a baby. I was going to be an uncle!

But all my enthusiasm was forced. I couldn't wrap my head around it. How was she so normal and well adjusted that she could fall wildly in love and have a baby when I couldn't do more than spend a lifetime pathetically pining for my best friend?

It wasn't fucking fair. Which was a childish way to feel, but I couldn't help it. How the hell had Tina, with her sweet optimism and caring nature, come out of the same home as me, with my broken, empty soul?

“When are you due?” Annie’s voice cut through the noise in my head. I wanted to wrap myself in her arms and breathe her in. If it were anything but our last night together, I would probably want to be alone, hiding from everyone so they wouldn’t see how much Tina’s news hurt me. So they wouldn’t see how weak I really was.

But it wasn’t any other night. It was tonight. The last night I could let myself have with the amazing, beautiful, brilliant woman I loved.



ANNIE

Something was up with Chris. Ever since Tina and Scott made their announcement, he’d been acting like a robot. His face made all the right expressions, but his eyes were flat.

I could only guess that it was tied up in his feelings about his parents and grandparents, that the prospect of his sister being a parent somehow brought up those resentments and hurts.

Shortly after dinner, Tina went to bed, complaining about how exhausting it was to grow a human. The rest of us settled in with beers to play poker. Friendsgiving was the only time we deviated from our usual Friday night poker. It just seemed right to do it the last night of our yearly vacation.

Several hours of poker later, I was more convinced of Chris’s sour mood. Some of it inevitably had to do with Evan’s assumed betrayal—if they didn’t talk in the next week, I would have to force the issue—and I liked to think maybe it was a little bit because he wasn’t happy about it being our last night together. After all, he had no idea of my plans for our

dinner meeting on Tuesday. Had no idea I was finally going to tell him how I felt.

Whatever the reason, he was clearly off. There was none of his usual playful smack talk, at which he was a master.

“I’m all in.” He shoved his chips toward the center.

“That sure of your hand?” Evan teased.

I cringed internally. Evan, of all people, needed to not tease Chris right now.

Chris stared at him, face blank. Even in a mood, Chris had an excellent poker face. He still vibrated with frustration, but that didn’t change from hand to hand.

The rest of us made our bets. Scott and I folded.

And they showed their cards. Evan had a pair of queens. Julia had a full house.

Chris had a pair of fours.

He tossed his cards in the center. “I’m beat. I’m going to bed.” He pushed to his feet.

I tried to catch his eye and see if he really was tired or if this was his way of setting it up so we could be alone. But he didn’t look at me, just stalked toward the stairs.

“Well that was ominous.” Scott got up from the head of the table and moved to sit next to me, in Chris’s vacated seat.

“You’re serious?” Evan asked.

“What?”

“This is some weird combo of daddy and uncle issues for him.”

I nodded at Evan. He'd hit it right on. Scott was the one who had known Chris since childhood, but he was a little dense when it came to the finer points of emotions. It was why Evan worked with people and Scott computers.

"He's terrified of having kids, or even getting too close to someone, because of his parents and grandparents." I shuffled the cards. My muscles itched to follow Chris.

"He's not the one having kids."

"Jesus, Scott." Julia rolled her eyes. "Even I can see that you and Tina having a baby is still triggering some uncomfortable feelings for him."

"Really?" Scott looked over his shoulder, as if he could still see Chris on the stairs.

I set the shuffled deck of cards in front of Scott. "I'm going to go talk to him, and then I'll probably crash too. You can all divide up my chips. I don't care."

I hurried down the stairs and into the bedroom. He'd turned on one dim light on his bedside table and left the door open. His shirt and hoodie were on the floor next to the bed. He lay on the bed in only his sweatpants, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

I shut the door and sat on the other side of the bed. And didn't say anything.

I moved my hand across the bed toward him, and a moment later he wrapped his hand around it. Laced his fingers through mine.

"You understand why I'm upset, right? You get it?"

"I do." I squeezed his hand and stroked him with my thumb.

This moment right here, this was a moment like before. Before this week when we'd become lovers, when we were best friends.

It gave me hope. If we could cross the line yet still have the times that were uniquely Annie and Chris, that had been part of our friendship from the very beginning in a dorm in Cambridge, maybe, just maybe, we could blend the two. And become the greatest friends-to-lovers story since *When Harry Met Sally*.

OK, maybe I was romanticizing real life a little too much. But still, I remained hopeful.

I scooted closer to him and lay down next to him. The only thing touching was our hands. I squeezed him again. "You're going to be an amazing uncle. And Tina, she's going to be such a fantastic mom. Because she'll be all the things your mom never was."

"I just—" His voice cracked. "I just don't know how. How do we know what good parenting is when all we saw was bad?"

I pulled my hand away from him to roll to my side and prop my head on it. My other hand, I rested on his chest, above his steadily beating heart. Even though this was a friendship moment, I couldn't help noticing how warm and soft his skin was.

"For one thing, Scott's parents are some of the best in the world. And Scott and Tina will do what so many parents do. They'll fumble around but always lead with love. That's how my dad raised us. He was far from perfect, but we don't doubt for a second that he loves us."

He rolled his head to look up at me. His hand lifted to slide my hair behind my ear, then he cupped my cheek. “Annie.” He exhaled more than spoke my name. His gaze searched mine for long moments.

Then he half sat up to capture my lips. An instant later, I was on my back, his body over mine. His mouth pressed to mine.

The kiss was endless, one blending into the next into the next. It was lazy, with no agenda but exploration. We were in no rush to get past kissing. It was its own destination. I held his face between my hands, a day’s worth of stubble tickling the sensitive skin there. His arms clasped me against him, but he made no move to caress me.

The kiss was everything.

Gradually he grew hard against my thigh, but he didn’t move to take things further. He nibbled at my bottom lip, kissed across my cheek to tug at my earlobe, then made his way back to my mouth. He repeated this several times.

“I could fucking kiss you forever,” he mumbled against my lips. He started yet another path across my cheek.

“Me too,” I said, voice breathless. Just because we weren’t tearing each other’s clothes off didn’t mean the kisses weren’t turning me on. I was wet and needy and felt like we had been kissing forever. And I was content to stay right where we were.

His teeth scraped my earlobe, and my eyes rolled back. Some kind of grunt-groan sounds escaped my throat. He moaned and licked around the rim of my ear.

Pleasure seared through me, and I arched against him. This time when his lips met mine, there was more heat, more

hunger. His tongue swept my mouth and I sucked on it, pulling another moan from his throat.

But still we didn't move past kissing. Which I was fine with. I hadn't had a good make-out session in years. And kissing Chris was a destination of its own, not merely a step on the foreplay path to sex.

Time lost all meaning as his lips played over mine. We occasionally murmured things to each other, but our lips never parted except when he detoured over to my ear. But he always returned.

I reached a point where I was sure I was going to come just from kissing him. My clit throbbed almost painfully. All it would take was one brush between my legs and I'd explode. I was so hot, so needy.

This time I was the one to pull my mouth away, gasping for breath. My lips trailed his jaw and I managed to exhale, "I need you."

"You have me."

My pulse skipped a beat at his words. Had I heard him right? He couldn't possibly mean what my longing heart wanted him to. And I wasn't going to ruin this night by asking. I didn't want a conversation; I wanted sex. I wanted to speak his language tonight.

He undressed me as slowly and lazily as he'd been kissing me. His mouth followed the progression of my shirt and sweatshirt as they inched up my belly, leaving a wet trail along my skin. He set loose wild sensations in me, ones more pleasurable than even previous sex with him.

His teeth grazed the underside of my bare breast—I'd taken off my bra before dinner—and I arched into him.

“Chris.”

He didn't respond, just continued making his slow magic against my skin.

Once he had my shirts pushed up to my armpits, he propped himself on one elbow to help me remove them. I tried to toss them off the bed, but his teeth scraped against my nipple and my arm went weak. My whole body went weak. I was dizzy with pleasure; it arced through my body, every cell alive with desire.

Then he sucked me into his hot, wet mouth, and I started squirming. My clit screamed for attention and my lower body moved, trying to find something to rub against.

His hand was there, his suction on my breast never faltering. He cupped me between the legs, through my clothes. I was dizzy with how much I needed to come and shameless as I ground against him. “Yes.” My voice was breathless, barely a word.

“Annabelle,” he moaned with his mouth still at my breast.

The tight thread of pleasure connecting my nipple to my clit was the breaking point. He ground his hand against me at the same moment he sucked hard and I broke. A silent cry got stuck in my throat as my body jerked against his. Pleasure threw me high and held me at the peak for endless moments, then I came flying back down to the safety of his arms.

Not giving me even a moment to catch my breath, he was already kissing his way back down my belly. He wasn't as slow this time, his hands clumsy as he pulled at the waistband of my sweatpants and underwear.

The anticipation of where he was headed next sent a fresh wave of pleasure through me. He yanked my pants past my

knees, then I kicked at them to get them off. His hand skimmed down one leg to pull off my sock, then the other.

Then he settled his shoulder between my thighs, lowered his head, and took a long, slow, delicious lick.

“How am I supposed to stop enjoying my new favorite treat?” he murmured, almost as if he were talking directly to my pussy.

I shuddered. This was exactly what I had planned.



CHRIS

How am I supposed to stop enjoying my new favorite treat?

Damn, I was a total sap. When I said shit like that, she was probably glad we'd be done tomorrow and she could move on with her other guy. I might as well just admit I was in love with her so she could tell me how a man like me didn't deserve a woman as incredible as her.

I shoved the thoughts away. There'd be plenty of time for wallowing in the weeks to come. Right now, I was going to enjoy my new favorite treat for probably the last time. Maybe I'd get one more taste in the morning, maybe not.

So I buried my face in her pussy and kissed it the way I'd been kissing her mouth earlier. Slow and teasing at first, her sexy-as-fuck flavor coating my tongue. I held her open with my thumbs so I could taste every part of her, my cock screaming for attention. But it would have to wait.

“Chris.” Her hand slid over my head, holding me to her. As if I wanted to be anywhere else on Earth.

Her cold feet grazing my back made me jump, which caused my tongue to thrust into her. She tasted so fucking good, and she was so fucking wet, and I was so fucking turned on. I didn't want to give her up.

Maybe I didn't have to. Maybe I could fight for her, plead my case to her about how incredible we were together versus this other guy, an unknown entity. I could even tell her I loved her and would spend the rest of my life devoted to her.

And she would remind me of all the times I insisted love wasn't for me. All the times I went on about how I was certain to turn into my father, or worse, my grandfather, one day. And she wouldn't believe me that I loved her and she would doubt my truthfulness and it would ruin our friendship and she would have her new man and I would have no one.

No, there would be no confessing to Annie.

My sexy Annabelle, and those sexy sounds she made when she got close to coming. I knew what she needed to get there. Even after just a few short days, I knew how to work her body for maximum pleasure.

"Come for me, Annabelle," I murmured. She might not have even heard me, but she did thrust her hips up against my mouth. My nose grazed just above her clit, and she moaned.

"Please, Chris."

Any blood that wasn't already in my cock rushed there. I loved when she begged me. And I knew exactly what she was begging for.

So I gave it to her. I put my mouth over her clit and sucked as hard as I could. My tongue circled her as I continued to suck. Her hips jerked as she rocked against me. Together we worked her to the perfect spot.

And we found it. Her back arched and she cried out as her body went rigid. “Chris.” Her fingers dug into my scalp and the pain was bliss. I kept sucking her through her orgasm, looping my tongue in swirls around her clit. She chanted my name, and I’d never heard anything more wondrous than it on Annie’s lips as she came on my face. I would never be able to top this moment.

As soon as she started to drift down, desperation took hold of me. I needed to be inside her. I needed to be one with her. Just for tonight.

I crawled up her body and knelt between her legs, shoving my sweatpants down so I could pull out my aching cock. I fisted it and stroked as I looked down at the beautiful, blissed-out woman in front of me.

Love swelled up inside me, almost overwhelming in its intensity. She was everything I wanted in life and everything I could never have. She would someday find her happily ever after, just as my friends and my sister had. But that life wasn’t for me.

This moment, however, this night in bed with her one last time was.

“Tell me you want me,” I choked out. I needed to hear the words.

“I want you,” she said, breathless. I did that to her.

I leaned forward, bracing myself on one hand as my other tightened around my cock. Hunger clawed at my spine. “Tell me you need me.”

Her hand covered mine, then pushed it away. She wrapped her own around my cock and started to stroke. She had the

perfect balance of rough and gentle, and her thumb swirled around my head, coating me with my pre-cum.

“I need you.”

She pulled my cock toward her, lining it up where we both wanted it. Needed it.

“Tell me what you need.” I slid inside her, just the tip. Teasing us both.

“I need you.” She lifted her hips to meet me, and I slipped farther inside her. “I need you to fuck me. Now.”

Her words broke any restraint I was clinging to. I thrust all the way into her, pulling a gasp from her throat.

“Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head, nose brushing mine. “It’s so good.” She sounded almost like she was in awe.

Part of me wanted to give her what she’d asked for: a good, hard fuck. Mindless pleasure.

But this was our last night together. We’d fucked plenty this week. This was my last chance to truly make love to her. To worship her slowly and passionately. To show her with my body what I couldn’t tell her in words. To make a memory that would last us both a lifetime.

I love you so fucking much, Annabelle Louise Lang.

So instead of pulling back and thrusting hard, I held myself inside her. Slowly rolled my hips, pressing my pelvic bone against hers.

She gasped, then started rolling with me.

“You feel so fucking good.” I ghosted my lips across hers, swallowing her next gasp. She was hot and wet and so tight

around my cock. Better than anything I'd ever felt in my life.

“You too.” Her voice was beyond breathless, beyond bliss. “I think... I think I'm going to—”

She pressed her lips to mine so I could swallow her cry as her pussy started contracting around me. The feel of her unexpectedly coming on my cock drove an urgent need through me. My entire body begged me to start thrusting, to fuck her as hard as I could.

But I held back. I continued to roll my hips against her as she rode out the orgasm. My hand stroked down her side, then beneath her ass to cup it in my palm. I loved her ass. So I squeezed it and she yelped.

Then she went limp. Her eyes were glassy as she looked up at me, a tired smile on her lips.

“I—” It was on the tip of my tongue to say it. *I love you*. It would be so easy.

And it would fuck things up so much.

“What?”

“I... I just can't get over how sexy it is when you come.” It wasn't a lie. I'd never seen anything sexier. It just wasn't all I had to say to her.

She traced my jaw with her finger. “I can't get over how sexy you are when you make me come.”

My chest filled with emotions, swelling so much it nearly overflowed. So I kissed her and poured everything I had into the movement of my lips over hers. My hips started to roll again, and slowly, so slowly, I began to slide out of her. Back in. Out and then in. Out every time, but always returning home.

That's what she was, my Annabelle. She was my home.



ANNIE

Chris was killing me with his slow, deliberate lovemaking. Because I didn't know another word for what he was doing to me. He wasn't fucking me, and sex didn't come close to encompassing what was happening between our bodies. I was exhausted, yet already a fourth orgasm was building. The way he was touching me, the way he pressed his hips just right against mine, it was inevitable. It wasn't a question of if, but of when.

Just a few days together, and he already knew how to work my body better than anyone else I'd been with.

He pressed his forehead to mine as he continued his methodical thrusts. Methodical in how thoroughly they were destroying me. Did he realize that with each slide of his cock into me, I fell deeper in love with him. No, sex itself wasn't love. But this was. I knew it deep inside, as certainly as I knew he was a better man than he gave himself credit for.

Maybe this was the time to tell him. Not now, not during our lovemaking. He could too easily brush that off as the sex talking. But after. I could tell him here, before we went back to our real lives.

"Where'd you go?" he asked, tapping my temple with his finger.

"I'm right here." I smiled softly at him, then gasped as the root of his cock caught my clit.

“You disappeared into your head for a minute.” He gave me a wry smile. “You do it a lot, but I thought I’d be able to hold your attention during sex.”

I stroked my hand over his ass and squeezed, using my nails just a little. “I was lost in how good it is. I promise.”

His nose brushed mine, then he kissed me again.

“I think I need to move faster,” he said against my lips.

“Yes.” The slow lovemaking was incredible, and it kept me on the edge. But it wasn’t quite what I needed to get there again.

He increased the pace of his thrusts, and with it, the pleasure increased. My breath caught on each stroke as he caught all the right places, inside and out. Still forehead to forehead, our noses bumped as our bodies moved.

His eyes were dilated and shadowed as he looked down at me, but I knew they were locked on my gaze. I could feel the connection between us, deeper than physical. It was like my love was reaching out of my chest and into his.

I love you so much. I’ll never stop loving you. The words were so close to the surface, I nearly whispered them against his lips. Instead, I grabbed his ass and pulled him harder against me.

He groaned. “That feels amazing.”

“You feel amazing.” Everything about this felt amazing. My body was alive with pleasure, my skin electric from how turned on I was. My heart was swelling practically out of me, so filled with love. And I was dizzy with the combination of the two, in the best way.

“You are amazing.” His lips brushed mine as he said the words, breath a hot cloud on my skin. “Tell me you’re close. I don’t think...” He groaned again. “I don’t think I can last much... longer.”

“Then don’t.”

He didn’t move his head, but it felt like his gaze searched my face. “But you...”

“Came three times already.” And I was rapidly approaching the edge. “And I am, I’m close.”

“I just want you to feel good.” He ground his hips against mine and glitter rained through my vision.

“I do.”

His thrusts picked up speed again, his movement hard and fast and still stroking me everywhere I needed. I stretched my thighs impossibly wider and somehow it made things just a tiny bit better.

This orgasm started in my pussy, but rapidly swelled out to fill my entire lower half. Heat flared up my chest as my legs shook, my whole body vibrating with pleasure.

“Fuck, Annabelle.” He made a sound close to a snarl as he followed me over the edge.

As one, we moaned and grunted and shook, locked in the heights of bliss. Together.

And just as deep as the ecstasy were the emotions. This was everything I’d wanted for so long, and the thought that maybe I could have it was almost as engulfing as the orgasm. The feelings flowed through me, overflowing to wrap around the both of us.

Still inside me, Chris twisted us so he could collapse half on top of me, half on the bed. For long moments, we simply lay there, panting, coming back to ourselves.

“Is this really it?” he finally asked.

“What do you mean?” I was still too high on endorphins to think straight.

“We’re really not going to do this again? Ever?”

“Oh.” That. How did I answer him without lying? Or spilling everything?

He sat up to pull the quilts over us, then wrapped himself around me, big spoon to my little spoon. “I’ll be honest, Annabelle, it’s pretty fucking amazing between us. We could keep up some kind of friends-with-benefits sort of thing.”

His words crushed something in my chest. I found myself having to blink rapidly to keep tears from overflowing. Good thing he couldn’t see my face. Was that all this was to him? Had I completely misread what just happened between us?

“Is this other guy really that amazing?”

Was that hitch in his voice jealousy? “He’s beyond amazing,” I said honestly.

“How do you even know—nope, never mind. I don’t want to know.”

I exhaled slowly, relieved. I didn’t want to lie any more than I had, but I also wasn’t prepared to have a serious conversation with him about my feelings for him. Not when I was mentally and physically exhausted.

“This doesn’t have to be the last time, you know.” I reached back and stroked my hand along his thigh.

“This was pretty intense. I’m going to need a while to recover.” He caressed my hip.

I laughed lightly. “I didn’t mean tonight. I meant tomorrow, after everyone else leaves. We’ve got the entire house to ourselves. We could have one last time”—not even close to the last time if I had anything to say about it—“anywhere in the house. As loud as we want.”

He tapped me on the ass. “Naughty girl. I like it.” He nosed my hair out of the way and pressed a kiss to the side of my neck. I shivered.

He nibbled at my skin for a few minutes, and I let myself simply enjoy it.

“We haven’t exactly tried too hard to be quiet, have we?” he asked.

I quickly replayed the sex highlights of the weekend. My face flushed. “We haven’t.”

“You think they heard us?”

The heat washed down to my chest. Yes, I wanted Chris and me to be together and everyone to know that. And Scott and Evan had figured out years ago how I felt about Chris. But that didn’t mean I wanted them knowing we were having a lascivious weekend under their noses.

I especially didn’t want them finding out that way.

“I really hope not. That’s just awkward for everyone involved.”

He chuckled. “If Tina heard us, we’ll find out. I doubt Scott or Evan would say something.”

Evan might say something to me. But he hadn’t on our walk. So maybe he hadn’t heard. I certainly hoped.

Chris cupped my cheek and turned my head back to him. “Regardless, after everyone leaves. I’ve been fantasizing about you in the kitchen all weekend.”

I smiled as he brushed his lips over mine. “Oh, really?”

He kissed me firmly, then let my chin go. I settled back against his chest, my eyelids heavy.

“First you’re gonna sit on the counter so I can eat your delicious pussy.”

A shiver chased up my spine. Despite everything we’d already done, my pussy throbbed at his words.

“Then I’m going to bend you over the counter and fuck you until we both come so hard, we collapse.”

My clit woke up and stood up straight, ready for it to happen right away.

He pressed a kiss to my shoulder. “Good night, Annabelle.”

It was a long time before my body calmed down enough to sleep.

sunday

CHRIS

Most years, I did everything I could to delay everyone leaving Friendsgiving. It was the best week of my year, and that was true again this year. But for very different reasons.

This year, I was antsy and on edge, desperate for them all to get the hell out so I could have Annie one more time. At the same time, part of me did want to delay leaving. Once we walked out that front door and got in our cars, it was over with me and Annie.

The night before had almost convinced me she could love me. That our friendship and amazing chemistry could be enough as the foundation of a life together.

Almost.

But the reality was, today was the last time I would hold Annie's naked body and touch her everywhere, holding nothing back. It stung that she'd avoided my suggestion we try a friends-with-benefits arrangement, but it didn't surprise me. She'd been up front with me all week about why she wanted this.

After we'd all gotten our cars packed and cleaned the place, we stood in a group in the living room. For some

reason, every year we made a big deal about saying goodbye. Even though most of us would see each other at work tomorrow and I was having lunch with Tina on Thursday.

I was stepping toward her to give her a hug when Evan cleared his throat. Loudly and meaningfully.

We all turned to look at him.

“So, before we all head out, Julia and I have something we want to tell everyone.”

Tina’s eyes lit up. “You’re pregnant too?”

Evan and Julia both got horrified expressions. “God, no,” Julia said, shaking her head vehemently.

“We, uh, didn’t want it to be a thing all weekend, but it seems like we should tell you when we’re all together.” Evan’s gaze flicked to Annie. “Well, and Annie pried it out of me yesterday.”

Scott gaped at her. She shrugged.

“So get to it,” I snapped. I already felt edgy about ending things with Annie. I didn’t need Evan being dramatic and making it worse.

“Obviously there are a lot of details to work out, but Julia and I have been looking at moving to Atlanta, to be near her family.”

“Great, we’ll start the search for a new CCO when we get to work tomorrow,” Scott said bitterly.

“What? No! I’m not leaving the company.”

“We’re in Denver. You’ll be in Atlanta. Your entire staff is in Denver. Not sure how that’s going to work.” I gave him a challenging glare.

Evan looked back and forth between me and Scott. Next to me, Annie sighed.

“There’s no reason he can’t work from Atlanta. So much of what he does is online anyway.” My sister, being logical.

Wait, what?

Evan nodded, still focused on me and Scott. Clearly Annie had given him her blessing for whatever plans he had. “We’re a global corporation. Why shouldn’t we have offices in more than one place? We’ve been talking about opening a European and Asian office for a while, so why not another in the US?”

Damn him, he was making sense. I scrubbed my hand over my face and let out a huff. It wasn’t a bad idea, from a business perspective. Which I hated.

Because from a personal perspective, it meant one of my very best friends moving thousands of miles away. We were both too busy to visit much, and eventually he and Julia might expand their family, and he wouldn’t want to travel much anyway.

This at the same time Scott and my sister were having a baby, which would consume their time. And no matter what we said or how hard we tried, Annie and I were inevitably going to have a shift in our relationship. Especially once she started dating this other guy. And I would be left all alone. Exactly how I’d planned it.

It fucking sucked.

“Say something,” Evan said. “Even if you just yell at me.”

“I mean, it’s definitely workable,” Scott said.

“And it’s not a horrible idea,” I relented.

“Stop pouting,” Annie said. “It’s not like it’s going to happen next week. It’ll take time to set up an entire new office. You’ll have time to prepare.”

I sighed. She wasn’t wrong, but the heaviness in my chest felt like she was.

“Why not just tell us, man?” I asked. “You’ve been weird and secretive. We thought you were leaving the company.”

Evan scoffed. “Like I’d let you jackasses run my company without me.”

“Your company?”

“Hey now! It’s *our* company.”

“Your company, my ass.”

We all talked over each other now.

“I had to have some kind of plan in mind before I talked to the rest of you,” Evan said, a touch defensively. “We’ve only been seriously talking about this for a couple months.”

“OK, so you know our secret,” Tina said. “And we know yours now. Anyone else have any secrets we need to get out in the open before we head home? Because I’m already ready for a nap. So I want to get on the road.”

I fought to keep my expression neutral. It was an effort not to look at Annie. Nope, no secrets here. We definitely weren’t secretly screwing each other.

Annie gave an exaggerated shrug. “I got nothing.”

“Chris?” Tina prompted. “Anything you need to confess?”

I shook my head. “Nope.” Certainly not that I couldn’t wait for everyone else to leave so I could get Annie naked one last time.

“Thank god,” Tina said. “Evan, Julia, I hope you’ll come back every year. Chris, I’ll see you Thursday. Annie, it’s been lovely. Scott, let’s go.”

For the next ten minutes, we slowly worked our way to the door. Julia checked their room “one last time” twice.

“I’m just going to make sure I have everything I need to get Cranberry back to the city,” Annie said as the other four filed outside.

“Guess that means I’m waiting, since you’re parking me in.” I tried to sound natural, but it probably came off like I was reading lines for an infomercial.

“See you.” Tina gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, then headed for the car.

Another round of handshakes and hugs, then Annie went back inside and I followed her.

By the time I shut the door and kicked my shoes back off, Annie was upstairs. I hurried up after her. She stood in the kitchen, leaning against the island, arms crossed over her chest.

As soon as our eyes met, heat punched me in the gut. Fuck. I would never stop wanting this woman. Whoever this other guy was, he was a lucky motherfucker.

Her soft smile curled into a grin. “Thanks.”

I frowned. Wait, had I said that out loud? Shit.

“I kind of think I’m going to be the lucky one.”

I walked toward her, not stopping until my body brushed hers. “I don’t want to talk about him right now.” I put my hands on her hips while I pressed a gentle kiss to the side of her neck.

“You brought him up.”

My mouth worked its way slowly toward her mouth.

“I did. And now I’d much rather do other things with our mouths.”



ANNIE

With that rather corny line, Chris’s lips brushed over mine. “I thought they’d never leave.”

“Same,” I murmured, then pressed my lips more firmly to his. There was a touch of desperation to how he kissed me, one that hadn’t been there before. Because, of course, he thought this was it. Our last time.

And maybe I’d miscalculated. Maybe it would end up that way. But I had a solid confidence that it wouldn’t. Maybe he wasn’t fully in love with me, not the way I had been for so long. But he loved me, was attracted to me, and we had amazing physical chemistry. Strong relationships had been built on less.

His tongue played with mine, the sensation warming me everywhere. When his hands slid under the back of my sweatshirt, I shivered.

“Cold?”

“Not at all.”

He trailed kisses along my cheek, down the side of my neck, each leaving a dot of fire on my skin. “So that was the secret he was keeping from us?”

My lust-fogged brain struggled to make sense of his words. “What?”

“Evan. What he told us.” His teeth scraped the pulse at the base of my neck.

“Oh, right.” He wanted to deconstruct this now? At the same time he was sliding his hand up my side to cup my breast?

“He let us stew all weekend.”

“Chris?” He needed to shut up about Evan.

“Umm?” He nibbled at my collarbone.

“Do you really want to talk about Evan?”

He lifted his head, eyes glazed as he looked down at me. Slowly, one side of his mouth curled up. “You’re right. I did say we were doing better things with our mouths.”

“You did.”

He rocked his hard cock against me. “And I made a few promises last night, I think.”

“You did.” My voice was much breathier this time.

His thumbs slid under my bralette and brushed over my nipples. “I should probably do that, then.”

“You should.”

He lifted his arms, taking my sweatshirt and bralette with. Then he lifted my breasts together as he dropped his head to suck one nipple. Pleasure speared me between the legs. I moved restlessly against him, grinding my clit against his cock.

He hummed his approval into my skin, sending flutters of sensation over my breast. As he shoved his hands down the

back of my leggings and worked them down my legs, he never removed his mouth from my breast. Awkwardly, we undressed each other as he continued to suck on me. The only time he took a momentary break was to get his sweatshirt over his head.

At last we were naked, and he hoisted me up on the counter. Only then did he release my nipple. I was so thoroughly turned on, it seemed like one brush between my legs was all it would take.

His expression was lust incarnate as he looked up at me. “And now I believe I have even better things to do with my mouth.” He stroked a hand down my bare arm, making me shudder. “The only thing I love more than kissing your mouth is kissing your pussy.”

I shuddered again, possibility and hope filling me as much as lust and hunger did. Even the cold, hard counter under me didn't detract from my longing.

“Then you should probably kiss me.” My voice was amazingly steady.

He was teasing at first, little flicks of his tongue over my wet curls. Moving back and forth along my outer lips. It felt incredible, but it was so far from what I needed. Yet he stayed at it for what felt like forever.

A glance at the microwave clock revealed it was less than a minute before he spread me with his fingers and took a good, long lick.

“Fuck, you taste so good,” he murmured, his breath over my hot pussy making me shiver.

Without preamble, he wrapped his lips around my clit and sucked so hard I saw stars. A second suck and I was on the

very edge. And with a flick-suck combo, he sent me flying.

The orgasm came hard and fast and curled my toes against his back, pleasure surging through me, out to the farthest corners of my body. As I shook, his arms steadied me, holding me to the earth when I would've flown away. Keeping me with him as I panted his name.

“I need you.” He helped me down from the counter before my legs were steady. But of course he had me. He held me against him, his cock solid and insistent between us.

“Yes. I'm yours.” So many ways I meant those words. I would be his forever, not just this morning in this rented kitchen. Always, always his.

He turned me away from him so I could lean against the island, pulled my hips back toward him, and found my entrance. Two, three rocking thrusts and he was inside me, as deep as he could get.

“Chris.”

“Can't wait,” he panted as he started to thrust. His fingers came around me to play with my clit, and just like that, I was climbing again.

His thrusts were fast and hard, and he gave a soft grunt every time he shoved back into me. I was too breathless to do more than gasp each time he bottomed out inside me. His fingers had me rapidly approaching the peak again. It was so good. Too good. I was so—

“Oh, shit!”

At the sound of Tina's voice, Chris and I both froze. Oh, shit was right.

“Ewwwww.” Her next words held a note of horror.

Chris spun us away from his sister and Scott, who I'd caught a glimpse of in my frozen shock.

"Fuck," Chris huffed out, straightening. His deflated penis slid out of me.

Not anymore, my entirely inappropriate brain supplied.

A moment ago, I'd been burning up with desire. Now I was burning with mortification. It was one thing to get naked with Chris, but entirely another to be naked—and having sex—in front of Scott. My brain started freaking out about how entirely awkward our executive staff meeting would be tomorrow morning.

Maybe I should get naked for Evan. That way, they've all seen me naked.

My brain was an asshole.

"What are you doing here?" Chris snapped as he shoved my sweatshirt into my hands.

I took it gratefully and pulled it on. It hung far enough to cover the necessary bits. Not that the damage wasn't already done.

"I could ask you the same thing," Scott countered.

"I think we already know what they were doing," Tina muttered.

My face got impossibly hotter.

"I told you something was up with them." Tina lightly punched Scott in the arm.

"Can we not do this right now?" I asked. I didn't need a big confessional. I just wanted to pull on the rest of my clothes

and get on the road. The mood between Chris and I was thoroughly dead, and I didn't see any way to revive it today.

Judging from the stunned look on his face, neither did he. He'd pulled on his sweatpants, but even seeing his bare chest, which would've had me drooling minutes ago, now did nothing.

"I forgot my gloves," Scott said, edging toward the bedroom they'd been in.

"Lunch on Thursday is going to be interesting," Tina said with a wicked smile.

Would it be too much to ask for me to die now? I didn't mind her knowing about Chris and my weekend, especially given my endgame. But did it have to happen like this?

Scott saw me getting railed.

That part bothered me most. I didn't like the idea that my business partner saw me in the throes of sex. At least not that business partner.

"Got 'em." Scott's voice was overly cheerful as he waved the gloves at us. "Sweetie, why don't we go now?"

I'd never once heard him call Tina *sweetie* before.

"Sounds good." Tina glanced back and forth between Chris and me a few times, then followed her husband, who had disappeared down the stairs.

As soon as they were out of sight, I grabbed for the rest of my clothes.

"I'm so sorry," Chris said. "This isn't how..."

I yanked up my sweats. "It's not your fault." I handed him his sweatshirt.

He wrapped his fingers around my wrist and pulled me against him. “I don’t want this to end like this.”

His expression was more serious than I’d ever seen him. Maybe now was the time to say something. I had originally planned to wait a few days so he could feel how hard it was to go back to being apart, so he’d appreciate it that much more when I told him I was in love with him. Plus, after the intensity of the week, I needed a little breathing room.

No, I would stick with the plan. Cranberry and I would get in the car and head home, and Tuesday during our dinner meeting, I would tell Chris.

I cupped his cheek, his stubble tickling my palm. He hadn’t bothered shaving that morning. “I know. Me either. But we can’t really change it. And we have to be out of here in a half hour.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist. “It’s gonna take me longer than that to recover from my sister seeing that.”

I smiled. “Or our business partner.”

“That too.”

For long, silent moments, we simply watched each other. I put every ounce of love I felt for him into my gaze, trying to communicate what I would tell him with words in a few days. My chest swelled with emotion, making it hard to breathe.

“So I guess this is it, then.” His voice sounded sad.

“Yep.”

He cupped my cheek and ran his thumb over my bottom lip. “I’m never going to forget this week. It’s meant a lot to me.”

It’s meant everything to me. “I won’t either.”

He smiled stiffly. “Sure you will. You’ll start dating that other guy and forget all about me.”

He looked so sad, I had to tell him. “Chris, I—”

His lips closed over mine in a fierce, passionate kiss, his tongue sweeping in to silence what I’d been about to say. He tilted my head to just the right angle and kissed me like I was oxygen.

Just as I was about to wrap my arms around him and really sink into the kiss, he pulled back. “I should get going.” He stepped back a step, two. Backing toward the stairs.

I held up my hand to signal he should wait. “Chris, wait.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” He turned and bolted down the stairs.

So much for confessing my feelings early.

tuesday

CHRIS

The holiday charity dinner scene was exhausting to me in the best of years. This was not the best of years.

It had only been two days since Annie and I were over, and I was already more miserable than I'd been in years. At least since I'd left home at 18 and met her. So the last place I wanted to be was at a stuffy, hob-nobbing dinner in a tux.

The only thing making the night even a little tolerable was that my business partners were also there. Which meant Tina.

And she looked really fucking sexy. She was in a slim-fitting sparkly red dress with thin straps, and it plunged down to her waist in back. She probably had on some fancy contraption to serve as a bra, but my imagination liked to think she didn't have one on.

And if my mouth watered a little at the idea, remembering how her perfect breasts tasted, well, I was only human. Human and in love and missing her like crazy, even though she was only a few feet away. The four of us, plus of course Tina and Julia as Evan and Scott's dates, were at a table together. But for the fancy clothes, it could've been an extension of Friendsgiving.

“I don’t know why it surprises me every year, but this champagne is amazing.” Julia held up her glass and looked into it. “Why don’t we get champagne like this at home?”

“Because it gives you nasty hangovers, and if we bought the really good stuff, you’d drink it all the time,” Evan said patiently.

“Fair.” Julia took a long sip.

“How are you feeling?” Annie asked Tina, who sat next to her. She was between Evan and my sister. Instead of next to me where I wanted her.

They started talking about Tina’s pregnancy, Julia continued nursing her drink, and Evan and Scott started talking about work. I half listened to them, but mostly tuned it out. I felt oddly detached in a way I’d never felt with my friends before.

It was more like being with my parents, a sense that technically I was part of the group, but I didn’t really belong.

Which was ridiculous. I was just feeling sorry for myself about Annie. Of course I belonged with this group. The company was my idea, for fuck’s sake.

At least Annie hadn’t brought *him*. I didn’t even know his name, knew literally nothing about him, but I still hated him. He didn’t deserve Annie. Whoever he was, he wasn’t good enough. No one was.

Especially not me.

“I’m going to go check out the dessert table.” Tina gave me a meaningful look across the table. “Come with me, Chris?”

Did I have to?

One look at the hard expression on my sister's face said yes, I did have to. I took my scotch and soda and followed her across the room. As we walked, she slipped her arm through mine.

“What the hell is up with you tonight?” she asked softly, leaning into my shoulder.

“What do you mean?” I played dumb. I still hadn't gotten over my little sister walking in on me having sex and was not at all in a place to talk about anything surrounding it.

“I mean, it was pretty obvious what you and Annie were doing all week, and now you're barely looking at each other.” Tina dropped my arm to pick up a plate at the dessert buffet.

I didn't bother. Sweets wouldn't help my mood even a little.

“Did me and Scott really ruin it?”

“What? No. No, it was never meant to be past last week. Just... scratching a mutual itch.” That sounded so crass. And so disrespectful to what had happened between us. Even if she didn't love me back, I still respected the fuck out of Annie. She was so much more than an itch.

Tina made a strange sound.

“What?” OK, fine. One pastry. I popped a mini-cream puff into my mouth.

“You two have been in love with each other for years. That was more than scratch—”

“Well, well, look who's here.”

The sound of my father's voice was like ice injected into my veins. My chest flushed hot with anger, yet I was freezing.

Of course he was here. And if he was, so was my mother. And most likely my grandfather. Suddenly the amazing filet mignon wasn't sitting so well.

"Father," Tina said stiffly.

"Bringing your sister as a date, Christopher? Really?"

"She's with Scott. Her husband," I bit out. Because she hadn't invited our family to their wedding, my father liked to pretend he didn't know she was married to my partner.

"Oh, and where is your date, then, son?"

"I didn't bring anyone." The words hurt more than I wanted them to. But that was mostly because my father was being an ass. His default state.

"I'm surprised to see you here. I heard you haven't had such a great year." His eyes sparkled with glee.

"We've done just fine." Technically, our profits were down slightly over last year. Because we'd given raises that actually matched cost-of-living increases. Because we believed in people over profit. "How's employee retention going for you?"

My grandfather's corporation was a notoriously horrible place to work. Low pay, poor benefits, bad work environment. They squashed any attempt to unionize. Whereas we encouraged our employees to join our company's union. It was to their benefit.

A hand landed on my arm, startling me. I turned to see Annie standing at my side. Even in my angry state, her up-swept hair presented her neck as a temptation I could barely resist.

"Chris, I needed to talk to you about something. It's urgent."

My father made a disapproving sound. He had exactly zero women on his executive staff or on his board. He was a good old-fashioned misogynist. He'd once said Annie was too pretty to possibly be smart. It had taken everything in me to keep from punching him.

"Excuse me," I said coolly, following Annie as she led me away from the hateful man who'd spawned me.

"I need to get back to my table," I heard Tina say as Annie and I walked toward the open area at the front of the room where couples were dancing to a live band.

Annie led us to an open spot on the floor, took my hand, and slid her other hand around the side of my neck. I stepped into her body, and for a moment, I closed my eyes and just breathed. Let myself enjoy the simple pleasure of holding her.

"I'm sorry your dad's here," she murmured.

I looked at her. Normally she was half a head shorter than me, but in heels she was closer to my height. Her dark eyes shone with sympathy. After Scott, who I'd grown up with, Annie knew best about my struggles with my family. Besides Tina, of course.

"Me too," I said. My chest ached, holding her but with a distance still between us.

And because I'd barely been able to think about anything else, and because I was an asshole, I asked, "Have you talked to that guy yet?"

We both knew what guy I was talking about.

Her cheeks turned a lovely pink. "No, not yet. Haven't had a chance. I'm hoping to connect with him later this week."

The ache in my chest grew hollow. The pain was all-encompassing. It was still worth every second we'd spent together last week, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt like fuck.

I wanted to bury my face in her neck and tell her how much I loved her. My lips practically tingled with the unspoken words. Only two days like this, and it was hell.

History had shown me that my feelings for her wouldn't lessen; if anything, they would grow. But maybe the deep cut of having had her and letting her go would ease some.

I had to hope.

We danced silently for the rest of the song and into the next.

"It's a lovely party," she said as a third song started.

She hated these events as much as I did. We attended because it kept us in good standing in the Denver business community. But I would much rather have written a large check and stayed home. Or gone to the gym to swim. I could swim out my frustration better than I could deal with it anywhere else.

"Delicious food."

This was where we were, reduced to bland small talk. I wanted to not only tell her how deeply I loved her, I wanted to talk about what seeing my father had done to me. Because on top of the permanent ache I now felt in my chest, my gut was rolling with anger. That was the effect my dad had on me. If I saw my grandfather, I'd probably lose my shit. The situation with Annie had me too on edge to handle them.

"I think I'm going to leave soon," I said, staring at a random spot on the floor behind her. If I looked at her too much, I would cave to my feelings.

“Before the awards?”

I’d forgotten about those. Our company was nominated for a Good Business Citizen award.

“Evan can take it. He’s the communications guy anyway. They don’t want a CFO.”

“Yeah, but you’re the handsome one.”

I couldn’t help looking at her and found her smiling coyly up at me.

“Stop that look, or you might have to leave with me.” The words fell out before I could stop them.

Her smile froze. She blinked at me, blinked again. “We probably shouldn’t... here...”

I wasn’t sure exactly what she was saying, but the overall message came through loud and clear.

Annie and I were through, and we would not be talking about it. Ever.



ANNIE

Chris was lost. More lost than I’d ever seen him. To some degree, this was his usual reaction to his father being there. But he was more tense than usual to begin with.

My hopeful heart told myself it was because he missed me. Certainly the way he’d looked at me just now was evidence supporting that hypothesis. I missed him too. After just a few nights in his arms, I’d gotten used to having him there. Waking up the past two mornings had been cold and lonely.

Hopefully that would all come to an end tomorrow.

“We still on for a dinner meeting tomorrow?” I asked.

His eyes searched my face for a long moment, long enough to make my spine tingle. As he looked, his gaze grew hotter, like he was imagining all the things we could do alone in his office.

Did he realize I didn’t have business to discuss with him? Or at least not company business. This was personal business. The business of our future. Together.

Hopefully.

“Yes, six o’clock. I let Rich know we’ll need something,” he finally answered. Rich was the head of our cafeteria services. “I gave him discretion over what he wants to make.”

I shrugged one shoulder. “I’m not picky.”

His gaze dropped from mine to my mouth for a long pause, then back to my eyes. He looked ravenous, like he wanted to devour me.

And I knew. I knew with absolute certainty if I said *take me home* I could have him tonight. I could wake up in his bed with him instead of my own with Cranberry. Who didn’t hold the same appeal.

Was I being ridiculous, sticking with this plan to tell him over dinner tomorrow? We could leave now, have incredible sex, and I could tell him while wrapped naked in his arms.

Yes, I really should—

“May I cut in?” A cool, haughty voice interrupted my thoughts.

Chris froze. I turned to see his mother standing there, her expression just as chilly as her voice.

He dropped his arms and took two steps back. “I need to go.” With nothing further, he spun around and walked away. The line of his disappearing body was as tense as I’d ever seen him.

I watched as he stalked toward the coat check. A minute later he had his wool coat, shrugging into it as he hurried out of the room.

Next to me, Cathryn Wexler made a delicate throat clearing noise. For a moment, I’d been so absorbed in watching Chris leave, I’d almost forgotten she was next to me.

Anger and indignation on Chris’s behalf bubbled up in my chest. I whirled on her. “What is wrong with you? Haven’t you gotten the message he very clearly sends?”

“That he wants to pretend we’re not his family,” she snapped. “Yes, I get that loud and clear. I don’t accept it.”

I didn’t have anything further to say to the nasty woman who had so deeply hurt my friends. So I turned away, intending to head back to our table.

Her hands on my arm stopped me.

“One of these days, he’s going to give up his dalliance with your little company.” Her tone was as hateful as the expression on her pinched face. “He’ll come home, to us, to our company, where he belongs.”

“Chris is too good a person to ever set foot in one of your buildings, let alone work for your company.” I shook off her hand and walked away as fast as I could in my stupid heels. I hated dressing up for these charity events.

“Let me guess,” Tina said as I approached the table. “He talked to Dad again?”

“Your mom this time.”

Tina actually growled. Scott slid his arm around her shoulders.

“Shit,” Evan muttered. “You think one of us should go after him?”

“Nah, he needs to stew. He’ll be over it by tomorrow.”

I sat and reached for my water glass. I certainly hoped he was calmed down by tomorrow.

We had a future to discuss.

wednesday

CHRIS

By the time the official workday ended, I was in a foul mood. I'd stupidly gone home and gotten drunk last night and woken up with a killer hangover. Because of that, I'd been grumpy as fuck all day.

Plus, the prospect of dinner with Annie had me on edge. She hadn't said exactly what she needed to meet about. But inevitably we'd talk about more than work. It was what friends did. She'd probably finally tell me about this other guy. Or, masochist that I was, I might ask. If only to remind myself that she couldn't be mine.

At five, I sent my executive assistant home and checked in with the kitchen staff. They informed me that we were having Cornish game hens and roast vegetables. Tiny birds with lots of bones were about as unromantic a food as you could get. Which was perfect. I didn't need to do something self-destructive, like picture us having sex while we were talking.

This was work, dammit. I could remain professional around Annie. I always had before and now would be no different.

Except now I was picturing us having sex on the table. And if I was honest, it was far from the first time I'd imagined

it. Which was the opposite of professional. But I'd promised Annie nothing would change, so I'd make sure it didn't. It was the least I could do for her.

Beyond being the love of my life, she was my best friend. In many ways, I was closer to her than I was to Scott, even though I'd known him longer. Though I'd never been attracted to Scott, even though I was to men in general. Probably because he was straight.

I answered some emails and did other busywork until two members of the kitchen staff brought the food.

Right as they left, Annie showed up. Two minutes early. Not that I was obsessively watching the clock or anything. I wanted to be around her as much as possible, but it also hurt right now to be with her. More than it had... before. Hopefully that would fade with time.

Annie's smile was warm, as usual, but there was something a little off about it too. If I knew Annie—which I did, well—she was nervous about something.

That made two of us.

“So how was your dad's Thanksgiving?” I asked as we dug into our food. Because I didn't know what else to say to her right now. And if we really were going to talk business, that was easier done after we ate.

She finished chewing, then said, “It sounds like it was really nice. They had dinner at Jason's. And my niece was apparently stealing the show, entertaining everyone.”

I did my best to actually listen to her words instead of getting lost inside my head, in memories of the past week. I'd been struggling with it since Sunday. “How old is she now?”

“Just turned three.” Her ponytail fell over her shoulder, long enough it almost dipped into her food.

I couldn't stop myself from reaching over to catch it. Our gazes connected, and it was like being shot in the chest with electricity. My throat closed, making my words sound choked. “You don't want garlic butter on your hair.”

She took the handful of hair from me, her smile soft and maybe a little sad. “Thanks.” She wove it into a quick braid and tossed it down her back. The silky strands of her hair immediately started to unwind.

She started telling me an anecdote about her niece, and I tried to listen, I really did. But all I could focus on were her lips. Those soft, amazing, delicious lips.

I pictured her coming over to me, climbing onto my lap, and riding me. Or we could do it standing and I could take her from behind over my desk. Since we hadn't gotten to finish that way on Sunday.

My cock stirred at the mental picture.

Shit, I could not get hard during a work meeting. Not that it would be the first time, because sometimes she was just too much for my libido to handle. All it did was prove that I truly was an asshole who didn't deserve her.

I shifted and started reciting financial formulas in my head.

“So yeah. My dad had to pick peas out of his beard, but at least Nadia still believes in Santa Claus.” She gave me a mega-watt grin, and even though I had no idea what she was talking about, I grinned back.

“That's a relief.” It seemed like a good thing to say. Even I thought kids should get to hold on to the magic of Santa for a while.

We ate in silence until I couldn't stand it anymore. The words just popped out of my mouth before my brain had time to think better of it.

“Have you talked to that guy yet?” My gut twisted. Why the fuck had I asked? I didn't want to know.

Annie stared at her plate. “Um, yeah. About that.”

There is no other guy, it was all a ruse, she's actually madly in love with me.

Stupid brain, clinging to hope that didn't exist. Shouldn't exist.

She straightened her dessert fork on the table. Took a drink of water. Pulled at the button on her sweater.

Was it that hard for her to talk to me about him? Shit, I didn't want that part of our friendship to end.

“I shouldn't—”

“There is no other guy,” she blurted.

For a minute I just blinked at her, processing the fact that she'd said the exact words I'd imagined.

“Then...” My heart started pounding, adrenaline flooding my system.

“I...” She cleared her throat. Then finally she looked me directly in the face. “I wanted to see how good we can be together. Because there's something there. Something more than friendship.”

She reached her hand toward me, setting it on the table near my plate. But I didn't take it. Her words weren't making any sense to me. This couldn't actually be happening. She couldn't—

“I’m in love with you, Chris. I have been for years and I’m tired of pretending otherwise. And I think—”

“Why not just tell me, then?” I snapped.

She loved me? No, no, that wasn’t right. She couldn’t love someone like me. Someone so empty inside. Someone so lost. Someone who would do nothing but hurt her.

“You always say you’re too much of an asshole to commit to a woman, but I don’t believe that.” She leaned into me, her expression soft and pleading. And so, so vulnerable.

And because I was the asshole she didn’t believe in, I was going to hurt her. I had no choice.

I shoved back from the table and stalked to the window. “You lied to me. Not just lied, but manipulated. The same way my father and grandfather manipulate everyone. Including me.”

The same way one day I could grow to manipulate anyone I pleased.

“I knew you’d resist if I just told you, flat out. But I thought—”

I whirled around to face her, the anger building into righteous fury. “You thought if you fucked around with my feelings, you could get what you want?”

“What? No, that’s not...” Her face crumpled in pain.

And because I was an asshole, I forced myself not to care. To ignore my own pain at shoving away the woman who, yes, had made me angry, but who I ultimately loved.

“I think you should leave. I assume this was a ruse too?” I swung my arm to encompass our dinner. “That there’s no business to discuss?”

She stared at the floor, looking more miserable than I'd ever seen her. She nodded, ponytail swishing over her shoulder.

I wanted to wrap that ponytail around my fist, pull her head back, and kiss her until we both stopped hurting.

But she'd *lied* to me. And beyond that, I was still the man who wasn't good enough for her. I couldn't give in. For her own good.

"I think you should leave." I turned to stare out the window at the dark skyline.

"Chris." She said my name like an ache.

I couldn't see her, but I could tell she hadn't gotten up from the table. Which was good. If she came over and touched me, I would cave. And this was, in the end, the best thing for both of us.

I heard her moving around, hopefully gathering her things. The kitchen had sent up cherry cheesecake that wouldn't get eaten, which was a shame. It was damn good cheesecake.

"Take the cheesecake home with you."

She didn't respond, just moved around some more. I stared out the window, not seeing the city before me. Not seeing anything. Barely feeling anything. Somehow, knowing she'd done something as foolish as falling in love with me made me numb. The anger had faded to... nothing at all.

Besides the ever-present love for her. Which was why I was doing this.

I heard my office door open. "I know why you're doing this, and I'm not letting you push me away." Her voice was gentle and caring. "I'm not giving up on you."

“Then you’re a fool.”

There was a long pause before she walked out and shut the door behind her.

Leaving me alone in my empty office with my empty thoughts and empty feelings and empty life.



ANNIE

Everything hurt. My head, my joints, my muscles, deep into my internal organs.

Especially my heart. There was a physical ache in my chest that had taken root when Chris got up from the table, and it held on now as I drove home. Out to the big house I’d bought in the suburbs, thinking one day I’d have a family there. At least a spouse. Once upon a time, when I’d bought the house, I’d still believed there was a chance I’d get over Chris someday.

But after more than a decade of loving him, I was resigned. There would be no one else. And though I’d said I wasn’t giving up on him, I had no idea what else to do.

If our time together hadn’t convinced him, and we were already best friends, what else was there? I knew he had romantic feelings for me that went beyond sex. I felt that as deeply inside as I did the hurt of him rejecting me.

So it was just me in my big, empty house. Me and Cranberry.

She was curled up in a ball of fluff on my family room recliner when I got home. When I reached down to scratch her

head, she yawned and stretched and was so damn cute, I couldn't help smiling, miserable as I was.

It was barely after seven, but I was ready to hole up in my bed and wallow for a bit before I went to sleep. It was tempting to drown my sorrows in a few glasses of wine, but I had a seven a.m. meeting tomorrow and Future Annie would hate me if I did that to her.

I had work I should do tonight. Put the finishing touches on my proposal for tomorrow's meeting. But the proposal would have to go without those touches. Tonight was for self care.

"This is why we never told him before," I told Cranberry as I carried her upstairs with me.

She bumped her head against the hand that wasn't carrying her. She didn't care about my romantic life. Or lack thereof. She had simple needs. Food, sleep, scratches. Oh, to be a kitten.

I set Cranberry on the bed and changed into my favorite pair of flannel pajamas. They were blue with cartoon chocolate chip cookies and glasses of milk all over them. They were old, I'd gotten them shortly after college, and they had the soft feel of well-worn, well-loved clothes. They were the comforting hug I needed tonight.

Twelve years. I'd loved him for twelve years. Since the first week of college. Maybe not quite that long. At first I'd been more infatuated with him, but we'd gotten to know each other quickly and infatuation turned to love not long after.

Had I blown it? Was any chance we might have had destroyed because I hadn't been straightforward with him from

the start? The ruse had felt necessary, a way to lower his defenses, so he'd let me in all the way.

Not just lied, but manipulated. The same way my father and grandfather manipulate everyone. Including me.

His words rang in my head as I climbed onto my bed next to Cranberry. She'd propped herself against the pillows and fallen back to sleep. Being a kitten was apparently exhausting.

Fuck, Chris was right. I had manipulated him. I dropped my face into my hands and groaned. Not quite like his dad and grandpa; they did it with malicious intent. But intent didn't matter when I'd hurt Chris.

In trying to win over the one I loved, I'd hurt the one I loved.

That was a lot to wrap my head around.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed my phone and sent him a quick text.

Annie: I'm sorry I lied. I had an amazing time with you, and it's hard to regret what we shared. But I should've been straight with you from the start.

Annie: And I'm so sorry I hurt you.

Heart pounding with adrenaline, I tossed the phone down next to Cranberry. I grabbed the remote and put on the latest streaming rom com movie. I needed something I could get absorbed in without having to think too hard.

Twenty minutes in, my phone chimed with a text. My pulse kicked up again.

Chris: Apology accepted.

That was it. The crush of disappointment that had been pressing on my chest for the past hour got heavier. It felt like I couldn't breathe. I couldn't have said what exactly I was looking for, but it was more than that.

Tears welled up in my eyes and I let a few fall before I swiped them away.

More miserable than I'd felt in years, I picked up Cranberry and cradled her to my chest. She barely woke as she snuggled into me. I stroked her head and tried to focus on the movie instead of my agony.

How did I begin to get over someone I'd loved for so long?

Another half hour passed, and my phone buzzed again.

Chris: I still can't be the man you need.

"Thanks, that's fucking helpful!" I yelled at the phone.

Cranberry made a sound of protest.

"Sorry, baby. Go back to sleep."

I'd meant what I said. I wasn't giving up on him. But what if nothing changed? What if I couldn't get through to him?

The tears came again, and this time, I let them flow. I sat in my bed, tears dripping, then streaming down my face, cuddling Cranberry and getting her little head wet. I let the hurt flow through me, and in its wake, there was anger. How dare he do this to me?

How dare he do it to himself? He was not even close to the horrible man he thought he was. Sure, he had his asshole moments. We all did. But he was so convinced he was going to turn into his father and grandfather when all available evidence said otherwise.

By the time his dad was his age, Chris and Tina were born. He was already exploiting workers and the environment at work and ignoring his kids at home.

By contrast, while treating our employees a step past really well was important to all of us, it was Chris's passion. And the company was started to create green technology.

He was the exact opposite of his father. So why couldn't he see that?

As I was using tissues to sop up my tears and blow my nose, my phone pinged again. Hope flared in my chest.

But it wasn't Chris.

Tina: my brother might have told me about your dinner and I might be thinking about going over there and killing him. If this baby didn't have me so damn exhausted.

I had no idea how to begin to respond to that, so I didn't bother.

Tina: anyone can see you two belong together, even if I could have lived without seeing it live and in person.

I groaned at the memory. Definitely in the top two most mortifying moments of my life. And it wasn't number two.

Tina: he'll come around. Even my brother isn't that big of a dumbass.

I sniffed and pet Cranberry's damp head. Poor thing, not protesting at all as I cried all over her.

Because I felt like I had to, I forced myself to text Tina back.

Annie: Thanks. I hope you're right.

saturday

CHRIS

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Before she sat down across the table from me, Tina hit me in the back of the head.

“Ow!” She wasn’t holding anything back. My skull stung.

She settled into her chair and stared at me. Like she was waiting for something.

“What?” I’d very nearly cancelled our postponed lunch date. I’d postponed on Thursday because I was too miserable to talk to anyone. Funny how I was the one who’d turned down Annie, but I was the one who was also miserable. I had no doubt she was too, but it seemed ridiculous that I would be.

After all, this was what I wanted.

I mean, it wasn’t, but it was.

“You know what. How could you do that to Annie?” She glared at me, her blue eyes narrowed. “And to yourself. You’ve been in love with her since college.”

“What... how...” I’d literally never told a single soul that I was in love with Annie.

She rolled her eyes as she picked up the menu. Which she did every time we met at McSomething's, her favorite Irish pub for a burger. Which was what she would order. With onion strings and a Coke. Which she did every time.

"Everyone but you, apparently, knows you're in love with her. Maybe she doesn't know either. But the rest of us have known pretty much since college."

I just gaped at her. I didn't act differently around her than I did any other friend. I made sure of it.

I mean, OK, I snuck looks at her amazing ass, and occasionally could get lost in her pretty brown eyes. But no one paid enough attention to me to notice that.

"Come on, Scott and Evan lived with you two. Of course they noticed. They also know she's been in love with you as long as you have with her. If it helps, we think you're both dumbasses for waiting this long." She nodded to the server, who was hovering nearby.

After she took our orders—my sister got her usual, as did I, the bacon cheeseburger with fries and lemonade—Tina picked the conversation thread right back up. "I was sure something would happen when you two went to Tokyo together."

"That was a business trip."

Tina shrugged.

"So if you're all so smart, why didn't anyone say anything?" She was starting to piss me off. How had she been able to tell Annie was in love with me when I hadn't known?

"Not our jobs to figure out your life for you."

"Then why are you getting involved now?"

Tina sighed and sat back in her chair. Crossed her arms over her chest. “Because, Christopher. You’re my brother and I love you and you’re miserable and you’re wrong about a dozen things. And I just want to see you happy. Annie makes you happy. You make her happy.”

She made me so happy. And maybe I did that for her now, but soon enough, I’d make her miserable. And I couldn’t live with myself if I were the cause of Annie’s misery.

Or was I just telling myself that because I was scared I couldn’t measure up?

“You’re not him, you know. And you’ll never come close to being him.”

She didn’t need to specify who she was talking about. She could be referring to either our dad or our grandfather. It didn’t really matter. They were basically the same awful person.

“Not yet,” I replied.

“For someone so smart, you can be so fucking dumb.” She took a long drink of her soda.

“Thanks for the pep talk.” Irritation tugged at my chest. I should’ve stayed home and wallowed.

How was Cranberry doing? She was a such a sweet little thing. I could picture her cuddled on Annie’s chest as Annie sat on the couch watching a movie.

And my obnoxious imagination slipped me into the scene. Next to Annie on the couch, arm around her. The three of us snuggled together.

Scenes like that had been floating in and out of my mind all week. It was wonderful and awful at the same time. I wanted every one of them to be true. Not just the sexy

fantasies and memories I jerked off too way too often, but the domestic, couple-y ones like this most recent one.

Tina waved her hand in front of my face. “Where’d you go?”

I sighed and took a sip of lemonade. “What makes you so certain I’m not going to end up just like Dad?”

“Because I know you. I see everything you do with your company. Everything you stand for. You’re kind, you care, you give a shit about other people. You go out of your way to treat your employees well. You’re a *good* person. A dumbass, but a good person. Do I need to go on?”

“I mean, it’s not horrible for my ego to hear it.” I didn’t necessarily agree with her, but it was nice to hear. Nice to know someone I loved saw me in such a positive light.

“You’re good enough for her.”

The comment cut deep. Right to the heart of what I was struggling with. I desperately wanted to be good enough for Annie. Because yes, I’d pushed her away. But when she said those words, *I’m in love with you, Chris*, for one small moment, I’d believed.

Believed we could be all the things I imagined. Believed I could be worthy of her. Believed that maybe one day she’d even wear a white dress and become my wife.

But fuck, it was so hard to let go of these beliefs I’d held for so long.

“Aren’t you scared?” I asked my sister.

The server showed up with our food, pausing the conversation temporarily.

When she left, Tina cocked her head to the side and asked, “Scared of what?”

I used a French fry to gesture in the general direction of her belly. “Fucking up the kid?”

She laughed as she took a bite of her burger. “Of course I am. I’m terrified.”

I shook my head as thoughts flew through my head. “How is it you came out of the same house as me, yet you can believe in happy endings when it seems so out of reach for me?”

“Several years of therapy.” She looked me straight in the eye, face serious. “You know I’ve been in therapy since college.”

We ate in silence for a while. The food was delicious but I barely tasted it, so lost in my head. Was that what I needed to do? Could it be that simple?

Not that therapy was simple. I knew Tina had worked her ass off at times, had hurt from the things they discussed. But she was so much mentally healthier than I was even though she’d come from the same loveless family.

“We have really good mental health benefits,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“I know. We use Scott’s insurance.” She watched me, eyebrows raised.

No longer hungry even though I’d only eaten half my meal, I sat back in my chair and rubbed a hand over my face. “I just don’t want to hurt her.”

Her expression softened. “I know. But don’t you think she’s hurting now?”

“Of course she is.” And it hurt me just to say the words. She was already hurting because of me.

“Chris, the only reason you can’t be with her is your own stubbornness.”

I sighed. “Shouldn’t I start working on therapy first? Get better for her?”

Tina shook her head. “That’s not how it works. You need to get better for yourself. And she loves you already, screwed in the head though you are.” She smiled gently.

I smiled back, a sad smile, but a smile. It felt like the first time in days.

“Annie is a strong, loving, supportive woman. She’ll be there for you as you move through your journey, whether she’s your friend or your girlfriend. So it might as well be as your girlfriend. Having Scott there has gotten me through some of the hardest shit I’ve unpacked. And I’m not saying you can’t do it without Annie, but why would you want to?”

I covered my face with my hands, and for a minute, I just breathed. Could I really do it?

Therapy, sure, no problem. I’d do some research over the rest of the weekend, make an appointment Monday.

But could I get over myself enough to be with Annie? Finally let myself truly enjoy the woman I’d loved for so long?

Excitement surged through me, shimmery and electric. Could I really have everything I’d wanted since I was 16?

“Do me a favor?” Tina nibbled at an onion ring.

I raised my eyebrows to indicate she should go on.

“When we’re done with lunch, go over to Tina’s. Just talk to her. Tell her how you feel, tell her why you’re scared. Tell her you’re going to start therapy and see if she’ll be there through it with you. Just talk. But in person, not on the phone.”

A bass drum of nerves struck up a rhythm deep in my chest. But somewhere a joyous cymbal crashed too. “I... yeah. I can do that.”



ANNIE

One reason I bought my house was the huge bonus room on the second floor. Too big to be a single bedroom, the previous owner had used it as an office and storage space. Instead, I’d had a whole new domed ceiling put in, painted everything black, and blacked out the windows. One projection system and software purchase later, I had my very own planetarium.

It was everything an aerospace engineer who’d ended up working more on clean energy than rocket science could want. And it was where I went when I wanted comfort.

I rolled out a yoga mat and lay down on it to stargaze. Hands behind my head, Cranberry curled up by my knee, I stared up into the vast darkness, broken up only by pinpricks of light. I’d set it to look like what I’d see if I went outside tonight, minus the cloud cover and suburban light pollution.

And as I stared at the scene that gave me so much comfort, I let my mind wander. It of course wandered to Chris. As it had been doing for the past few days. Even though I had still worked this morning, it was a relief it was Saturday and I

didn't have to go to the office for any meetings. Poker night the night before had been difficult, largely because Chris had been held up at a meeting in Colorado Springs and couldn't get back in time. And I hadn't seen him since our dinner Wednesday.

My chest ached with an emptiness I'd never felt before. It was an absence of Chris, more acute than it had ever been. And it was the crushing hurt of finally telling him how I felt and being rejected.

And knowing he hadn't rejected me because he didn't love me. I was almost certain he did. No, it was a worse pain, the pain of knowing he loved me and rejected me anyway.

From far away, I heard a beeping, indicating someone had just disarmed my home security system. My pulse leapt. Not because I was scared; all my friends had the code and permission to let themselves in.

It leapt with hope.

It was probably Scott coming to go over some code with me, or Tina checking in. It wouldn't be him.

So I continued staring at the ceiling and waited. Cranberry moved around, licked something three times, then settled back down. Though my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I still couldn't see what she was doing. That was the point of the near-total blackout.

I should get up. Turn on a light, go greet whoever my guest was. But I couldn't find the motivation. Everything inside felt slow and heavy.

I heard the door to the room open, but because I had a heavy black curtain hanging over it, no light spilled in. The door closed and the curtain rustled, and I didn't need to see

him to know. I could feel him just being in the same room with him.

“I’m an asshole.” His voice came from over by the door. He didn’t come closer.

“This is news so groundbreaking you had to come over and deliver it in person?” I couldn’t help a bite of sarcasm in my words. I loved him, but he’d hurt me. Deeply.

“No, it’s pretty common knowledge. But I meant specifically the other night.” His voice drifted closer as his footsteps moved across the floor.

Cranberry moved and let out a tiny *meep* for him.

“Hey, Cranberry. I’ll try not to step on you.”

“She’s on my legs, so don’t step on me either.”

“Working on it.” His voice was next to me now, and I could feel his energy beside me.

“Can I sit down? Can we talk?” His voice held an edge of desperation.

One part of me wanted to sulk and be angry with him. Because he really had been an asshole the other night. But mostly I just wanted the ache to go away.

Mostly I just wanted him.

“Yes.”

He sat down, then stretched out beside me. He was close, close enough I could hear the whisper of his breath. Awareness prickled over my skin, as it did every time he was near.

“I’m sorry, Annie. So fucking sorry.”

“For what, exactly?” I wasn’t going to make this easy for him. If he wanted my forgiveness, whether as a friend or as

more, he had to own what he'd done.

“For being so cold when you told me how... you feel.” His voice choked a little. “For pushing you away. For generally acting like an immature asshole the other night. And for not coming to my senses sooner.”

“OK.”

“OK? I don't know what that means.”

“It means I accept your apology.” My pulse was all over the place, racing, skipping beats. “But I still don't know where we stand.”

He shifted beside me, moving closer. Cranberry got up and moved to where she wasn't touching me anymore. I had no concept of where she'd gone.

“Annie, I am so fucking in love with you, I can't think straight.”

Immediately, tears welled in my eyes. My heart missed more than one beat.

“I've been in love with you almost since we met, and I've never thought I was good enough for you.”

“Chris, that's—”

“Let me finish, please. I know that's something I need to work on. I had a long conversation with Tina and she convinced me it's time I get some therapy. Work through all my issues with my dad and grandpa. I'm not saying it will be an easy process, but I'd really love if you could be there with me while I'm going through it.”

He let the words hang between us, let me process them.

Then, before I could respond, he said, “And after, too. I want you with me during and after I do that.”

I could barely process the words. Never in my life would I have imagined Chris would go to therapy without more pushing. Then again, maybe Tina had been pushing for a while.

“Chris, I love you exactly as you are. I hope you know that.”

“I do. I gotta do this for me. But also for us. I need to be able to believe I’m good enough for you. Because I really do want to be.”

“You are. But I think it’s great that you’re going to work on your issues with your dad and grandpa. You deserve to be free of that burden.”

“Annie?”

Even the way he said my name sounded more loving. Though it could be my besotted imagination. Something warm and calm was winding its way through me, settling deep inside. A sense of rightness, a knowledge that things were going to work out. And even though I knew I couldn’t really predict that, I would embrace the feeling for as long as it lasted.

“Yeah?”

“Can I touch you?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes. Please.”

There was a pause, then his hand settled on my belly. He let out a soft moan. “I’ve missed touching you so much.”

“Me too. And I should apologize too. For lying about why I wanted to be together last week.”

He scooted closer, his body pressing against my side. “Apology accepted. And honestly, it was a very enjoyable plan.”

I laughed again. “It was.”

“And I’m not sure I’d have had the guts to face my demons if you hadn’t given me such incredible incentive.”

“So you’re saying you’re just in it for the sex?” My voice held a note of teasing.

He wrapped his arm around me and pulled me closer to him. “You know that’s not what I’m saying.” He buried his face in the side of my neck, his lips trailing along my skin and making me shiver. “But as incentives go...”

He made out with my neck for a few minutes, until I was so turned on I was squirming against him.

“You know, there’s something I’ve wanted to do since the first time you showed me this planetarium.” His voice was lazy and seductive.

My clit throbbed at that tone. I knew where he was going with this, but I asked anyway. “What’s that?”

He placed a gentle kiss along my jaw. “Strip you naked...” A kiss to my chin. “Touch you everywhere...” A nip at my lower lip. “Eat your delicious pussy until you scream my name...” A nip at my upper lip. “Then fuck you until I scream your name.”

He kissed me, his lips firm and warm and gentle and perfect. Emotion swelled in my chest as tears again welled in my eyes. I moaned into him, my lips parting.

His tongue plunged into my mouth, taking me, claiming me. And turning me on. I was so, so turned on. I wrapped my

arms around his chest and pulled him to me.

The kiss went on and on. Time lost meaning when I was in the darkness of the planetarium, and it disappeared completely when Chris kissed me like this. His hands roamed my body, mine roaming his, as our mouths made love to each other.

Seconds and hours later, he kissed his way over to my ear. “I love you so much, Annabelle Louise Lang. I never want to be without you again.”

“Yes.” In the dark, my whisper echoed around us.

“Say it.”

“I love you with everything I have, Christopher Dean Wexler.” I shoved my hands under his shirt. “And right now I need you naked.”

In the dark, we fumbled with our clothes, each other’s clothes. Bumping elbows and knocking knees. It was awkward, not being able to see anything, and we laughed. “I love your laugh,” I said.

“I love that you make me laugh.” He kissed my bare shoulder.

Finally we got all our clothes off and came together, kissing and caressing again. His cock was hard against my thigh. When I wrapped him in my fist, he let me stroke him twice before grabbing my wrist to stop me.

“Not yet.” His voice was low, nearly a growl. Arousal zinged through me.

He kissed his way down my body, hands stroking me as he went. By the time he settled between my legs, I was writhing on the yoga mat, desperate, wet, and so needy.

He lifted my legs over his shoulders, pressing them wide. Then he ran one finger through my crease. We both moaned.

“So wet for me,” he murmured.

“Always.”

He did it again, and a third time. A light, teasing touch. My hips strained, needing more.

“Please, Chris.” It came out almost a whine, but I couldn’t help it. He made me feel so good. So alive.

“I like when you say that.”

I could picture the hot gleam in his eyes, could picture him watching me as I begged for him.

“Do it again, and I just might give you what you want.”

“Please, Chris. Please.”

Eschewing preliminaries, he sucked my clit into his mouth.

I screamed, the pleasure so intense it bordered on pain. The perfect edge. He thrust two fingers inside me and kissed and sucked at my clit, and in no time at all, I was right at the brink. My eyes were wide open in the dark, staring at the stars above me. Above us. The stars that would always be there, watching us as we went about our lives.

“Come for me, Annabelle.”

So I did. I came harder and deeper and wider than I ever had before. Pleasure sent me soaring, waves of ecstasy moving through me like they had no end. I was flying among the stars and I’d never come down from this high. It would stay with me forever.

Because Chris loved me.

I was only vaguely aware of him moving, still swept up in my orgasm, so when he started to push inside me, I gasped. Oh, but it felt so good.

“Fuck, Annabelle.”

Yes, fuck Annabelle. Somewhere in my blissed-out brain, the thought managed to form.

“You feel so good.”

Somehow the orgasm went on, pulsing around his cock as he joined with me. He didn't start thrusting, just held himself deep inside me as slowly, reluctantly, I came back to myself.

“You feel so good on my cock,” he said, breath hot on my ear, sending shivers through me.

“Your cock feels so good inside me,” I said back, voice breathy.

“I don't know if I can be gentle. I need you too much.” His voice was tight with restraint.

“You have me. Forever.”

“Forever.” He started to move, slow rolls of his hips at first, then harder, faster thrusts. I was barely over my last orgasm and already a new one built. He made magic with my body.

We made magic together.

Soon we were simply one writhing mass, and I couldn't tell whose yelp was whose, who the groan came from. All I knew was bliss. Perfection. Everything I had ever wanted, all in this one room, in this one moment.

With that thought in my mind, the orgasm burst inside me. Soft and gentle this time, but no less incredible.

“Oh, that’s good. Come for me, just like that.”

“Come for me,” I managed to gasp.

He groaned, long and deep. And he fucked me, long and deep. “Annabelle.”

He went rigid in my arms, as deep inside me as he could get. I wrapped my arms and legs around him and held on tight as he shook through his orgasm. “I love you, Chris.” I kissed his face, his shoulder.

“Love. You.” With a heaving breath, he relaxed in my arms.

We lay like that for endless minutes, simply holding each other. He kissed my face, and I stroked his back.

“I think I should move in here.” His voice cut through the darkness.

If I could have, I would’ve pulled back to see his face. Instead, I nipped his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“I don’t want to spend a single night more in my empty condo. My bed is too lonely without you in it. And I’d say you could move in with me, but my place sucks. It doesn’t have any personality. Your house is... it’s you. And I just think, if we’re going to do this, we should—”

I cut him off with a kiss. “I would love if you moved into my house,” I murmured against his lips. “Make it our home.”

I felt him smile. “Good. Then I can fuck you in a planetarium any time we want.”

I giggled, lightness bubbling through me. I’d dreamed of moments like this for so long, but part of me had never believed it could happen.

I stroked my hand down his face. If only I could see his eyes right now. “I love you, Chris.”

“I love you too, Annie. Forever.”

THANK YOU FOR READING CHRIS AND ANNIE’S STORY. I HOPE you enjoyed it!

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acknowledgments

Thanks to all my readers, past, present, and future.

Thanks to Jessalyn Jamieson for making such a great cover and for editing.

Thanks to brainstorming partners and general writer support, Liz Czukas, Carla Cullen, Natalie Caña, Lorelie Brown, Carrie Lofty, Keri Stevens, Mary Ann Marlowe, Kait Nolan, and Katy Cooper.

Most importantly, thanks to my family. To my kids for (usually) cooperating when I say “Mom can’t, she has to finish her writing.” And to Dan, for taking the kids to the zoo/museum/park/anywhere but the house so I can write, for making dinner or picking up Happy Meals, for accepting that writing will always come before vacuuming, and for just generally picking up all my slack. For always supporting me as a writer, since the day we met. And for giving me some credibility when I write about two people in love.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious way.

Scoring a Spouse

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Everything hurt. Every single cell in Erika Parker-Ward's body screamed with pain. Not only the kind of pain she always had after a hard-played match, though she had plenty of that too. This was the kind of pain that dug into her body, deep into her bones, burrowed into her spirit and made that ache too.

Having played elite-level soccer since age nine, she knew what to do with the usual post-game aches, how to baby a muscle strain or suck it up until a bruise healed. But the new pain had been with her for less than six months. It still wasn't controlled and she didn't know it well enough to have developed work arounds and tolerance levels.

And as long as she was in public, no one could see her suffering. Certainly none of the team doctors with her soon-to-be-former team in Atlanta nor her newly-traded-to team in Milwaukee could know. And absolutely, definitely none of the US Soccer docs. So far, she hadn't even told her moms.

No, absolutely no one could know that soccer superstar Erika Parker-Ward had rheumatoid arthritis. She needed still more endorsements if she was going to keep being able to pay for her doctor and meds out of pocket.

The worst part was—OK, the second worst; the pain was the worst—her pain had killed her post-win high. Despite her limitations, she'd been able to shove all her ailments to the corner of her mind that she locked up tight when she was on the field. Sharply honed instinct took over and she'd had two assists for the US's 2-1 win over Japan. It was the first game in a series of friendlies.

Part of the run-up to next summer's Women's World Cup. And for her, these games were an audition. No one was a sure thing for the World Cup roster. Just because she'd gone to the WWC four years ago, and scored in the bronze medal match at the last Olympics didn't mean she was definitely going to Australia next summer.

And at thirty-one with a newly diagnosed secret inflammatory condition, she was barely hanging on by her fingernails to her spot on the team.

Too bad no one except Dr. Clayborn knew what Erika going through. She could really use someone to talk to.

So instead of celebrating out on the town in Pasadena with her teammates, she was huddled at the bar with a tonic and lime. She couldn't even get drunk and forget; her not-very-effective medication could cause liver failure if she drank too much.

The only other person in the bar was a white man with features a little too sharp to be gorgeous, but who was nonetheless striking. His nose was narrow and pointy, his dark hair slicked back too severely, his eyebrows pointed in a way that gave him resting sardonic face, and his dark eyes a little too piercing. But the full package was intriguing. He definitely caught her eye and sent a punch of attraction to her gut in a way that had her immediately looking away.

While she'd discovered that orgasms were the best way to find temporary relief from her pain, her life was too complicated for even a one-night stand. That took effort. Her little air pulse pleasure penguin—yes, her vibe was black and white with a bowtie—took almost none.

She really should head up to her room and try to figure out how she could continue to afford Dr. Clayborn's out-of-pocket costs. Even with her salaries from US Soccer and her NWSL—National Women's Soccer League—club team, plus her few endorsement deals, it wasn't enough. Not if she wanted to continue helping her moms keep their business afloat. Her savings were rapidly being eaten up by the tests and scans and visits and medications. And she couldn't risk using her insurance and having an unethical medical receptionist or health insurance employee find out and leak that she was sick. It would be all too easy for US Soccer to find out and in a world as cutthroat as pro sports, she wouldn't risk it. She'd seen it happen to teammates in the past.

Maybe a time would come when she would reveal that she had rheumatoid arthritis, but she would make that decision on her own terms.

Tonight, Erika would steal sideways glances at the handsome man while he flirted with the bartender, his lips turned up in a smile that made the gut punch even more thrilling. And when she finished her drink and was sufficiently turned on, she'd go up to her hotel room for a date with her penguin.



Holy shit. Erika Parker-Ward was in the same bar as him. Erika fucking Parker-Ward. Nate Simmons had known the

USWNT—Women’s National Team—was in Pasadena for a match at the same time as his conference, but he’d never dreamed they’d be staying at the same hotel.

He’d especially never dreamed he’d find his favorite player, the player whose career he’d followed since she made her debut on the team more than a decade ago, at the bar without her teammates. And, as much as he would have done a complete fanboy routine if more players had been there, he was about ninety-eight percent sure he preferred this scenario.

He had to have some reserves of Social Nate buried deep inside him. He’d exhausted most of his small extroverted side during nine hours of networking and workshops, but for Erika Parker-Ward, he could find some scraps and pull himself together. He didn’t want to hit on her or anything. But he could say hi, tell her nice game today.

Did he dare asking for an autograph? He’d seen endless pictures of her grinning as she signed jerseys for fans, usually young girls who looked up to her. Her enjoyment of her fans seemed genuine but he knew better than anyone how well someone could fake enthusiasm for socializing. Plus, a group of ten-year-old girls after a match was a far cry from a lone man interrupting her solitude at a bar.

She clearly wanted to be alone. He should respect that. It was probably best if he finished his gin and tonic with lime and headed back to his room. His flight tomorrow wasn’t until noon, but he had piles of work he needed to make a dent in. Maybe he could toss a “Great match today” at her as he passed her on his way out. But she didn’t owe him time, even if he was a fan.

So he turned to the bartender, a petite white redhead with long neon pink fingernails that clicked against the wine glasses

she was sliding into a rack above her. “Ashley, can you charge this to room 704? I’m gonna head up soon.”

Ashley looked up long enough to flash a wide pink smile. “Sure thing, Mr. Simmons.” She’d introduced herself when Nate sat down so he’d done the same.

Nate glanced up at the TV mounted above the bar. It was tuned to a sports show that had just flipped from basketball news to today’s soccer game.

“The US women had a decisive win over Japan today in soccer,” the sportscaster said. “Lauren Vorski and Abbi Hasek had the two goals, each with an assist from Erika Parker-Ward.” The image onscreen flipped to a clip of Lauren leaping into a hug from Erika.

“Hey, that’s you,” Ashley said, grinning at Erika.

Nate couldn’t be sure but he thought Erika’s cheeks pinkened.

“It is,” Erika said.

Nate had heard her talk on TV plenty of times but he still wasn’t prepared for the huskiness of her voice in person. It was a little scratchy as well, like she’d spent much of the game yelling.

“I watched the first part of the game before my shift,” Ashley said. “That first goal was sick.”

As she said it, the TV above her showed the goal. Erika had kicked a rocket from midfield. Then Lauren caught it on her head and managed to twist so the ball went to the opposite corner, making the save all but impossible for Japan’s goalkeeper.

“That was amazing,” Nate couldn’t stop himself from saying.

Both women turned to him. Erika’s long golden-brown hair slid over her shoulder in an alluring cascade.

OK, so Nate might have been following her career so closely because he had a crush on her. A celebrity crush, since they’d never met. Until now.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt.” It was only a small lie. He hadn’t planned to talk to Erika, but when the opportunity practically threw itself at him, he couldn’t not pick it up. “Just wanted to say you had a great game.”

On the TV, coverage turned from soccer to NFL postseason.

Erika’s smile widened and seemed a little warmer. Her teeth were white in her tanned face, with the perfect straightness that spoke of years of orthodontics.

“Thank you,” she said, gaze meeting his. He felt her attention like a jolt to the chest, in the best way.

He threw back the last of his drink. He wanted to stay and talk with her, get to know the real woman behind the public persona, just a little. But he also wouldn’t be the asshole who intruded on her alone time.

So he was about to pull out his wallet for a tip when Erika got up and came toward him. Her chocolate brown eyes held his as she took the seat next to him, something hot flashing in her expression. But he noticed she scooted her chair a touch farther away from him than it had been. Which was fine. If there was attraction there, which it felt like there was, an extra few inches between their chairs wouldn’t be the deciding factor on whether they acted on it or not.

“So you know who I am, but you haven’t told me your name.” Erika wiggled in her chair, like she couldn’t get comfortable. If he’d run so hard for that long, he’d be sore too.

“Nate Simmons.” He held out his hand.

She took it, and her hand was soft and warm in his. A small spark of... something meandered up his arm at the contact. It wasn’t the usual jolt he felt when he was attracted to a woman he’d just met. He was familiar with that sensation even if he rarely did anything about it.

No, this was an entirely new experience. Softer, less intense. But more startling in its unfamiliarity. It couldn’t be that she was famous. As Chief Communications Officer for the corporation he’d co-founded with his three best friends, he’d met plenty of celebrities.

But it didn’t much matter. They’d chat at the bar for a few minutes, go to their separate rooms, and never see each other again except when he watched her matches on TV. A one-night stand would only make him want more, and he didn’t have more to give anyone.

“It’s nice to meet you, Nate Simmons.” She said his name slowly, each syllable rolling off her tongue in her husky voice. It set off yet another warm spark in his chest. He liked the way she said his name.

“And nice to meet you, Erika Parker-Ward.” He put a touch of flirtation into his smile. “I’ll admit, I’ve been a fan for years.”

Now she grinned and sat up the slightest bit straighter. “I’m flattered.”

“I was just a kid, but I remember watching the 99ers with my grandma.” As long as Nate could remember, Oma watched

every match she could.

“Your grandma sounds like a great lady,” Erika said, grinning.

It was Nate’s turn to have pride straighten his shoulders. Now in her nineties, with congestive heart failure and living in an assisted living community, Oma wasn’t as fierce as she’d once been. But having raised him since his parents died when he was two, she’d largely shaped who he was.

“Oma’s the best.”

They lapsed into a temporary silence while he mentally flipped through all the small talk ice breakers he could think of. Except boring chit chat wasn’t good enough. This was Erika Parker-Ward. She deserved so much more than mundane.

To buy time, he was about to ask if he could buy her another drink but she spoke first.

“Are you hungry? I’m always starved after a game. If you want to join me, we could grab a snack somewhere that isn’t a depressing hotel bar?”

For a second, he just blinked at her. Then her question registered and he was momentarily stunned.

Did Erika Parker-Ward just ask him out?

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