



Honey Do

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TAWNA FENSKE

ABOUT HONEY DO

I've wanted my best friend forever.

We've vowed not to cross the line, but Nina leaves no doubt she craves my touch. I've reined us both in, keeping a distance as Nina gets off on satisfying her lovers' hottest fantasies.

But what about hers?

It's a question I pose one wild night drenched in too much champagne. She makes a list, and now I'm hellbent on helping her fill each of her deliciously dirty fantasies.

Even the ones she's afraid to admit.

Honey Do is a scorching hot standalone m/f erotic romance with a little m/f/m/m treat. If you like friends-to-lovers and menage, this one's for you. This story contains no cheating and an HEA is guaranteed!

HONEY DO

A SUGAR & SPICE EROTIC ROMANCE

TAWNA FENSKE

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ALSO IN THE SUGAR & SPICE EROTIC
ROMANCE SERIES

- [Eye Candy](#) (Lyla and Aidan)
- [Tough Cookie](#) (Skye and Devon)
- [Honey Do](#) (Nina and Josh)

A NOTE TO MY AWESOME READERS

Hello, lovely!

If you're looking for one of my fluffy rom-coms that's heavy on heart and light on heat, you may want to stop here. No hard feelings!

See, years ago, I ghost-wrote erotic romance under a pen name. I'd almost forgotten until a surprise email from my publisher explained they'd discontinued the pen name and granted me rights to the two books I'd written. Did I want to do anything with them?

Uh...*yeah!*

Writing these tales in the first place was a kick in the pants, and I loved returning to the spicy world of no-holds-barred sexytimes laced with kinky fuckery. I re-wrote and re-edited the two existing books (now *Eye Candy* and *Tough Cookie*) to add more of my rom-com voice and link these standalone stories. Then I wrote a third book (this one, *Honey Do!*) to round out the trio.

The Sugar & Spice books are short, *not* sweet, and packed with heat. If you've read this far, I hope you enjoy these racy tales of couples exploring their sexual desires with a little help from their friends. Read all three, or just pick the story that piques your interest, since each stands alone.

Happy reading, my friendly fellow perv!

Love, Tawna

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CHAPTER 1

“*T*hanks for coming.”

I kiss the hot guy’s cheek, intending both meanings of the phrase.

“Thank *you*,” he says as his wife pulls me in for a hug.

Her hair tickles my nose as she squeezes me tight. “You’re the most amazing unicorn.” She draws back with a look that’s almost shy. It’s sweet considering we were naked not twenty minutes ago. “This was one of those bucket list fantasies we never thought would happen, you know?”

I *do* know. It’s not the first time I’ve made a married couple’s three-way dreams come true. That’s a unicorn, by the way—a single female happy to hook up with a couple without seeking commitment of her own.

That’s me—the ultimate unicorn. The rarest of mythical sex creatures.

“We appreciate you making our first time so memorable.” The man loops an arm around his wife’s slim waist, and she twinkles up at him. “Thanks again for everything.”

“My pleasure.” I mean it, since these two delivered so many mind-blowing orgasms, I lost count. “Take care of each other, okay?”

“We will.” The wife gives a chipper little wave as her husband steers her down the hall of my apartment complex.

I watch them go, waving from my doorway as they slip into the elevator and kiss while the doors swish shut. I’m

stepping back through my door when the stairwell bangs open and my best friend bursts through.

“Nina!” A grinning Josh lopez over and pulls me in for a hug. “Mmm... you smell like sex.”

I laugh and sniff him right back. His familiar, woodsy scent mingles with hints of a woman’s perfume. “And you smell like your date with whatshername got intimate.”

“There was kissing.” He moves past me into the apartment, beelining it for the fridge. “Not much chemistry beyond that. I declined her generous offer of a blowjob.”

“You did?” I follow him into my kitchen, hard-pressed to think of any reason I’d turn down oral. “Did she have mouth sores or something?”

“Gross.” Josh drags a carton of salsa from the fridge and locates chips in my pantry. Balancing both, he heads for the living room while I fix us a drink. Gin and tonics with lots of lime. I use the extra-tall glasses Josh prefers and find a fresh bag of citrus for the twisted lime garnish he loves.

“I just wasn’t feelin’ it,” he continues as I settle beside him on the sofa. He nudges the salsa in front of me. “Besides, I had to come tell you my big news.”

I gasp and set his drink down hard, sloshing tonic over the rim. “You guys landed the university job.” It’s a project his architecture firm lobbied months to get. There’s no doubt Josh’s charm sealed the deal. “Black & Reed gets to build the new campus medical center?”

“Better.” Josh picks up his glass and motions for me to toast him. “You’re drinking with the new lead architect on the whole damn project.”

“Josh, oh my God!” I throw my arms around shoulders so broad I have to strain to embrace him. It’s so sudden and fierce he holds his glass to the side to avoid spilling it. “Congratulations!” I gush as he laughs. “I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“Thanks.” He’s grinning as I release him and my body registers for the hundredth time how hot he is. My best friend

is built like a goddamn underwear model.

Too bad we've vowed never to let sex screw up our friendship.

We've been besties since Mrs. Traxel sat Josh beside me in third grade art and I promptly taught him to make boobs out of modeling clay.

The fact that we know each other so well is how he reads my face now.

"Holy shit, Neen." He hoots and clinks his glass to mine. "You got news, didn't you?"

"Yes." I bite my lip, not wanting to overshadow his achievement. "It's good news." Like that wasn't obvious.

Josh's blue eyes spark. "Tell me everything." He takes a swig and sets down his glass. "I thought you weren't finding out for another month?"

"Ainslie went on maternity leave early, so there was this emergency meeting." I'm practically bouncing on the sofa. "I'm officially the youngest partner in the history of Goodrich Publicity."

"Holy fuck. You rock!" He ditches his drink and grabs me in another bear hug. I'm conscious again of my breasts grazing granite pecs. "I can't believe we both got great news on the same day."

I kinda can. For as long as we've known each other, we've been in sync. We walked together at high school graduation. Moved to Portland within weeks of each other. Even our careers seem synchronized.

Maybe not our love lives. It's weird how I'm always dating someone right when he becomes single, or he's in a relationship when I'm flying solo.

But that's a non-issue.

"I'm proud of us." I take a sip of my drink as he grabs his again.

“Damn, that’s good.” He takes another gulp. “Did you use that new gin?”

“The one we got in Bend?”

“Yeah, at that place with the cool tasting room that had the big granite counter and all the—”

“Juniper trees!” I’m tickled he remembers. “Remember that presentation on using the juniper berries for the gin and —”

“—and they filter it through lava rock.” He laughs at the memory from our weekend friend getaway. “What was the name of that crazy lady in the tasting room?”

“The one with the dog named—”

“Monkeybutt!” He laughs again. “I can’t remember the woman’s name, though.”

“Gretel.” I love when we mind-meld like this. “God, that was a great trip.”

“Yeah.” As his eyes sweep my face, something unfamiliar flutters in my belly. “So. Who’s the lucky guy? Or gal or... I guess non-binary partner?”

I flutter my lashes. “What makes you so sure I didn’t stay home all evening painting my nails?”

That’s what I said I’d be doing tonight, but Josh knows me well. Naturally, I got antsy and hit the sex club where single women get in free. It’s my favorite form of fun on a Friday night.

He takes my hand and my breath hitches. “Nice nail polish.”

My fingers are bare, of course. I punch his shoulder before withdrawing my unmanicured hand. “What can I say? I felt celebratory.” At Club Rapture, there’s never a shortage of couples looking to spice up their relationship. Just call me the spice girl.

“Let’s celebrate.” I pick up my drink and take a hearty swig. This really is great gin.

“Hang on, I’ve got an idea.” He drains his glass, then bends to rummage through his messenger bag. When he pops up, he’s holding a bottle of my favorite champagne.

I gape at Josh. The stuff runs \$500 a bottle and I’ve only tasted it twice. Once with Josh, who’s beaming at me now.

“Where did you get that?”

“The guys gave it to me at the office.” He hands me the bottle. “Seemed like serendipity when I saw the label.”

“Let me grab champagne flutes.” I’m surprised to feel tipsy when I lurch to my feet. Guess I did make those drinks pretty strong. “Want me to bust out some of that gouda you like?”

“Yes, please.” Josh gets up and joins me in the kitchen, where he starts piling crackers on a plate. His hand skims my waist as he moves past me to the fridge. “Okay to cut up this pear?”

“Good idea.”

By the time we’re back in the living room, we’ve both got a happy buzz and a pretty little cheese plate. I even refilled our gin and tonics for when the champagne runs out.

Josh clinks his flute to mine and looks deep into my eyes. “We need a list.”

“You mean our next big career goals?” I take a sip of bubbles, then grab my trusty notepad off the coffee table. “Good idea.”

“No.” Josh sets his glass down and slowly draws the pad from my hands. His fingers brush mine and the force of his gaze makes me shiver. “Not work-related. Just pleasure.”

“Pleasure?” My throat feels funny when I swallow.

“*Your* pleasure.” His voice becomes a low growl. “It’s damn time we do something about it.”

CHAPTER 2

Well, that took a turn.

But I'm the one driving, so I hold Nina's gaze as she digests my words.

"My... um... pleasure?" Her throat rolls as she swallows. "What about it?"

"We're making a list." I tap the pen on her notepad. "A list of your fantasies."

"My fantasies?" She cocks her head like that's an odd idea. "What made you think of that?"

Lots of things, starting with the fact that I know damn well she hit Club Rapture again, looking to be someone's unicorn. Not that I don't love how sexual she is. Not that I haven't jerked off once or twice or... okay, *a few dozen times*, imagining Nina with her ass in the air, someone's cock sinking inside her as another woman draws her tongue along Nina's—

"What did you do tonight?" I swallow champagne and it swirls straight to my brain. I should slow down. "Besides *not* painting your nails."

With a sexy grin, she licks her lips. "I went to Club Rapture for Unicorn Night." Both flutes sit empty, so she tips up the bottle to fill them. "Brought home this adorable couple for—"

"Time out." I make a T with both hands before reclaiming my drink. "Whose fantasy was it to have a three-way?"

“Mine.” She says it with conviction and a spark in her eyes. “I love fucking strangers. Couples especially. How they light up like it’s the most magical, stupendous, otherworldly —”

“There you go.” I set the notepad on my knees and prepare to write. “You’re talking about *their* pleasure. Their fantasies. Not *yours*.”

“I think I know what I like, Josh.” She arches one dark brow. “I came my brains out three times. Once while I was fucking him as she licked my—”

“And that sounds amazing.” I’m a little lightheaded as the picture fills my head. Nina, with her neck arched back, breasts bouncing as she eases onto a thick hard—

Stop it right now.

I clear my throat. “Let’s talk about stuff that’s one hundred percent focused on you. Things you *haven’t* done.”

“That’ll be a short list.” A naughty grin coaxes her dimple out to play. “Doubt you’ll need more than one page for this.”

“Try me.” The words slip out sorta sexy, and I wonder if she hears it. If the alcohol’s going to her head like it is mine. “Come on, give me your best shot.”

“Twins,” she says suddenly. “I’ve never had sex with twins.”

I blink. Didn’t expect that one. “At the same time? Male or female or—”

“Yes, to all of that, and no—I’ve never been with twins of any gender, together or separately.”

I’m already pondering how to make that happen. “Good.” I write down “twins” and meet her eyes again. “What else?”

Nina chews her lip. “Believe it or not, I’ve never fucked on a boat.”

“Really?” Seems like that would have made the list before now, so I write it down. “You love water.”

“And boats,” she agrees. “I’ve just never dated anyone with a boat.”

I make another checkbox on the page as Nina refills our glasses. I must’ve finished mine? My head feels buzzy and warm.

So does her body, snuggled close on the couch. Not like we haven’t crossed the touch barrier a thousand times. We’ve even shared a bed, cuddling close like chaste friends. Chaste friends who maybe let their fingers wander while one of them hides a hard-on and—

“Didn’t your dad get arrested once for having sex on a Ferris wheel?” She swirls a chip through the salsa bowl as my gut curdles. “That always sounded interesting.”

“Getting arrested?” I avoid her eyes so she won’t see I hate this subject. I made jokes the day it happened; a cocky, teenage prick faking like his parents’ split didn’t rip his heart out.

For the record, it did. But if you ask me, the divorce was too long coming for my mother’s sake.

I just wish my dad wasn’t such a dick.

Nina moves on from the Ferris wheel. “You’re right, I’d rather not risk arrest or traumatize a bunch of kids at a carnival.” She pauses to think. “Oh! Remember that lighthouse we passed on our road trip up the Washington Coast?”

I bust out laughing. “I’d almost forgotten.”

“Great Head Lighthouse.” She’s shaking with laughter, and I definitely don’t watch her breasts move under her shirt. “We were in such a hurry to get to your mom’s birthday party that we never got to stop.” She wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. “I always wanted to experience Great Head.”

My hand falls to her knee for a friendly squeeze. “I’m sure you have.”

“Write it down.” She slaps the notepad hard enough to prove the booze is really hitting her. “Great Head Lighthouse. I’m totally having sex there.”

“You’re what?”

Oh—right. We’re making a sex list. I almost forgot. My brain feels foggy, but not so foggy I can’t picture Nina naked on the windswept Pacific shore. “You want great head in Great Head Lighthouse?”

“It’s a worthy goal, right?”

Can’t argue with that. I start to scribble as Nina whacks the pad again, sending the pen skittering across the page. “Oh!” she shouts. “What about that thing you do with your tongue?”

My brain does a dizzy little detour to Nina and me, naked together. Is she suggesting—

“Uh,” I say, stalling to collect some brain cells. “The Hungry Butterfly?”

“That’s it! That’s what you called the sex position you made up, right?”

“Er, I can’t say for sure I invented it, but... yeah.” I try not to read too much into this conversation. We’re both tipsy. This doesn’t mean anything. “My signature move.”

Nina licks her lips and I get dizzy again. Pretty sure it’s not the champagne. “Put that on the list.” She smiles so sexy I nearly lose my mind. “I’ve always been curious.”

I don’t write “Hungry Butterfly.” I suppose I could take myself out of the equation, but—*fuck*. The thought of that stings way more than it should. “No way,” I tell her. “I’m not teaching my move to some douche at Club Rapture.”

Nina doesn’t answer. When I look up, champagne shimmers with laughter in her eyes. “It should probably come direct from the source, anyway.”

Wait... what?

Careful Josh. Don’t be your dad.

For the record, the Ferris wheel wasn’t his only transgression. The old man spent my childhood chasing anything in a skirt. He’s still paying off a settlement from

taking a tipsy colleague to bed and getting hit with a well-deserved lawsuit for—

“No.” I say it too quickly and Nina blinks. “I mean—I’m not even sure I remember what the Hungry Butterfly was all about.” I swallow some pride with the lie.

“Well, put it on the list, anyway.” She’s beaming as she bounces, unaware of how hard I’m fighting not to think of her that way. There’s no way we’re doing this when we’re drinking.

You’re not doing this ever. She’s your goddamn best friend.

“We can figure out the details later,” she says.

“Right.” I write it down because what the hell. It’s not like any of this will ever happen. “Anything else?”

“You mean that doesn’t involve you going down on me?” She says it with such a casual smile that I’m wondering if I heard wrong when she grabs my arm. “Oh! Write down sex in my childhood bedroom. I never did that.”

“Really?” I write it down with my brain still stuck on tasting her. “Not once?”

“I’m talking about the house in Olympia. The one we left when I was eight, so Tess and I could go to private school?” Her shoulders tense and I know why.

We’ve been friends long enough to spot each other’s family landmines. Nina hates harping on hers, so I’m not surprised when she moves on.

“Write it down,” she insists. “Childhood bedroom.”

“Didn’t your parents sell the place when you moved to Seattle?”

“Sure, but it could still happen.” That’s definitely the booze talking, but who am I to argue? “Gotta make goals a little hard to reach, right?”

“Right.” I write it down, penmanship wobbling on the last few letters. Did I just chug another half of a gin and tonic? I glance at my glass, wondering when it got refilled.

How much champagne have we had? I tip up the bottle to see there's not much left.

But we're celebrating, dammit. I just need to keep my dick in my pants. Keep us both from doing anything dumb.

"We're out of cheese." Nina stands and starts to sway. "I'll grab us some more—"

"Whoa there." I catch her by the waist as she sways again. As my hands grip her hips, I see her watching me with hooded eyes. "Guess we've had a little too much to drink."

Truth is, I'm not in bad shape. I wouldn't drive, but my mind feels okay.

And with her pussy in my face, just inches away through the thin cotton of her shorts, I'm way too close to ticking number four off her list.

The Hungry Butterfly.

We were in college when I came up with that name. I'd gotten laid at a few frat parties and thought I was this big man on campus. Rumors swirled among college women that my tongue had talent.

Like a dumbass, I bragged to my dad.

"A chip off the old block," my old man declared. "The ladies love ya, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, swallowing a sour mix of fear and pride. "Guess I'm just like you."

Jesus.

But here I am now with my hands on Nina's waist and her breath coming faster. Green eyes glint down at me, daring me to make a move.

"Josh." She licks her lips. "Are you aware you're touching my ass?"

"I'm not." Crap, I kinda am. With my palms on her hips, my fingertips find a mind of their own. They're stroking firm cheeks through her thin cotton shorts, and I try to draw my hands back.

Try being the operative word.

“Still touching my ass,” she sings, swaying her hips as a tease. “I don’t mind. You’ve got great hands.”

Electricity crackles between us. I could tug down these shorts right now and have my tongue inside her in two seconds. I could yank her close, thighs splaying open around me as she tumbles to my lap.

I draw a shaky breath. “We shouldn’t.”

She doesn’t ask what I mean. “I suppose you’re right, but...”

“We’ve been drinking.” I let one hand fall, then the other, stealing a last, quick touch on the way down. “That’s a line I’ll never cross.”

“Fucking each other, you mean?”

That’s not what I meant. “I know we’ve promised never to —” I trail off because I suddenly can’t recall why we agreed not to sleep together. Something about screwing up our friendship?

For some reason, that seems impossible right now. We’re celebrating the biggest achievements of our adult lives. We’ve been friends for nearly two decades. What if just once, we—

“No,” I say, startling us both. “I actually meant taking advantage of someone who’s impaired.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders roll as she shrugs. “Good thinking.”

“Yeah. Yes. Definitely important to think things through.” Too bad all I can think of right now is having just one taste. Just one time, to get it out of our systems.

Would it be so bad?

Nina’s thinking like I’m thinking. “I guess we shouldn’t screw up our friendship, but...” she trails off, licking her lips again. “Haven’t you ever wondered?”

“Wondered what?” I know what she means, but I need to hear it. Need to know the booze isn’t scrambling my brain.

“Come on, Josh.” She’s doing the brow lift again, the one that makes me want her bad. “Haven’t you ever wondered how we’d be in bed together?”

We’d be magic. No question.

“I’m a man,” I say, deciding on honesty. “Of course I want to fuck you.”

“Then do it.”

There’s a challenge in her eyes. Heat in her skin beneath these thin cotton shorts.

And a whole lot of liquor running through her body.

“Just once,” she breathes. “To get it out of our systems.”

God, how I want to. They’re the same words I just thought. It must mean something, right?

It takes every ounce of strength I’ve got to say the next word out of my mouth.

“Go.” I give her ass a light smack. “Grab whatever you were going to grab before we both do something drunk we might regret.”

She holds my gaze for a moment. There’s a question there I read plain as day?

Are you sure?

I’m not sure of anything except how much I want to taste Nina right now. Just once, to get it out of our systems.

Her breasts move under her thin cotton top as she draws a breath. “I guess you’re right.” Mission forgotten, she sinks down beside me and rests her head on my shoulder. A yawn wracks her body and I yawn, too. “It’s been a really long week.”

Uncertainty twitches my cock. The quick subject change means she’s tipsier than I thought. I made the right call saying no.

“Want to snuggle?” I’m playing with fire, but I need to touch her. “We could take a nap if you want.”

“Yes!” She bounces up and grabs the blanket off the back of the couch.

Her breasts brush my face, but I sit on my hands like a goddamn gentleman.

Seconds later, I’m wrapping my arms around her like I’ve done dozens of times.

We’ve fallen asleep together plenty. There’s nothing different about this time.

But as I spoon her from behind, cock settling in the perfect curve of her ass, I know something’s changed.

And I know I’ll never stop imagining my tongue inside her.

Nina yawns again. “This is nice.”

“Mmmhmm.” I breathe in the scent of her hair, willing my hard-on to fade. “We can work on the list tomorrow.”

Dumb as it is, I don’t want to drop this. Nina needs to chase her own pleasure. To know what it feels like to focus on her needs alone.

This list is just the ticket. Pretty sure I’ll think so when we’re both sober.

“Oh, I thought of another thing.” She snuggles closer, her voice going sluggish with sleep. “One of those sex classes where you get off on electrical shock. What’s that called again?”

I have no idea but make a mental note to add it to the list. “Shocky sex?”

She giggles as I kiss behind her ear. “Yeah, that. I want to try that.”

“Okay.”

“And getting married someday.”

“Sure.” I’ve always known she wants that. Since I don’t, it’s another reason I’d be a dick to act on my urges. “I’ll add it to the list.”

Nina gives a sleepy sigh. “And falling asleep with a guy I’ve had sex with.” She burrows against me, the curve of her lush ass driving my dick mindless. “That might be nice.”

Did I hear that right? “You’ve never gone to sleep with a sex partner?”

But Nina’s out cold. I lift up on one elbow to check, and yep... her lashes lie soft on her cheeks, breath coming in that slow, deep rhythm reserved for when she’s bone tired with a few drinks under her belt.

Who can blame her?

She’s kicked ass these last few months, fighting to make partner at the PR firm where she’s worked for six years. I’ve done that with my work, busting my balls to show Aidan and Devon I’m as good at designing buildings as I am at making their wives come when they want an extra set of hands in the bedroom.

I draw Nina close, convincing myself this is enough. We can snuggle and sleep and celebrate our career wins like good friends who don’t want to fuck each other senseless.

But as sleep clouds my brain, as her heat floods my body, one thing’s certain: There’s no putting this genie back in the bottle.

* * *

I WAKE to the sound of the shower running. Blinking back grit from my eyes, I find I’m alone on Nina’s couch. As I sit up, I spot her scrawl in purple ink on a page torn from her notepad.

TAKING A SHOWER. Join me if you’re down to water the garden.

A SLEEPY GRIN grabs the corners of my mouth. Then I stop, not sure what to make of this.

I mean, I know what *watering the garden* means. The sound of her shower brings the memory flooding back.

“Check out this shower.” She threw open the glass door the day she signed the lease on this apartment. “It’s huge!”

“That’s what she said,” I quipped, earning a smack from Nina as I surveyed the slate tiles, the big copper showerhead, the wide bench spanning one whole wall. “Is that for watering the garden?”

I never explain my silly sex jokes to Nina. She gets them every time.

With a grin, she twirled her apartment keys. “Isn’t watering the garden where someone sits spread eagled on a bench with the shower running and the other person kneels in front of them and—”

“Yep,” I confirmed, not liking how my dick twitched at the thought of sinking between Nina’s spread thighs. My best friend, for God’s sake.

“I’ll be sure to put it to good use.” Her grin left no doubt she planned to do that.

Now, as I drag fingers through my sleep-rumpled hair, I wonder if she means it. I read the words again.

TAKING A SHOWER. Join me if you’re down to water the garden.

I GLANCE at my watch and do some quick, sober math. It’s been six hours since we had a drop to drink. We’re both clearheaded. We’re both consenting adults. My eyes slip to the notepad, which sits open to Nina’s fantasy list. Number four grabs me like a squeeze to the balls.

HUNGRY BUTTERFLY.

THAT'S MY HANDWRITING, but I see now she's added something.

HUNGRY BUTTERFLY WITH JOSH.

THOSE LAST TWO words are Nina's. Purple ink, like the note she left, and not the pen I used last night for her list. I'm no Sherlock Holmes, but even I can fit those pieces together.

Nina wrote these words this morning.

Nina's naked, inviting me to make the next move.

Nina's in the shower singing "WAP." Like I need another reason to picture her *Wet Ass Pussy*.

As my fingers rake my hair again, last night's words bubble up through my brain.

Just once, to get it out of our systems.

She said it. I *thought* it.

Surely that means something?

Dropping the notepad, I surge off the couch. The shower keeps running and I follow the sound and the throb of my cock. Nina hits the end of WAP as I charge through her bedroom with my dick hard as steel. She's got the bathroom lights dim as she spins beneath the shower spray.

"Josh?" Her eyes meet mine through the foggy glass door. The outline of her body, so lush, so wet, makes my mouth water.

"Nina." It sounds like a growl as I take a step closer. Then another. "Tell me now if you don't want this." Another step brings me to the bathroom door. "Tell me right fucking now if I'm reading you wrong."

I could still stop. Barely. But if she tells me to go, I still can. It takes everything I've got to rein myself in as our eyes stay locked through the steam.

Nina licks her lips. "You're not wrong."

That's all I need to hear. "Good." I stalk forward, eager to claim what's mine. "Because I'm feeling awfully fucking celebratory right now."

She drags both hands down her body, palms slicking her breasts before one hand dips between her legs. "Show me."

"My fucking pleasure." I yank open the glass door and shove her hard against the wall. Water pounds my shoulders and I cup the back of her head before it hits the tile.

"Oh my God, Josh, you're still wearing your—"

The word "clothes" gets lost in my mouth as I kiss her hard and fierce and wet. She's so soft, so slick and eager as I drag one hand down her flesh. She feels better than I dreamed, and I have to break the kiss to keep from losing my mind.

"Just once," I breathe. "To get it out of our systems."

She nods, eyes flashing surprise and mirth. "Just once." She looks down at my wet jeans and T-shirt. "Don't you want to take off your—"

"No." If I stop now, I might change my mind. And if I lose that barrier, I lose my plan for how this goes.

I'm in control, but just barely. Water drums my back, runs down my spine in hot rivulets. "We do this my way. Understood?"

Nina nods, green eyes big with desire and something I can't read.

I kiss her again, fusing our mouths in the steamy heat. Then I slide down her body, nipping her neck, her shoulder, her collarbones as I slowly taste each hot wet inch of her.

It's not 'til I'm kissing her breasts that I know how long I've wanted this. Months. Years. Maybe as long as I've known her.

"Josh," she groans, gripping my hair as I bury my face in her tits. "Fuck, that feels good."

My tongue flicks her nipple again, then moves to the other. She's got perfect tits. I've always known that, thanks to a

topless beach trip in college and Nina's natural comfort with nudity. She's changed in front of me before, and I've helped put sunscreen on her bare back.

But I've never touched her like this. Never drawn her nipple between my teeth to hear her groan with pleasure.

"Like that." She gasps as I bite down. Not hard, not enough to do damage. But enough to know she likes it rough.

"Josh," she groans again as I circle her with my tongue. Pleasure and pain, they're the best bedfellows. Water blasts my face as I nip her again, and she grips my hair tighter. "You're so fucking good at that."

I've barely gotten started.

Clutching her hips, I move so the back of her knees brush the bench. I try to be gentle with shoving her down, but her ass hits the wet tile with a *smack*.

Nina gasps. "That's cold."

"Then I'd better warm you up." I drop to my knees and shoulder her thighs apart. Locking eyes with her, I swipe wet hair off my forehead. "Do you know how long I've wanted to taste this pussy?"

"How long?" The words ride a gasp as I lick half an inch above her clit. So close.

"So fucking long I lost count of all the times I pictured you spread for me, just like this." I push her thighs apart with both hands. "Look at you, all hot and wet and eager."

Her eyes drop to her pussy, and I wonder if she sees what I do. Perfect pink folds glisten in invitation. Her swollen clit begs for my tongue, and I dip my head to answer.

"You want my mouth?" I brush her with my lips, still barely touching. "You want me to slide my tongue inside you?"

Squirming, she grips my head to bring me closer. "Please, Josh."

“Please what?” I want to hear her say it. I nuzzle her folds, tasting her for the first time. God, she’s sweet. “Tell me what you want.”

Nina cries out as my tongue finds her clit. “Oh, fuck. Make me come in your mouth.”

My fucking pleasure.

No, wait.

It’s *her* pleasure I’m after. Her wants, her needs, her fantasies for getting every goddamn scrap of gratification she deserves.

My tongue swirls her clit and she gasps again. Drawing the tight bud between my lips, I feel her grip the back of my head.

“Oh, fuck. That’s it. Right there.”

God, she tastes perfect. Exactly like I knew she would, like I dreamed of all these years. Her slick heat coats my chin as I draw my tongue down, tracing her seam. Then back up again until she bucks up to ride my face.

“You want more?” I draw back to look in her eyes. “You need something inside this hot little pussy?”

She nods, wiping wet hair off her cheek. “Please, Josh. Fill me up.”

I plan to. And before this is done, I’ll have her screaming my name.

CHAPTER 3

*H*oly bliss beans, this feels amazing.

Josh grips my hips as water pours down my shoulders and spatters the bench seat beside me. My thighs tremble on the tile as he eases one finger inside me. His tongue strokes my folds as I clutch the back of his head.

“Oh, God.” Does it feel this good because of where we are? Steam billows off the tile floor, laced with notes of orange ginger body scrub. Golden light glows from amber sconces on my shower walls. Maybe that’s what’s making the mood.

Or maybe it’s Josh, solid and sturdy and so fucking good at what he’s doing.

“Right there, *yes!*” I don’t have to tell him. The man knows my body, though he’s never touched me like this before.

But how many times have we talked late in the night about intimate details of our lives?

I like it a little rough.

I love fingers or toys or a cock inside me while someone licks my clit.

I love when someone grips my hips and—

“Josh.” My sharp cry must tell him I’m close. That every detail he’s memorized about my desires just paid off in spades. “Don’t stop.”

The rumble of laughter tingles my clit before he draws back to smile. He's stopping. Exactly what I said not to do.

Why does it feel right as he looks into my eyes?

"Nina." Blue eyes search mine, so filled with heat I get dizzy. "This is the first time I get to make you come. I'm damn well making it last."

He says it with such sureness, I almost nod. Instead, I lick my lips. "Maybe you should make me come more than once."

I expect him to laugh, but he nods instead. "Count on it." He lowers his head. "When I finish with you," he says, pausing to lick his way up my seam, "you won't be able to stand."

Is it a promise or a threat? I'm game either way as he slides in a second finger. As he sucks my clit between his lips, I cry out. Whatever he's doing with his tongue and his teeth, his fingers moving inside me—

"It's the Hungry Butterfly." That's what I try to say, anyway. It comes out a garbled groan as Josh makes me mindless with his mouth.

I still remember when he coined the phrase in college. Drunk on wine coolers and our own heady youth, we went around the party sharing our best sex moves. Josh described his, eyes meeting mine for the briefest instant.

"I don't want to pat myself on the back or anything," he said slowly. "But I fucking love eating pussy. And I'm good at it."

Back then, I heard the words of a twenty-year-old boy with too much ego on his hands.

Now?

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*." I've never felt anything this good. His tongue, his fingers, even his nose and chin—he's using everything from his neck up to drive me wild with pleasure. "Don't stop."

He strokes my g-spot with the pad of one finger before drawing both digits apart inside me. Does he know how full

that makes me feel? How the tip of his tongue shoots shockwaves of bliss from my clit to my core?

I can't hold on much longer. He wants this to last, but I'm right on the edge. "Yes. Oh, Josh—yes!"

The climax hits like a cannonball, plastering me to the tile. My pussy grips his fingers, pulsing with my heartbeat. I suck in a mouthful of shower spray, but I don't care. My ass starts to slip off the bench, but he holds me steady. His hand grips my hip as the other makes me mindless from inside.

As I start to come down, I wait for him to let up. For fingers to slide out of me or his grasp to release my hip.

"Huh-uh." He's got a mouthful of me, so I'm not sure what he means. Was that a no?

Then the pad of his finger pumps my g-spot and I get it. He's going for multiple Os, determined to make me come again as his tongue sweeps my clit.

I should tell him it doesn't work like that. Tap his shoulder and say as much as I love coming two or three or five times a sesh, I need a few minutes. A chance to catch my breath before—

"Holy fuck!" His thumb probes my ass and my brain skids from my skull. He's sucking my clit, nailing my g-spot, and working my backdoor like a goddamn champ.

I'm gonna lose it.

"Josh, *fuck!*" My thighs clutch his shoulders as I throw my head back and scream so loud, I'll get calls from the neighbors.

I don't care. All I care about is that he keeps doing that with his tongue and fingers and *holymotherofgod*, this is the longest orgasm of my life.

My head spins as I come back down. Stars sparkle behind my eyelids as I ease them open to peer at him. "That was—damn." I laugh because words never fail me. There's a wet blob of meat where my tongue should be, and I can't make my legs stop trembling.

I try to sit up, but Josh doesn't take his fingers out of me. Just looks into my eyes and nods. "I could make you come again right now." He licks his lips. "Guarantee it."

If another guy said it, I'd shake my head. I'm a goddamn tiger when it comes to sex, but three orgasms in five minutes?

"Um. Okay." I somehow manage to sit up and his fingers slip out of me. There's an instant ache deep in my core, a desire to have him back where he belongs.

I can solve that.

"Let me get you off." I slide to my knees, wet tile biting my skin as I grab for his fly. He's huge and hard behind wet denim as my fingers find his zipper. "Sit on the bench and I'll suck you while—"

"No." The steel in his voice says that's non-negotiable. He catches my hips and shoves me back on the bench. Palms clamp my thighs, hard enough to leave bruises.

I shouldn't love this so much.

Almost as much as I love the possession in his eyes. "You're going to learn a lesson whether you want to or not."

Shoving wet hair off my face, I lick my lips. "What lesson is that?"

"How to take what you deserve, as much as you deserve, again and again." He loops my legs over his shoulders and dips his head again. "How to focus on your own goddamn pleasure and nothing else."

Something in his tone makes me shiver. "That sounds like a mindfulness meditation." I'm trying for coy, but Josh doesn't smile.

"Call it what you want," he says, "as long as you call my name when you come."

I shiver again. Does he mean we're doing this more than once? Maybe that's what it takes to get this out of our systems. With his fingers still in me, I know once won't be enough.

A hundred times may not do it.

“Okay,” I say, not sure what I’m agreeing to.

He holds my gaze a second longer. Then dips his head and *ohmygod*—

“Oh!” I gasp as his tongue sweeps my clit. I’m expecting discomfort, the shock of having my flesh stimulated so soon after two mind-blowing orgasms.

But all I feel is pleasure. Maybe there’s something to his theory.

Or his magical fingers, three of them dipping inside me. God, that feels good. I’m so focused on the fullness that I almost miss the faint hum.

It’s not ‘til the toy touches my ass that I know he found what’s stored in my soap dish. He must’ve grabbed it as he sank to his knees, always planning ahead. Or maybe he remembered how I told him every girl needs a waterproof vibe stashed in her shower.

I’m dripping wet, so the toy slips easily into my ass. I growl with pleasure, thanking every deity I can name that Josh knows his way around the backdoor. “Right there.”

He’s way ahead of me, working his mouth and his tongue and the toy in a rhythm my body’s screaming for.

I’ve been with plenty of guys. Girls, too, and lots of group sex. But I’ve never had a lover play my body like Josh is doing now. There’s magic in his touch. A mystical certainty of how and when and where to put fingers and mouth and—*holy fuck*, how is he doing this?

And how have we lasted this long without doing it before?

Just once, to get it out of our systems.

As I grip the edge of the shower bench, I’m not sure that’ll be enough. His tongue, his fingers, his breath between my legs. I’m an insatiable creature, clawing for more. Sensation mounts, making my head spin. Christ, he’s got me on the edge again.

When I scream this time, I’m not sure if it’s me or the monster he’s made inside me. My shriek echoes off the tile as

my fists clutch the wet shirt stuck to his shoulders. Each wave feels stronger than the last, and by the time it peters out, I'm a limp noodle slipping off slick tile.

"I've got you." He grips my hips and straightens, setting the toy on the bench beside me. "You good?"

I choke out a laugh. "Good?" Another laugh escapes. "Is chocolate lava cake *good*? Is fancy champagne *good*? Are multiple orgasms *good*?"

Josh lifts an eyebrow. "These feel like trick questions."

"I feel fucking fantastic." I sit up straighter with my core quivering. "Good is a wholly inadequate word."

"Glad you liked it." He stands and adjusts the shower spray. That's when I notice it's gone lukewarm. And also, he's fully clothed.

"Let me take care of—"

"Nope." He swats my hand off his fly. "Just enjoy the afterglow."

I can tell from the pole in his pants that he wants me. So what's the problem? "Just give me a chance to—"

"Nina, finish your damn shower." He steps free from my reach and pulls his shirt over his head.

As he wrings it out, my mouth starts to water. He's always taken care of his body, but have I ever wondered what my tongue would feel like tracing those washboard abs?

Yes. You have.

But I've tried not to. Do I at least get credit for that?

He's got his jeans off now, twisting the denim to get the water out. Blue boxer briefs cling to his ass and to the thick cock filling the front of them. I swallow to keep from drooling.

"Quit staring." He's smiling as he shoves open the shower door. "I'm using your clothes dryer."

I try to stand, but my legs won't work. "I might have some sweatpants that'll fit you."

“I’ve got gym stuff in my bag.” With a wink, he saunters away. At the bathroom door, he turns. “Take your time. Let’s talk when you’re ready.”

He turns back around before I shiver. Not the good kind of shiver this time. Those words, they stirred something in me. Something... not great.

I cringe as my parents’ faces fill my mind. They’re a decade younger and wear matching looks of disapproval.

“Let’s talk, Nina.” My father’s frown said we weren’t discussing dinner plans. “About your future.”

“We’re very disappointed in your choices,” my mother agreed, frowning alongside my father. “You’re being selfish.”

“Extremely selfish.”

I didn’t argue. No good ever came from that.

My mom kept going. “After everything we’ve invested in your future—”

“After everything we’ve done for you,” my dad interrupted. “After everything we’ve done for *both* you girls.”

My mother sighed. “And only Tess understands what it means to be exceptional.”

Be exceptional.

The last words of all conversations that start, “Let’s talk, Nina.”

I shiver now, shaking myself to shed the memory. My legs wobble as I try to stand, but I catch myself on the shower door. Josh didn’t even use the same words. Why am I getting all worked up?

But the prospect of *a talk* puts me on edge. My sin back then, by the way?

Getting a B on a term paper. A B+, but my sister, Tess, took the same class a year before. She got a flawless A+, of course. Everything about my sister is a flawless A+.

She’s the very definition of *exceptional*.

“Enough.” I stare at myself in the steamy mirror and force a smile. “You are *enough*.”

It’s a silly affirmation, but gets the job done. I towel off slowly, thoughts turning back to what just happened. The reason my blood buzzes warm and tingly through my body. The reason Josh’s face floats through my mind, crowding out pictures of my parents.

Do I regret what we did?

No way. Maybe I should, but it’s tough to regret something so... so...

God, I can’t describe it. What’s the word for when your best friend makes you come your brains out three times in five minutes?

Let’s talk when you’re ready.

Okay, that’s ominous. But I’m ready to face it, whatever it is.

By the time I’m dressed in jeans and a tight pink tee, the scent of bacon pulls me like fishing line through my living room. At the stove beside my fridge, Josh stands flipping pancakes in my cast-iron skillet. He’s in black athletic shorts and a fitted gray t-shirt, looking ruffled and sexy and right at home in my kitchen.

“Hey.”

He looks up and smiles. “Hey yourself. Got any orange juice?”

“Just the canned stuff.” I grab some from the freezer and find my favorite blue pitcher. “Thanks for making breakfast. I’m starving.”

“Figured you might be.” He piles pancakes on a plate and arranges stacks of bacon on the other side. My microwave beeps and he pulls it open to grab the syrup.

“Want lemon slices?” I don’t know why I’m asking when I know the answer.

“Yes, please.”

“Your affinity for sweet and sour knows no bounds.”

He grins and carries the pancakes and bacon to the table. “Someday, you’ll recognize the wisdom of my ways.”

I snort and follow him to the table, orange juice and two glasses in my hand. “Don’t hold your breath.”

Relief lets the tension out of my shoulders. See? This isn’t weird. We’re bantering like normal. Like nothing even happened.

My core clenches.

Oh, something happened, all right...

We fall into our breakfast plates without talking, both of us ravenous. I keep stealing glances at Josh, wondering what he wants to talk about. If he feels weird or regretful or—

“So.” Josh wipes his mouth with a napkin. “That happened.”

I burst out laughing. “I guess it did.”

“Good.” He grins and sets his napkin down. “I’m glad we went there. It’s the perfect segue for what we’re doing next.”

“You going down on me is a segue?” I take a bite of bacon. “Your afterplay needs work, Cline.”

“The hell it does.” He takes the last piece of bacon and breaks it in half, giving the bigger piece to me. “I reviewed the list.”

“The list—oh, right.” I almost forgot. “You might have to jog my memory on what we wrote down.”

Stretching an arm, he grabs the notepad off my kitchen counter. Didn’t we leave that on the coffee table?

“I’ve been reviewing it—”

“Of course you have.” I bump him with my elbow. “Did you also create a spreadsheet?”

“You mock, but my organization skills got me the lead on the university project.”

“Your *architecture skills* got you that job.” And his charm. That skill makes him touchy, so I don’t bring it up. “Let’s see what we wrote.”

He turns the pad so we both can read it. His scrawl gets loopier as the list goes on, evidence of how much we had to drink. That’s true for what’s on the list as well.

1. Twins
2. Boat sex
3. Lighthouse
4. Hungry butterfly
5. Shocky sex
6. Childhood bedroom
7. Sleep with someone I’m banging

NUMBER THREE—THE lighthouse—has a note in Josh’s writing. “Demo,” whatever that means. Number four—hungry butterfly—has a checkmark beside it, which is the most Josh thing ever.

There’s also my handwriting beside it.

Hungry Butterfly with Josh.

I knew exactly what I set in motion when I wrote it. Why back down now?

I look up to see him watching me. “I don’t remember the last one, but shouldn’t it have a checkmark by it?”

“What do you mean?”

“We fell asleep on the couch last night.”

“Doesn’t count.” He shakes his head. “Sleeping off a bender together and falling asleep after sex are two totally different things. Besides,” he adds with a smile. “We hadn’t hooked up last night.”

“That does change things.”

“Does it?” Josh cocks his head. “You feel okay about what happened?”

Okay? Is he kidding? “I’m still tingling all over,” I admit. “Definitely more that okay.”

“All right, then.” He studies my face. “Let’s do it.”

“Do what?” I already know, but need him to say it.

“The list,” he says. “Together.”

I glance at the words, deciding how I feel. “Aren’t you worried it’ll mess up our friendship?”

“No.” He’s quick and decisive, no hesitating at all. “Are you?”

“A little.” I bite my lip. “I mean, I feel great right now. Not weird at all.” I just don’t want to risk our friendship.

“Tell you what.” He slides the notepad out from under my hand. “If either of us starts to feel uncomfortable for any reason at all, we end the experiment. No more list. No more sex. No pressure to be anything but Josh and Nina, friends forever.”

It sounds simple when he puts it that way. I nibble the last of my bacon, stalling to collect my thoughts. “I guess for two people as sexually charged as you and I are, it’ll take more than one time to get it out of our systems.”

“Atta girl.” He grins and scribbles something else on the page. “There. Now it’s complete.”

“What?” I crane my neck but can’t see what he’s written. “Did you add something?”

“Yep.” He grins and guards the page with his arm.

“What.” I grab for the pad, but he pulls it back. “What did you write?”

“Nothing.”

His smug grin shoots me out of my chair to take another swipe at the notepad, but he’s too quick. “Josh, you butthead. Let me see.”

“Nope.” He tears off the page and folds it in half. Then quarters, before he slides it in the pocket of his shorts. “I’ll hang onto this. So.” He picks up his juice and grins. “I’ve got a plan to get us started.”

CHAPTER 4

JOSH

“Nice work, man.” Devon slides my blueprints across the table to Aidan, who frowns down at them.

It’s nothing personal. The dude frowns at everything.

“The university team’s gonna love this,” Devon continues. “Especially the north tower.”

“Thanks.” I glance at Aidan, who nods his own approval.

“Wouldn’t change a thing.” He checks something on the spreadsheet I sent this morning. “Pretty tight for your first solo job.”

“Thank you.” It’s all I can do not to fist-pump. “I appreciate you guys giving me a chance on this.”

“You’ve been busting your balls with us for years.” Devon claps me on the shoulder as Aidan shoves the blueprints back at me. “I know you’ll make us proud.”

“It’s a big job, but you’ve got this.” Aidan chugs from his coffee mug and I can’t help spotting the love bite on his neck. His wife, Lyla, is a hellcat. The man met his match, and I couldn’t be happier for them.

I might’ve even added to their happiness a time or two, but that’s just sex. Nothing that gets in the way of their relationship.

And now you’re thinking about Nina...

Standing up from the conference table, I roll the blueprints back in their tube. “Thanks again, guys.” I shove the cap on the cardboard cylinder. “Anyone doing something fun this weekend?”

Devon gets a goofy smile on his face. “It’s the anniversary of when Skye and I first said ‘I love you.’ We’re going out for dinner.”

“Hey.” Aidan gets up, too. “I was there for that.”

“You sure were.” The look they trade says there’s more to the story.

“Let me guess.” I glance from Devon to Aidan and back again. “Must’ve been a sex thing?”

“Yep.” Aidan grunts. “Nina was there.”

Ah, I see.

“That’s why we didn’t invite you.” Devon shrugs. “We know you two are kinda weird about—”

“We hooked up.” I blurt it fast before thinking things through.

Aidan blinks. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Might as well tell the guys. We’re a helluva lot more than colleagues, and I could use some perspective. “Nina’s got this habit of prioritizing everyone else’s pleasure, so I’m trying to shake her out of it.”

Devon looks dubious. “Noble of you.”

“You’re right, though.” Aidan’s frowning again. “Shit, I never thought of that. You think she’s unhappy?”

“Nina loves sex. She definitely doesn’t regret anything she’s done.” I watch relief fill both guys’ faces. “But her parents kinda did a number on her.”

That’s my theory, anyway. I could be wrong, but there’s no need to go into it with the guys. “I just want her to know it’s okay to put herself first sometimes, you know? To prioritize her own happiness.”

I sound like a goddamn self-help guru, but my friends don't laugh. Aidan nods once. "I like it."

"Yeah." Devon grins. "And who knows? Maybe you'll be the next one awkwardly declaring your love during sex."

"No fucking way."

I didn't mean to say that.

Both guys stare, and I need to do damage control. Can't have my colleagues thinking I'm psycho.

"It's just—I don't say that." I swallow hard. "Ever."

Aidan frowns. "Really?"

"You must've said 'I love you' to a girlfriend or something." Devon cocks his head. "At least once?"

"Nope." I'm not getting into this. Not with Nina on her way here and a million reasons I'd rather not discuss it. "So hey—I'm meeting with the university board next week." I sling my messenger bag over one shoulder and look from Aidan to Devon. "Either of you assholes want to join me?"

If Aidan finds my subject change weird, he doesn't say so. Just shrugs and says, "We trust you to handle it solo."

"I'll go if you need me." Devon starts for the door. "Doesn't seem like you need anyone, though."

I need someone, all right. But she's not sitting at this table. She's headed here to meet me for this evening's adventure. My dick's been lunging in my pants all day, eager for what's to come. I wonder if the guys can tell.

"Got a date tonight?" Aidan's the mind-reader, but Devon eyes me, too.

"Don't tell me it's with Nina."

The front door's chime answers for me. It's after five, so I know it's her. Seconds later, she swings through the door.

"Hey, guys."

Good god. Has my best friend always looked this hot?

“Nina.” I clear my throat as the other guys greet her. That buys me a second to check her out.

The tight black skirt hugs her flawless ass. With two buttons undone on the green top matching her eyes, I catch a glimpse of perfect tits. As she strides into the room, I command myself not to drool.

“Good to see you again.” She hugs Aidan, which should maybe make me jealous. Not too long ago, I introduced them. Aidan’s wife, Lyla—his neighbor at the time—asked him to put on a show with another woman. Nina volunteered. She did the same for Devon when his girl wanted extracurricular fun.

I know Nina loved it. And I *love* that she loves sex. But it must get old playing the supporting role. Nina’s a goddamn star, and she needs to know that. To get what she deserves, every fucking time.

My pulse kicks up as she ends her hug with Devon and turns to me. “Sorry to barge in. Your text said come back when I got here.”

“We were just wrapping up.” I claim a hug of my own, pulling her closer than I normally might. Her breasts press lush and warm against my chest, and her hair smells sweet and lemony. “Sorry we ran late. I’ll grab my stuff.”

She trails me to my office, as familiar with the building as I am. For as long as I’ve worked here, we’ve met twice a week for lunch. “You’re really not going to tell me your plan?”

“Nope.” I grin and shove my laptop in my bag. “It’s a surprise.”

“You know I hate surprises.” She perches her perfect butt on the edge of my desk, and I try not to gape at her legs. Her top dips open as she bends to fix her shoe. The sight of lace and lush cleavage sends my dick throbbing again.

I’m more than a little lightheaded as I zip up my bag. “You’ll like this surprise. Promise.”

“It’s one of the things on the list?” She tilts her head. “I know we’re not heading for the coast, since you didn’t tell me to pack warm clothes.”

“Patience, little girl.” I smack her ass to get her hopping off my desk.

That’s a lie.

I smack her ass because I’m dying to touch her. She scuttles away, grinning as I finish grabbing my things. “We’re not leaving town, right?”

“Correct.” Palming my keys, I lead her to the front door, then lock it behind me so Aidan and Devon won’t have to deal with anyone barging in. “But we’re definitely driving somewhere.”

Her gaze sweeps the wind-torn sky, the windshield speckled with raindrops as we pull from the parking garage. “I’m gonna guess we’re not going out in a boat,” she says. “Not with this weather.”

“Maybe it’s one of those luxury yachts where we’d be protected from the elements.” That’s not a bad idea, actually. But it’s not tonight’s plan. “No boat ride,” I assure her. “And I’m not saying more because you’ll figure it out soon.”

Seconds later, we’re pulling into the university parking lot. I park behind the student union building and check my watch. We’re five minutes early, but my old pal’s striding from the main entrance. He’s in a suit and tie because he always fucking is. Cameron Wolf is the consummate boss-man, and one of my grad school friends.

“Josh.” Cam claps me on the back as we shake hand. Then he turns to Nina. “You’re even more gorgeous than Josh described, and that’s saying something.” He sticks out his hand. “A pleasure to meet you, Nina.”

She’s smiling as she shakes his hand. “Aren’t you a charmer?”

“A charmer with no manners.” I jerk a thumb at Cam. “Cameron Wolf, meet Nina Stone, a partner at Goodrich Publicity.” Her eyes light up at her new job title as I complete the introduction. “Nina, meet university president Cameron Wolf.”

“Just Cam is fine.” The shameless flirt keeps holding her hand, trying to mess with me.

It won't work.

Knowing Nina turns on every guy she meets is one thing I love about her. If she wants to hook up with Cam, I'm not one to judge.

But that's not why we're here.

“Here's the key.” Cam pulls it from his suit pocket and hands it over. “Just lock up when you're done—uh, taking measurements.”

He shoots me a look and I know he's onto me. Having pals in high places helped land the university job for Black & Reed Architecture, but it brings other perks, too.

“Thanks, man.” I palm the key and take Nina's hand. “My lovely assistant and I will lock up when we're finished.”

A grinning Cam tugs his tie. “I trust you. See you at the presentation next week?”

“Count on it.” I watch him walk away as Nina's eyes bore holes in the side of my face.

She waits 'til he's out of earshot to ask what she's dying to know. “He's not a twin, right?”

I laugh and take her hand. “Not a twin. Also not a lighthouse keeper, in case you're wondering.”

“I wasn't.” She tilts her head as we stroll toward the student union building. “Wait. Was that a clue?”

“Kinda.” Might as well get this over with. “So, the bad news is that the Great Head Lighthouse got demolished last year. The ground washed out from under it in a landslide and there was too much structural damage to—”

“That's what 'demo' meant.” She squeezes my hand. “On the list?”

“Yeah, sorry. We won't be able to check that box, but I came up with the next best thing.” We've reached the door to the bell tower, so I dig the key out of my pocket.

Nina's eyes drift up and land at the top of the bell tower. "Wait. We get to go up there?"

"Yep." We're doing more than going up. "There's a platform all the way around the top. A railing, too, so it's totally safe."

"And it's basically a landlocked lighthouse."

"Pretty much." I twist the key in the lock and give it a shove. "The bell tower is two-hundred and twelve feet high, which is exactly the same as the Great Head Lighthouse was."

"Can I just say I love that you know this?"

I'm hoping she'll love what we're doing here more. "You can't see the ocean from the top, but we've got views of the Columbia River, which technically flows to the Pacific less than sixty miles from here, so—"

"Come on already, let's go!" She smacks my ass in revenge for earlier.

I pause with my hand on the door. "You'll pay for that."

Her green eyes flash. "You plan to punish me?"

"Maybe." My dick throbs as I push open the door and usher her inside. "Or maybe I'll just stare up your skirt as you climb one-hundred and ninety-six stairs."

She laughs and starts up the steps. "Guess it's a good thing I ditched the panties." She throws a devilish grin over her shoulder. "That'll make your views more interesting."

The blood leaves my brain, bound for my cock. I hustle behind her, hungry for a glimpse up that short shirt. "You showed up at my office without panties?" My brain catalogues what Aidan and Devon and I could do for her on the conference room table.

"Nope." She skips ahead of me up the steps. "I took them off when you were fiddling with the keys down below."

"You—really?"

Another grin as she rounds the spiral staircase. "Check your pocket."

I pat the right pocket of my jacket, then the left. Sure enough, there's a lump of fabric. Dragging it out, I see Nina's black lace thong. Lust courses through me as I chase her up the stairs. "You're definitely going to pay for that."

"I hope so."

My breath comes faster as we near the top of the stairs. The peak of the bell tower opens on four sides with a copper roof to keep rain out. It's a solid design, one I studied in school while honing my knowledge of campus buildings.

"Wow, this is gorgeous." She turns in a circle, finding her footing on the narrow catwalk around the top. "Look at that view."

"Right?" I step closer to take it in. To take *her* in. That flowery scent—something light with hints of lemon—floats on the breeze. "You can see all the way into Vancouver from here."

"There's the I-205 Bridge." As she leans over the rail, I step closer and brush her ear with my lips.

"Can you spot my car down there?"

She nods and her hair skims my lips. "I've never seen this view of the Columbia, where it splits the two states."

It's a mighty big river, sparkling with pink glitter as the sun sinks lower. The rain stopped on our drive here, and the sky swirls with sunset streaks. "I know it's not the ocean, but I can fix that." Slipping a hand in my pocket, I come up with my phone. I queue the ocean sounds playlist and set it in the corner where it won't get kicked over.

"Oh my God." Nina laughs and turns in the bracket of my arms. "You really thought of everything."

"I aim to please." At least until we hit the end of the list. That's all this is, right? A fling with an end date. A chance to fulfill a few fantasies and give Nina what she deserves.

I search her eyes for hesitation. For a sign we're still on the same page.

With a grin, she drops to her knees. “Please say I get to suck your cock this time.”

Oh, Christ.

She’s got my belt undone and my dick out before I know what’s hit me. “This wasn’t the pl—oh, God.” As her lips close around me, all rational thought leaves my brain.

I should fight this. I should. This is about Nina’s pleasure. Nina’s fantasy.

But as she draws me deep into her throat, I can’t think of anything but the hot, wet hollow of her mouth. Fisting one hand in her hair, I fight for control.

“Nina.” I breathe it through gritted teeth as she tunnels her tongue around me. “I’m not expecting you to—Jesus, you’re good at that.”

“Mmm.” She slides me to the back of her throat, then withdraws slowly. “I’ve thought about sucking you all day.”

“Okay, but I really didn’t plan for you to—”

“Stop fighting me.” With a devilish grin, she licks the head of my cock. “I’m making a new plan.”

She’s making me come is what she’s doing. God, the girl can suck. I’m not close—give me some credit—but a few minutes of this will seriously screw with my staying power.

“Jesus, Neen.” I close my eyes as she draws me all the way back into her throat. How long can I last like this?

I’m not sure where to look. At sun dappled tugboats chugging up the river? At the aspens shimmying in the breeze below?

Or at Nina, taking me in her mouth as she looks up with wide green eyes. “That’s it,” I coax as she sucks me again. “Take it all.”

She does, firing spears of pleasure through my chest. It’s crazy how good this feels. How I’m hurtling to the edge when I’ve normally got good staying power.

But her mouth feels unreal. Just a couple more strokes and I won't be able to—

“Enough.” I bend and catch her by the arms, pulling her to her feet. “If you want this to last, you do what I say. Understood?”

Her shiver says she likes this bossy side of me. “Yes, sir.”

God, that's hot.

Gripping her hips, I nod to the sprawling campus below. “Which view do you want?”

“You mean the river or the lawn or—”

“You want eye contact,” I interrupt, “or an outside view?”

She gets what I'm asking and grins. “As much as I love being fucked from behind, that's not what I want for our first time.”

“No?” Me neither, but I need her to say it. I want to know we're on the same page.

Nina licks her lips. “I want to watch. I want to see every inch of you sliding into me, nice and slow.”

“Yeah?” Threading my fingers through her hair, I tug her head back. “You want to watch this cock disappear inside that hungry little pussy?”

Her nod pulls her hair taut through my fingers. “Just for a few strokes.”

I hear her loud and clear. “And then you want to get fucked hard from behind?”

“Yes,” she breathes, nodding again. She must like the way I'm tugging her hair, so I do it harder. “Yes, please.”

“Take out my wallet,” I command. “There's a condom inside.”

“Just one?” Her eyes glint with mischief, but she knows me better than that.

“We're not at risk of running out.” I stuffed three more in my pockets, not sure where the night might lead us. “Wallet's

in my right front pocket.”

“I know where you keep your wallet, Josh.” She pulls it out and has the condom in hand before I take my next breath. “I remember the first time I saw your cock.”

It takes me a sec to remember. “Strip poker at that St. Patrick’s Day party?”

“Yep.” With a grin, she rolls on the condom. “I couldn’t get the full effect since you weren’t hard, but—”

“You took care of that.” Maybe she doesn’t remember. “You lost your top on the next round. I had to make a bathroom run after that.”

Her eyes meet mine and she smiles. “Did you jerk off thinking about me?” Her fingers squeeze my shaft, testing. “Did you wonder what it would be like to slide inside me nice and sl—*oh!*”

I catch hold of her thigh, hoisting her up as I pin her against the side of the bell tower. Her skirt hikes up and *holy God.*

“Look at that.” My mouth waters as I ache to taste her again. “So wet and ready for me.”

“Josh.” Her throat rolls as she swallows. “I need to feel you.”

And I need to savor this moment. These sweet, heady seconds before I sink into her slick channel. “Put it in for me.” Still gripping her hip, I use my free hand to guide hers to my shaft. “I want to watch you feed that cock into you.”

We both watch her fingers wrap around the base. Slowly, oh so achingly slowly, she draws me to the apex of her thighs. Her pussy glistens as she drags the head through her folds.

“Oh,” she gasps as my crown bumps her clit. “Fuck, that feels good.”

“Put it in,” I command. “Just the tip. Just one inch is all you get for now.”

“Or else?” With a grin, she eases me to her entrance. “God, that’s good.”

She’s such a snug fit I could stay like this forever. Just the slightest tilt of my hips has me working the head through the tight clench of her sex.

But I need more. So does she, if the rocking of her hips is any indication. “Drop your hand.” I don’t give her the chance to question me. Grabbing her wrist, I shove it behind her and up against the cement wall. “Keep your eyes on that pussy.” As I ease in deeper, she groans. “You like that, Nina? You like watching my cock split you wide open?”

She groans and licks her lips. “You’re so big.” Another groan as I slide deeper. “God, that’s good.”

“We fit together well.” My voice sounds raspy, and I clear my throat. “I feel how you’re gripping me. You want it deeper?”

“Yes.” She gasps as I slam in balls deep. “Yes, *yes!*”

I do it again, pounding her hard as I cushion her back with my free hand. I don’t want to hurt her, but God—she’s so snug. Like a slippery fist wrapped snug around me. Nina lets her head fall back as I pump my hips harder.

I look down to see her fingers inching toward her clit. “Let me.” I push her hand away, replacing it with my own. As I pull out—not all the way, just enough so the head stays snug inside—I skim my thumb along my shaft to wet it.

“There,” I breathe, circling her clit with the pad of my slick thumb. “You like that?”

“Yes.” She bites her lip. “Harder.”

I’m not surprised she likes it that way. I pick up the pace, circling her clit with a commanding touch. Pushing my cock deeper, I watch her face. She’s so fucking beautiful. Her lips part on a moan as she opens her eyes to look at me.

“I’m close.”

“I know.” I feel her clenching around me. “Come for me, Neen. I want to watch you.”

That's all it takes. That, and another swirl of my thumb. She cries out, pussy clenching tight as I slam in hard.

"Oh God, oh God, *oh God!*" Someone looks up from the sidewalk, but they don't see us up here. Doesn't matter. I keep my eyes on Nina, watching her explode as I slam into her again and again.

"That's it," I urge, still stroking her clit. "Milk me just like that."

I'm fighting to hold on, to make this last. It's tough with her pussy working me like a vise grip and her soft moans swirling around us.

Not yet.

Gritting my teeth, I watch her eyes flutter open. With a smile, she blows a shock of hair off her forehead. "Well, that was fucking amazing."

And we've barely gotten started. "I love how hard you squeeze me when you come."

"And I love how huge your cock is."

That's an awful lot of love for two people who've agreed we're not doing that. We're just getting it out of our systems, right?

I slide out and she groans. "You didn't come, right?"

"Nope." Gripping her hips, I spin her around to face the view. "Look at all those students down there. They have no idea I'm about to bend you over the rail and fuck you 'til you come again."

"Jesus, Josh." She grips the rail and tips her ass up to greet me.

I flip up her skirt, hungry for the clutch of those sweet, pink folds. I ease in slowly, taking my time as Nina growls.

"Ohhhh." She groans as I go balls deep. "That's so goddamn good."

I pound her slowly, knowing I should admire the view. The trees, the river, the campus below.

But all I see is *her*. Nina, with her smooth, round ass slamming against me. Nina with her hair spilling forward, cunt clutching me each time I slide inside. She's so wet, so goddamn tight I can barely hang on.

Releasing her hips, I slip a hand inside her top. It takes some work, but I manage to get two more buttons undone. Her breasts spill into my palms, plush and wrapped in satin. Her nipples pebble under my fingers as I cup one soft globe, then the other.

"You've got perfect fucking tits," I growl.

"You want to fuck my tits?" She turns her head to grin back at me. "Is that what you're saying?"

"It's not." Releasing her, I dip my hand down the front of her skirt. "I want to work that sweet little clit until you scream my name again."

"Josh," she gasps. It's not a scream, but a clue I've found the pressure she likes. The rhythm that sets her blood boiling. "Faster."

I'm not sure if she wants me to fuck her harder or work her clit with more intensity. I do both, slamming her from behind as she holds the rail for dear life. "Yes, yes, *yes*—just like that."

I love how responsive she is. The way she squeezes around me as I drive into her, savoring the slap of her ass. I'm growing dizzy, getting closer as I fight to hold on. It's our first time, it's Nina's fantasy, and I need to make this last. I should —

"Josh," she gasps. "Come with me. Please."

That's it. I'm a goner. I let go and unleash a howl as my dick jerks inside her and I'm coming my goddam brains out. It goes on forever, pulse after pulse as Nina's tight body milks me.

We're both panting as I pull out. I tie off the condom, then reach for her as she tugs down her skirt. Turning to face me, she smiles.

“Wow,” she says. “That’s lighthouse sex.”

“Closest thing I could get to it on short notice.” I bend to retrieve my phone, tapping off the ocean sounds. “Was it all you wanted it to be?”

“Pretty damn good.” She stretches to kiss me. Just a peck, or that’s how it starts.

But I’m hungry for more, and as my tongue parts her lips, she responds with a soft sigh. Our tongues explore, bodies fused tight as our hands explore. This is the part where we should step back. Where I walk out the door and definitely don’t think words like “love” or “forever” or “did I seriously just fuck my best friend?”

Nina draws back first and meets my eyes. “Can’t wait to see what’s next.”

“Yeah?” I brush some hair back off her face. “Think you could get used to being the center of your own fantasies?”

“Possibly.” Her sexy smile says she’s coming around to the idea. “That really was awesome.”

It was, but she deserves the credit. “You’re pretty goddamn exceptional, you know that?”

She flinches, hurt lighting her eyes. Oh, shit. Was it something I said?

“Nina?” I shouldn’t put so much emphasis on the sex thing. “Hey. You’re amazing, but it’s not just the sex. Our friendship—”

“Rock solid.” She says it so fast that I’m sure I imagined that flicker. “Just not a fan of that word.”

I replay what I said. Goddamn? Pretty? Oh—
“Exceptional?”

She makes a face. “It’s just a personal thing, okay?” She shrugs and straightens her skirt. “Like how some people don’t like the word ‘moist’ and other people hate the word ‘slacks.’”

“People hate the word slacks?” We’re getting off track here. “Look, I’m sorry I said something that—”

“It’s fine, Josh. Really.” She smiles and holds up a hand. “Put it here.”

I’m left with no choice but to slap her palm. High-fives after sex. I guess it could be worse?

But Nina’s smiling, so that’s what matters. That, and the list.

I make a mental note to steer clear of the word “exceptional.” I don’t need to know the reason. Not until she’s ready to share.

“You want to keep going?” I have to ask, in case this is too much for her. “We don’t have to do the rest. The boat sex or the shocky thing or the twins or—”

“I want to, Josh.”

“Yeah?” I search her eyes to make sure that’s true. Those familiar green depths look just like they always do. “It doesn’t have to be me if you’re feeling weird about it.” It pains me to say that, but I have to. “If you’re uncomfortable or worried about our friendship—”

“I’m not.” She squeezes my hand and I finally believe her. “It has to be you.”

“Yeah?” I’m almost afraid to ask. “How come?”

“Because we’re friends and I trust you.” A little color creeps into her cheeks. “I didn’t want to admit it at first, but you’re right about me.”

“That you put everyone else’s pleasure above yours?”

“Yeah.” She licks her lips and I want her all over again. “You’re the first person with the balls to call me on it. Hell, maybe you’re the first one to even notice.”

There’s that flash in her eyes again.

But she pushes on before I can say something. “I’m realizing it can only be you,” she says. “If I’m going to do the list, it has to be with my best friend. The person I love and trust the most.”

Love.

The word makes me swallow hard. I'm swallowing back panic and fear and a bunch of other stuff I don't want to deal with. "Okay." I let out a long breath. "I want to keep going, too."

"Good." She squeezes my hand again. "This will be great. Kinda like self-improvement, but with orgasms."

Sounds perfect to me. "I'm game."

"Between the two of us, we've got plenty of practice doing the no-strings thing." She smooths down her skirt, looking polished and practical. "I know you don't do long-term, so we're both on the same page there."

"Good."

It *is* good, right?

"I mean, we've both had partners get all emotional and weird and attached when that's not what we want..." She trails off as I get to my feet. "Anyway, it's nice knowing we're not risking that."

Ouch.

But she's not wrong, so I force a smile. "Okay then. What's next?"

She grins and squeezes my hand. "I have an idea."

CHAPTER 5

“*I*t’s the first cabin to the left of the pier, as you stand facing the lake.” My boss presses the key into my palm, hazel eyes searching mine. “You’re sure you don’t mind doing this?”

“Positive.” I love how Eve thinks it’s a hardship to spend the weekend at a rustic resort in the mountains. “Is the client okay with TikTok, or should I stick with Instagram content for now?”

“The whole package, if you don’t mind.” Eve takes a seat behind her desk and crosses her legs. “The owner’s an old friend and I promised we’d work some PR magic.” Leaning forward, she lowers her voice. “We were friends for years, and then lovers, and then—well, it’s complicated.” She clears her throat. “Anyway, I’m looking to mend things with Jordan.”

“I’m on it.” And I’m intrigued by what she just shared. A friends-to-lovers-to-it’s-complicated relationship sounds intriguing, and *Jordan*? There’s a non-gendered name.

I’ve always wondered about Eve. If she’s into guys or girls and what her backstory might be.

Not my business. She’s my boss and we’re friendly, but I don’t go nosing in her personal life. I’ve got enough on my plate with this plan to spread social media love for Lush Lake Resort in the Cascade Mountains. When Eve first mentioned it, I jumped at the chance.

And I’m giddy as I dial Josh from my office. “I got the keys,” I say the instant the answers. “It’s officially on.”

“Awesome.” His throaty sigh says he’s loosening his necktie in an office across town. “And they’ve got a marina?”

“Yep.” A shiver zips up my spine as I imagine the second item on my list. “Watercraft rental is included with our stay.”

Boat sex.

Seems silly I’ve never done it, but I’ve meant to for years. There’s something about being out on the water, surrounded by nature, that makes me horny as hell.

What? Is that not why people like outdoor recreation?

“I’m just wrapping up a project here,” Josh says. “I can be done by three. Want to go right after that?”

“I’ve already got a bag packed.” And I thought of the essentials like bug spray, bathing suit, s’mores stuff, condoms, lube, handcuffs—

“This is gonna be great, Neen.” The lift in his voice says it’s true. “It’s been a long week at work. I need this getaway.”

I need a lot more than that, but this isn’t just about sex. “Same. I’ve been fantasizing about sitting on the dock reading a good book. Maybe taking a hike around the lake.”

“Liar.” The ring of his laugh shoots straight to my snatch. “You can’t wait to get bent over the bow of some speedboat and fucked so hard you scream and scare all the wildlife.”

Busted. “Or that.”

Josh laughs again. “The other stuff sounds good, too. How about I swing by your place around four?”

“Perfect.” I hang up and spend a few distracted minutes setting an out-of-office notification on my email. Eve said there’s Wi-Fi in the cabin, though she warned it’s sporadic.

“Apparently, it’s just in this one back bedroom with bunkbeds,” she said. “Maybe make that your mobile office?”

“I’ll figure it out.” Honestly, I’m not big on sharing a bed with someone. Since Josh and I hooked up, we’ve had sex several more times. I always send him home right after or find reasons to hustle home.

Something about sleeping together—actually *sleeping*—feels a few steps too far for my fragile heart. Seems silly to draw my line there when I’ve got so few other boundaries in my sex life.

We all have our issues, right?

A memory swells as I hear Josh’s words in the bell tower.

“You’re pretty goddamn exceptional, you know that?”

He couldn’t have known. I’ve never told him how my parents picked that word to motivate me.

Maybe motivate’s not the word. Provoke? Torment?

“Only Tess understands what it means to be exceptional.”

I never could please them. I gave up trying years ago.

Maybe that’s why I try so hard to please everyone else. Some kind of fucked up roleplay thing, and not the good kind.

It’s not ‘til Josh said something that I noticed. He’s right. I don’t do great prioritizing my pleasure. I get off during sex—always, I swear—but am I doing it for me?

Or is my enjoyment secondary to someone else’s?

It’s sure as hell not with Josh. This give and take we’ve got going—it’s new to me. My whole life, I’ve believed the words my parents yelled when I didn’t do what they wanted.

“You’re being selfish.”

“Extremely selfish.”

Maybe that’s not the worst thing.

I consider that on the drive home, tapping my fingers on the wheel as I stop for the light at Fifth and Clay. By the time I get home and throw a few final things in my bathroom bag, I’ve still got thirty minutes to kill.

Might as well bust out my favorite vibe. I treat myself to two fantastic orgasms. See? Self-care.

Picturing Josh while I do it might be a new slide in the spank bank show, except... well, it kinda isn’t.

If I'm being honest, I've thought of him like that before. Not often—just when I dig deep in my archives of bean flicking fantasies. Before now, I didn't want to mess with our friendship.

What changed?

I'm still not sure, but now that I know he's a phenomenal fuck, I can't picture anyone else as I take pleasure in the vibe between my legs.

I've just washed up when the buzzer trills at my door. A glance at my watch says Josh is ten minutes early.

I throw open the door, but it's not Josh.

"Hey, Nina." Skye Cross throws her arms around me and squeezes. "I was in the neighborhood and remembered I still had your popcorn maker."

"Oh, hey! I forgot I loaned this out. Thanks."

She hands it over with a grin. "You're looking... flushed. Were you exercising?"

The girl knows me better than that. "Rubbing one out, if you must know. Want to come in for a sec?"

She laughs and looks at her watch. "Devon's waiting in the car. He's out of town this weekend, though. Want to grab drinks Saturday?"

"Raincheck?" I set the popcorn maker on my end table and lean on the door frame. "I'm on my way out of town."

"Oooh, sexy getaway?"

"Something like that." I fight back a grin. I haven't mentioned the Josh thing, despite Skye being one of my closest friends.

When I say "friends," I don't mean book club buddies.

I mean, every few months we get naked together with a spouse or lover or two or three or—

"Did you hear Aidan and Lyla might start trying?" Skye beams.

“Trying... what?”

“To get pregnant.” Skye shoves a shock of hair off her face. “Not right away, but they’re discussing it. Devon says Aidan’s thrilled.”

“That’s right.” I snap my fingers. “Lyla mentioned it last week.”

“Think they’ll bow out of group fun?”

“Doubtful.”

“You’re right.” Skye laughs. “I can’t imagine those two going without having friends in their bedroom on the regular.”

“And what a wonderful bedroom it is.” I love how openly we discuss this stuff. How our friendship bloomed from borrowing cups of sugar to groping each other as we ride our lovers’ cocks.

Speaking of which—

“Hey, Neen.” Josh bangs through the stairwell door, never one to take the elevator. “Oh, hey, Skye. I thought I saw Devon downstairs.”

“He’s waiting for me. I should run.” She gives him a hug, then embraces me again. Before she draws back, she whispers in my ear. “You fucked him, didn’t you?”

I fight not to let my mouth fall open as she pulls back with a knowing smirk.

“How did you—?” I stop and dart a glance at Josh. “Did he —?”

“Lucky guess.” She steps back with a sexy little wave. “Lucky *girl*. Have fun, you two!”

Then she’s gone, slipping into the elevator where, legend has it, she first banged her hot husband.

God, I love my friends.

Especially the one smiling in my doorway, looking ready to devour me. Josh wears a worn college t-shirt in cool gray

and shorts that hug his perfect ass. He's smiling like I'm a batter bowl he wants to lick.

"You played with yourself before I got here, didn't you?"

"Duh." Does he know me that well? "Just let me dry off Ricardo and tuck him in my bag, and I'll be ready to go."

He follows me into the apartment. "Good ol' Ricardo. Glad he's doing well."

Friendship means knowing the names of your bestie's favorite vibes. We've been through a lot together, Ricardo and me.

Almost as much as Josh and I have.

Leaving Josh by the couch, I hustle to the bedroom and grab my things. Laptop, extra bathing suit, day planner, condoms. So many condoms.

There's a spring in my step as I stride back to the living room.

"Ready to roll," I call, shifting the strap on my laptop bag. "Maybe we can stop by—"

I skid to a stop. The words freeze in my throat.

Josh stands staring at my wall of family photos. There's dust on the frames, but that's not what caught his eye. He's studying a pic from our high school graduation. A photo I hate and love in equal measure.

The longer he stares, the more certain I am I should say something. Anything. But what?

I can't have this conversation. Not here, not now. Not with Josh.

"Should I drive, or do you want to?" I clutch my suitcase tighter. "Josh?"

"I'll drive." He turns around slowly and shoves both hands in his pockets. "I brought the convertible."

Josh inherited his grandpa's 1963 Austin-Healy 3000. It's a treat to ride in it, but the thrill doesn't bloom in my chest like

normal.

Still holding my gaze, Josh tilts his head toward the photo. “This just reminded me of something.”

“Oh?”

“Did you get the invite to our ten-year reunion?”

“Um, maybe?” Memories flood back, but they’re not happy ones. Not cheers as we waved our diplomas in the air. Not a giddy sea of high school grads in our colorful caps and gowns.

In the back of my mind, I see my father. He’s snapping this pic of Josh and me at our high school entrance. My gown hangs askew where his hand rests on my shoulder, and Josh’s cap tilts to one side.

To our right, my sister poses with perfect hair.

“Come on, Tess.” My mother grabbed her hand to tow my sister toward the parking lot. “We’ll be late for the tournament if we don’t hurry.”

My father paused and let the camera hang from its strap. For a moment, I thought he might stay. That he understood Tess’s college debate tournament—one of ten that season—didn’t trump their youngest child’s high school graduation.

“Enjoy the ceremony.” My dad pulled out his keys and stepped back. “It’s a good time to consider your future.”

“Call if you need a ride later,” my mother yelled over her shoulder. “Or if you change your mind about law school.”

They threw their arms around Tess and walked away. No one turned back. Not even my sister, the golden child, the perfect daughter, the *exceptional* one.

The child who’s never selfish.

She gave our parents what they wanted. A perfect daughter to follow in their footsteps. A lawyer, just like them.

“We should get going.” I swallow hard and force myself back to the living room. Josh studies my face, and I pray he can’t read what’s racing through my mind.

You'll never be exceptional. You're too selfish to be anything at all.

I swallow again and put on a bright face. “I’d love to get to the lake before dark.”

“No problem.” He holds the door for me, palm skimming my ass as I turn to lock the door. “What are you wearing under this skirt?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

The glint in his eye lets me know we’re back on safe turf. I breathe with relief as my brain screams a warning that should be fucking obvious.

If sex with your bestie feels like safe turf, you’re in big trouble.

* * *

“THERE’S REALLY no boat with an engine?” I hate how disappointment leaks through my voice. “Not even a little one?”

The marina manager—also the guy who checked us in, and, I’m guessing, the guy serving dinner at the lodge tonight—appraises me sadly. “Fraid not.” He plucks a toothpick from his mouth and points at the lake. “Got two families reserving our pontoon boats the whole weekend. The speedboat broke down Tuesday and we’re waiting for parts.” He shrugs and scratches his chest where the stitching on his shirt reads “Tom.”

I draw a breath and force a smile. “You have fishing boats, right?”

He sticks the toothpick back in a corner of his mouth. “Got a fishing tournament going all weekend. Those’ve all been reserved for months.”

Josh rests a hand on the small of my back. “What about that one over there?”

Toothpick Tom frowns at the dock where Josh points. “That ol’ wooden rowboat?” He shrugs and looks back at us. “Sure. Hell, you can claim that one the whole weekend. Might even have some oars out back.”

“That would be helpful.” Josh slides a hand to my hip. “What hours is the fishing tournament going on?”

“Six a.m. to six p.m., Saturday and Sunday.” He leads us to the rowboat, and I try to keep my heart from sinking. Water pools in one corner and the wood looks waterlogged. “Did you bring your rod?”

I bite back a childish *rod* joke as Josh replies, “I’m not much of a fisherman. Not since my dad yelled at me for baiting the hooks wrong.”

No way I’ll let that go. I peer up at him with my sweetest smile. “You’re saying you weren’t a good baiter?”

Josh grins. “Never quite mastered it.”

Toothpick Tom ignores our childish masturbation jokes and hands Josh a pair of oars. “Keep it all weekend. Tell Eve I said thanks for sending you up here.”

Wait. “You’re Eve’s friend?” I thought she said Jordan.

“Yep.” Tom’s grin erases any doubt they’re more than friends. “Me and Eve and our buddy, Jordan, spent a lot of time together a few years back.” The faraway look in his eye says his memory’s off and running. “We’d get a jug of cheap wine and spend the weekend making double penne pasta. Man, the fun we had.”

“Sounds amazing.” I dart a glance at Josh. Did he just hear that?

We wait ‘til Tom loads up our life vests and saunters back to the lodge before I bust out giggling. “Isn’t ‘double penne pasta’ a euphemism for three-way?”

“Pretty sure.” Josh grins. “Your boss is a dirty, dirty girl.”

“Maybe he didn’t mean it like that.”

“Double penne pasta?” He gives me a dubious look. “You ever seen that on the menu at an Italian restaurant?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“But you’ve heard it mentioned at Club Rapture, yeah?”

There’s no denying that. “I knew I liked Eve.”

Josh throws an arm around me and leads me from the broken-down rowboat. “It’s why I like you.” There’s a devilish look in his eye as he leans in and nips my earlobe. “Want to hear my plan for tonight?”

I shiver and bite back an urge to tell him everything I want.

All of it.

Every single fantasy.

But that’s not happening.

I look out over the lake and draw a deep breath. The water sparkles silver and green, rippled with reflections of towering pines and spiked mountain peaks. It’s a magical place, and there’s no one I’d rather share it with.

As friends. You’re friends with benefits. Nothing more.

I know in the bell tower, I said we’re not gonna fall for each other. It seems true on the surface. Josh doesn’t do love. I’ve known that forever, and I’m guessing it’s got something to do with his dad.

Josh doesn’t talk about it, but I remember Carl Cline well.

“I’ll sneak over after dinner.” That’s what Carl whispered into the phone the day Josh brought me home for pizza. I’d gone looking for a bathroom and found Josh’s dad scrunched in the tub, unaware a twelve-year-old girl heard every word he murmured. “Yeah, I know. Love you babe.”

I backed out of that bathroom, bladder forgotten as I avoided Josh’s eyes.

“Did you find your way?” his mom called from the kitchen.

Nodding, I kept my eyes on my plate as Mr. Cline swept back into the dining room. “Lookie here at my beautiful wife.” He dipped Mrs. Cline, making her laugh as he kissed her loud and sloppy. “Love you, gorgeous.”

I never told Josh. His parents split for the first time a few months later, and I saw no need to rub salt in the wound. He knew who his dad was. Having *me* know was a layer of pain Josh didn’t need.

“Nina?”

I snap back to Josh and the water’s edge. “Yeah?”

“Where’d you go just then?”

“Oh, um.” Crap, he’s been talking, hasn’t he? “Just thinking about this weekend.”

“Same.” He steers me toward the cabin with a smile. “Let me tell you what I’m planning tonight.”

With a shiver, I release my fears and lean into the sinful night to come.

CHAPTER 6

“*O*h my God.” Nina gasps. “I’ve never seen so many stars.”

The wonder in her eyes steals my breath away.

So does this view of her breasts under a filmy white swimsuit cover. Cool night air perks her nipples to stiff peaks, with her pink bikini top leaving little to my imagination. One tug of the string around her neck would send those sweet, soft mounds tumbling into my hands.

But first things first.

I’ve rowed us to the middle of Lush Lake. Crickets chirp on the banks, and spirals of smoke swirl with kids’ campfire laughter. From our spot on the water, we’ve got a nostalgia-tinged view of it all.

“You really never camped as a kid?” I can’t believe we’ve never discussed this. “Not even a campout with friends?”

“Nope.” The melancholy I saw back in the bell tower seeps through her voice now. “You know how my parents were. Tess and I had to be focused.”

“But still, *camping*?” I know Christine and Collin Stone aren’t exactly the outdoorsy type, but doesn’t everyone camp in the Pacific Northwest? “Seems like the sort of thing they’d have you do to look well-rounded on college applications or something.”

Her laugh sounds stilted. “Between debate team and AP classes and all the extracurriculars they insisted we do so we’d

grow up to be successful lawyers—” She stops, drawing a breath. “There wasn’t time. At a certain point, it seemed too late to learn how to camp.”

I digest her words slowly. “It’s never too late.”

“Yeah?” She lifts a brow and looks at me. “Same goes for you, you know.”

I draw back one oar to keep us from turning with the breeze. “What does that mean?”

Nina leans back on her wooden seat. “How many girlfriends have you had?”

“A lot.” Leave it to Nina to answer a question with a question. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

Her eyes trail my arms as our oars slice dark water. “In all that time,” she says softly, “and all those women, you’ve never been in love?”

I take a long time answering. A minute, maybe two. I’m honestly not sure what to say. “My dad was a dick.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” I slide my eyes back to hers. What I’m about to say, I’ve never shared with anyone. “Want to know how he wooed all his women? How a married man managed to attract so many smart, capable, competent—”

“He told them he loved them.” She tilts her head, not breaking eye contact. “Right?”

“Right.” I tug the oar again. She knew? I shouldn’t be surprised. “Pardon me if I’m not eager to be a chip off the ol’ block.”

“Josh.” The kindness in her voice makes my heart hurt. “You could never be your dad. Not in a million years.”

“He’s a successful businessman.” I grit my teeth, knowing that’s the wrong point to make. “The fucker used to brag about all the women he bagged. Dad and Grandpa—they’d take me out fishing so they could boast about their conquests. Teach

me the best ways to get women in the sack. I was eight fucking years old.”

I’m practically shouting that last part. It’s the last thing I want when I’m trying to set a mood.

Nina touches my arm. “Honey.”

She’s never called me that before. I hate how much I love it.

“Josh,” she tries again. “I’m so sorry. Truly. I know your dad was a cad—”

“*Is* a cad.” As far as I know. “Haven’t talked to him for more than a year.”

“That’s probably for the best.” She lets out a long breath. “Anyway, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” My right oar ripples through black water. “I swore I’d never do that. Never say those words unless I meant them.”

I don’t tell her the rest. That I’m pretty sure I *can’t* mean them. My old man stole that part of me, and there’s no getting it back.

“I understand.” She takes her hand off my arm. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re one of the most loving people I know. Even if you don’t want to be *in* love.”

That’s the distinction, isn’t it? Nina knows, just like I do.

I clear my throat. “How about you?”

“What about me?”

Is she stalling or does she not want to connect the dots? “Your parents did a number on you. Tess, too, probably.”

“Tess is just fine.” Her voice sounds harsh and hollow. “She did what she had to do to make them love her. The right college, the right career, the right husband—”

“Tess is a pleaser.” I knew that the first time I met Nina’s sister. Just a year older, Tess aided our art class in middle school. When their mom picked us up after class, Christine

Silas-Stone beamed with pride. “It’s nice how *one* of my daughters goes the extra mile to make something of herself. Isn’t that nice, Josh?”

I was fourteen, so what the fuck did I know? Even back then—before I’d heard the words “passive aggressive”—I recognized bullshit when I heard it.

Now that I’m older, I know that’s how Nina wound up the way she is.

“Hey,” I say softly, wanting us back on solid ground. “I think it’s pretty damn ballsy that you grew up and did your own thing. Marketing wasn’t your parents’ choice, but it’s gutsy to follow your own path.”

Her eyes gleam with starlight and something else. “Yeah, and how’s that working out for me?”

“Pretty good,” I say slowly, sensing a trap. “Considering you just made partner.”

“Yeah, but I’m still a pleaser in other ways.” She wraps her swimsuit coverup tighter around her. “You’re the one who pointed it out.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I should know when to leave well enough alone.

“Maybe we’ve both got work to do,” I say instead. “Maybe it’s not so easy unraveling all the shit you get from your parents.”

“True enough,” she says, and I know we’re back to an okay place. Back to Nina and Josh, best friends forever.

So I shoot her a smile and release the oars. “Maybe we start with camping. Not in a cabin, either—I’m talking *tent* camping.”

“Camping, huh?” She sounds relieved at the subject change. “Like some sort of outdoor therapy?”

“Sure, why not?” Wouldn’t be the worst idea I’ve had. “Let’s go camping sometime. I’ve got sleeping bags and supplies and a nice, big tent.”

“How big?” There’s that saucy smile I love. “Are we talking *really big*, or *huge*?”

“Ginormous.” The innuendo sends a jolt to my cock. “Let me pitch my tent for you and you’ll find out.”

We dissolve into snickers, swiping away dark clouds that gathered in the last few minutes. *Thank God.*

It’s a gorgeous night and I’ve got plans for us. Big plans. *Ginormous.*

“How’s this spot?”

Nina looks at the bank. “Good. Plenty of distance from the campground.”

I hook the oars in their locks and drop the anchor off the side. According to a map back at the lodge, it’s shallow here. Less than thirty feet deep, but far enough from shore to shield us from prying eyes.

In other words, just what we need.

Maybe not the luxury yacht she pictured, but I plan to make this count. We’re halfway through her fantasy list and I want each new experience to be amazing.

“So.” I reach into the cooler and pull out a thick wool blanket. “Shall we move to item number two?”

Nina laughs as I unfold the blanket. “I thought you had wine in there.”

“Nah, I’m much more practical.” I refold the blanket and fit it to the bottom of the boat. Then I lie on my back, glad I had the foresight to sop up the water before we set out.

Let’s just hope this thing holds.

“Come on.” I pat the blanket beside me. There’s room for us both to lie side by side, so Nina slides into the space beside me. Her skin feels molten where it brushes my arm, and I ache to reach for her.

“Wow,” she breathes. One arm lifts to trace a spot in the sky. “There’s Jupiter. Is that Venus?”

“I think so.” I consider a Uranus joke but decide not to kill the mood again. “I wish I’d brought my telescope.”

“That’s right!” She rolls to one side and looks at me. “You bought it sophomore year when we took astronomy for that dumb science credit.”

“Dr. Cockburn, right?” I pronounce it correctly, just like the good doc did at the start of each lecture.

“*Coh*-burn,” Nina annunciates in a perfect imitation of our old prof. “God, what an asshole.”

“I hated how he stared at your tits.”

She rolls to her back and turns her head. “Well, I loved how you told him to knock it the fuck off.”

The asshole never gawked at her again. “Just looking out for you.”

“Thanks.” Her fingers brush mine on the blanket. “That was the year you dated whatshername. Sadie?”

“Good ol’ Sadie.” My first serious girlfriend taught me tons about sex and relationships and life in general. “She dumped me because of you.”

“What?” Nina gasps and smacks my chest. “You never told me that.”

“I didn’t?” Of course I didn’t. I knew she’d be upset, and there was no sense making things awkward. “She felt threatened.”

“Because we were besties?”

Among other things. “She thought I secretly wanted to bone you.”

“Did you?” It’s a teasing tone, but her voice holds a real question.

So I give her a real answer. “Kinda.” I was twenty, so I wanted to bone anything that moved. “Our friendship was too important. I’d never have made it through college without you.”

“Don’t be modest.” She sighs. “I’m glad we had each other.”

“Same.” I prop my hands behind my head, conscious of electricity crackling between us. Does Nina feel it?

This talking, it’s great. The cornerstone of our friendship.

But now that we’ve crossed the line, I need more. More of her. More of everything.

I close my eyes to keep from seeing her. Making this all about sex when it’s not. It’s so much more.

Fuck.

I’m in trouble, aren’t I?

“Josh?”

“Yeah?” I open my eyes to see her watching me.

“I can’t help noticing you’re pitching a tent.” Her green eyes flash with mischief and starlight as she strokes my cock through my swim trunks. I’m hard as a fucking brick and now she knows it. “May I?”

I’m not even sure what she’s asking as I nod. “Be my guest.”

Nina sits up and throws one creamy thigh over me. Her hips roll as she straddles me. “My, my,” she murmurs. “That’s a mighty big tent pole.”

I groan as she grinds on my cock, and my hands move to cup her ass. Through the thin pink bikini bottoms, I feel every hot inch of her. “Either you’re wet and ready, or we’ve sprung a leak.”

“I’ve been wet and ready all day.” She grinds again, letting me feel her slick heat through our thin swimsuits. “Aching to get you inside me.”

“Yeah?” I untie her top like I’ve been dying to, and her breasts fall free into my palms. She’s beautiful, bathed in starlight with waves lapping the boat.

Speaking of lapping—

“Come here.” I don’t let her argue. Just drag her body up mine until she sits on my face. “Jesus, you’re wet.”

I tug her swimsuit to the side, baring her pussy. My tongue’s inside her in an instant and holy hell. “You taste so fucking good, Neen.”

“Oh, *fuck*.” She grips the back of my head, riding my face as the boat rocks. “I love when you suck me like that.”

I do it again as her arousal coats my lips, my tongue, my chin. I could drown like this and die a happy man. “I want you to come on my face.” Gripping her hips, I make sure she can’t move. “I need my tongue inside you when you explode.”

“Josh.” She gasps and keeps riding my tongue. “Want. Your. Cock.” She’s panting as she moves, getting closer from the sound of it.

“Come for me first.” I suck her again, then shove my tongue in her soft hollow. She’s so slick and needy, so turned on I can’t stand it. “Give it to me, Neen. Then I’ll let you ride me.”

They’re the magic words. She cries out, gripping my head as she fucks my face and sets the boat rocking so hard, I’m afraid we’ll tip.

I hold her hips to steady her as she comes down. Her body goes slack, and I lick my lips to savor her.

“Holy fuck.” She’s breathing hard as she slides down my body. “How did you get so good at that?”

“Years of practice.”

Years of dreaming about what just happened. Not in a boat. That was never my fantasy.

But if I had a dime for each time I’ve pictured Nina riding my tongue, I’d never work again.

She kisses me then, and I savor our mingled essence. The sweet saltiness of her sex. The mint tea we had with bourbon after dinner. Is this making her dizzy like it does me?

When Nina draws back, I see her smile lit by stars. “I did what you said. Do I get my reward now?”

“Riding my face wasn’t enough?” It wasn’t for me, but I want her to say it.

“You know damn well it was outstanding.” Her fingers find their way behind my fly and *holy God*—that’s quite the grip. “This is a mighty hard cock.” She strokes me from root to tip and I groan. “It’d be a shame to waste it.”

“Waste not, want not.”

“Oh, I want it.” Nina grins. “I definitely want it.”

“Then climb aboard.”

“If you make a Popeye the Sailor Man ‘toot toot,’ I’m outta here.”

“No you’re not.” I grip her hips and fight the urge to don a Popeye accent and quip, “blow me down.”

That’s not what I need right now.

“I need that sweet pussy around me in the next ten seconds or I’m gonna lose my mind.”

“Then it’s settled.” She pulls a condom from somewhere and sheathes me with one hand. “Boat sex time?”

I drag my gaze off her face and study the sky. “From the position of the stars, I’m gonna say yes.”

I’m not sure how she does it, but I stop caring as her hand makes magic stroking me. “All aboard,” she growls as she sets me at her entrance.

“Now who’s being cheesy?” Like I care. She could tell knock-knock jokes at this point, and I’d still shove my cock inside her, hard and fast and deep and—

“Oh, God.” I groan as she sinks to the hilt. “You’re not messing around.”

“Nope.” She starts to move, hands going to her breasts as her hips roll with the slosh of the lake. A breeze stirs her hair

as her head tips back, and I lose my breath with how gorgeous she is, all lit up by stars.

“Nina.” I forget the rest of what I meant to say. She feels so fucking good, tight and slick as she rides me like a goddamn champ. Hands on her hips, I drive up into her.

“Fuck,” she growls, as I hit something good.

“You like that?” I thrust again, conscious of her g-spot at the tip of my cock. “You like it when I’m balls deep inside you?”

“So good.” Her hips move faster as lake water splashes the sides of the boat. “God, you’re huge.”

My ego loves the stroke, but my cock loves the rest of this. The sweet clench of her pussy. The scent of sex mingling with sunscreen and lake water and fresh pine. It’s an explosion of the senses and I nearly forget I’m on the brink of exploding.

“Neen.” I grip her hips to slow her down. “Better ease up if you want this to last.”

“Can’t,” she breathes, closing her eyes as her head falls back. “Feels too good.”

Her hands cup her breasts and that’s too much for me to take. I drive up hard, filling her deeper than I have before.

Nina cries out as her eyes fly wide. “Josh.”

“That’s right,” I growl, fucking her harder as the boat tips dangerously. “It’s me fucking you right now. Me making this fantasy come true. My cock in that tight pussy as I fill you so full.”

The dirty talk does it, and the next thing I know, she’s pulsing around me. Her cry echoes out across the lake as I clutch her hips and pound her hard. The boat sways, rocking to the rhythm of our need.

She pinches her nipples and cries out, her body clenching around me. Is she coming again? I’m still riding my pleasure, cock throbbing as I find my release inside her.

Nina comes down hard this time. One minute she's upright, the next she's sprawled panting on my chest. I wrap my arms around her, conscious of each place our bodies touch. Hips, bellies, chests, thighs tangled in a sweaty heap. I never want to let go, but I need to get rid of the condom.

As I slip out of her, Nina rolls to her back and opens her eyes. "Check."

I laugh and ditch the condom. "One more item off the list."

"Never thought I'd love having this many to-do items."

"How'd it compare to the fantasy?"

"Better," she says. "And I'm not just saying that."

"How do you mean?" That's my ego asking, but I really want to know. Brushing hair off her face, I study her eyes. "How was it different from what you imagined?"

"I pictured a different boat." She props herself on one elbow to look at me. We're face to face now, somehow more intimate than five minutes ago. "I guess I imaged it'd be on some friend's ocean cruiser or maybe a houseboat on a lake."

I laugh. "Not a leaky rowboat?"

"Nope." Her grin puts the starlight to shame. "But this was so much better. The motion of the water beneath us. The breeze in my hair. The friendly campers watching from the lake shore."

"What?" I crane my neck to look, and she laughs.

"Not really. I mean, I don't think so. I'm good with putting on a show, but not for a family of five roasting marshmallows."

I scan the shore, but I don't see anyone. We're alone in the middle of the lake. Just Nina and me, our bodies sticky with satisfaction. Our heartbeats drumming together as we breathe the cooling night air. "Just four more things on the list?"

Her question catches me off guard. She never saw the last thing I added, so I nod like a robot. "Something like that."

"Did I tell you I found a class on electrosex?"

“Say what?”

She laughs and brushes hair off her face. “Shocky sex—I guess the real term is *electrosex*. It’s where you use electric stimulation to shock someone into orgasm.”

“And there’s a *class*?”

She shrugs and adjusts her bikini top. “It’s at that adult store off Burnside. I put us both on the waiting list.” Biting her lip, she looks at me. “That’s if you’re still game.”

“I am.”

“I figured. You’re just like me in that way—willing to try anything once.”

Almost anything.

What about love?

The thought floats unbidden through my brain. It can’t happen. I know damn well it shouldn’t.

That doesn’t stop some silly, childish part of me from wanting it.

“So,” Nina says. “We’ve got the class, the twins, the childhood bedroom—”

“Don’t forget sleeping with someone you’re banging.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.” She rolls her head to look at me. “You’re not mad we’ve got separate bedrooms in the cabin?”

Truthfully? “It annoyed me at first. But you’re right. We’re on totally different schedules.”

“You like to run in the mornings,” she says. “And I need my little office space to work late at night. This project’s really important.”

“I get it.” It all makes sense. My brain understands, even if my body wishes things were different. My heart doesn’t get it, either.

But sooner or later, Nina has to fall asleep in my arms. It’s part of the plan, right?

And sooner or later, you'll stop kidding yourself that you're not already in love with her.

Pushing that aside, I pull her close instead. "Bottom line, we're making progress on the list."

"We should get a gold star."

"Three or four gold stars." It's hard to keep disappointment from dripping through my voice. So dumb, considering I'm naked in a boat with a gorgeous woman beside me. I'm the last guy who should feel sorry for himself.

But my pulse in my ear reminds me the clock is ticking. This thing with Nina, there's a time limit on it. Sooner or later, we'll reach the end of the list.

What happens then?

I brush her hair from her face. "I guess we should head back in?"

"I suppose." With a sigh, she sits up and reties her bikini top.

Is it insane that I want her all over again?

"Josh?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." She rests a hand on my thigh as I reach for the oars. "You're a good friend for going through this whole list with me."

Friend.

The word's never bothered me before. Our friendship matters more than anything else in the world.

"That's what friends are for," I manage. "Happy to do it."

It's the first time I've lied to my best friend.

Because the truth? I'm terrified it's too late already. I'm scared to death I've already fallen for Nina.

Now what the fuck do I do?

CHAPTER 7

*F*lip a page on my eReader, pausing to turn my face to the sun. It's peaceful here.

Sunshine sparkles like glitter on the water as a family of four in hiking boots crests a ridge on the opposite shore. In the trees overhead, birds flit from branch to leafy branch. My arms feel warm, and I'm not sure if it's sunburn or a touch of rope rash from when Josh tied me to the headboard this morning.

Yeah, we've been busy. Not just in the boat, but in the shower last night. And again after breakfast, with the ropes and chocolate syrup. Then, just before lunch, we went out on the cabin's private balcony and—

"Hey there." Josh joins me on the dock, legs flexing as he lowers himself into an empty Adirondack chair.

"Hey yourself." My mouth waters as he stretches muscular legs out in front of him. "What have you been up to?"

"Went for a run around the lake."

"Another one?" Pretty sure he ran this morning.

"It's too nice here not to enjoy it."

Can't argue with that. I'm not a runner, but I admire the effects on his physique. He must've showered, since he's wearing the shirt he bought this morning in the gift shop. Across muscular pecs, scripted font reads, "*Show me your bobbers and you can touch my rod.*" He laughed all the way to the counter.

If Josh cares that I'm staring at his chest, he doesn't say so. Just nods at the Kindle in my hands. "Good book?"

"Mmmhmm." I tap the button to turn it off before tucking it into its case. "Just started a new one, actually."

He waggles his brows behind dark sunglasses. "Erotica?"

I hesitate. It's tempting to say yes. To pretend I'm a sex queen 24/7.

But I can't lie to Josh. "It's actually more of a vanilla romance."

"Vanilla?" He puts on a faux thoughtful face. "Does that have something to do with drizzling sauces on each other and licking it off?"

"Very funny."

"Seriously, what is it?"

I shrug and rest the eReader on my knee. "It's just a tame, run of the mill romantic comedy with closed-door sex."

"Closed door, huh?" His next words surprise me. "What's the trope?"

"What?" I know damn well what a romance trope is, but how does he?

"Give me some credit, Neen." He leans back in his chair and studies the lake. "You've read romance novels for as long as I've known you. And how many cheesy rom-com flicks have you made me watch?"

"None," I answer primly. "Because they're *not* cheesy." All right, some are cheesy. "I didn't think you paid attention to tropes."

"Sure I have." He glances at me. "Best friend's younger sister?" he guesses. "Second chance romance?"

I press my lips together. "Friends to lovers."

"Yeah?" His expression looks pleased. "Huh."

"It's been on my Kindle for months. I'm just getting around to reading it." That's not the defense I thought it was.

Josh takes the bait. “So this thing with you and me...” His grin goes cocky. “It’s been on your mind for months?”

“No.” I answer too quickly for it to be true. “You’ll find every romance trope under the sun in my library. It doesn’t mean anything.”

The hell it doesn’t.

His eyes hold mine like he hears my guilty conscience. “Does it have a happily ever after, or a happily for now?”

“I don’t know.” I fight not to look away. Not to break this intense eye contact. “I’ve still got five chapters to go.”

“Let me know how it ends.” He smiles and I hate how my heart melts. “Marriage and babies and the whole nine yards, or do they fuck like rabbits and shake hands at the end?”

“Do rabbits have hands?”

He ignores my dumb joke and steals a glance at his watch. “I’ve got a surprise for you in about an hour.”

“A surprise?” That’s my kind of subject change. “Is there anything I should do to get ready for it?”

“Nope.” He rubs his chest with one hand. “Well, you can shower if you feel like it, but you don’t need to.” He leans close and nuzzles my neck, nipping at my earlobe. “You’re delicious, just how you are.”

“Oh.” I gasp as his teeth drag the column of nerves at the base of my throat. Sitting here in the sun made me sweaty, so I really want that shower. “I like surprises that involve getting naked and wet.”

“I know you do.” His lips brush my jaw and he nips me again. “And I promise you’re gonna love this surpr—”

“Ahoy, mateys!” A man’s voice shouts, jolting us from wherever we might’ve been headed.

We draw apart as an aluminum fishing boat glides close. There’s a man and a woman inside, fishing rods hooked in the holders. The man wears a huge smile and an oversized shirt that says, “*I jerk it every chance I get.*”

Josh nods at the words. “I take it you’re a fly-fishing fan?”

The guy grins and pats the cartoon figure on his chest. “Fly-fishing’s my first love.” He clears his throat and nods at the woman. “Second, I mean.”

The silver-haired beauty blushes as her partner keeps talking.

“We’re here for the angling tournament.” He jerks a thumb at the woman. “My wife, Susie. I’m Bill.”

“Great to meet you.” Susie stretches out to shake my hand. Her shirt reads, “*Never fish with another woman’s rod.*” I like her instantly.

“Josh and Nina,” I offer. “We’re here through the weekend.”

“Great weather, isn’t it?” Susie tilts her head. “Did I see you two out there night fishing?”

“Oh—yes, right.” I offer my best smile as I fight back a laugh. “That’s the best time to do it.”

“Sure is.” Josh can’t keep the smile from his voice. “You catch anything out there?”

“We did!” Bill beams at his wife. “Susie caught a twenty-two-inch Eastern Brook Trout.”

She brushes hair off her face. “It was so big I had to use two hands.”

“No kidding.” Josh does a masterful job of not snickering. “Did you keep it or toss it back?”

“The tournament’s catch and release.” Bill sighs. “Not having much luck, myself. A couple times I felt something tugging my worm, but she wouldn’t swallow.”

It’s all I can do not to giggle. “Don’t you hate that?”

“Absolutely.” Susie smiles like she knows damn well Josh and I have the maturity of two middle school kids. “Maybe we’ll see you out on the lake. You’re here through Monday?”

“We leave Sunday, actually.” Josh rests an arm on the back of my chair. A simple gesture, but it feels meaningful somehow. “You?”

“We’ve got another week to go.” Bill squeezes Susie’s hand. “Nothing like fresh mountain air to spice up a marriage, am I right?”

I blink as I realize he thinks we’re married.

Married.

The word puts a lump in my throat. I swallow it back so I can answer.

“Right,” I agree, since it’s the easiest course. “Maybe we’ll see you around.”

“Sounds good.” Susie waves as they putter away. “Have fun *night fishing*, you two.” She makes air quotes and giggles, leaving no doubt we had witnesses last night.

“Well,” I tell Josh as they motor away. “Guess we had an audience after all.”

He studies my face. “Does that bother you?”

“You know it doesn’t.” Exhibitionism isn’t my top kink, but it’s up there. “The more the merrier.”

“Good.” He stands and extends a hand. “We’ve got less than an hour ‘til your surprise arrives. Come on.”

I take his hand and let him lift me from the chair. His grip feels strong and steady as he leads me down the dock toward our cabin. Once we’re inside, he grabs the hem of my tank top and tugs it over my head.

“Mmm, that’s what I thought.” He drops to his knees and kisses my bare breasts. “You should always be braless.”

“That’s one way to make sure I never jog around the lake.” I groan as his tongue does something magical to my right nipple. Threading my fingers through his hair, I let my head fall back against the log cabin wall. “Is this my surprise?”

He draws back and grins up at me. “Not even close.”

“Too bad.”

He hops to his feet and smacks my ass through denim cutoffs. “You want wine or beer?”

“I want a shower.” I’m already shucking my shorts as I head for the bathroom. “I’ll be out in a sec.”

“Here.”

I turn and he tosses a can of my favorite IPA. When I catch it, he grins. “Shower beer.”

“Thanks.” I crack the top and stuff it in the koozie we bought with the t-shirt. The “*part time hooker*” slogan makes me smile. I’ll have to remember to take pics. Eve’s gonna flip for the content I’ve captured on this trip.

With my beer tucked on the shampoo shelf, I crank the taps and duck under the spray. My hair’s still clean from this morning, so I keep it pinned back as I twirl beneath the water. There’s lemon-scented bath gel in the dispenser, so I suds myself up between sips of beer. It’s cold and hoppy and goes down easy as I belt out a few lines of Selena Gomez’s sexy song, “Fetish.”

When I hop out, there’s a fluffy white towel waiting above the sink. I’m still humming as I rub myself dry, then slather my skin with citrusy lotion. I feel clean and soft and, yeah, *sexy* as I glide my hands down my bare breasts. Should I get dressed or just walk out naked?

Spotting a plush robe on the back of the door, I shrug into it. As I cinch the belt, I picture Josh peeling me out of it as he pushes me back on the bed. Maybe we’ll skip dinner at the lodge and stay in tonight. We’ve got chips and cookies and beer, and this feels like a snacks-n-sex evening. Maybe that’s the surprise? A romantic picnic under the stars, followed by fucking in a meadow. Not on the list, but I’m game.

My pussy squeezes as I push through the door on a cloud of scented steam. “Hey, Josh, I was thinking we could—oh.” I skid to a stop and stare.

We’ve got guests.

Tall, muscular, sandy-haired guests who look deliciously identical. “Twins,” I breathe. “Whoa.”

Whoa is right. These guys are built like Josh, so they must be fitness buffs. One leans on the cabin wall and scans the V of the robe between my breasts. The other folds flexed arms and fixes his gaze on my bare legs.

Holy shit.

A grinning Josh steps to my side. “Nina, meet Brax and Cade.”

“Brax.” The guy on the left steps forward. A tattoo of a sword flashes on his forearm as he takes my hand and shakes it. “Glad to meet you.”

“Same.” My heart ticks up as Cade approaches. Are these guys the answer to number one on my list?

“Cade.” Twin number two lets liquid brown eyes roll down my body as he shakes my hand. “Great to finally meet you, Nina.”

“Same.” I swing my gaze to Josh, curious why he never mentioned these guys before.

“Brax and Cade own Keller Steel.” He threads his fingers through mine. “My dad’s construction company used their dad’s steel fabrication services and... well, here we are.”

“I see.” And I’m seeing every lean, muscular inch of these two tempting brothers. Do they know why they’re here?

Do *I* know why they’re here?

I look at Josh and he senses my uncertainty. “The Kellers have a vacation place over in Bend. Hope it’s okay. I invited them to dinner while we’re all in the same part of the state.”

“Of course.” I lick my lips and wonder if I should put on some clothes. Brax’s eyes burn the opening of my robe, and I swear I’m not imagining that bulge in Cade’s cargo shorts.

Josh squeezes my hand, and I know he hasn’t missed any of it. “The lodge serves dinner ‘til midnight.”

“Great.” Brax runs a hand through his hair. “I hear there’s a killer double penne pasta on the menu.”

Cade cocks an eyebrow. “Wasn’t it a triple penne pasta?”

Holy shit.

Any doubt about what’s happening just went up in smoke. These guys know exactly why they’re here.

Lucky me.

“Right—triple penne pasta.” Brax shrugs and looks at Josh. “It’s a big menu. Plenty to choose from, depending on your mood.”

“It’s Nina’s call.” Josh meets my eye and there’s way more than dinner in his questioning look. “I didn’t run this past her first, so if she’s in the mood to just chill at the cabin while we grab a guys’ night at the lodge, that’s cool.”

“Totally,” Brax agrees.

“Yep.” Cade shoves his hands in his pockets. “It’s real good to see you again, Josh. You look... happy.”

He does look happy. I study his face and feel his fingers squeezing mine. Does he really think I’m not a thousand percent on board for getting freaky with these two tempting brothers?

“Dinner sounds great.” I swivel my gaze back to Brax and Cade. “But if it’s all the same to you boys, I’d rather stay here and fuck all three of you at once.”

Brax laughs first. A big, booming laugh that’s echoed by an identical one from his brother. They’re shaking their heads as Cade claps Josh on the back. “You weren’t kidding, man. Your girl doesn’t hold back.”

“I know.” The pride in Josh’s voice heats me from inside. “It’s what I love about her.”

Your girl.

Love.

I push those words aside, along with the flutter of hope that flares in my belly. If we all know why the twins are here, there's no point pretending otherwise. "Anyone else think it's hot in here?" I twirl the belt of my robe around one finger as my eyes trail from Brax to Cade to Josh. "Feel free to take off your shirts and stay a while."

Brax grins first, followed by Cade.

"Don't mind if I do." Brax shucks his T-shirt and tosses it on a chair. Cade does the same, blue cotton tee landing on top of his brother's.

I steal a quick glance at Josh as he peels off his own shirt. His pecs flex as he throws it aside. The heat in his eyes tells me what I need to know.

He's as turned on as I am for what's about to happen. One long step brings him close enough to whisper in my ear. "Enjoy," he murmurs, brushing hair from my face.

Wait. "You're not going anywhere, are you?"

"No way." His grin gets wider as Brax reaches for me. "This is a team sport."

"Let's play ball." Brax hooks his fingers on the belt of my robe, golden-brown eyes searching mine. "May I?"

"You may." I'm not even sure what he's asking, but I'd let him lick jelly off my elbow if he wanted.

Josh moves behind me, hands bracketing my hips. His bare chest at my back feels solid and sexy, and that's definitely his dick pressing the cushion of my ass.

Cade joins his brother, with each twin tugging an end of my robe's belt. As the fabric parts, breeze from the fan licks my breasts. My nipples pucker as the three men drink in my body.

"You are so goddamn sexy." Cade breathes it like a prayer as Josh slides the robe off my shoulders. It joins the pile of T-shirts as fire fills the twins' eyes.

"So perfect." Brax lifts his gaze to mine. "I need to touch you right fucking now."

“Please.” It sounds more desperate than I wish it did, but I can’t hide the need coursing through me.

Brax cups one breast and squeezes, face buried in my neck. “You’re fucking delicious.” It’s a growl against my ear as his thumb skims my nipple. “I promise we’ll make you feel so goddamn good.”

“Sure will.” Cade dips his mouth to catch my nipple. His hair tickles soft against my shoulder as his tongue swirls around me. A gasp slips out as my knees start to buckle.

“That’s it.” Josh holds me steady, lips skimming my ear from behind. “Relax, Neen,” he growls as Brax plants kisses from my throat to my shoulder. “Let us take care of everything.”

“Everything.” Cade growls against my breast as his teeth graze my nipple. Liquid brown eyes lift to mine. “How many times do you want to come?” He goes to his knees, not waiting for a response. Big hands knead my ass as he nibbles one hip. “Twice? Five times? Twelve?”

That earns a growl from his brother. “We’ll make it happen.” Brax squeezes both breasts, mouth lapping hot and hungry at my nipples. “We’re wringing every last drop of pleasure out of you.”

Cade nips my hip again. “Tonight’s all about you.”

“Whatever you want.” Brax kneads both breasts, his mouth hot and hungry as he laps at my nipples. “Christ, you’re soft.”

“Fuck.” Cade growls the word against my belly, mouth dipping dangerously close to where I need it most. “The things I want to do with you.”

Josh tenses behind me. “This is all about you, Nina.” Ah, I get it. He needs the boys to know this. “Your pleasure comes first.”

“Oh, hell yeah.” Brax lets go of my breasts and lifts his eyes to mine. “Doesn’t mean we won’t enjoy ourselves, too.”

That seems to satisfy Josh. His hands fall to my waist, which feels perfect. I’m not sure I’d stay standing without his

chest at my back, his body strong and steady and thumping with the beat of his heart.

“You’re the reason we’re here, Neen.” He breathes it in my ear, fingers grazing my ribs. “You’re the center of everything. That’s how it *should* be.”

Brax licks the underside of my breast. “Like the goddamn goddess you are.”

Cade’s hands cup my ass as his tongue dips into my belly button. I shudder as he kisses his way down, down, down ... “You’re soaked for us, aren’t you?”

Squirming, I nod. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been this wet.”

Josh glides his hands down my arms, breath warm on my throat. “That’s what I like to hear.”

The combination of three sets of hands—big, rough, competent hands—makes me shiver. I love the sensation of these grown men feasting on my body. Their fingers, their forearms, their tongues, their mouths—they’re teasing each nerve to the surface.

How many times will Josh put my pleasure at the center of everything before I believe that’s where it belongs? That my needs matter. That I’m not selfish for taking what I want.

Still on his knees, Cade wedges his shoulders between my thighs. As Josh holds me steady, Cade looks up. “Can I taste you?” His Adam’s apple bobs. “That pretty pink pussy’s begging for my tongue.”

I nod as he lifts me up, throwing both legs over his shoulders as Josh takes my weight against his chest. My feet aren’t on the ground, but I’ve got three sets of hands holding me up. I’m weightless, breathless, anchored in pleasure as Cade’s tongue strokes up my liquid center.

“Oh God.” I gasp and dig my nails into someone’s arm. I’m not sure whose and its owner doesn’t flinch. “Fuck, that feels good.”

Cade’s tongue travels the length of my folds to find my clit. The man doesn’t waste time teasing. Just devours me like

he's been starving for weeks and the feast he's craved rests between my thighs.

"So good." He licks me again. "Such a sweet little pussy."

"Right?" Josh's lips skim my ear and cradles me against his chest. He's got most of my weight, but his voice holds no hint of strain. "Once you've had Nina, there's no going back."

I get the sense those words are meant just for me. His hands on my back, the delicate dance of his fingers tracing my shoulder blades—that's mine, too.

With Cade between my thighs, his brother pulls a chair from the corner. He draws it up close, angling his thighs to rest beneath my butt. "Hey, sexy." He dips his head to kiss my left breast. "You know you've got perfect tits, right?"

"So fucking perfect." Josh cups the right one, but not in jealousy. It's an act of pride. Possession. A certainty I'll be riding his cock tonight and tomorrow and the next day and—

"Oh!" I gasp as Brax draws a nipple into his mouth. He rolls it with his tongue as his hand finds the other breast.

Josh yields his hold on it, but there's no question he's in control. He's the man calling the shots. Directing my pleasure. Holding me at the center of it all.

Brax's big hand closes over my breast with a squeeze. I gasp and arch up into Cade's mouth.

"You like that?" His teeth graze my nipple and I moan. "Does Nina need it rough?"

Josh brushes hair off my face. "Whatever you need, sweetheart. Tell us and we'll deliver."

Sweetheart.

Such a tender contrast to the things they're doing to my body. As Brax pinches my nipple, I give a sharp cry.

"Harder." I groan as his teeth gently clamp my nipple. "Like that."

Did Josh tell the twins I like it rough? I don't need them to be gentle, so they're not. Between my legs, Cade slides two

fingers to the hilt with a growl of satisfaction.

“So fucking wet.” He angles his wrist, fucking me with his hand. My hips start to roll, eager for more. “That’s it, baby girl. You want another?”

I nod as Josh runs his hands down my arms. Most of my weight rests on Brax’s lap now, but it’s Josh holding me steady. He must sense I’m too mind-wacked for words, so he answers for me. “Nina needs something besides a finger.”

He knows me so well. “Please,” I beg. Their mouths feel amazing, but I need more. “I want you—all three of you—on the bed.”

“Good plan.” Josh’s fingers ripple down my ribs. “Make her come first, Cade.”

“Oh.” I cry out as Cade sucks my clit. He’s got three fingers inside me, making me mindless as his tongue drives me to the edge.

Josh strokes my hair. “You’re close, aren’t you?”

I nod because my God—I can’t find words.

“So tense.” Josh strokes the edges of my breasts, his hands sure and solid as Brax sucks hard on one nipple. “Come for us, Neen. Come on his face.”

I don’t have a choice at this point. With a sharp cry, I plunge over the edge. “Oh, fuck!” I grip Josh’s hand, squeezing my eyes shut as Cade fills me with his fingers. His mouth is everywhere at once, or maybe that’s Brax sucking my nipples, teeth raking sensitive skin.

But as the climax sweeps me to the sea, I know it’s not the twins in charge. It’s Josh whispering filthy words in my ears. Josh commanding Cade to bang me harder. Josh cupping my breasts so Brax can devour them.

I come down trembling, grateful they’re supporting my weight. “Fuck, that felt amazing.”

Josh plants the sweetest kiss on my lips. When he draws back, his eyes sweep over mine. “You good?”

“So fucking good.” I kiss him again between ragged breaths. “Thank you.”

“Still want more?”

I nod and—okay, I steal another kiss. “Yes, please.”

Grinning, he gets to his feet. “On the bed,” he commands.

I’m not sure who he’s talking to, but the twins know. They strip off their shorts together, tossing them on the chair where their shirts lie in a crumpled heap.

As I watch with my chest still heaving, the brothers roll condoms onto impressive cocks. They’re nearly as huge as Josh, and I’m grateful he picked twins built to please me in every way.

“I’ve got you,” he says, and steadies me on my feet. When I wobble a bit, his hands grip my hips. “Need a break?”

“No way.” I bounce a bit to stretch my legs, grinning when Josh scoops a hand under each breast. “I need to fuck you, please.”

“Oh, we’ll get there.” He grins and kisses me hard. “There’s a plan.”

Of course there is. Leave it to Josh to ensure everything about this fantasy is arranged to meet my every desire. This could never work without tons of trust between us.

“Can I at least touch your cock?”

“That can be arranged.” With a grin, Josh strips off his shorts, tossing them on the floor beneath the chair. Blue eyes hold mine as his cock springs free from his briefs. “Any limits you want to set first?”

“Nope.” I grip his cock with both hands and give a few strokes. “I trust you.”

“Fuck, Nina.” He grips my wrist and pulls my hands off his cock. “Patience.”

The ache in my core swells twice its size. We’re five feet from the twins stretched out on the bed, but it may as well be just Josh and me. “Promise I’ll get your cock at some point.”

“I promise.” His smile spreads low and lethal. “We’re going to make this count first.”

Like there’s any question of that. “I’m glad you’re in charge.”

“Me, too.” His smile spreads slow and lethal. “Now get on the goddamn bed.”

He doesn’t wait for a reply. Just scoops me up and carries me to the king-sized canopy he’s slept in since we got here. Brax strokes my thigh as Josh sets me on my knees at the head of the bed. There’s a couple feet of space between the brothers, and Cade slides a hand up my other thigh.

“Can’t get enough of that pussy,” he growls.

Brax tightens his grip on my thigh. “You gonna let me inside you, gorgeous?”

I want that so badly my chest aches. Josh guides me to straddle Brax. My knees fall on either side of his hips as his big cock brushes my entrance.

Shuddering with need, I look to Josh. What is he thinking? Is this weird to watch?

In the blue depths of his eyes, all I see is heat.

“Do it,” he rumbles. “Take what you need.”

I lower myself slowly, engulfing that long, thick length into my still-throbbing pussy. “Fuck,” I groan as I grind down. Brax buries himself to the hilt.

“That’s it, Neen.” Josh cups my tits as I start to move. “I see on your face how fucking good that feels.”

I nod because he’s right. Brax is big and curved to hit my g-spot. My hips roll to contain him, to feel the slick slide in and out.

Josh watches with undisguised lust, hands cupping my breasts as Cade strums my clit. I might be riding Brax, but it’s all three men fucking me. A trio of pleasure rushing through me.

Look, it's not my first rodeo. I've been with three guys at once before. I've done group stuff with women and men and a dozen configurations of bodies, but this feels different. I can't explain it. Each man here is focused solely on my pleasure.

All of them—Cade, Brax, Josh—they're watching like the world spins with me at its access.

But no one more than Josh. There's hunger in his eyes as he brackets my ribs with his hands and pumps me on his friend's cock. "You like that, Neen?"

I nod because I've lost my voice again. I'm a few strokes from losing more than that, and Josh must see it in my eyes. He's learned my cues through weeks of fucking. Through years of friendship. Decades of sharing secrets.

Not all your secrets.

I push that aside because *oh my God*—

"I'm coming." I slam down hard on Brax as his brother strums my clit. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*"

It's a full-body orgasm as each nerve screams to life. My pussy pulses as my fingers curl into my palms and Josh slams me hard on that thick cock. Stars burst behind my eyelids as I cry out again.

"Yes! Oh, God."

Brax groans like he's fighting to hold on. His eyes go wide and he groans. "Too fucking good."

And then he's coming, cock pulsing as a ragged growl rips from his throat. This may not have been planned, but the throb of his release sends me spiraling through another climax. I shriek and keep moving, spurred by breathless words from the other two men.

"That's it, Nina."

"Take what you need."

Josh catches me when I fall forward. I topple toward Cade as Brax rolls out from under me and gets rid of the condom.

“Christ,” he breathes, dragging a hand down his face. “You’re unreal.”

The awe in his voice makes me laugh, but it’s Josh who answers. “She’s very real,” he says. “And nowhere near satisfied.”

How does he know? I’m limp in his arms, still twitching with aftershocks. But Josh knows my body. Knows I need *more*.

I lift my eyes to his and smile. “You’re pretty damn sure of yourself.”

“Am I wrong?”

“Nope.” Still grinning, I let him guide me to straddle Cade.

My gaze drops to twin number two. To the thick, hard cock straining to get inside me. “Oh, yeah.” Cade groans and cups my tits as I sink down onto him. “So goddamn tight.”

My nerves feel electric and hot, still zinging from that double-whammy with Brax. But I start to move, blissed out by the feel of Cade filling me. Josh brackets my hips with his hands, dropping his head to suck one stiff nipple.

“Delicious.” He lifts his head to kiss my mouth this time. “I love how fucking insatiable you are.”

I don’t correct him, but the truth?

I’ve been satiated plenty by Josh’s cock.

That’s... new.

The group thing, I love it. Don’t get me wrong. But if I’ve learned nothing at all from these weeks with Josh, it’s that the right fit—the right *man*—gets me off in ways a hundred thousand men could never do.

Josh smiles like he just read my thoughts.

“Having fun?”

“Oh, yeah.” Something cool dribbles down my crack and I turn to see Brax lubing my ass. He meets my eyes and lifts both brows in a question.

“Josh said you love anal—”

“Yes, please.” I tip forward on his brother’s cock, giving him access to my back door. As his fingertip grazes my ass, I give a low hiss.

“Yessss.” I push back against him, forcing his finger past that tight ring of muscle. “That’s it.”

Beneath me, Cade gives a low moan. “Jesus Christ.”

He must feel Brax inside me. As my eyes lift to Josh, he smiles. “What else do you need, baby?” He brushes hair from my face. “Tell me anything. I’ll make it happen.”

“You.” I grind out the word as Cade’s cock drives deep inside me. “I need you.”

Josh doesn’t ask what I mean because he knows. He’s the only one here without a condom, so it’s a foregone conclusion. Maybe that’s why he’s here at the head of the bed, mouthwatering cock all stiff and hard.

As the brothers fill me from below and behind, I reach for Josh. “Please.”

His eyes search mine. “Is this to please me or to please *you*?”

“Yes.” I don’t even know what the question means. I only know I want him. I need to feel him in the back of my throat. I want to taste him as I come around Cade’s thick cock. “Please, Josh. Let me suck you.”

That must be good enough because he grips his cock at the base. “Open that pretty mouth.” He brushes my lips with the head of it and I shudder. “This is what you want?”

“Yes. Oh God.” I lick the tip and shudder. He’s salty and delicious and everything I crave right now.

Brax adds another finger and I rock harder on Cade’s cock. This pleasure, it’s almost too much to handle.

Almost.

“Josh.” I open wide and take him deep in the back of my throat. His scent fills my lungs, something woody and clean as

his velvety shaft slides down my tongue.

“Look at me, Nina.”

As I lift my gaze to Josh, the love in his eyes makes me almost lose it.

It's not love. It's lust. Keep your head on straight.

But everything blurs as my body skids toward the edge. It's too much, this pressure in my pussy and ass while Josh—thick and hard with eyes devouring me—Josh kneels the center of it all.

“So fucking beautiful.” He fucks my mouth, slowly at first. “Do you have any idea how goddamn gorgeous you are?”

I suck him harder, reaching to cup his balls. He groans and draws back, so I let my teeth lightly graze him as he pulls from my mouth with a pop.

“Nina,” he breathes as he pushes back in. “Oh, Nina.”

Someone strokes my clit—Brax? Cade? I have no clue at this point. All I see is Josh, blue eyes locked with mine as he fucks my mouth with purpose.

“Tell me when you're close,” he urges. “When that tight little pussy starts squeezing.”

I nod because that's all I can manage with a mouthful of cock.

“That's it, baby.” He drags the head of his cock past my lips. “You want me to come with you?”

I nod and then cry out as the twins step up the tempo. Hands stroke me everywhere, fingers filling my ass and stroking my clit. Everyone's moving in matched rhythm. The buzz at my core shifts to a scream. I can't hold back.

“Josh.” I gulp as he pulls out. “Do it. I'm gonna come.”

“Babe, yes.”

He gives a groan like I'm ripping his heart out. Cade grunts beneath me as Josh threads his fingers in my hair. I slam down hard on Cade and cry out.

“Oh, God!”

I go off like a rocket, exploding with pleasure. My ass, my pussy, my whole body shatters as we detonate together.

“Nina.” Josh spurts deep in the back of my throat. “Fuck, *Nina.*”

I scream again, barely conscious. Three men fill my body, but only one fills my heart. I swallow him down as Cade groans beneath me.

The orgasm goes forever, a ringing in my ears and body and soul. I don't know how I manage to curl to my side, male bodies pressed against me as someone tends me gently with a warm cloth. I've got my eyes closed as voices murmur and soothe and tell me how fucking amazing I am.

I drift in and out of consciousness, more sated than I've been before. At some point, after a minute—or maybe hours?—footsteps creak across wood floors. Clothing rustles and a door swishes open and shut.

I'm dimly aware it's just me in the bed. The sheets feel warm and I'm snuggling Josh's pillow to the hush of low voices.

“That was awesome, man.”

It's one of the twins, though I can't tell who. I'm too sleepy to open my eyes.

“Yeah, it's pretty cool.” That's Brax, I think. “Always thought when people fell in love, they got all serious and shit. No more play.”

“Right?” There's a series of smacks and I peek through my lashes to see Cade clap Josh on the shoulder. “You're livin' the dream, my friend.”

“Thanks.” Josh wears shorts and a sheepish smile. “It's not like that, though.”

“Like what?”

“We're friends.” His words land like soft blows to my belly, which is dumb. He's said nothing I don't already know.

“You guys know I’m not a love kinda guy.”

“Whatever, man.” There’s a creak as the cabin door opens. I shut my eyes tight and wait for the twins to leave.

As soon as they’re gone, I feel the bedsprings shift. Josh curls around me, and the burn of his body melts my insides to syrup. My heart syncs with his as four words pulse through my head with the rhythm of our breath.

I could love you.

I could love you.

I could love you.

I sit up fast and stretch. “Wow.” I yawn and lift my arms above my head, comforted by the drift of his eyes down my bare breasts.

Sex. Keep it just to sex.

I smile and yawn again. “That was incredible.”

Josh props a hand under his head and smiles. “I thought so, too.”

There’s a blanket at the end of the bed, and I tug it around me as I slip from the covers. “I’m gonna hit the shower.”

Though I can’t see behind me as I beeline it for the bathroom, I feel Josh’s puzzled energy. “Why are you covering up?”

“Just cold.” I shiver for effect as I reach the restroom door. “Gets chilly in here at night.”

“Neen—”

I grip the doorframe and pivot, flashing the world’s biggest smile. “Seriously, Josh—that was unbelievable. Thanks for setting it up.”

“No problem.” His eyes scan mine as he sits up in bed. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fucking phenomenal.” Physically, that’s true. I’ve never felt so satisfied. Like someone pumped my limbs full of hot cocoa.

But Josh looks tempting sitting bare-chested in bed, so I tiptoe back to kiss him. “No joke—probably the top sexual experience of my life.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep.” I back away, not wanting to get pulled back in. “I’m gonna clean up and head to my room.”

“Oh.” With his slow blink and rumpled hair, he looks like a befuddled owl. “I thought we’d—”

“I need to process all the video content from today.” I’m backing toward the bathroom with the blanket clutched like a shield. “Eve’s expecting preliminary drafts for campaign ideas. I’m gonna put in a couple hours, maybe eat dinner at my desk. Don’t wait up!” I sound chipper and perky and totally like normal Nina.

“Okay.” He says it slowly, like he’s not quite sure. “The guys are here through Monday if you feel like—”

“Yes!” That sounded way too peppy. “Let’s definitely do it again.”

As I turn to the bathroom, blanket gripped tight around me, I force my brain to focus. To concentrate on what’s real and not what’s happening in my heart.

Sex with twins—check.

Another fun fling—check.

Not falling for your best friend—check.

Right.

Heart in my throat, I blow Josh a kiss. Then I turn and slip through the door, releasing a breath as it clicks shut behind me.

CHAPTER 8

At one point, I worried the drive home from Lush Lake would be awkward. We'd ticked two biggies off the list—the twins and the boat—with tons of potential for weird feelings.

Or maybe that's just me.

The guys ribbed me hard the next night. We met up for beers while Nina got a massage at the rustic spa. She booked it on her own dime, glowing when she learned her boss covered all charges.

Meanwhile, Cade sat next to me at the bar. Brax claimed a barstool on my other side, nursing a frothy porter.

“There's no fucking way you don't love that girl.” Cade took a pull off his beer. “From the moment we got here, it's been *Nina this, Nina that*. You're hooked, man.”

“We're best friends.” I sipped my IPA and did my best to act normal. “The twin thing was the biggest one on her list. It took some planning to pull it off.” If it's true I've talked up Nina more than normal, that's gotta be the reason.

“Nope.” Brax wasn't buying it. “I know love, and you're in it, my friend.”

“Fuck you.” God, I'm such a dude.

He wouldn't let it go. “I know your dad's a piece of shit, but come on.” Brax gave me a hard look. “Enough already with the self-imposed love ban.”

Okay, wow. “Where is this coming from?”

Cade shook his head, almost sadly. “Nothing wrong with falling for a girl. Where things get fucked up is if you can’t admit it.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Brax lifted one brow. “You’ve got some shit to deal with, my friend.”

I gritted my teeth and drained the last of my drink. “I need another beer.”

So that’s how that went down. I’m fine. *Nina’s* fine. We’re happy and normal and our friendship’s never been better.

As we head back to Portland, we’ve got my iPod blasting Nina’s summer playlist. Shaggy pines swish past as she belts out the chorus of some Taylor Swift tune. I join in on the last few lines. What? It’s catchy.

As the song fades, Nina props her feet on the dash. “I spy with my little eye... something blue.”

Thank God. Everything’s normal. We’re both good, and the tension I felt that night was just imagined.

“Something blue, huh?” I peer through the windshield and play along. “The rest stop sign.”

“Nope!”

“The Tennessee license plate on that white truck.”

“Nuh-uh!” She sways her feet to the beat of Beyonce, looking tanned and relaxed and so sexy I nearly swerve off the road.

Behind her sunglasses, green eyes drop to my lap. I glance down and snort. “My underwear?”

“Bingo!” She laughs and tugs the waistband of my boxer briefs, which barely poke from the top of my shorts. “Your turn.”

See what I mean? Nothing to worry about. It’s just like old times, which can only mean one thing.

She didn’t hear my convo with Brax and Cade that night. She doesn’t know the dumbass thing I said about not loving her.

And why would that be an issue? She knows I don't do love. I've made it clear, and she knows not to expect more.

Except...okay, maybe I'm feeling things. I'm wrestling with it, all right? It's possible the guys had a point. Maybe it's true I need to take a hard look at my longtime love ban.

"So." I take a hand off the wheel to clean my sunglasses with the hem of my shirt. "Do we want to count number seven as crossed off the list?"

Nina grabs the glasses and whips out a tube of cleaning solution. "Number seven?" She cleans off my shades with a lint-free cloth and hands them back. "What's number seven again?"

"This is *your* list."

"Yeah, but *someone* stole it." She shoots me a pointed look. "Remember?"

Oh yeah.

All at once, I remember what I wrote that morning. The eighth thing I added when she wasn't watching. Weird how my thinking's shifted since then.

But that's not what we're talking about. "Sleep with someone you're banging." I set my eyes back on the road, conscious of her eyes on the side of my face. "Technically, you conked out pretty quick that second night with Cade and Brax."

"Doesn't count," Nina says. "We only slept a couple hours before we got up and went to the lodge for mac-n-cheese."

I can't help smirking at that one. "Sorry again they didn't have double penne pasta on the menu."

She laughs and tucks a shock of hair behind her ear. "Oh, I got my fill."

God, she's gorgeous.

And smart and funny and exactly the woman I'd love if I could possibly find a way to—

“Your call on number seven.” To be honest, I don’t want it to count. I want eighty more things on the list, so we can keep doing this for months. Years, even.

Forever.

If that’s not a sign something’s changed— “So besides the sleeping and the shocky sex—”

“Oh! We got in off the waiting list for that electrosex class.” She bites her lip. “It’s two weeks from tomorrow. Is it okay to drag things out that long?”

“No prob.” Thank the Lord. “There’s still one more biggie.”

“Fuck in my childhood bedroom.” Nina sighs and slumps in her seat. “I’ve had no luck tracking down the people who bought my parents’ place in Olympia twenty years ago. Even if I did, what would I say? ‘Excuse me, but I was wondering if I could bang my boyfriend in your home—’”

“Boyfriend?” Whoa. I like how that sounds.

Fuck.

I like it way too much.

“A figure of speech,” Nina says quickly. “Seems like a better selling point than saying, ‘My fuck buddy and I would like to—’”

“Open my phone.”

“What?” Nina drops her feet off the dash and grabs my iPhone from the console. “What am I looking for?”

She taps in the passcode since she knows it. Because of course she does. I know hers, too. Another sign we’re compatible in ways my dumb ass doesn’t want to admit.

Focus, Josh. You’re losing it.

“Look for an email from Airbnb,” I say. “Should be near the top of the in-box.”

“Airbnb?” Her forehead scrunches as she scrolls. I’m stealing glimpses at her face, which is how I witness the

moment she sees what I did.

“Oh my God, Josh!” she squeals and starts to scroll. “My parents’ old place is a vacation rental. How did you figure that out?”

“Tracked it down through county records.” She doesn’t need to know how many favors I called in with architects and developers and building code specialists. “It got a major remodel about ten years ago, but guess when it’s available for rent?”

“When?” She’s almost bouncing in her seat.

“Three weeks from this past weekend.” I steal a glance at her face when she doesn’t answer. “Our high school reunion?”

Nina stops bouncing. Her smile doesn’t vanish, but it’s forced now. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes lose their spark. “Oh. You were planning to go?”

“I could take it or leave it, but doesn’t this seem like a sign?”

“A sign.” Her voice isn’t quite flat, but it’s a far cry from the joy just a minute ago. “Sure. Yes! I mean—I need to make sure I can get time off work.”

“I’m thinking just a weekend trip. We drive over after work on Friday, or maybe do a half day. We take my car and maybe go the coastal route back if we can both get Monday off ___”

“Wow.” Nina’s eyes stay masked behind her shades. I can’t tell if that’s dismay or admiration on her face. Maybe both? “You really thought of everything, didn’t you?”

“Is that okay?” I ease off the gas and steal a longer look at her. “You sound a little... off.”

“No, it’s good. Great, actually.” Nina bites her lip. “That’s right before Tess’s birthday.”

“Tess? No kidding.” I haven’t seen Nina’s sister in ages. “It’ll be good to see her.”

Nina bites her lip some more. “The thing is, I haven’t seen Tess for a few years.”

“Seriously?” That can’t be right. “You went home for your mom’s sixtieth last year. And that trip to Iceland a year ago—didn’t you have a long layover in Seattle on the way back?”

“Yes, but Tess wasn’t there. And I kinda spent minimum time with my folks on that last visit.”

“So, they’ll be glad to see you.” I choose my words carefully in case that’s not true. “And we’ll have our own vacation rental an hour away, so we won’t have to stay with them.”

Her face brightens. “Good point.” She slides a hand to my thigh and then up. As she grazes my junk, I stifle a groan. “And we’ll be able to cross one more thing off the list.”

I lift one brow. “You’re planning to share a bed this time?” I kinda hope so.

“Maybe.” She strokes me through my shorts and my dick gets instantly hard. “But I mostly meant ‘have sex in my childhood home.’ That’s kind of a given, right?”

“Right, yeah. Obviously.” I fight to keep my voice under control. “That’s the goal here.”

If that’s the goal, we’re on the edge of achieving it.

As a goal-driven guy, I should find that thrilling. Rewarding. Exhilarating.

So why do I feel like someone slugged me in the gut?

* * *

LATER THAT NIGHT, after I’ve dropped Nina off, I stare at my phone for an hour. It takes a long fucking time to get the nerve to dial.

My old man answers on the third ring. “Josh, my boy!” He’s delighted to hear from me. “It’s been—what? Six months?”

More like a year, but who's counting? "Good to hear your voice, Pop."

"How's the life of an architect treating you?"

"Good. Really good." I catch him up, filling him in on my promotion and the new university building. That takes five minutes.

Then I clear my throat. "There's something I want to talk to you about, actually."

"Oh yeah?" He chuckles. "I know that voice."

"What voice?"

"The one that says this is all about pussy."

God, I hate him.

And I love him, too.

That's the crux of this, isn't it?

"Dad." Where do I start? "Look, I'll just say it—you really fucked me up with all your skirt chasing and womanizing." I draw a deep breath when he doesn't respond. "Thanks to you, the words 'I love you' became completely fucking meaningless, and I'm still not sure how you thought it was okay to treat all the women around you like disposable toys or like some kind of—"

"Hey now." He sounds genuinely hurt. "Where's all this coming from?"

Shit. That spiraled fast.

But I'm not backing down. "From nearly thirty years of you treating women like your personal playthings. Treating human emotion like currency." This is coming out harsher than I planned. I need to calm down, but I'm not sure how to do it. "My whole life, you made love into this cheap thing. You'd tell Mom, every morning, that you loved her, and then you'd run around town banging anyone in a skirt. Do you have any clue what that did to me?" Not just me. "To *Mom*. It fucking crushed her."

“Jesus, son.” He’s quiet a moment. “Look, I’m an asshole. I’ll give you that.”

If I thought I’d feel better, I was wrong.

“*Why?*” I blurt the question before thinking it through. “Why did you do that? Did you never think about how you hurt people?”

Me, shouts the selfish little kid inside me. You hurt *me*.

“Look.” He lets out a weary breath. “I’ve been doing some therapy.”

That lets the air out of my anger. “What?”

“Therapy!” he snaps. “Talking to shrinks and stuff. My old man was a real piece of work. Used to smack my mom around, you know?”

“Grandma?” Jesus, no. “I had no idea.”

“Yeah, you thought Gramps was just a sexist asshole. And he was.”

“He hit Grandma?” I knew he was a bastard, but—

“I grew up thinking I didn’t want to be like him,” he says slowly. “And I’m not. I went the opposite way, doing all I could to love as many pretty girls as I could.”

“How benevolent of you.” For God’s sake. “That is the most fucked up—”

“Hey now.” He lets out a long sigh. “My shrink says judging isn’t helpful.”

“All right.” I rake a hand through my hair. “I’m glad you’re working on your shit, Dad. I’m proud of you.”

As soon as I say it, my body feels lighter. Like a weight’s been lifted off my shoulders.

My dad says nothing for a long time. “You want an unsolicited piece of advice from your old man?”

“No.” I kinda do. “What?”

“At a certain point,” he says slowly, “you’ve gotta let go of having an asshole for a dad.”

“Gee, thanks.”

He ignores me and keeps going. “Let that shit control you, and it’ll make a goddamn mess of your life. Focus on yourself. On owning your own shit, instead of dwelling on someone else’s.”

“That’s—” I stop and shut my mouth. “That actually makes sense.”

“Yeah, it does.” He sighs again. “Been learning a lot lately.”

Is that what I need to do? Work on my own shit, instead of hanging on to all the ways Pop set me up to fail at love?

I stay quiet and digest those words. Finally, I speak. “I might’ve met a girl.”

“Yeah?”

“Not *met*, that’s not what I mean.” No way I’m telling him too much about Nina. I don’t trust him that way. Not yet. “We’ve been friends a long time, but it might be turning into more.”

“Sounds like a damn good starting point.” He sounds almost puzzled. “What’s the problem?”

What *is* the problem? I’m not even sure anymore.

“I guess I’m not even sure what the hell love is.”

My dad chuckles, and I want to hit him again.

But I also want to hear what he says.

“*You?* You’re the most loving kid I’ve met. How the fuck could you not know what love is?” He’s talking fast, like he thinks I might hang up. “Remember how you rescued those kittens? Or wrote letters to teachers on the last day of school, saying thanks for teaching your sorry ass. Or how about the time you built a wheelchair ramp for Mrs. Miller when she fell and broke her—”

“That’s being a decent human,” I interrupt. “That’s not love.”

He chuckles again, like I've said something funny. "For a smart kid, you're kinda dumb sometimes."

As fatherly wisdom goes, it's not great.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know damn well what love is," he says. "You're pretending you don't, because it's too damn hard to feel it."

Ouch.

But hell, maybe my old man has a point. Maybe I know more about love than I think I do.

Maybe it's been staring me in the face this whole time, and I've been too blinded by anger to notice.

"Josh?" He sounds concerned. "You still there?"

"Yeah." My voice sounds ragged and shaky. "Thanks, Pop."

"For what?"

"For giving me something to think about."

"Yeah. Well, that's what dads are for." Another chuckle. "If we can't lead with good examples, we let you learn from our bad ones."

This time, I laugh, too.

When we disconnect, I digest his words.

You know damn well what love is. You're pretending you don't because it's too damn hard to feel it.

What if he's right?

And if he is, what does that mean for Nina and me?

CHAPTER 9

“*H*ere.” Skye tugs a red silk camisole from my closet and hands it to me. “Pack that. It’s sexy as hell and feels like a dream.”

Her devilish smile spreads to Lyla, who leans on my bed and grins. “Oh.” She gets a dreamy look in her eyes. “You wore that top the night we all got together with Devon and Aidan and—”

“Yes.” I fold the camisole into my suitcase. “That was hot.”

The memory steams up my brain, but something’s missing. I love group play, but since Josh and I started playing, I’ve felt... different.

The twins were fun, no question. But when I’m alone with Josh, I’m somehow totally quenched and thirsty all at once. It’s a new sensation, and it’s throwing me off my game.

“Where was Josh that night?” Skye’s voice coaxes me back to packing.

Lyla hands me a stack of folded panties. “That’s right—it was just the three of us with Devon and Aidan.” She catches Skye’s wrist and smiles. “That’s the night we got to show Skye how to let go.”

A pretty flush spills up Skye’s throat. “I think about that night all the time.”

“Same, girl.” Lyla looks at me. “But Josh wasn’t there because you were still pretending you didn’t want to fuck up

your friendship by—”

“Fucking each other,” I finish, surprised to feel my heart flutter.

“How’s that working out?” Lyla cocks her head. “You two seemed great at dinner last night.”

“Yeah. We are.” I can’t believe how *not* weird it’s been. We still make each other laugh. Still finish each other’s sentences and share bites from the same fork like some long-married couple.

If anything, the friendship’s stronger than ever.

Skye studies my face. “You seem happier somehow. Content, but not in a beige sweater and vanilla pudding way.”

Lyla grins. “More in a fur handcuffs and huge cock way.”

“Nailed it.” I bite my lip. “I always guessed he’d be great in bed, but we’re talking next-level sex here.”

“Yes!” Skye pumps a fist. “And Lyla’s right about the huge cock?”

“A lady doesn’t kiss and tell.” I grin. “Since I’m not a lady... yeah. He’s hung. And knows exactly what to do with it.”

“Love that for you!” Lyla smiles. “How’d he do in your shocky sex class?”

“Great.” Because of course he did. “Didn’t even flinch when they told me to hook electrodes to his—”

“Ow, no.” Skye holds her hands up. “Doctor in the house. Please don’t tell me anything that’ll make me worry about your health.”

“We’re good, I swear.” Feeling weirdly wistful, I pack a pair of strappy sandals. “He’s got great foreplay game, and he’s not afraid to get freaky.”

“But?” Lyla’s brow furrows. “I feel like there’s a ‘but’ here.”

“Do not,” Skye points at me, “avoid the question by making a butt sex joke out of that.”

“I would nev—” I sigh. “Yeah, okay.”

Skye folds a flirty skirt and hands it to me. “Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know.” I nibble the edge of my lip. “Things are great and all, but what if—” I stop myself there.

Once I say it, I can’t unsay it.

“You caught feelings, didn’t you?” Skye’s brow furrows. “That’s it, right?”

“Yeah.” It feels good to get it out. “Maybe.”

Lyla grabs my arm. “Honey, that’s great.”

“Is it though?” I tuck my toiletry case in one corner and zip up the suitcase. “I plan to be kinky forever, but I also want a family someday.”

Lyla’s blue eyes get misty. “You know you can have both, right?”

“Not with a guy who doesn’t believe in love.” I sigh and set the suitcase on the floor. “That’s what it comes down to—I give up the dream of having it all, or I compromise and spend the rest of my life having wild sex with my best friend.” When I put it that way, it doesn’t sound so bad.

“Without love.” Skye frowns. “Yeah, I see where you’d be missing something.”

“Exactly.” And now I’m sad again.

“Hon?” Lyla stands slowly, wrapping her arms around me. “Want a little advice from a woman who’s been there?”

“Sure.” I sniff and discover I’m a little more emotional than I thought. “Lay it on me.”

When she draws back, I see tears in her eyes. “Don’t give up on the dream.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it.” She smiles and her blue eyes sparkle. “Sometimes, it really is that simple.”

Skye stands, too, wrapping her arms around us both. “It’s simple, but it’s not easy. You’re both gonna have shit to deal with.”

“There’s always shit to deal with.” Lyla shoots Skye a look of sympathy. “Especially when family’s involved.”

“Just don’t give up on him, okay?” Skye brushes hair off my face. “Give him a chance to get there on his own.”

“God, I love you guys.” I squeeze them both hard, wondering if they have a point.

Wondering how long I can wait for someone to come around and love me.

Wondering why that’s the waiting game I seem destined to play forever.

* * *

“COULD YOU PASS THE BREAD, PLEASE?” I look at my mom, since she’s closest to the bowl of focaccia.

But Christine Silas-Stone pays no mind. She’s got a hand on my dad’s arm and her gaze fixed squarely on my sister.

We’ve met at a restaurant in Olympia, since Mom and Tess had an attorney conference at the hotel next door. They haven’t stopped debriefing all evening.

“You think they’ll go to trial?”

Tess wipes her mouth with a napkin. “Tough to tell.” My sister slides her coy lawyer smile to her husband. “I really can’t say much more than you’ve read in the paper. Attorney client privilege and all.”

“Of course.” My father grabs the pitcher to refill his water. “Your mother and I know how that is.” As he hoists his glass, he bumps the breadbasket with his arm.

It moves the focaccia a few inches closer, so I try again. “Could I please have the—”

“It’s so exciting,” my mom continues, oblivious to her younger child’s need for carbs. “My own daughter, the lead attorney on one of the city’s highest profile cases in a decade.”

“We’re proud of you, Tessy.” My dad clinks his water glass to hers. “It’s everything we wanted for you.”

Beside me, Josh clears his throat. “Nina got a promotion.” I kick him under the table, but he keeps going. “It comes with a raise and a big corner office. They announced it a few weeks ago. Can we get the bread over here?”

My father shoves the basket toward us without taking his eyes off Tess and Thomas.

That’s right—my sister and her husband have matching names to go with matching professions and, if my eyes don’t deceive me, matching briefcases tucked under the table at this posh Italian restaurant.

It’s the night before my reunion, and already I regret this dinner date with my family. Drawing a breath, I grab a hunk of bread while my dad keeps talking like he didn’t hear a word Josh said.

It’s just as well.

“Hey.” Josh leans close and fills my water from the pitcher he’s somehow wrangled from my dad. “You okay?”

“I’m great.” I scan for our server as my stomach growls. “Apparently when the waiter said, ‘be right back for your order,’ he meant next year?”

“Not what I meant.” Josh touches my arm, and my skin tingles. “We don’t have to stay if you want to make a run for it.”

Tempting.

But I’m not the kind of girl to run away, so I shake my head. “This place has the best calamari in the state. I’m staying.”

“In that case, I think your folks need to hear what’s going on in your life.”

“Good idea.” I swallow a hunk of bread and keep my voice low. “You want to start with Brax and Cade, or share what we learned in electrosex class?”

Josh snorts and grabs a hunk of bread. “Amazing as that was, you know that’s not all you’ve got going for you.” His eyes flick back to my parents, who haven’t heard a word of this.

Thank God.

“They’ll have to make you partner now,” my dad’s saying to Tess. “Think it’ll be official before your law school reunion rolls around?”

“Of course it will.” My mother tries to signal a waiter. “That’s the goal, right? And Tessie’s a go-getter when it comes to goals.”

They don’t look at me, but why would they? I hear the accusation in their words.

Nina’s a disappointment.

Nina didn’t follow in our footsteps.

Nina failed to meet our goals.

Josh clears his throat. “Nina’s now a partner at Goodrich Publicity,” he says. “Youngest in company history. They said she earned it by working her ass off and—”

“What’s that?” The word “ass” must catch my dad’s ear because he looks at us and frowns. “Nina got a new job?”

“A *promotion.*” Josh seems undeterred, despite me stepping on his foot hard enough to feel his toes twitch. “She’s really great at her job. There’s this campaign she launched last spring—maybe you’ve seen it? For Stan’s Spicy Snack Bites?”

“Maybe.” My dad looks unsure for the first time since we sat down. “I don’t have time for television.”

“It’s been all over social media.” Josh squeezes my hand under the table. “She launched the campaign on YouTube first,

and then on Instagram, she rolled out this really great—”

“We don’t have time for social media.” My mother picks up her water and looks thoughtful. “I do like Stan’s Spicy Snack Bites.”

I feel a faint flutter of hope as Josh keeps going. “That whole campaign was Nina’s idea. The black and white-striped packaging and the jailhouse jingle. Even the tagline—‘Stan’s Spicy Snack Bites—so good they’re criminal.’”

“Criminal!” My mother snaps her fingers and turns back to Tess. “I meant to ask what you thought of the verdict in the Chomsky case.”

And they’re off again, talking with Tess about law.

I can’t blame them, really. It’s where they connect. Where Tess and Thomas and my parents find common ground.

Sitting here, watching across a table that may as well be a canyon, I feel a familiar, aching loss. For the relationship I never had. For a sense of belonging in my own family.

It’s what I’ve wished for since I was old enough to ask for second helpings of the peas they all hated. Probably my first clue I didn’t fit in.

Josh squeezes my hand again. “You should tell them about the new campaign for Lush Lake Resort.”

“No, thanks.” I chew a hunk of bread with more force than the task requires. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but please butt out.”

He looks like he might argue. Instead, he grabs my butt. “You do have a great one.” He leans close and murmurs in my ear. “I’ve got plans for this butt after dinner.”

I shiver as heat floods both sets of cheeks.

Naturally, that’s when my mom looks over. “Nina? Are you feeling all right?” She looks from Josh to me, then back again. “Your color looks off.”

“I’m fine.” I pick up my water and pray the waiter appears soon.

“There’s a bug going around.” As my mom studies me, I search her face for concern. For the maternal compassion I crave. “You look thin.”

“Thanks?” I’m not sure it was a compliment.

“Too thin.”

It wasn’t.

Josh puts an arm around the back of my chair. “I think she looks great.”

My mom’s not giving up. “Has she been making real meals?” She aims her frown at Josh. “Or are you two surviving on fast food and frozen dinners?”

It’s a triple blow that wipes the words right off my tongue.

Nina doesn’t look healthy.

Nina makes poor choices.

Nina’s not taking care of her man.

Does Josh hear all that? Or is the filter of my childhood required to read between the lines? I’m not sure.

When I meet Josh’s eyes, I see his jaw clenched tight. “Neen?” His eyes search mine as he rests a hand on the small of my back. He lowers his voice and lets his lips brush my ear. “Still want me to keep my mouth shut?”

I nod once and look back at my mother. “I’m fine. *We’re fine.*”

Good. That’s good. Succinct. Strong. No-nonsense. If I can just get through the main course without maiming my parents —

“You know, Nina,” my father begins, leaning back in his chair. “It’s not too late to go to law school.”

“That’s right—Tess.” My mother turns to my sister. “What were you telling us about that new attorney at your firm?”

My sister sips her water, taking her time swallowing. “Her name is Jacinda.”

“And what’s Jacinda’s story?” Our mom leans toward her like Tess holds the secret of life and multiple orgasms. “Jacinda got a late start on her law career, right?”

Tess darts a glance at me before turning to Thomas. “She actually works in Tom’s department. Contract law, mostly dispute resolution.”

Thomas drapes his arm around the back of Tess’s chair. “Jacinda was a third-grade teacher for eight years.” He says *teacher* with the same inflection as *janitor* or *stripper*. “She went back for a law degree and passed the bar on her first try.”

Tess pats her mouth with a napkin. “Thomas says she had the third most billed hours in their department last month.” She slips me a smile I can’t quite read. “Jacinda’s been really successful for someone who got a late start.”

“There, see?” My mom pivots back to me. “You still have options, Nina.”

I’m weighing my response when a waiter appears at my father’s shoulder. Once he rattles off the specials, my sister’s husband grills him on the restaurant’s supply chain.

“Is the beef organic?” Thomas rubs his chin. “And the Wagyu—is it grass fed or grain fed?”

Josh lets his lips skim my ear. “I thought Thomas didn’t eat red meat.”

“He doesn’t. He’s just an asshole.” Or maybe I am. My sister seems happy with her husband. Someone strong and assertive with nice taste in ties. Maybe our parents did push her hard to pick an overbearing partner. Someone take-charge and, yeah... a bit obnoxious. But Tess seems fine, so it must work for them.

I meet Josh’s eyes and thank God I don’t have that issue.

Josh isn’t your boyfriend.

That’s right, I keep forgetting.

And if my parents catch that Josh and I seem cozier than normal, they haven’t said so. Have they noticed his hand on

the back of my chair? The love bite on my neck? The fact that I seem happier, healthier, more relaxed in his presence?

Like they care.

“Know what you’re ordering?” Josh murmurs.

“Hmmm...” I pretend to study the menu. “I don’t see double penne pasta listed.”

“That’s a shame.” There’s a smile in his voice as he snags the wine list from the center of the table. “What do you want to drink?”

“Should we split a bottle of red?” I pick up the wine list and scan for one that’s not too expensive. We’re walking distance to our Airbnb, and I could use a damn drink. “Maybe this one that’s a blend of Chianti and Syrah.”

Across the table, my mom makes a clucking sound. “That’s not really fair, is it?”

I look up, perplexed. “How is wine unfair?”

“Your sister’s not drinking.” My father lifts a brow and waits for me to get it. “Seems selfish ordering wine under the circumstances.”

My belly twists as I clutch the menu. Drawing a breath, I look at Tess. “You gave up drinking?”

She shifts uncomfortably. As she opens her mouth to answer, Thomas cuts in. “We’re starting a family.” He draws Tess close and plants a kiss on her temple. “That means cutting out alcohol, sugar, junk food—”

“In other words,” Josh quips, “all the things you need once kids come along.”

His joke makes me laugh, even if everyone else sits stone-faced. As my father dictates his order to the weary looking server, I turn to Tess. “You’re *pregnant*?”

“No, not yet.” She bites her lip. “We’ve talked about trying for a few years. Thomas read this article about how the risks of birth defects go up as the mother ages.”

“You’re not even thirty.” I blink at my smart, career-driven sister. “Are you sure about the timing?”

“We’re sure.” Thomas pulls her closer and smiles, but there’s steel in his eyes as he regards me across the table. “Your sister’s going to be an exceptional mother.”

The word *exceptional* rings in my brain, bouncing around like a bad echo.

“Only Tess understands what it means to be exceptional.”

I swallow hard and look at Josh. “We can skip the wine for now.”

He studies my face. “You sure?”

“Yeah.” I nod once and set down the wine list. “I’ll have some at the reunion tomorrow. I don’t mind taking a night off.”

He nods and hands the list back to the waiter. “Just water to drink.”

My parents look pleased, and my inner child pumps a prideful fist. I order the eggplant parmigiana, knowing I can’t finish it.

But my father loves leftovers, and some shameful childhood part of me likes the thought of handing him the box before they head home.

Josh gets the tagliatelle with Bolognese, and we settle back into uneasy conversation.

“You’re still with the same architecture firm, Josh?” My mother spreads her napkin on her lap. “Your mother said it’s an excellent place to work.”

“I am, and it is.” He picks up his fork as a server slides a Caesar salad in front of him. “I actually got a promotion the same day Nina got hers.”

“Oh?” My father nods his approval. “Nice work, son.”

A velvet fist hits me in the chest. I struggle to breathe. Any hope I had that my parents might be proud of me—*me*, their

youngest daughter, even if I didn't become a lawyer—it shrivels like a scrotum plunged in ice water.

My mental turn of phrase makes me giggle. I hide it fast behind a forkful of radicchio. At least that's something. I can still laugh at this bullshit. No matter how bad it gets, I've still got humor.

“Is something funny, Nina?”

I look up at my mother's sharp words. “Sorry?”

She sighs like I've disappointed her. “We've got a lot to celebrate at this table. Your sister's big case and impending motherhood and her birthday next week. Josh's promotion. I'm just wondering what you find so funny.”

Funny?

Nothing's remotely funny at this table. Shame and anger bubble up my throat, blending with a toxic brew of jealousy that boils over when I'm with them. I've spent my whole damn life trying to please these people.

I never will.

“I think it's nice we're all together like this.” My mother tries to change the subject as she lifts her water glass. “To family.”

My dad follows suit, along with Tess and Thomas. “To family.”

I swallow my pride and clink my glass to theirs. “To family.”

“Family.” Josh's arm skims mine as he hoists his glass into the fray.

With a smile, my dad sets down his glass. “Whether we're successful or silly or sane or selfish, we belong to each other.”

That's it. I'm not imagining the way his gaze flicked to me on that last one.

Selfish.

You're selfish, Nina.

I'm so over this.

I set down my glass and clench both hands in my lap. "Should we go around the table and decide who's silly, who's sane, who's successful, and who's selfish?" Fire flares in my belly as I look from him to my mom to Tess to Thomas. Josh squeezes my knee as I keep going. "It's pretty clear where you stand on that one."

My mother gives a tired sigh. "Not now, Nina."

Jesus. Like I'm the one who started this.

Blinking back rage, I grab my glass and drain it in two long gulps. I need air. I need to get out of here.

But my dad's not done. "That was a nice performance. You want to let us know when you're ready to have an adult conversation?"

The words jab like needles. Balling my napkin into a fist, I jump up from the table. "You know what? Screw you guys." I shove in my chair, conscious of my hands shaking. "I can't win when I try to please you. I can't win when I do my own thing. I'm done with this conversation. With this *family*."

Fists curled tight, I spin on my heel and head for the door. I make it ten steps before recalling I didn't come alone.

"Neen, wait." Josh grabs me at the door, pulling me into the private event space off the foyer. "Hey. Slow down."

I shake my head as tears blur my vision. "What's the point, Josh? Huh?" I swipe some stupid tears threatening to spill down my cheeks. I won't let them. "It doesn't matter how successful I am, or how hard I kill myself trying to please them. No matter what I do, they'll never love me. They're not even fucking capable of love."

The words drop like dice and freeze there. My mouth goes dry and I meet his eyes. "I didn't mean—" I draw a quick breath. "I was just being dramatic."

"I don't think so." His eyes search mine as he holds me tight by the elbows. "That's what this come down to, right? The people pleasing, the fear you're not worthy of love."

“Don’t, Josh.” I dash the tears away, furious with myself for feeling this way. At Josh for dragging me here. “You’re not my goddamn shrink.”

“I am your goddamn friend.” He holds me tighter. “And I care about you.”

Care. That’s not the same thing as love. It’s nice, it’s sweet, but it’s not what I’ve chased all these years.

What I’m ashamed to admit I’m still chasing.

“I need to get out of here.” My throat feels tight, like Josh’s hands on my arms.

“Wait.” He holds me tighter. “Please, Neen. Give me two minutes to go back in there.”

“What’s the point?” I take a step back, needing some distance between us. “They won’t change. It’s on me to protect myself.”

I wait for him to follow. To recognize I need him right now. Maybe I’m the loser who spent a lifetime looking to meet everyone else’s needs, but can he see how I’m desperate for his support?

Josh takes a step back. “I have to say something to them.”

“That’s fine.” It’s not, but I try to force a smile. My lips won’t work, so I turn away. “I’m going back to the house.”

“Nina—”

“Just let me go.” I swallow back tears as I turn to face him. “Finish your dinner, give mine to my father—whatever you want.”

It’s too much to ask him to follow me.

That doesn’t stop me from wishing he would.

But Josh’s gaze flicks back to the dining room. To the dozens of strangers staring at us. We’ve caused a scene, and he’s itching to fix it. To smooth things over like he does at the firm. He’s great at charming people.

Not so great at loving them.

I gave up wishing my parents would change, but Josh? Deep down, some silly part of me hoped he'd come around. That he'd find a way to fall in love.

Fall in love with *me*.

"You're so stupid," I whisper as I walk out the door alone. I do my best to keep my head high as I stride down the steps. "Stupid and selfish and not at all *exceptional*."

But dammit, I have my pride. Squaring my shoulders, I stride down the sidewalk toward the rental house. I make it to the end of the block before I break down.

Josh isn't coming. I'm alone, all alone.

Just like I'll always be.

CHAPTER 10

Nina's tears shimmer in my mind as I storm back to the table. I'm seeing red, but I fight to rein it in as I reach our empty chairs.

"Josh." Mr. Stone peers past me toward the lobby. "I take it you couldn't talk sense into her?"

Her mother sighs and stabs her salad. "Nina's always been flighty. I don't understand how she turned out like this when Tess—"

"Stop right there." I grip the back of Nina's chair so hard the wood creaks. "Do *not* compare your daughters or, so help me God, I'm flipping this table."

I mean it. From the look on her dad's face, he knows. He tries to catch the waiter's eye, but I cut him off.

"I'm tired of watching Nina run herself ragged trying to please everyone else. Trying to be the perfect daughter, the perfect friend, the perfect employee."

The perfect *lover*, I think, but don't add.

"Josh." Tess puts a hand to her chest. "You don't really think we're responsible for—"

"I don't think. I *know*." My voice lifts, and patrons at a few scattered tables turn to look. I'm making a scene, but so what?

"I know Nina's spent her whole life trying to live up to your stupid high standards. Trying to become who she thinks you want her to be, but you know what?" I'm shouting now, but I don't care. "The Nina I know is already the smartest,

kindest human I've met. But better than that, she knows who she is. She doesn't have to change how she acts or what she does for a living to be *exceptional*, because she's already the most exceptional person you'll ever meet. And I'm sick of watching her bend over backwards to please everyone else."

Thomas smirks at the end of the table. "Spoken like a guy who's hoping to get laid."

Tess blanches. "Thomas—"

"Make your dumbass jokes." I glare at him, willing him to stand so I can punch him in the face. I'm done being civilized. "Maybe that's your thing—treating women like puppets put there for your pleasure? Something pretty to parade around?"

That's an awful lot of Ps in one sentence. I'm spitting on the table and a little afraid I've just insulted Tess.

I open my mouth to apologize, but stop. Tess stares at her husband like she's never seen him before. Like something I said struck a chord she needed me to hit.

None of my business. And Thomas wisely shuts his fucking mouth.

I look at her parents instead.

"Your love for Nina might hinge on whether she does what you want, but guess what?" I stare them down, willing them to say something snarky. To give me an excuse to unleash my rage. "My love for her doesn't depend on any of that bullshit. I don't care what she does for a job or for dinner or for fun on the weekends. She's a fucking amazing woman, and I love her unconditionally, no matter what. Nina could have three heads and a fondness for slaughtering pandas, and my feelings for her wouldn't change."

I glare at Christine and Collin, expecting them to argue. To tell me I'm wrong about how they treat their own daughter.

"Son." Her father looks around. "You're making a scene."

I glance to the right and see silent tables. Same thing to the left where diners sit with forks frozen halfway to their mouths.

So what?

I said nothing I regret. Not even as a manager in a black jacket storms toward our table. I'm about to be thrown out, but I said what I came here to say. I'm done with these fuckers.

I start to turn when Tess speaks. "Does she know?"

"What?" I turn back to Nina's sister.

"Does Nina know?" Tess draws a breath. "Does she know you love her?"

My throat goes dry. Crap. I said it, didn't I? More or less, I told Nina's family I love her.

Worse, I didn't say it to *her* first.

The biggest fucking revelation of my life and I've fucked it up. "I—"

"She knows." Fingers brush my arm, and I turn.

Nina.

Her eyes shine liquid green as she gazes up at me. "And I'm glad he had the balls to say what I've been too chicken to tell you."

"Nina." I let out a breath, relieved she's not pissed.

Not at me, anyway.

As her gaze swivels to her family, she narrows her eyes. "Unconditional love. Look it up sometime. Until then, don't expect to see me again."

She snatches her purse off the back of her chair and I realize that's what she came for. Not to read me the riot act. Not to tell off her parents.

But she heard me just the same.

Heart pounding, I follow her out of the restaurant. We don't speak as we push through the door and into cool dusk. We make it five steps before Nina grabs my arm.

"Holy shit." She stops us both in our tracks, green eyes gleaming. "Did you mean it?"

"Which part? Never mind—yeah." I swallow hard, searching her eyes. "Every word I said back there is the truth."

“Say it again.”

I don't have to ask which part. “I love you, Nina.” Looking in her eyes feels so much better than saying it to her family, so I do it again. “I love you. For your passion, and your heart, and your sexy fucking ass. I love you for your brains and beauty, and your sense of humor. I love that you share your life and your kitchen and your bed with me, but I never understood before how all that fucking love means I love *you*. I love how you laugh, and how you walk, and how you talk in your sleep —”

“I do not.” She's laughing now, but I'm not done.

“Look, I've spent my whole life sucking at saying those words.” I drag a hand through my hair, not sure how to say this. “You know as well as I do how shitty parents can screw you up for good. Make you think you're unworthy or that love's not something you deserve, but guess what?”

“What?” Her mouth tips up in a smile. “You love me?”

“Yeah, that.” I draw a deep breath and catch both her hands in mine. “I love you, and you're the first person in my whole life who feels safe enough to say that to. You're my best friend, Nina. You're everything.”

She tugs a hand free to wipe her eyes. “You're my best friend, too. Still, even after we've spent the last few weeks shagging each other silly.”

“God, we were idiots.”

“What do you mean?”

“All these years, we've been so afraid to screw up our friendship.” I step closer and brush the hair off her face. She's stunning in the syrupy light of sundown. She's stunning *anywhere*. “But a friendship like ours—a love like ours—there's not a damn thing that can screw that up. Not shitty parents, or crazy sex parties, or kinky bucket lists, or anything else that tries to get in our way.” I squeeze the hand I'm holding, willing her to hear this. To believe it with everything she's got. “I love you no matter what, Nina. And it feels so fucking good to say that.”

Her laugh slips out on a snuffle. “It feels good to hear.” She bites her lip. “Say it one more time?”

“I love you.” The words heat my chest like warm honey. “I love your sexy smile, and your slinky underwear, and that thing you do with your tongue when you suck my—”

“Nina, wait.” Footsteps tap the pavement behind us.

Dread curdles my gut as I turn to see Tess running toward us. Bright blonde hair falls from her topknot and she’s missing the jacket that goes with her pantsuit.

As she skids to a breathless halt, she grabs her sister’s hand. “Don’t leave.”

Christ.

What now?

CHAPTER 11

“Don’t leave.” My sister stands, chest heaving, on the sidewalk in front of me. “Please.”

I straighten my spine. “I’m not going back in there.”

“No, I get it.” Tess touches my arm and I fight the urge to flinch. “I’m not the enemy, Nina.”

“I never said you were.” I need to stay strong. To ignore the pleading look in her eyes. “But I need distance from Mom and Dad. If that means I don’t see you—”

“I’ve missed you.”

That shuts me up. “I’ve missed you, too.” I swallow hard as memories flood my heart. Tess braiding my hair for the first day of middle school. Tess buying me condoms when I got my first boyfriend. Tess waving goodbye when she went off to law school.

I force the words through a clogged throat. “I’m sorry I ruined your birthday dinner.”

“Nina, *no*. I’m the one who’s sorry.” She takes a shuddery breath. “I knew Mom and Dad were harder on you, but I never understood how that hurt. I thought it was their job to push you to be better.” Her gaze darts to Josh before flicking back to me. “What I should have told you sooner is that you’re already fine the way you are. Better than fine—you’re perfect. Josh is right.”

“Damn straight.” He nods at Tess. “Nina deserves to hear that every goddamn day.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” Tess touches my arm. “Can you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Tessie.” I think of all the time I spent resenting my sister, when I should have just talked to her. All this time, maybe we could have been allies.

Or maybe not. Despite her kind words, we’re still vastly different people. We might become friendly, but I’m not sure we could ever be friends.

But she’s my sister and I love her, so I gulp back the fresh lump in my throat. “I’m happy for you, Tess. You got the life you always wanted.” The life Mom and Dad wanted for her, but still a good life. “Just because it wasn’t the right path for me, doesn’t mean I’m not proud of you.”

“I hate my life.”

I blink. “Come again?”

She brushes hair off her face and flicks a glance at Josh. “Could I have a second in private with my sister?”

“Yeah. Sure. No problem.” He looks at me for a nod to signal it’s okay. “I’ll walk back to the rental. If you’d rather talk there, I can make myself scarce.”

Tess shakes her head and shifts a shame-filled gaze to mine. “I need to get back inside, but I couldn’t leave without telling you that.”

“That you’re miserable?” I hold tighter to her hand. “That sounds like a cry for help. I’m not sure I should let you go back.”

“It’s fine. I’m a big girl.” She chokes out a brittle laugh. “It’s just—I don’t know how things became such a mess.”

“What do you mean?”

She closes her eyes and lets out a long breath. “I bill out at nearly \$600 an hour—more than almost any other attorney in the firm—and I hate my job. It’s stressful and demanding and I never have time for what I want to do.”

“What do you want to do?” Color me intrigued.

“Live on my own terms.” Her green eyes shimmer. “Have hobbies and vacations, and parties that don’t involve hanging on my husband’s arm wearing red lipstick and a tight black dress.” She darts a glance down the sidewalk as Josh disappears around a corner. When she looks back at me, she offers a small smile. “Maybe sex parties or something. I don’t know.”

I touch my sister’s arm. “I had no idea.” Drawing a breath, I debate how to comfort her. “It’s not too late to change your life or your career. Just ask Mom and Dad.”

That’s earns a laugh, so I keep going. “And Thomas—he’s a butthead sometimes, sure. But he loves you, and maybe with some couples’ counseling—”

“He’s cheating on me.”

I blink for a full five seconds this time. “You’re sure?”

Her eyes remain dry as she nods. “I’ve known for months, but I haven’t had the balls to confront him. And we both work so much that it’s not like we see each other, anyway.”

“Oh, honey.” Sympathy for my sister swirls in my core, along with the joy from what Josh said.

I love you.

I have no problem saying those words. Neither does he, apparently. Not anymore.

“God, I’m sorry.” She swipes at her eyes. “Here I go, making this all about me, but that’s not what I came out here to say. I just want you to know I’m sorry. I should have done more.”

“You’re fine, Tess.” Honestly, her problems sound shittier than mine. At least I managed to walk away. She’s stuck in the life I refused.

Turns out my instincts were better than I knew.

“I love you, Tessie.” I pull her in for a hug, breathing in her familiar scent. “It really isn’t too late to start over if you want a different path. Different career, different marriage, different life.”

“Thanks.” She sniffs and draws back. “I’ll start with a different choice for dinner.”

“Yeah?”

With a sigh, she swipes mascara rings under her eyes. “I’m ordering wine. A big bottle.” With a shaky laugh, she jerks a thumb toward the restaurant. “And whatever the fuck I want for dinner. That’s a start.”

“A good start.” I can’t believe I’ve never had this conversation with her. “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah. Eventually.” She hugs me again, then draws back to look me in the eye. “What Josh said back there—about Mom and Dad and how you’ve felt all these years? I’m so sorry I didn’t do more to stop it. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you. I’m sorry—”

“You’ve already apologized enough.” I shoo her toward the restaurant. “Go on. Get your wine.”

“I love you, Nina. And I admire you, too. Maybe someday I’ll get what you’ve got.”

“A raging libido and a hot guy who dishes up great orgasms?” I’m only half joking, but it gets the right result. Tess laughs.

Then turns serious as she straightens her hair. “The gumption to go after what you want. To know you deserve it.” She smiles bigger. “And the orgasm thing. Maybe someday for me.”

Before I can say more, she hugs me again, then turns and runs for the restaurant.

Huh.

That was.... unexpected.

Unexpected, but wonderful.

A little like Josh and me.

Before I can think, I’m running toward my childhood home, high heels clutched in one hand as my bare feet slap the pavement.

When I hit the front door, it flies open before I can grab the knob.

“Nina.” Josh studies my face. “Are you okay?”

“Better than okay.” I launch myself at him, kissing him hard and deep and fierce.

He stumbles backward, but somehow keeps us upright. Strong arms grip my waist as he kicks the door shut and carries me to the main bedroom. The one that once belonged to my parents.

The one we’ve claimed for ourselves on this trip.

The one that’s about to fulfill number six on my list.

We break apart long enough for Josh to lift my dress over my head. His eyes sweep my body and go molten. “You wore a red lace thong and a see-through bra to have dinner with your parents. It’s like a hidden *‘I’ll do what I want and fuck you if you don’t approve.’*” He draws a bra strap down my shoulder and I shiver. “I love that.”

“And I love *you*.” I kiss him again as he makes quick work of unhooking the bra. I work his shirt off his shoulders and I break the kiss to draw a breath. “I’m so glad you made me come here.”

“Me too.” He grins and shoves me on my back. “Before I make you come in other ways, I need to say one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you.” He drags my panties down my thighs, coming to rest between them. “I love your mind.”

My breath hisses out as he strokes a tongue along my seam. “That’s not my mind.”

“I love your kindness, and your body, and your sense of humor,” he continues, licking me again. “And your heart.”

Which is beating a lot faster as his tongue swirls my sensitive bud. “Josh,” I pant, clutching his hair. “Don’t stop.”

“Never will.” Two fingers slide inside me as he sucks me hard. When he releases my clit, I whimper. “I love everything

about you, Nina.”

“Especially *that*?” I groan as his tongue dips into me.

He laughs as he crawls up my body. “Especially *that*.”

I hadn’t noticed he’s got his pants around his hips and a condom in place. Gripping his shoulders, I hold his gaze as he slides inside me, slow and deliberate.

“Josh…” I groan as he starts to fuck me.

Not fuck.

Make love.

This might be the first time I’ve used that term. I’ve always found it cheesy, but as I rake my nails down his back, I can’t think of other words for what’s happening. His chest against mine, our heartbeats synching. Our breath coming faster as I arch up to meet him. Nothing’s ever felt this perfect, this right—

“Nina,” he growls. “God, what you do to me.”

“You’re close, aren’t you?” So am I, and I see in his eyes that he feels it.

“Fuck, I can’t hold on.”

“Do it.” I groan as the tip of his cock hits my g-spot. “Do it, Josh—come with me.”

He lets out a roar as spots dance behind my eyelids. I’m two breaths behind him as he slams hard into me and growls, “So fucking good.”

“Yes, yes, *yes!*” I squeeze my eyes shut and come my brains out, legs wrapped tight around his hips. We’re one body, one heart, one extended burst of pleasure that goes on forever.

As we come back down, Josh groans and rolls us to our sides. He slips out of me, and my body misses him instantly.

My heart knows he’s not going anywhere.

“God, Nina.” He smiles and tucks some hair behind my ear. “Is it always going to be this amazing with us?”

“No.” I kiss his mouth as he frowns. “It’ll only get better.”

He laughs and grabs my ass. “Damn straight.”

For the first time ever, I believe it. And as we snuggle close and slowly drift off in each other’s arms, I finally cross number seven off my list.

Sleep with someone I’m banging.

No, scratch that.

Sleep with someone I love.

That’s more like it. Proof we can change our goals and still be okay. Better than before.

As I drift off to dreamland, I know that’s only the start.

CHAPTER 12

“*I*’m glad that’s behind us.”

I take my eyes off the road to glance at Nina. “The reunion, or dealing with your parents?”

“Both.” She smiles and my insides heat up. “Last night was fun.”

“It was.” We’re possibly talking about two different things. She means the reunion, and sure, it was great seeing old friends.

But for me, taking Nina from behind against the bleachers in our school gymnasium— “Are we allowed to add stuff to the list retroactively?”

She laughs. “You’re adding things to *my* sex bucket list now?”

I shrug and steer the car around a bend in the road. We’re taking the coastal highway home. It’s a bit out of the way, but the best things in life sometimes are. “The list has always been sort of a team effort, hasn’t it?”

“That’s true.”

My hands feel shaky on the wheel, but it’s got nothing to do with curves in the road. It’s for what I’ve got planned.

The plan that’s changed slightly since I first wrote it on the list.

The question is, will Nina be on board?

We've come so far these past few weeks. Love. Commitment. The world's biggest friendship blended with the world's best sex. It's everything I never knew I needed and never dared to dream I could have.

Almost everything.

I hit the blinker and turn off on a side road. It takes Nina a second to notice.

"Hey." She points to a roadside sign. "We're going to Great Head Point?"

"Yep." I wondered when she'd notice.

"But—I thought the lighthouse got torn down."

"It did." I aim for the pullout, angling the car so we've got views of the spot where the lighthouse once stood. I wish we had a little more privacy, but beggars can't be choosers.

Besides, I couldn't have asked for better weather. The sun throws handfuls of diamonds on the ocean as seagulls squawk overhead. I kill the engine and look at her. "I thought we could check the place out for a sec."

"Sure, I'm game." She glances at her watch. "We've got time."

That's the thing about time. You think you've got tons until you realize how much you've wasted. How many years could I have spent touching Nina if I'd stopped being a dumbass sooner?

But maybe we had to take our time getting here. Working through your shit—as my father so eloquently put it—that doesn't happen overnight.

And now we're both here. We've been careening toward this place since the day we met in Mrs. Traxel's third grade art class.

Nina opens her door and steps onto the asphalt. I run around the car to catch her hand, breathing the scent of sea air and the citrus of her shampoo. A chilly breeze whips her hair in my face as I lead us to the viewpoint a few steps down.

Shielding her from the wind, I angle us to look out at the spot where the Great Head Lighthouse once stood.

The sun on our shoulders, the salt in the air, Nina beside me—all of this feels right. I may never have imagined this moment, but it's perfect. Exactly how it's meant to be.

“Wow.” She squints at the empty spot on the rocks below. “It looks so naked.”

“Bad naked?”

“Maybe.” She looks up at me. “I guess sometimes you have to tear stuff down, but it's still sad.”

“There's talk of rebuilding,” I say. “They'll have to start from scratch, and there's a lot of architectural review stuff, but it's possible.”

Anything's possible.

Including what's about to happen.

I draw a deep breath and drop to one knee. “Nina Marie Stone.”

She turns around and gasps. “Oh. My. G—”

“On some level I'm only just starting to grasp, I have loved you since the first day I walked into art class and saw you sitting there with your pigtails and your little pink pig shirt.”

“The pig shirt!” She sputters a laugh as tears fill her eyes. “I can't believe you remember that.”

And I can't believe it took me this long to realize what part of me knew all along.

“I love you, Nina.” God, that feels good to say. “We've been best friends since we were still too small to go on the Ferris wheel.” I fish a hand in the pocket of my hoodie. “And all through the awkward years of high school and college and first heartbreaks, first apartments, first jobs. And even if we weren't each other's first in all the ways, you will always be the first girl I loved.”

I draw a hand from my pocket, but it's not a ring I hold.

Nina looks puzzled. “The list?”

“Look at the last thing on it.”

She unfolds the paper, brow creased in confusion. I watch as her eyes scan the page. When they meet mine, hers shimmer with tears. “When did you write that?”

“Same morning we made the list.” I don’t need to see the words. I wrote the damn things, so I know them by heart.

Marry a nice guy who deserves you.

But that’s been crossed out. “The part in blue pen got added later.” I point to the page where I’ve drawn a line through the original words. “That’s the important part.”

Nina turns the paper to the side. “*Marry Josh and he’ll spend his whole life trying to deserve you.*”

“I added that the day we came back from Lush Lake.” I study her face, making sure she understands. “It’s always been you, Nina. It just took me a while to understand.”

She’s shaking her head, her expression caught somewhere between joy and confusion. “Help me out here—is this a proposal?”

“Yeah.” An awkward one, but I’m doing my best. “For the first time in my whole sorry life, I know exactly what love is. It’s wanting the best for you, no matter what. It’s wanting your face to be the first one I see every morning and the last one I kiss before I take my final breath. It’s knowing we fit together—not in bed, though obviously that’s true.”

“Obviously.” She laughs a little, still looking unsure. “You’re really on board with the whole love thing?”

“One hundred percent.” I fish a hand in my pocket again. “I can’t imagine my life without you. You mean more to me than anyone else in the world. When I see you, my heart starts dancing around like a drunk elephant banging into walls and stomping my ribs and spraying water with its trunk and—” I stop because I’m getting off track. “There was a more poetic way to say that.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “That was the most Josh way of saying it. I love it.” Her throat rolls as she swallows. “And I love *you*.”

“I love you so much, Nina.” I draw the ring box from my pocket and she gasps. “I want to spend the rest of my life proving I’m worthy of you. Proving you deserve all the happiness in the world and being the guy to chase that with you. To give it to you every chance I get.”

“Oh my God, Josh.” Green eyes meet mine. “Is this for real?”

“This is for real.” I open the box to show the ring I got from my mom this morning. Nina had brunch with Tess, while I took Mom up on a long-ago offer.

“I know your dad did a number on you,” she said the day Nina and I graduated. Mom pulled me aside and drew the ring from a safe in her room. “I know you say you’re never getting married. Never falling in love.”

“I’m not,” I said with the self-assurance of a young adult male with his head wedged in his posterior. “Never.”

“That may be true.” She smiled with a mother’s endless patience. “And maybe you think this silly old jewelry is cursed, but it’s been in my family way before your dad went and wrecked things. It was part of Grandma and Grandpa’s happily-ever-after. Great-Grandpa and Grandma’s, too. Maybe it’ll get another chance.” She looked at me with tears in her eyes. “Just know the ring’s here for you when you’re ready.”

I’ve never been more ready as I offer it now to Nina. “My great grandfather on my mom’s side bought this ring when he was sixteen years old.”

“Your grandpa bought a *diamond* at sixteen?”

“It’s real and yeah.” I give a sheepish smile. “He made a ton of money designing birdhouses and—anyway, yeah. It’s kinda special.” I gulp back the cheesy thing I want to say.

Then I say it anyway. “Special like you.”

“It’s perfect,” she says, laughing. “That’s where you get your architect genes?”

“Maybe so.” I draw a deep breath and keep going. “My mom’s grandparents stayed married sixty-two years before Grandpa passed away,” I say. “He told me, before he died, that the secret to happiness was marrying your best friend. I was just a dumb teenager, so I nodded and thought, ‘that’ll never be me.’ But I guess Gramps got the last laugh.”

I take the ring from the box and hold it out to her. “Marry me, Nina. Let’s take this best friend thing to the next level.”

“The level that comes after crazy-hot sex, you mean?” She laughs and slips her finger through the ring. It’s a perfect fit as she wiggles her hand to make the diamond spark with sunbeams. “Yes,” she breathes. “I can’t wait to marry you.”

Thank God.

I wasn’t sure she’d say yes. I thought maybe I’d be rushing things to do it here, now, with “I love you” still fresh on my lips.

But seeing the glow on her face, I know I made the right call.

“Get up and kiss me, fiancé.” She laughs and hoists me to my feet. “I can’t believe this is real.”

“I believe it.” Just like I believe I’ll never grow tired of kissing her and holding her in my arms and—

“Did you two just get engaged?”

We break apart to see two women holding hands just a few feet away. Their car sits angled on the other end of the shoulder and they’re smiling like they witnessed the whole thing.

“I proposed to Kelli in this exact same spot eleven years ago,” says the taller of the two women as they approach. “Back before they tore down the lighthouse.”

“Let’s see the ring.” The shorter woman hustles over as Nina holds out her hand. “Oh, that’s gorgeous, honey. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Nina laughs and holds her hand up to the light. “I love seeing this on my finger.”

“I was the same way.” The taller woman tips her head to the other. “I’m Sue and this is Kelli. I hope you don’t mind, but we snapped some pictures once we figured out what was happening.”

Kelli holds up her phone. “I can send them to you if you want?”

“I’d love that.” Nina pulls her phone out and they quickly exchange numbers. Seconds later, the shots appear on her screen. “Oh, these are gorgeous!”

“Thank you so much.” They captured it all, from the moment I sank to one knee to a shot of me sliding the ring on Nina’s finger. “I’m really glad you two showed up.”

“Same.” Kelli grins. “I just love proposals.”

Sue gestures to the sign behind us. “Want me to take a shot of the two of you in front of the sign?”

“I’d love that.” Nina hands her phone over and tugs me toward the rock wall at the cliff’s edge. “How’s the light?”

“It’s gorgeous, honey.” Sue clicks a shot and frowns. “Actually, you may want to step up or down a little bit.”

Kelli giggles. “The way you’re standing now, it just says ‘Great Head’ in big, bold letters with the arrow pointing at your, um—”

“Crotch,” Sue supplies, wincing like she might offend us.

“Oh, that’s perfect.” Nina looks up at me. “Don’t you want at least one pic like that in our wedding album?”

With a laugh, I pull Nina close. “Sounds good to me.”

Great head.

Great friendship.

Great marriage.

It’s all in our future, and I can’t wait to get started.

EPILOGUE

“Should I run to the store for more chips?”

I look up to see Lyla holding an empty bowl. Skye’s beside her with the last little dribbles of salsa in a cute glass cup. “I should have brought more of this tomatillo stuff,” she says. “Devon didn’t think we needed it, with all the burgers and dogs and salad and watermelon and—”

“It’s fine, we’re good.” With my best hostess smile, I take the empty bowls from my friends. “I got so excited about this house christening that I overbought everything.”

“I know how that is.” Lyla laughs. “Ask me how many potholders I bought when Aidan and I moved in together.”

Skye takes the bait. “How many?”

“About a dozen.” Lyla grins at me. “And I don’t bake.”

God, I love my friends. “Let me grab more chips and salsa. I’ll be right back.”

The ladies wander back across the grassy green expanse of my new backyard. The yard I now share with Josh, who surprised me with a visit here on the one-year anniversary of that first hookup.

“I know we agreed to wait until after the wedding to buy a place together,” he said. “But you’re gonna go nuts for the backyard at this house.”

As usual, my fiancé knows me well. We closed last week, which is why we’re celebrating with a barbecue for our closest friends.

“Nina, this is amazing.” Boss lady Eve takes a bite of the bacon-wrapped water chestnuts I made this morning. “Everything’s delicious.”

“I can give you the recipe if you—*oh*.” She’s not talking about the appetizers. Her eyes linger on Cade and Brax standing by the hot tub. “You’re right. Everything *is* delicious.”

She looks at me and smiles. “Great work on the new campaign for Primo’s Pasta.”

“Thanks.” I tilt my head. “Had to eat a lot of it for research.”

“Isn’t their penne amazing?”

I swallow hard to keep from laughing. “Yep. Sure is.”

I wander away before I say something inappropriate to my boss. Eve goes back to ogling the twins as I approach the grill.

Aidan looks up and nods. “Tell Josh to hurry the fuck up with the caramelized onions.”

“Are the burgers done?”

“Nope.” He lifts one bushy brow. “I just like bossing him around.”

Devon laughs beside him and nods at the bowl in my hands. “Let me guess—my gorgeous wife was right as usual, and we didn’t have enough.”

“Yeah, but it’s no problem.” I sashay past on my way to the back door. “We probably have six jars of salsa in the pantry.”

And what a pantry it is. I make my way through the glass door to the monstrosity at the end of my kitchen. This space is the real reason I fell in love with the house. The pantry has double doors and enough space to hold roughly six grocery stores’ worth of snacks and canned goods and small appliances.

The fact that I’m excited by storage space should be a warning I’m settling deep into domesticity, but I’m not

worried.

“Hey, sexy.”

That’s why.

Josh’s grin from his spot at the stove sends goosebumps rippling up my arms. He bangs his wooden spoon on the edge of the skillet and lets his eyes coast up my body. “Have I mentioned that dress is fucking hot?”

“Maybe once or twice.” I laugh and do a little twirl to let the hem of my yellow sundress swirl around my thighs. It’s a bit short, but Lyla convinced me to buy it.

“Think of how hot it’ll be when you wear it with no panties, and he shoves it up around your hips to bend you over the table.”

That’s exactly what I’m thinking as Josh follows me into the pantry. He’s stalking me like a tiger, and I am here for it.

He’s grinning as he pins me up against one wall and nuzzles my neck. “Need me to reach something on a high shelf?”

I laugh and set the bowls on top of the toaster. “Mmm, actually, what I need is on the bottom shelf.”

“Oh yeah?” He takes a step back with a devilish smile. “Well, in that case, don’t let me stop you.”

I fucking love this game.

Taking a step away, I turn so my back’s to Josh. “Let me see.” I bend down and pretend to inspect jars on a low shelf. “We’ve got kidney beans, marinated artichoke hearts, cranberry sauce—”

As Josh flips my dress up, it dawns on me most couples don’t see a recitation of pantry staples as a turn-on.

But we’re not most couples, and as Josh skims his hands up to my breasts, I shudder with anticipation. “Someone forgot her bra *and* panties today.”

“I wonder who that could be?” I groan as he strokes my swollen nipples. His cock glides hot and thick against my bare

ass, and I realize at some point he unzipped his shorts. The head skims my slippery entrance and I let out another moan.

“I guess there’s only one thing to be done about it.” I suck in a breath as he slips in just an inch.

“Time to teach you a lesson about the importance of wearing underwear.”

I’m learning the exact opposite as he slides swift and sure inside me. I grip the edge of a shelf as he begins to fuck me. My breasts sway as Josh pounds me from behind.

God, that feels good.

“Josh.” I gasp as he drives in hard. “Someone could come in here.”

“Good.” He slides a hand between my legs and starts to stroke my clit. “Let all our friends see me fucking the hottest woman on earth.”

His words turn me on, and so does the memory of doing just that. While today’s all about the housewarming barbecue, I don’t rule out the possibility we’ll end up naked with a guest or two by the end of the night.

It’s one thing I love about our life. About our friendships. About this life we’ve built together, filled with love and laughter and so much good sex.

“Oh.” I cry out as he drives in hard, jiggling my tits. I reach up to cup them as he holds me steady with one hand on my hip. “Josh. I’m already close.”

“I know.” His thumb strokes my clit. “I can feel that sweet pussy squeezing me.”

“Fuck.” How is this still so amazing? We’ve been friends since third grade, besties through adulthood, lovers for a year, and now— “You’re gonna make me lose it.”

“Do it.” He growls and slams into me. “I’m right behind you, babe.”

I cry out as the first wave hits, toppling me forward so my head nearly hits the shelf. But Josh holds me steady as the

orgasm sweeps me over a waterfall of ecstasy.

“Yes, yes, yes!” I squeeze my eyes shut as he roars behind me, chasing me over the edge.

“Nina, Jesus.” I feel the first spurt of his release as my walls clench tight. “So good. So goddamn good.”

We’re good. Together, Josh and I feel like fire as we groan and slap together before coming down slowly.

Breathing hard, he plants a kiss on my shoulder. “Did you find what you were looking for on the low shelf?”

I laugh and grab a jar of tomatillo salsa. “Thanks for your help.”

“Hang on, here’s a towel.” He hands me a clean, folded flour sack cloth and I study it before using it to mop up our mess. “Please tell me I didn’t just wipe jizz on our new dish towels.”

“You did not just wipe jizz on our new dish towels.” He’s smiling as I turn back around. “I hooked us up.”

I scan the bin he’s pointing to, which is labeled “fuck stuff.” With a laugh, I swing my gaze to my fiancé. “Only you would think to stock our pantry with sex supplies.” I peer inside to see lube and clean towels and a few toys I haven’t seen before.

Marrying this guy is going to be the best decision I’ve ever made.

Josh tucks himself back inside his shorts, smiling the whole time. “We should probably get back out there, huh? Our friends will wonder what we’re doing.”

“Our friends know exactly what we’re doing.” I stretch up to kiss him, lingering at the spot beside his ear that always makes him shudder. “It’s why they’re our friends.”

As if on cue, Devon’s voice echoes from the porch door. “Hey, asshole—you want me to save your onions from burning, or are you almost done fucking in there?”

Josh laughs and kisses me one more time. “Coming,” he calls, and tucks a few strands of hair back in my braid. “Let me fix this before Tess calls you out for having freshly fucked hair.”

“She’s actually not here yet.” I scrub at a wet spot on my dress. “She called to say she got hung up with some guy she met in a bar last night.”

“Perfect.” He uses the towel to dab at the spot. “Divorce is treating her well.”

“I’ll say.”

“Good for her.”

I agree. Since Tess moved to Portland, we’ve grown closer than ever. Even Josh sees the difference in her. It’s never too late for fresh starts. Just ask any of us.

“I love you.” Josh kisses me again and then opens the door. “I’ll make sure the coast is clear.”

“Thanks.”

I take a few minutes fixing my dress before stepping through the door to the sink where Josh stands washing his hands. He steps aside and lets me have a turn before he offers a dish towel—a real one, not a jizz mop this time—and returns his attention to the onions.

“Hey, Neen?”

I look up from dumping salsa in a dish. “Yeah?”

“In case I haven’t told you today, I love you.”

He told me twelve times before breakfast, but I’m not complaining. “I love you, too.”

“And I can’t wait for you to be my wife.”

“Same.” I kiss him again as he stirs the onions on the stove.

My eyes slide to the frames above the stove. The wood looks rustic and battered because it is. We rescued it from a truss that once stood as part of the Great Head Lighthouse.

Josh got first dibs on the castoff wood, since he's designing the remodel. Brax and Cade donated the steel for the project the three men call their labor of love.

But it's what's inside the handmade frames that has me smiling. Two smaller frames hold pictures of our engagement. One's serious—Josh on one knee, sliding the ring on my finger—and the other's silly, with the *Great Head* sign angled right at our crotches.

It's perfect.

But it's what's in the middle frame that steals my breath each time I see it.

Our list, tattered at the edges from being in Josh's pocket. Each item has a checkmark except one.

The last one, scrawled in his handwriting.

Marry Josh and he'll spend his whole life trying to deserve you.

He stirs the onions and smiles. "Think we're ready?"

I grin and wrap my arms around him. "I know we are."

Oh my word! I'm so thrilled you finished *Honey Do* and I hope you loved Josh and Nina as much as I did. Want an extra-special bonus scene featuring the happy couple hosting a party in their new home? It's a chance to catch up with old friends in the sexiest game night ever. This bonus story is **free** when you subscribe to my newsletter (and don't fret if you're already subscribed—I won't add you twice!)

Here's that link:

<https://BookHip.com/ZNVFHBH>

If *Honey Do* happens to be your first taste of the Sugar & Spice series, you should know all three books are standalones (thanks, autocorrect, for repeatedly changing "standalones" to "scandalous") and you can read 'em in any order.

For a taste of book 1, *Eye Candy*, keep scrolling...

YOUR EXCLUSIVE PEEK AT EYE CANDY

“*W*here’d we put the penis straws?”

My co-worker catches my arm, dislodging a dick-shaped balloon from my mouth. We watch as the limp love log sputters past the bar and flops at the base of a sign that says, “Beth’s Bachelorette Party.”

I turn back to my colleague. “The straws are on the buffet.” I’m not sure where I set them among the peen cuisine. “Maybe try looking between the beefcake kabobs and the pecker pizza?”

“Thanks.” She scurries off and I pick another cock balloon from the pack. The party doesn’t start for ten minutes, but early arrivals have already found the Panty Dropper cocktails. Blowing a shock of hair off my forehead, I inflate the last meatsicle for the centerpiece.

Beyoncé blasts through the stereo as new arrivals file past befuddled randos at the bar. Our colleague’s quickie wedding didn’t give us much time to find private event space, but we’re making do with the watering hole next door.

Jill from IT confers with Kim from accounting at a bistro table nearby. Jill leans on the wall, one hand resting on the the pin-the-junk-on-the-hunk board.

“Ron loves watching threesome porn together.” She giggles and takes a sip of her drink. “It’s so *naughty*, but what’s the harm?”

“Absolutely,” Kim agrees. “It’s not like we’d ever really *do* it. But you’ve gotta keep things spicy.”

Ain't that the truth.

Not that I'm an expert on long-term relationships, but spicy sounds good to me.

Jill stirs her drink with a cock straw and leans closer to Kim. "How do you and Pete keep things sexy?"

"Well." Kim coughs and gives a wicked grin. "We play this game sometimes where I'm a burlesque dancer and he pays me for a lap dance."

I cover a smile and think of my grandma. She's a burlesque dancer—a real one—or she was before she retired to raise me when my parents died. A glance at my watch confirms it's too late to call. Grandma's tied up tonight leading Dotty's Dirty Book Club at her retirement home.

Let's just say having a guardian like Grams explains a lot about how I turned out.

At the table beside me, Jill's sharing her own tale of how she and her husband keep things exciting. "Sometimes, Ron pretends to pick me up in a bar," she says. "Like we're strangers or something. It's so hot."

"I love it!" Kim must sense me listening because she waves me over. "Lyla, you're our resident single girl—come tell us the wildest thing you've ever done."

No way.

Not in a million years.

Not if I want my sweet, kindhearted co-workers to keep seeing me as one of them. I'm still fairly new to the team and can't afford to overshare.

But my smile's for real as I head for their table because I'm glad to be included, and besides—they're discussing my favorite subject. Cocktail in hand, I cover the distance in three strides on my four-inch heels.

"I love sex." That came out louder than I meant it to. Adjusting my dark-blond ponytail, I try again. "I mean, I'll try anything once."

“*Anything?*” Jill gives a scandalized laugh. “That’s a pretty broad range.”

“Yeah, give us something juicy.” Kim’s smile seems encouraging. “You had great ideas for this party. You must have a whole treasure trove of stories.”

She’s not wrong there. I swallow my drink to buy some time. “Oh, you know how it is.” Another sip as I choose my words with care. From the look in their eyes, they *don’t* know how it is. “I like being watched. Or watching—that’s great, too.”

Jill cocks her head. “You mean porn?”

“Exhibitionism.” Kim’s whisper comes with a jab to Jill’s ribs, but at least she’s smiling. “Or what’s the other one—voyeurism?”

“Ooh, yes.” Jill’s eyes light like birthday candles. “On our tenth anniversary, Ron and I did it in the coat closet at his office party. *Anyone* could have caught us. It was hot.”

“You bad girl!” Kim giggles and sips her own drink. “Is that what you mean, Lyla?”

Not quite. She’s in the same ballpark, but more like the back row of bleachers, while I’m standing naked in centerfield.

But I keep on smiling because what’s the alternative? I can’t have them knowing what *really* turns me on. It’s not the time or the place, and why make them uncomfortable? Their vanilla sexcapades aren’t my flavor of choice, but I’ll bite into anything that brings pleasure to the two people involved.

Or three.

Or four people or even—

“Something like that,” I say to get my thought train back on track. “I suppose I do have a bit of an exhibitionist streak.”

That’s putting it mildly, and my colleagues titter with excitement.

“That’s so...scandalous!” Jill’s positively giddy.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Kim asks. “A boyfriend or—”

“Or girlfriend.” Jill nods once. “No judgment from us. We’re not prudes.”

“Or how about casual sex?” Kim giggles. “Or just someone you’re hot for.”

Jill bumps me with her hip. “Give us something, girl!”

I sip my drink, stalling for time as my lips wrap around the plastic penis straw. Do I tell them about my hot neighbor?

The urge to share overwhelms me, so I dip one toe in the pool. “There’s this hot guy who lives in the house beside mine.” I watch their faces for judgment. So far, so good. “We’ve never spoken, but he’s sexy as hell and lives right next door.”

Kim cocks her head. This isn’t starting out how she expected. “You moved to a new place last month, right?”

“Right.” I came to Portland to be close to my grandma, and I love my modest ranch home flooded with light. All those windows, and the views...

“My neighbor’s this big, brooding guy who sits on his back deck a lot,” I continue. “My place sits a bit higher than his, so I can see right into his yard when he mows the lawn without a shirt.”

“Oooh sexy!” Jill laughs and stirs her drink. “He’s got a nice body?”

“Yeah.” I lick my lips and sip some more cocktail. It’s tangy and spicy with just a hint of sweetness. “I was pulling weeds last week and I knew he could see me, so I took off my shirt.”

“Really?” Kim shimmies her shoulders. “You weren’t in your *front* yard, right?”

“Backyard,” I say, though I wouldn’t mind either way. “I had on this lacy black bra and these tiny little cutoff shorts. I felt his eyes on me the whole time and it was crazy hot.”

“Lyla!” Kim laughs and sloshes her drink. “You’re so bad.”

If she only knew.

She’d die if I said what I’m hoping to see each time I peer through my curtains. Each time I long for a glimpse of my neighbor. I may not know his name, but I know the shape of his shadow as the sun dips low behind his shaggy maple trees. I know the span of his shoulders as he sips a beer in the dark, cricket song sizzling between us.

Can he feel me watching? Does he know what I crave?
What I want more than anything?

What if he wants the same thing?

But no. That’s not possible. Guys like that don’t exist. Not long-term, anyway.

“Tell us more.” Jill’s almost to the bottom of her drink and the glint in her eyes shows it. “Us married girls live vicariously through you.”

I swallow and smile, wondering again if there’s any way to meld those two things. Marriage and the kind of kink I crave. Long-term love and lust and hunger and the sort of screaming, head-banging sex that leaves me walking funny for days.

I lick my lips and keep going. “We have this shared fence and he was out there painting it shirtless last week.” My pulse ticks up as I recall the ripple of muscle in his shoulders. The flex of his pecs as he paused to wipe sweat from his brow. There’s a jagged scar snaking from his cheek to his chest and I wonder how he got it. How it might feel to trace it with my tongue.

Jill’s voice brings me back to the bar. “Is he single?”

“I think so.” I heard him tell the mailman he’s unattached when a catalog came addressed to a woman. “The night I moved in, he brought a date home. Probably a fling, since I never saw her again.”

My pulse pounds and my skin prickles with heat. Flames flood my core at the memory of that night.

“He kissed her on his back deck with his hand up her shirt,” I continue as my palms get slick. They’re not the only part of me growing damp. “Then he took her inside and I stayed on my deck thinking maybe I’d hear something or see something or—” I stop as confusion fills their eyes.

This wouldn’t turn them on.

Not at all.

Watching a man they desire fuck someone else?

It’s the last thing they’d want.

And it’s the thing that separates me from friends like Jill and Kim and really everyone of any gender I’ve ever met.

I clear my throat. “I’m just a girl looking for love and sex and the whole happily ever after.” That’s not untrue, but it isn’t the whole truth.

“Here hear!” Jill’s smile says she hasn’t read my mind. *Thank God.*

“Someone needs a refill.” She grabs my glass and scurries toward the bar. That leaves me with Kim, who wears a wary expression and a blouse buttoned up to her throat.

Time to do damage control. “Anyway, I don’t think my neighbor has a girlfriend.” I tug the hem of my skirt, wondering if I should have worn something longer. “Maybe I’ll ask him out sometime.”

“You’re so bold.” Kim sighs. “I love how modern girls just go for what they want.”

“True.”

What’s even truer? I want my neighbor.

Not just him, but the fantasy of how we’d be together. Is it nuts to think we could be kindred spirits? We’ve never spoken, so of course it’s insane.

That doesn’t stop me from wishing. From wondering if his kink could match mine. From feeling the heat in his eyes as he watched me weeding topless. Something in his hungry gaze called to me and I’ve ached to answer for days.

I glance at the bar as Jill hands our glasses to the guy behind it. The bartender gives me a wink and mouths six lovely words before pointing to the clock.

I get off in an hour.

And so will I.

Lifting a hand, I give him a nod.

I won't pretend he's my soulmate. We've fucked a few times and it's great, but that's it. Just casual sex, which scratches the itch sometimes. I'm not even sure of his name. Chris, maybe? Kyle?

Jill returns and I take my drink and thank her. With a glance at my watch, I contemplate the night ahead.

It's not the bartender filling my thoughts. Not his thumb on my clit or the slide of his cock inside me. Not my breath coming in quick pants as his thrusts rush me to the edge.

I'm picturing my neighbor.

I'm thinking it's time to test my theory.

Want to keep reading? Nab *Eye Candy* at the link below (and don't forget it's free in Kindle Unlimited!)

<https://amzn.to/3lauPp0>

And don't forget to sign up for my newsletter to score that tasty *Honey Do* epilogue. Here's that link again:

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<https://tawnafenske.com/bonus-content/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



When Tawna Fenske finished her English lit degree at 22, she celebrated by filling a giant trash bag full of romance novels and dragging it everywhere until she'd read them all. Now she's a RITA Award finalist, *USA Today* bestselling author who writes humorous fiction, risqué romance, and heartwarming love stories with a quirky twist. *Publishers Weekly* has praised Tawna's offbeat romances with multiple starred reviews and noted, "There's something wonderfully relaxing about being immersed in a story filled with over-the-top characters in undeniably relatable situations. Heartache and humor go hand in hand."

Tawna lives in Bend, Oregon, with her husband, step-kids, and a menagerie of ill-behaved pets. She loves hiking, snowshoeing, standup paddleboarding, and inventing excuses to sip wine on her back porch. She can peel a banana with her toes and loses an average of twenty pairs of eyeglasses per year. To find out more about Tawna and her books, visit www.tawnafenske.com.



ALSO BY TAWNA FENSKE

The Sugar & Spice Erotic Romance Series

Eye Candy

Tough Cookie

Honey Do

The Ponderosa Resort Romantic Comedy Series

Studmuffin Santa

Chef Sugarlips

Sergeant Sexypants

Hottie Lumberjack

Stiff Suit

Mancandy Crush (novella)

Captain Dreamboat

Snowbound Squeeze (novella)

Dr. Hot Stuff

The Juniper Ridge Romantic Comedy Series

Show Time

Let It Show

Show Down

Show of Honor

Just for Show

Show Off (coming soon!)

The Assassins in Love Series

Killer Looks (prequel novella)

Killer Instincts

Killer Moves

Killer Smile

The Where There's Smoke Series

The Two-Date Rule

Just a Little Bet

The Best Kept Secret

Standalone Romantic Comedies

At the Heart of It

This Time Around

Now That It's You

Let it Breathe

About That Fling

Frisky Business

Believe It or Not

Making Waves

The Front and Center Series

Marine for Hire

Fiancée for Hire

Best Man for Hire

Protector for Hire

The First Impressions Series

The Fix Up

The Hang Up

The Hook Up

The List Series

The List

The Test

The Last

Standalone novellas and other wacky stuff

Going Up (novella)

Eat, Play, Lust (novella)