

IN HUNTER VALLEY,
IT'S OPEN SEASON ON MEN.

MANI CANDY

on a manhunt



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VANESSA VALE

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BOOK 2

VANESSA VALE



Man Candy by Vanessa Vale

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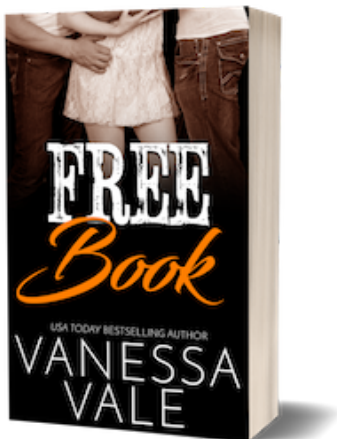
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CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Bonus Content](#)

[Join the Wagon Train!](#)

[Get A Free Book!](#)

[Also By Vanessa Vale](#)

[About Vanessa Vale](#)

From USA Today best-selling author Vanessa Vale, a small-town billionaire romance with a hot-as-puck hockey hero and a wannabe romance writer.

I'm looking for Mr. Right. Date after blind date, they're all duds. None of them meet the requirements on my Man List.

Until Dex James.

My brain? It says he's all kinds of wrong.

He's young. In town on vacation. A lazy billionaire.

He'd only be a fling. A muse for the spicy book I'm writing.

Nothing more.

My body? It's telling me to jump that big piece of man candy.

Check off guy-given O's from the list with Mr. Right Now.

Which is right? Maybe neither. Maybe my heart has to decide because it turns out Dex is so much more than I ever imagined.

Maybe Mr. Right Now could be Mr. Right after all.

Find out who wins in this steamy small town, reverse age gap game of love. With all the books in the On A Manhunt series, it's open season on men.



LINDY

IT WASN'T until Dex James that I started having sex dreams.

I didn't want to open my eyes because this dream felt too good. A warm hand on my thigh held me open, the other cupped my breast. And a mouth... a wicked, talented mouth was on my pussy.

No, this wasn't a dream. This was sex reality.

"Mmmmmmm," I practically purred, writhing with pleasure.

"Morning, sugar."

That deep voice. The rasp. This was really happening.

Dex James was having me for breakfast.

Yes. Yes!

"God, I love waking up like this," I said, rolling my hips, trying to get more contact with my clit and his mouth. Although Dex never needed much help getting those two together.

“I love this pussy,” he growled, then did some kind of swirly thing with this tongue.

I smiled at his praise, tilted my head down and opened my eyes for the perfect sight. A tanned, heavily veined forearm led to fingers that were tugging my sensitive nipple. God, arm porn. Lower still, Dex’s head between my thighs.

He glanced up and pierced me with those dark eyes as he gave me one full lick.

I tilted my head back, stared at the vaulted ceiling. For a moment, I forgot where we were.

Oh yeah. Las Vegas. The golf tournament. Dinner. Then...

“Dex,” I said, settling my hands on his head, tangling my fingers in his dark hair. *Right there. Yes. Right. There.*

“Hmm?” he asked, the vibrations right on my clit had me whimper.

It was really hard to talk. And think. And get tongue fucked. “I... what happened last night?”

He lifted his head, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His hair stuck up every which way. His eyes were heated, but sleepy. Whiskers covered his square jaw. “You don’t remember?”

“Don’t stop while I think about it,” I said, pushing his face beneath the edge of the sheet and back to my pussy.

“If you’re thinking, I’m doing it wrong,” he practically growled.

With that statement, he added fingers inside me to the mix and got me from sleeping to screaming fast enough to make him always feel ridiculously proud of himself.

He should be. When my screams turned to moans and then to gasping breaths, he crawled up my body, kissing his favorite spots on the way.

“I don’t remember how we got here,” I said with even more mental fog.

“Vegas or this suite?”

I pursed my lips, trying to think. It was pretty much impossible after what he just did. “After dinner last night is all a blur.”

“Um... yeah. We had a lot to drink.” He shifted and flopped down beside me. “I loaded us up on water and painkillers before we crashed.” He tipped his chin toward the bedside table where the empty plastic bottles were. “How are you feeling? Hopefully you aren’t hung over.”

He stretched his arms overhead and I watched every play of his muscles. He was hard beneath the low-slung sheet. The tenting was impossible to miss.

I looked. And yes, it jumped. No, it *grew*. And grew some more.

“No. I’m okay,” I told him, but I had a little headache. Distracted.

“Good. Pre-gaming’s over. Come here, sugar.”

He tugged me toward him for a kiss.

“Gah, morning breath from hell,” I said. My teeth felt furry. “You know I need to brush my teeth. This time I’m saving you from roadkill breath.”

He grinned, clearly having no issue with bad breath. But he always humored me. Because once the funk was replaced

with minty freshness, he never let me up until we were both wilted and satisfied.

He lay there as if he were in a sexy men's calendar while I dashed to the bathroom in a pale blue nightie, the one I'd packed because he loved it.

With the door firmly shut, I decided peeing came before toothpaste because my clit was no longer numb. I *really* had to go. I dashed for the toilet. I sighed as I went, closing my eyes with relief.

I remembered dinner with some of Dex's hockey friends after the golf tournament. A football player, too. Drinking cranberry vodkas. Then... nothing. I didn't do that, black out. Forgetting blocks of time. Not even in college. I should be thankful Dex loaded me up with water because remarkably, other than the headache that was growing, I wasn't hungover. I had no memory, but I wasn't going to throw up.

I reached for the toilet paper and froze. There on my left hand was a ring. Not just any ring but one with a big ass diamond in the center and a line of them that went all the way around the band. God, it was gorgeous.

I blinked, then moved my hand as if it might go away if I shook it enough.

"What the fuck?" I shouted.

"Like the ring, Mrs. James?" Dex called from the other room.

Mrs. James?

I finished up and flushed, then flung the door open.

"Mrs. James?" I practically yelled, waving my left hand around.

Dex smiled as he raised his left hand, and I couldn't miss the simple platinum band that glinted in the Vegas sunlight. The suite had floor to ceiling windows, and it seemed we forgot to close the blinds before we went to sleep.

Among other things. Like getting married.

“Come back to bed, sugar. Since it seems we got married last night, let's have our honeymoon.”

He pushed the sheet down, gripped the base of his insanely big, insanely perfect dick and gave it a hard pump. “This is all for you. *Wife.*”

Holy shit. *Holy shit.* I married Dex James.

And I don't remember a thing.



Two weeks earlier

LINDY

HIS HAND CUPPED the nape of her neck. He wrapped his fingers around the long length of her ponytail and gave a gentle tug.

“Knees, sugar.”

Celine’s lips parted. She wanted to obey, the need to do as told had her legs bending.

He guided her down until she was before him.

He was so tall her head tipped back to hold his blue-eyed gaze.

“Good girl. Now pull my dick out and show me how much you love to please me.”

Her fingers flew to open his jeans and he quickly sprang free. Thick, with a flared crown, she could only lick her lips at the need to taste as she wondered how she might take it all.

As if he could read her mind, he murmured, “It won’t fit. But you’ll try to get those lips around it, to take as much of it as you can. Because you know your pussy will have the same struggle.”

“HOW’S IT COMING?”

I startled at the voice that came through my laptop. I was on a video call with Lucy, an author friend in Arizona, although the little window showing her face was hidden behind the one with the book I was writing.

Glancing at the clock in the corner of the screen, I realized the last thirty minutes had flown by. I didn’t even notice the rev and noise of my neighbor’s chainsaw until now and God, it was loud. We were doing writing sprints, putting as many words down as we could in half hour increments and I really sank into that scene, even blocking out that awful noise. Using the mouse, I switched tabs so Lucy appeared in the small video chat window.

I never met her in person, but she was a close friend. Besides my editor, one of the only people who knew I wrote romance. On the side. The far, *far* side of my regular job. Meaning while the two books I’d published to date were starting to bring in a little money for me to buy a fancy coffee at Steaming Hotties. It was my nine-to-five weekday job at a small accounting firm that still paid the bills. I tackled other people’s taxes and general bookkeeping. Lots of numbers. Very dry, boring numbers.

Unlike my sister, Bridget, who was a human calculator, I found the profession boring as hell. It wasn’t my dream career, that was for sure. The saying, *everyone could rely on death*

and taxes meant job security. I could agree. I was very familiar with both.

These days, I spent my nights and weekends working on my stories in secret because I was confident not everyone in Hunter Valley would be okay with me writing smut. It was *romance*, but people would call it that and I didn't think I could live it down. This was a small town. I couldn't leave the house without my hair done and my face made up because I always ran into someone I knew out and about. I wasn't sure I could deal with my neighbors if they read the sex scenes in my books, especially ones where I imagined myself as the heroine.

God, like the one I was working on now.

Knees, sugar?

I scanned what I just finished typing. Yeah, that would go over well at yoga. And my chances in the dating pool, which was shallow enough already.

Still, I was determined to make my writing a new career. It had been my plan when I got out of college, but then my parents died not long after graduation and it got put to the side. I'd needed a job that was reliable, that paid the bills. Health insurance. All that grown up stuff I'd had to take on at twenty-three because raising a ten-year old sister became my priority.

Being a bookkeeper had been the first available opportunity at the time and I took it. All these years later, I was still there, but my role had advanced.

Unlike my life. Bridget was grown and had Maverick James in her life. A *real* man who was blatantly committed after a ridiculously short time. No, I wasn't jealous she had a gorgeous, successful, wealthy, *kind* boyfriend. Literally the only eligible guy in town my age.

Yeah, *my* age.

Although not eligible any longer.

So no jealousy. Not at all. Because I just *loved* going on dates through the online singles sites and having every one of them be a dud. Which made me one, too.

Me. Lindy Beckett. Single. A dull accountant. A secret fledgling romance writer. Thirty-five with a biological clock that wasn't just ticking, the alarm was going off.

I rubbed my eyes and gave Lucy a smile. "Sorry."

"Must've been a pretty good scene. Or are you thinking about the date you have tomorrow?"

"Date? Hell, no." I was to have dinner with another guy I met through a dating app. He looked attractive in his profile photo and seemed nice in our messaging, but like every man before him, he probably didn't check all the boxes on my man list. Meaning, he definitely wasn't the reason I'd totally gotten into the latest chapter.

I didn't write just romance. I wrote *steamy* romance. In fact, I squirmed in my desk chair because I was aroused from what I'd written. Lately, the words came easier. It wasn't like I had a boyfriend that I could practice these sexy scenes with or planned to enact with Mr. Dinner tomorrow night. No, I pulled out my extensive collection of battery powered boyfriends to get off.

The difference now was that one specific man kept popping into my head. One dark haired, dark eyed, gorgeous man. I pulled my thoughts of him out late at night when I grabbed a toy from my bedside drawer. The past few times it had been the big vibrating dildo between my parted thighs. God forbid he—Dex James—heard me cry out his name as I

came. I couldn't remember coming harder, and that was from only thinking about him. Or when I was writing the sexy scenes for my latest book. Because I definitely pictured him telling me his cock was going to be too big for me to handle.

Big guy, big dick, right?

That was what I envisioned. Except what if I was wrong? What if he had a tiny one? A little miniature hotdog?

I shook my head and frowned at the ridiculousness of it.

Dex James was one of Maverick's brothers. He—Dex, although probably Mav, too—definitely did *not* have a cocktail weenie between his muscular thighs.

The man exuded big dick energy.

He also had an easygoing, quick-to-smile, quick-for-fun kind of way about him. Which was completely the opposite of me. I'd been called uptight. Rigid. High maintenance. No doubt last weekend in Denver when I was super stressed, super annoyed and super behind on my book.

I'd taken it out on Dex. And Mallory, too, although she was used to me, as Bridget's best friend, of being a little crazy after all these years.

"I was working on the second sex scene," I told Lucy.

"I want to read it," she said, her voice eager, eyes lighting up with anticipation. "God, what is that noise?"

"Chainsaw. The guy next door is trimming trees, I think."

Mr. VanMeyer had been running that machine for the past hour.

"Jump to page thirty-two," I told her. We wrote in a word processing program that was shareable online so she could

toggle to my document and read what I wrote with ease. Like right now where she opened it and went to that page.

I grabbed the glass of iced tea from beside my laptop and took a big gulp while she read. It was a warm day, and I had all the windows open.

“Wow, Lind, that’s super-hot.” In the little display on my screen, she fanned herself.

“I know. It’s—”

“That guy, isn’t it?” she prodded with a sly smile. “The one you and your sister went to Denver with last week. Whatever his name is. You’ve made him be the hero of your book.”

“What are you saying, that he’s my muse?” I shook my head with a little more vigor than the question deserved. If Lucy could pick up on it, I was worried. “Nope. Definitely not him. He’s not a cowboy like in my stories.”

I couldn’t imagine Dex James wearing a Stetson like the heroes I wrote. Sure, he’d look good in one. Or a potato sack, but a cowboy wasn’t his personality.

“So? I’m sure he’d love to put you on your knees.” Her dark eyebrows went up and down, then she grinned. “When’s the last time you had a guy do that? Boss you around.”

Never. Still, my panties were wet from the possibility. And the top unchecked box on the man list. There were many things on that list I’d started with my mother when I was fourteen and AJ Alvarez asked me to go bowling. Back then, it had honest on it. Friendly. Courteous. As I got older, I added more things, like loyal and good with kids. The one I was thinking about now was sexually attentive. Guys in the past

who I'd let into my bed hadn't been selfish, but they hadn't been attentive either. Or bossy.

An alarm came through the video call. "Shit, I have to go," she said with a sigh as she swiped at her cell. "Ariel will be off the bus in ten minutes. Bye!"

The video call ended. I pushed back my chair from the kitchen table and grabbed my glass to refill it. The whirring of the chainsaw was incessant. I might have pushed through before, but I needed a break from the noise. Shutting the windows was only going to make the house stuffy and wouldn't block out Mr. VanMeyer's yard work completely.

It was time to leave the house. I needed to get groceries anyway. I always went on Saturday afternoons, only today I'd stalled for a few hours as the words flowed from my fingertips.

Thinking about sexy times with Dex. Bossy, me on my knees, sexy times.

"Gah!" I said to the empty kitchen.

Dex was all kinds of wrong. He lived in Denver, not Hunter Valley. He was young. Two things that said not permanent and that was what I was looking for. A permanent, as in forever, man. Mr. Right.

I set my glass in the sink, then tore the list of what I needed at the store off the notepad next to the fridge.

Going upstairs, I checked my face in the bathroom mirror, swiped on some colored lip gloss and ran a brush through my hair.

Outside, I stopped in my front lawn to see what Mr. VanMeyer was up to.

We were in an older neighborhood in Hunter Valley and the trees were large, the landscaping well established. There were shrubs separating our two yards, but he had a massive cottonwood that gave his backyard lovely shade all day and mine later in the afternoon when it blocked the Western late day sun. It wasn't that one he was working on though, which was good because I liked that shade, but a second tree that had been dead for a year or two. He was finally trimming some of the lower branches he could reach from the ground.

He wore his usual outfit of jeans and white t-shirt with suspenders. No matter the season, this was his outfit every day that I'd known him, which was my entire life since he lived in his house when my parents bought ours after they were married. I came along two years later and had been here ever since.

He saw me, shut the chainsaw off and waved.

"Hiya, Lindy!" he called. He was a kind man, always happy, but a little crazy.

"Hey, Mr. VanMeyer. Trimming the tree?" I asked.

He rubbed his mostly bald head and grinned. "Chopping this sucker down."

I looked up at the big, bare tree and wasn't sure how he was going to do that. He liked to take on adventurous do-it-yourself projects and then ended up calling in the professionals to finish up. Like replacing the back steps off his deck. Or when he decided to repave his driveway. Or put in the new mailbox post.

"Careful on a ladder getting those low limbs." The tree was at least thirty feet tall with lots of long, sweeping

branches. There were a few small ones he'd already been able to cut off that were scattered around him in the grass.

Shaking his head, he patted the handle of the chainsaw. "Oh, I'm not getting on a ladder."

"Good." I didn't want him to fall because it would definitely lead to him breaking something. And with a working chainsaw, maybe cut something off. At least he called in the pros first thing this time. "Then there will be more for the tree trimming service. I'm off to Van's. Need anything?"

"I'm not hiring a— Wait. You're going to Van's?" His eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning at the mention of the grocery store. "I like those brownies they have."

I laughed. "I know you do. I'll get you some."

He offered a thanks only after reminding me he liked the ones with nuts sprinkled on top, then pulled the cord to start the chainsaw again.

Hopefully the brownies would be enough to lure him away from the chainsaw and I could get a thousand more words in before it got too late. I'd finish the sex scene with Dex... with the *hero*, before bed.

And my date with my vibrator.



DEX

THE MUSIC in grocery stores was the worst. No matter which one I went to, no matter which state, or hell, which country, it was all the same.

Saxophone remakes that became permanently stuck in my head.

I couldn't help but hum along to an Adele disaster—sorry, Adele—when I brought my cart to a halt by the produce island of bananas. There, standing in front of the squash was Lindy Beckett.

“God, I love small towns,” I murmured to myself, tossing a bunch into my cart. They landed on top of a few peach yogurt containers.

The chances of running into Lindy were greater here in Hunter Valley than in Denver and worked to my advantage, especially with her. The woman of my dreams. And when I was awake.

I pushed my cart with the rogue wheel over to her. I was famous for being a top scorer on the ice. Lately, for the one

time I was called an enforcer off it when I beat up an asshole at a bar. Pro hockey enforcers were known for using their fists on the ice, not off. And me? I was the nice one. The one the enforcers protected. I was too valuable to get into ice fights. So when I took a guy down for being a dick to a woman, they made it into a big deal.

Still, no matter how the media painted me with their ruthless brush, women literally tossed their panties at me. I handled puck bunnies like they were no big deal. To me, they weren't, because I didn't want any of them. Not if they thought I was the good boy they wanted to tarnish, or the bad boy they wanted to reform. Either way, they only wanted to fuck.

Sure, maybe back in my rookie season when I was first exposed to the insane lifestyle when I'd been up for a little casual fun, but only for a few months. It wore off quickly, especially when I caught on that me sleeping with those shallow women wasn't any better than my father working his way through the intern pool at the office.

Meaningless. Empty. He'd needed pussy to feel validated. To get off. No connection. Hell, I doubted he even knew any of the women's names he fucked.

I sure as shit didn't remember the names of those women that first year. Of course, they'd wanted to fuck a hockey player, so the quickies were evenly balanced. Consensual anonymity.

Since then, I practiced and played. Hard. As a kid, hockey was what got me out of the house—or in my case, dysfunctional mansion. I spent as much time as I could at the local rink for endless practices and games. Then when I got older and in the travel league, away games, even ones out of state, kept me

sane. The sport had kept me away from joining James Corp, the family business, because we all knew I'd go pro. My brothers Mav, Silas, and Theo encouraged me to play my ass off because I was fucking good. It wasn't cocky to say, but the truth.

But it was lonely.

My life was fucking lonely. I was constantly surrounded by trainers and players and coaches. I shared rooms with teammates at the away-game hotels. I was rarely alone. Yet I didn't have a family—a *real* family of my own—to come home to. To play for. To have in the WAG section cheering me on. No wife, no girlfriend in the special box.

Until now. Until Lindy, because I could picture her at my games. In my—our—house. In our bed. She was why I was lingering here in Hunter Valley in the off season.

I didn't know what it was about her that had hearts throb out of my eyes like in cartoons. Why I was obsessed with her. The day we met, she wasn't the... nicest. To others, she may be seen as a bitch or cranky. To me, it seemed... standoffish.

She didn't have to fly to Denver with us last weekend, but she had. Maybe she was worried about Bridget and how Mav had treated her. Maybe she was mad at him. Not maybe, probably. Maybe it was because she left town with five minutes notice. Maybe... well, who knew?

There was more to Lindy than the one incident and I wanted to figure her out. No. Not just figure out. I was going to marry her.

That had me walking toward her across the produce section with my heart rate double timing as if I were doing speed drills between the blue lines.

She doesn't know you're obsessed. Obsessed? I had the wedding ring Mallory and I picked out for her tucked away. Dude, chill the fuck out.

The obsessed guy versus the standoffish woman.

“Size isn’t as important as what you do with it,” I commented when I strolled up. Okay, maybe that was the dumbest thing in the world to say. Did a woman want a guy to fling innuendo about vegetables at them while grocery shopping?

Fuck. Probably not.

Be cool. *Be. Cool.*

Her blonde hair swirled around her shoulders as she looked my way and my dick got hard. Yeah, from the swing of her fucking hair.

Surprise and awareness widened her blue eyes.

She recognized me. Not from the sports channel, because it was crystal clear Lindy had no clue I was a pro hockey player. She knew me from our little ride on the family’s private jet to Denver with Bridget and Mallory. Since she didn’t know I played hockey, she assumed I was a bored billionaire kicking back in Montana for the summer because the Azores or Boca Raton were dull.

I could just tell her the truth. What I was. That I wasn’t a slacker trust fund kid. That would change her opinion of me pretty fast, but I wasn’t going to do it. I wanted her to be into me. Not because I was famous. Not for my skill with a stick.

Okay, *one* stick. The one getting hard for her right now.

Fuck, she was pretty. Every time I got in front of her, it hit me. In my heart. In my dick.

For a Saturday afternoon when most people went casual, especially grocery shopping, she was perfectly put together. A jean skirt, crisp blouse with cutouts around the neckline that hinted at tanned skin beneath. Her shoes were the same pale pink as her top. So were her glossy lips. Lips I wanted to kiss that sheen right off of.

I had no idea how she and Bridget were sisters. Besides looking nothing alike, Lindy was clearly high maintenance while Bridget was... no maintenance. I'd even seen the younger Beckett in only a sheet—and not in a good, sexy times kind of way.

“What did you say?” she asked, her words full of surprise at seeing me.

I tipped my chin toward the yellow vegetable she held which looked a fair amount like a dick. Yes, the thought made me somewhat of a perv, but I didn't want to talk to Lindy about the weather.

“Stir fry? Shish Kebab? It's what you do with it that makes it good,” I commented as if I was a cooking channel host.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, instead of telling me her plans for the veg.

I glanced around. “Picking out dinner.”

Reaching out, she put the squash back in the pile with the rest in the display case. A rumble of fake thunder announced the imminent spray of water over the vegetables. “I mean Hunter Valley.”

I shrugged. “Don't you remember flying with me last week? Aren't I a little bit memorable?” I held up my hand and set my pointer finger and thumb close together.

She rolled her eyes. “I mean still. Don’t you have work in Denver?”

Yeah, she had no clue.

“On vacation.” I shrugged, not telling her it was the off season for the professional hockey league. “I’m hiking. Mountain biking. Did you know there’s a waterfall up the canyon?”

“Yes.”

I took a step toward her. “You’re lucky. You grew up here.” I reached out, stroked her hair behind her ear. “Hi, sugar,” I murmured softly, as if we were alone somewhere and not in the middle of a store.

I hadn’t seen her since we returned from the Bridget/Maverick popcorn-fest in Colorado. Fortunately, everything turned out and Mav and Bridge were back in town, hot and heavy and in love. After only two weeks.

It was sickening, but I was right there with my brother. One look at a Beckett woman and it was instalove for me, too.

Lindy’s eyes widened at the touch, but I couldn’t resist. I wanted to put my hands on her, kiss her, lick her because I knew she was going to be sweet like candy. In Denver she was all kinds of wound up. And it wasn’t worrying about Bridget. She didn’t want to kick back and have some fun. New city, Saturday night... yeah, no. She took her laptop and went to a hotel room and worked. *Worked*. Maybe that was the reason for her attitude that night. Work stress.

She needed to wind down with a few orgasms and I was going to give them to her. Except I had to approach this with the patience I struggled to find, because now that she was in front of me again, I wanted her. Now.

Would anyone notice if I tossed her over my shoulder and carried her out of the store?

Definitely. Dex James manhandling a woman buying groceries might be a dream for gossip sites, but it wouldn't go over with the team owners. Or my agent. Or that sponsor he was trying to land for me.

I had to be good. In public. When I got her alone though...

"Hey, Dex," she breathed as a flush spread across her cheeks. "Look, I'm, um... sorry about how I acted in Denver. I was a little overwhelmed."

So she had been off.

The corner of my mouth tipped up showing her I wasn't affected even though I was dying to know if she flushed like that when she came. "It was pretty spontaneous."

I'd showed up on their doorstep, offered to fly them to Denver on the company jet for Bridget to confront Mav and we were in the air within an hour.

She nodded. "Bridget was upset all week about Mav, plus she told me about her time in Boston and—"

"You didn't know?" I asked. Being kicked out of MIT for plagiarism was a big deal. So was the reason it happened.

She frowned. "You did?"

I scratched my cheek, slightly uncomfortable because my answer was going to probably make Lindy feel worse. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I wasn't going to lie though, so I said, "Mav got it out of her the night before when we were at a bar."

"Figures," she muttered.

“I’d be upset too if one of my brothers kept something like that a secret. You two seem close.”

She nodded. “We are. I’m more mother than sister. I guess I went all Mama Bear over her about the MIT thing and Mav being a dick.”

I wasn’t going to remind her that Mav hadn’t been a dick, but well, he kind of had. He did some things wrong, but how they worked it out wasn’t my business. Or Lindy’s, no matter how protective she felt.

“Then you had work. I get it.”

“That’s it?”

She eyed me, as if debating whether I was being honest. For me, it was easy. She said she was sorry. It was done. I was taking the fact that she opened up as a win. Still, I couldn’t help but mess with her a little.

I glanced around and pointed. “I can bend you over the kiwis and give you a spanking if that’d make you feel better for being a bad girl.”

Three things happened simultaneously. Her eyes widened, her mouth dropped open, and she flushed bright red.

I stepped close and whispered in her ear. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

I sure as hell would.

She shook herself, as if flinging that idea off her body.

“You getting food for dinner?” I asked, switching topics faster than getting whiplash on an amusement park ride. I couldn’t spank her ass here no matter how much either of us liked the idea, so it was better to get us back to more

appropriate grocery store topics. Otherwise, the squash in my pants was going to become apparent to all the shoppers.

She nodded and I didn't miss the way her gaze dropped to my lips. Yeah, she wanted me. And that spanking. Or was I desperate to think that? Perhaps, but I considered it driven instead of desperate. Focused. Single minded. Whatever the term, that was me where Lindy was concerned.

“Good. We'll have it together,” I said. I wasn't asking.

She blinked and looked me in the eye. “What? Us, dinner? No.”

“It's easier cooking for two. Besides, it'll make up for last week.” I glanced down into her cart which so far only had a few things. A head of lettuce, a jar of salsa, two loaves of bread and—

“Ooh, brownies.” I reached into her cart for the plastic bakery container to see if that was fudge frosting on top. She slapped my hand.

I pulled back, not the least bit contrite. Turned on, definitely.

“Those are for my neighbor.”

“A guy?” I frowned at the possibility.

The corner of her mouth tipped up as if she picked up on my cranky tone. “Yes.”

I was suddenly wildly jealous.

“You're giving your brownies to other men?” I took a step closer and touched her hair again. This close, I could pick up her soft scent. “I thought that sweetness was all for me. That hurts, sugar.”

Her mouth fell open and fuck yeah, she wasn't thinking about baked goods either.

Then she rolled her eyes and tried not to smile. Failed. "Mr. VanMeyer is in his late sixties. I might be hard up for finding eligible men around here, but not that hard up."

I wasn't sure if I should be sympathetic or thrilled she hadn't found a guy. That meant the path was clear for me. I was used to taking out players left and right to get to the goal.

I kept my hand on my chest. "I'm eligible and I'm right fucking here."

"You're in your twenties," she reminded, saying it as if it was a huge deal like *you have a raging case of herpes*.

I couldn't change my age, but if that was all that was keeping her from becoming mine, I could work with it. "I know what to do with squash," I reminded, trying to keep things light. That's what I did. Made people relaxed. Comfortable.

She looked to the pile of veg and grabbed one. A large one, held it between us and waved it back and forth.

"Sorry, I only like the big ones," she countered, finally setting it in her cart.

I couldn't help but laugh. *Well played*. She wasn't going to make this easy, but it was going to be fun. She didn't have a clue about how much I liked to win.

Trying to move around me, I stepped in, blocking her way. I looked left. I looked right. Then leaned in close so her hair brushed my nose.

"Sugar, I assure you, I've got one you'll like just fine. It'll be the best thing you ever put in your mouth."



LINDY

OH. My. God.

Dex James was... wow. I'd never, ever, gotten turned on in the grocery store before.

Until now. Until him.

About squash.

Maybe because he was the man of my naughtiest fantasies, the man who I'd just written into my latest sex scene.

I was attracted to him and that was a *huge* problem.

It'll be the best thing you ever put in your mouth.

That was all I could think about—and putting his *squash* in my mouth—as I pushed my cart out of the produce section and away from the sexy as sin Dex James.

Would it be just like what I wrote earlier? That it would be really big, too big, for me to take it all? Would I have to grip the base and stroke it as I tried to take as much as I could? Would he hold my head in place as he came down my throat?

I veered to the freezer section to cool off, but it wasn't going to help.

Ever since I met him when he showed up on my doorstep to take Bridget to Denver I'd been insanely aroused and obsessed with him. Which was a big problem.

I should have been excited about flying on a private jet.

A private jet.

Who had access to something like that?

He did. He was a billionaire. The youngest of the James brothers. He may not run the family business—the Fortune Whatever James Corporation—but he was loaded. Enough spare cash to have a plane.

I bought a new shade of lipstick or a pair of shoes with my spare cash.

We had *nothing* in common.

So what if I did a little *ménage à moi* and got myself off while whispering—no, screaming—his name even though I gave him a serious brush off in Denver.

Even after that, when I'd been really cranky, the guy still wanted to have dinner with me. Me!

Like the crazy person I was, I pretty much told him off via vegetables and walked away. Why did I resist the man who had a bank account equivalent to the GDP of a few small countries? Why did I resist a guy who was six-two, two hundred-plus pounds of solid muscle? Who had chocolate colored hair that needed a trim and a jaw that always had a five o'clock shadow? Who smelled like expensive soap and the rugged outdoors? Whose smile made my panties melt and his remarkably dark eyes seemed to follow me whenever we

were together? Who called me sugar and made me want to do all kinds of dirty things with him like stick my hand down the front of his jeans and feel how big and amazing his squa–dick was instead of just imagining it?

Yeah, him.

Because he was twenty-seven years old.

I was thirty-five. These days, I tweaked my neck just sleeping weird. I tried so hard to find the One. Mr. Right. It irked me that Dex was an eager puppy—maybe a Rottweiler puppy—and into me when he was Mr. Wrong.

Not a local. Meaning he wasn't sticking around.

He didn't seem to have any kind of job or ambition, wandering between Colorado and Montana checking out waterfalls.

He didn't appreciate how hard it was to earn a living.

He was young. Thinking of having sex with him, let alone actually doing it, was like robbing the cradle. Hot as hell, but he was too young.

At his age, his stamina had to be impressive. God, he could probably go a second round without any recovery time. And he'd be eager to please like that Rottweiler puppy, I was sure.

I didn't want a puppy though. I wanted someone who knew what the hell he was doing and knew what I needed—like a mind (or body) reader—and gave it to me. Multiple times.

Like a spanking bent over the kiwis.

Gah!

Stamina, youth, vigor—all of that was irrelevant because what guy his age wanted to settle down and immediately work

on making babies? I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't going to waste time on fucking even the hottest man on the planet if it didn't lead to marriage and kids.

Dex was forward. Direct. Bold about what he wanted and that appeared to be me. So I had to shield myself. Push him and his squash away.

My vagina didn't agree because it was crying right now in the checkout line. My panties were soaked. They had been ever since the squash/dick conversation ten minutes ago. I was thankful I'd made a shopping list because my brain was only thinking about getting in Dex's pants, not picking out ketchup and tampons.

“Have dinner with me.”

I turned as I was putting that box of tampons—which only reminded me I wasn't pregnant or getting that way any time soon—on the conveyor belt.

Dex stood in line behind me. He eyed the box, then me, without even a blink.

“Dinner?” I questioned.

“We'll put your squash with my chicken,” —he held up a package of poultry thighs— “and make something hot.”

Because he had a huge grin on his face, I couldn't help but smile at him. Total puppy. “We don't need to have dinner together because our siblings are dating.”

His dark eyes held mine. “I promise you; this isn't about them.”

I blinked because his usually carefree and playful demeanor had been replaced by an intensity that wasn't exactly scary, but surprising. And potent.

I swallowed, grabbed the brownies and put them on the conveyor belt.

“Seriously. Have dinner. I make a really great pasta dish and I want to share it with you.”

I turned my head and studied him. He wasn’t fooling around, and he seemed earnest.

Before I could answer, my cell rang. I pulled it from my purse, saw the name on the screen. “Hi, Mr. VanMeyer,” I responded in my usually bright voice when talking to the older man. He probably didn’t want me to forget the brownies.

I turned back to my cart to grab a carton of orange juice.

“There’s been a little accident with the tree,” he said in my ear.

I froze, stared at the magazine display without seeing any of the covers. “Oh my God, are you alright?”

“Yes. But your house isn’t.”

“What? What do you mean my house isn’t okay?”

The next thing I knew, Dex was standing beside me, really, really close and he had his hand on my hip. I had to tip my chin up to meet his gaze. His *concerned* gaze.

“You’ll see when you get here,” Mr. VanMeyer said vaguely. “You’ll have to park down the block since the fire truck’s in the way. Don’t forget the brownies!”

Before I could question him further, he hung up.

I stared at my phone hoping it would give me answers.

“What’s going on?” Dex asked. His voice was gentle, the playfulness gone.

“My neighbor was chopping a tree down before I left and now he’s saying my house isn’t okay. That a fire truck’s out front. Did he set the tree and then my house on fire?”

His fingers squeezed gently, then slid to the small of my back to usher me through the checkout, abandoning our carts. “Come on. I’ll get you home.”



DEX

THERE WAS a tree in Lindy's house like her place was the film set for *Jumanji*.

I stood beside her on the sidewalk and stared because I couldn't believe it any more than she could.

Her next door neighbor sat on his back deck with a chainsaw at his feet. He must not be the sharpest tack in the box because... fuck.

He'd cut the huge tree at the base like he was a lumberjack in the woods. It had tipped over right onto her house. The main trunk fell into the side of it and huge branches pierced the roof and the exterior of the second story in four or five places. A window was smashed in. Drywall and insulation dangled in the open gashes.

The fire department was here because a tree limb had also taken out her gas line right at the meter. The power company had shut off electricity and got the gas capped so it was no longer leaking.

Lindy had been on the phone with her insurance company for the past ten minutes.

I didn't leave her side, not sure what someone needed in a situation like this. No one was hurt, thankfully. The neighbor's pride was dented—because he'd come over to apologize to her—but he wasn't my problem right now.

Lindy was.

She ended the call and sighed. I didn't know what that sound meant in this case. Sure, I knew when a woman was frustrated or angry or just plain tired, but a sigh when your house had been damaged by a tree? I studied her closely to make sure she wasn't about to cry. I didn't blame her if she did. I had experience with women, but not crying ones.

“What did they say?”

If she had shitty insurance and wouldn't fix this, I would, after I cracked a few heads. Starting with the guy next door. Now I knew why Mav was focused on destroying the professor who'd stolen Bridget's hard work and published it as his own. And got her kicked out of MIT.

“They'll send someone over to take a look and start the process, but I don't need an adjuster to tell me the house isn't livable.” She glanced up at the clear sky. “Hopefully it won't rain before they cover that hole.”

She pointed to the roof where a huge branch had poked through it. A huge skylight could be installed once it was removed. That wasn't the only hole that would let rain in. Pretty much the side of her house on the second story was wide open.

Rain wasn't the only thing that could get in. Squirrels, raccoons. Birds. Hell, around here, maybe even a bear. All of

them could take up residence.

“Bridget hasn’t stayed here all week since she’s been back,” she continued, meaning her return from Denver, “so I assume she’ll keep staying with Maverick. I can go to a hotel until it’s all fixed—”

“You’ll stay with me,” I told her.

No way was she staying in a hotel. During the hockey season, I stayed in hotels more than in my own bed. It got old real fast. This was a big mess and wasn’t going to be fixed quickly. It could be weeks before she was back in. I didn’t know how long a construction project like this took, but Mav’s James Inn project was behind schedule, and he had a billion-dollar company pushing it to completion.

When I first got here, I was going to stay with Mav, but that was before Bridget. The last thing I wanted was to be in his house when the two of them were most likely fucking on every horizontal—and vertical—surface. So with a quick call to Mav’s assistant, the ever-efficient Bradley, found me a place of my own. A two-month rental right in town. A little old miner’s house that had been overhauled and restored. It was perfect for one. Or two who liked to be on top—or underneath—of each other.

Yeah, Lindy could fucking stay with me.

For the first time since we pulled up she looked my way. Her usually bright gaze looked weary. But no tears. Still...

“Oh sugar. Come here.”

I took her hand and pulled her into me. Hugged her. I’d be lying if I was doing it solely to comfort her. Besides me tucking her hair behind her ear at the grocery store, this was the first time we touched. That I held her. That I felt every soft

curve of her body. Got close enough to breathe in her soft scent.

For a moment, she was stiff, then gave over and sagged into me, which was the most incredible thing ever. She let go for me, even if for just these few short moments.

I kissed the top of her head because... how could I not?

“This is a fucking mess, but it’s fixable,” I murmured, hoping I was being reassuring.

She nodded against my chest. “Yeah, I know. The house is turning into a money pit. Last winter it was the hot water heater. After that, I had to replace the toilet in the powder room because it leaked. Then the fridge—”

“The guy next door’s paying for this clusterfuck. Not you. I’m sure your insurance company will get in touch with his to cover it all.”

“Probably.”

Not just probably. *Definitely.*

“It’s a big house for just you.” I turned my head and looked at the place. Two stories painted white with ivy growing up trellises between the lower windows. Besides the tree in it, the house was well maintained, the yard perfect with mulched flower beds. Not a stray leaf dared blow onto her recently cut grass. Meticulous, just like the owner herself.

“It was my parents’ house. I inherited it.”

I stilled, stroked her hair then gave it a slight tug so she’d look up at me. There, in her blue eyes, was a mix of emotions. She would be a horrible poker player. I saw weariness. Surprise at the slightly controlling touch. And arousal.

Was it how I firmly gripped the back of her neck? Or the pull on her hair? Or being in my arms? I was going to find out. I wanted to know this and everything else about her. While her lips were right fucking there, I wouldn't have our first kiss be in front of her damaged house with a fire crew milling about.

“What happened to them?” *Inherited* meant they weren't alive.

I had lunch with Bridget and my brothers last week and we'd gotten to talking about our fathers. She mentioned hers had died but hadn't elaborated. She certainly didn't say anything about her mom being gone, too.

“Car accident when I was twenty-three,” she explained matter-of-factly. “Bridget was with them, driving home from one of those princess shows on ice in Billings. She was in the back seat, asleep. Not a scratch on her.”

Holy fuck. Lindy lost her parents in one go, and almost her sister at the same time. No wonder she wasn't freaking out about the tree through her house. Worse things had happened to her. She knew true tragedy. Lived through something that wasn't fixable and could only move on as best one could.

“Oh sugar.” I kissed her head again and held her close. She didn't resist. We stood there until a fireman approached. He had on bunker pants and boots but skipped the jacket. He was totally ripped. Instead of wondering if Lindy found him attractive, I should be thankful the civil servants of the community were so fit.

Still, telling him to fuck off, that Lindy Beckett was mine, was on the tip of my tongue, but he was doing his job, not proposing.

“Hey, Lind.” He gave her a smile that screamed familiarity right along with how he shortened her name.

Damned small town.

“Gant,” Lindy said.

She pulled back and I let her go, but I rested my hand on her shoulder.

Gant noticed the placement.

That’s right. She’s mine.

“You can go inside, but obviously you won’t be living there.” He glanced over his shoulder at the house for a moment, then back to Lindy. “They won’t turn the gas or electric back on until the tree’s removed and the wiring’s been inspected.”

“Right,” she replied.

“You got a place to stay?” he asked.

I wasn’t sure if he was offering his bed or ensuring she was settled somewhere. Either way, it didn’t matter. I took care of what was mine.

“With me,” I told him.

She looked at me with wide eyes because she hadn’t said yes. I was taking her options away and speaking for her, but... well, I didn’t give a shit.

“It’s safe to go in and get some stuff,” the guy continued. “Clothes and whatever you might need. We’ll board up that lower window that’s damaged to keep people out, but there’s not much we can do about the rest of the holes.”

“Mr. VanMeyer called his insurance company and mine is sending someone and said they’d connect with a tree service

and contractors.”

“Good.” He tipped his head toward the house. “Go ahead in.”

I followed her through the front door. From the entry, it didn't look like anything happened. The back of the house was where the extent of the damage became clear. The kitchen had a broken window, which was easily fixable, but there was a branch that came down through the ceiling and pierced the top of the stove.

Upstairs, there was a tree branch that poked through the ceiling in the hallway and another through the bathroom. It was Lindy's bedroom that took the brunt. She stood in the doorway and stared. A big section of the exterior wall along with a large picture window were gone because the trunk of the tree was through it and across her bed. I could see where an offshoot branch went down into the kitchen.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. What if she'd been home? Asleep?

Lindy blinked, then started moving about. She went into her closet, which was unharmed, pulled out a bag, then started pulling clothes off hangers.

“I need clothes for work. Yoga. Toiletries. Bridget will want some things. I need to clean out the fridge as the food will spoil.” She paused and ran a hand over her face, then continued. “I need to make a list.”

“Slow down, sugar.” I reached out and took the bag from her. It was cloth and quilted or some shit with flowers on it.

“Slow down?” She set her hands on her slim hips. “You know what's worse than telling a woman to slow down? To *calm* down.”

I bit my lip and tried not to smile, but it was really fucking hard.

“I had work to do tonight, Dex. A schedule. I’ve barely talked to Mr. VanMeyer.”

The lumberjack next door.

“I think Mr. VanMeyer’s been talked to. By the fire department. The police, most likely. The gas and electric guy. His wife, who should have told him to slow the fuck down with that chainsaw.”

She shifted her gaze from the mess to me. “He’s not married.”

“That’s not a surprise,” I said.

“I still need to make a list.”

It seemed that was something she did. That it helped her feel organized. In control. Especially now when she definitely wasn’t.

I looked around her room for a pencil but all I could find was a fucking tree. I pulled my cell from my pocket and pulled up the notes app.

“Okay, let’s make a list.”

Ten minutes later, I walked out to the car with two bags slung over my shoulder and a list a mile long in my phone.

The fire department had boarded the kitchen window and left. Mr. VanMeyer was nowhere to be seen.

Lindy locked the front door behind her and followed me to my car—we’d left hers at the grocery store in our rush to get here. After tossing her bags in the back, I held the passenger door open for her.

As she slid in, she looked up at me and said, “I can stay at a hotel.”

I took in the way her jean skirt rode up her thighs, which made my one word reply a little louder than it should have probably been. “No.”

“I need to go tell Bridget about this, then stay with them.”

I leaned on the open door so I could meet her gaze. “Call Bridget, but sleep in Mav’s guest room? Sugar, you really want to do that?”

I didn’t want to point out that her little sister was going to be busy having sex with my big brother.

She quirked her lips, coming to that conclusion too.

“You could stay at a hotel, but you’re not,” I told her. “You could stay with your sister, but you’re definitely not. You’ll stay with me where I know you’re safe.”

“Safe? I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. Besides, your list is in my phone.”

“Why?”

I frowned, looking down at her in my car. “Why what?”

“Why are you being so nice?”

I squatted down in front of her. I didn’t say a word because her question pissed me off. Did she actually think I was an asshole? I was the nice brother. Mav was all growly and huge, scaring people off with his size alone. Silas was quiet, which made people uncomfortable. Theo was always serious and intense.

I was the chill one. Laid back.

Except when I wasn't. When someone fucked with those who couldn't defend themselves. Maybe it was my father who brought out the trait. No, it was *definitely* my father who'd done that. I hated the way he'd treated me. My mom. So I knew what it was like. I started a charity for kids to find safety in sports. A safe place to be, to grow, to become strong and confident. I protected people, even a woman who was being harassed at a bar by a drunk fucker and wouldn't take no for an answer. I gave the guy a few punches so he finally understood.

Unfortunately, the incident had been recorded by a number of bar patrons and it went viral. Dex James beating up an innocent fan watching the playoffs since we'd lost that night. Yeah, we'd lost. That was true. But the rest of it? He wasn't innocent and he hadn't been watching the game. I doubted the fucker even knew hockey was played on skates.

It didn't matter. Social media had crowned me the on- and off-ice enforcer. Dex the Destroyer or some stupid name like that.

That was why I'd originally come to Hunter Valley with Theo and Silas to check on Mav. To get the hell out of Denver and away from the limelight. To pretty much hide until things settled down.

Lindy didn't even know I was a professional hockey player, let alone know anything about that mess. It was a relief because how I was portrayed versus who I really was weren't the same. She was—hopefully—discovering the real me because if she heard the gossip, she might be afraid to stay with me.

So back to her question—why was I being so nice? It was because I *was* fucking nice. Honorable. Enough so to take care of those shitheads who weren't.

No one messed with Lindy Beckett. Even a stupid fucking tree.

Without saying anything, I grabbed the seatbelt, reached across her and clicked it into place. Then I shut the door behind her, went around and climbed in beside her.

I realized she asked because she was used to guys being dicks. Or not helpful. Or... whatever. So I looked her way and told her the truth.

“I’m not being nice. I’m taking care of what’s mine.”

She stared at me. Blinked. Stared some more. I could see her brain working, like cogs on a gear. Finally, she asked, “What?”

I couldn’t miss the thrumming pulse at the base of her neck. I wanted to lick that spot, feel it throb against my tongue. See her subtle response to me had me pushing on with the truth.

“I want you, Lindy Beckett. Since the first time I saw you.”

Her mouth dropped open, then she snapped it shut. “We... we barely know each other.”

“Mav and Bridget barely know each other,” I countered. They hadn’t even been together two weeks.

“They’re different,” she countered.

“How? Mav saw her and wanted her.”

Like I saw you and wanted you.

“So that’s it? I’m yours now? I don’t get a decision?” she asked, folding her arms across her chest. It should have made

her look imperious or snooty, but it only made her look hot with those tits pushed up in her top.

I learned from the *slow down* talk that I shouldn't tell her exactly that, that she didn't have a decision. That she was going to be mine. I knew it and she'd catch up.

So instead, I said, "I'm patient. You'll want me back soon enough." Before she could debate the point, I started the car and pulled away from the curb. "Let's get you home so you can start working on that list."

Home. She may have thought staying with me was a temporary arrangement, but she was wrong.



LINDY

DEX CARRIED MY BAGS INSIDE. I followed and stopped just inside the door, setting my purse and laptop bag on the couch.

“Make yourself at home,” he said, cutting past the tiny dining table and down the short hallway to put my bags, I assumed, in the guest bedroom.

The small house was in the oldest section of town, two blocks off of Main Street. Prime real estate and even something so little was valuable. I stood in the main room, with seating and eating areas separated from the small kitchen by a butcher block topped peninsula. The house had been beautifully restored with crisp white walls and glossy refinished pine floors. It was minimally, but attractively, furnished.

Dex told me in the car Mav’s assistant found the place for him. He wanted to stay in town for a few weeks and didn’t like hotels. Besides, he didn’t want to get in the way of our siblings’ newfound togetherness. By togetherness, I meant sex. Lots of sex.

I wasn't bitter that Bridget was getting some—okay, probably a whole hell of a lot—from Maverick James, hot billionaire who blatantly *loved* her after only a week. Bridget's happiness was hard to witness, which made me feel like a bitch after all I learned she went through recently. Maybe I wasn't bitter, but definitely jealous. I admitted it.

Bridget was twenty-two. Twenty-two!

Younger than I was when our parents died and she became more my child than little sister. And she found her forever guy in Mav. Who was thirty-seven. She got her dream guy and me? At thirty-five, I was still trying to find Mr. Right. I had the same job, the same house, the exact same life.

Now the job was boring, the house had holes in it like a block of Swiss cheese.

Dex leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his broad, muscular chest. He had on a pair of gray pants and a t-shirt with University of Minnesota across the chest. He made looking hot effortless.

“Since we abandoned our groceries at the store, how about we walk to the pizza place on Main? Their sauce rivals anything I've had in New York.”

“We should get the food in my fridge before it spoils,” I replied, making sure I stayed on track.

He pushed off the wall and came my way. *Stalked* my way. I held my ground even when I wanted to retreat from his intensity.

“That's number nineteen or something on your list. As long as the fridge door isn't opened, it'll stay cool until tomorrow.”

He was probably right.

He reached out, brushed my hair back just as he had at the store. “Pizza?”

I didn’t know what he had to eat in his kitchen, especially since he only moved in a few days ago. I wasn’t going back to Van’s to pick up things to make.

“I thought you wanted to do something with squash,” I muttered, unsettled. A tree had fallen on my house. It was insane. Surreal. Although with Mr. VanMeyer’s craziness, not all that surprising.

“I do. I so do. I told you it’ll be the best thing you ever put in your mouth.” His gaze dipped to my lips.

Oh my God.

I cleared my throat because it was suddenly quite dry.

“I don’t think you’re quite ready to taste my squash. Remember, I’m patient. Pizza?”

Like he suggested... pizza. Yes. Excellent. Because I definitely wasn’t ready to taste any part of Dex, let alone his squash. *Liar!* “Sure.”

“Good, let’s go.”

“Um... give me a few minutes to clean up.” And maybe make myself come.

His gaze raked over me as he was clearly debating how I needed to do just that.

“You look perfect.”

I rolled my eyes because that was such a guy thing to say.

He held up his hands. “Okay, don’t believe me. Go do what you need to do.”

“Bathroom?” I asked.

He pointed over his shoulder. “First door on the right.”

I grabbed one of the bags from just inside a bedroom doorway. The blue one, which I knew had my toiletries in it. The bathroom had a glass enclosed shower with white tile that matched the flooring. A skylight brightened the space along with a frosted glass window over the toilet. While the house was small, it was updated and well-appointed. It even had a heated towel rack.

I pulled my toiletry case from my bag and grabbed everything I needed, set things on the marble topped vanity in a long line. I brushed my hair and touched up my makeup.

When I was done, I came out and found Dex sprawled on the couch reading a book. His feet were up on the coffee table that was a solid chunk of wood. I needed to take a picture of it because I could make one of those—or maybe fifty—with the tree lodged in my house.

“Did I take too long?” I asked, noticing how settled he was.

He did that gaze raking thing again as he set the book on the couch and stood. I felt seen. Too seen as if he were doing an inventory of my body.

I glanced down. “Is there a stain on my shirt?”

A slow smile crept across his face as his eyes finally met mine. “No sugar. You look perfect.” My cell chimed, prompting me to a text. “That things been going off non-stop.”

I grabbed it from my purse which was still on the couch, scrolled through the unread messages. “Other neighbors about the house. My friend Molly. And—”

“Leave them for now,” he advised. He moved around the coffee table.

“But—”

He set his hand over mine and I flicked my gaze to his. This close, I could see his eyes were more melted chocolate than the boring brown I thought. He hadn't shaved in a day or two and I wanted to feel the soft rasp of his whiskers against my palm. Between my—

“They'll still be there after we eat,” he added.

“They will be, along with a whole lot more.”

“Then you'll work your way through them then. No one expects you to go hungry to get back to them.”

“But—”

“Sugar, were you on the debate team in school?”

“High school.”

“Thought so.”

I pursed my lips, but didn't say anything else, which made his mouth twitch with clear amusement. I huffed.

He held the front door open for me as I stuck the cell back in my purse and slung it over my shoulder. I *was* hungry and people could wait.

“You sure you don't have something else to do?” I asked as he locked the door. Running into me at the grocery store shouldn't turn into the rest of his day. “I mean, you said you're here on vacation.”

“Take worrying about me off your list. I'm good. I'm right where I want to be. Bridget told me you're an accountant,” he said, switching topics as we went down the sidewalk, taking a turn toward Main. It was a gorgeous day, and the downtown area was busy. A couple riding bikes rolled past.

“That’s right. I work for a local firm. I’ve been there for twelve years.”

God, that made me sound really boring. And old. Dex had been in high school twelve years ago.

“There must be a big demand for tax work around here.”

We made it quickly to the historic downtown area and walked side by side past the shops. Turning to look up at him, I asked, “Oh?”

“You work lots of hours. You took your laptop to Denver last week and had to work. You said you had more tonight. You even put it at the top of your list.”

I licked my lips. Dex was the last person I wanted to tell that I wasn’t doing accounting all that time, but instead writing. It was my secret. My... *thing* that made me happy. That gave me hope that I could finally become a successful author. The career I put on hold to raise Bridget.

I didn’t want him to laugh at me if he learned the truth. I wasn’t sure how I’d feel if he thought it a joke, that my dream job was writing sex. That because of that I was pervy. That I was weird.

I couldn’t handle any of that.

“Yup, lots of work. After we eat, I need to respond to those texts. Bridget will need to know about the house. Then I have a few hours of work to do,” I added, hoping I could somehow get a chapter written. I coordinated with an editor to read and proof my book for typos and grammar issues in two weeks. I could feel the pressure of getting it finished.

A woman with a double-wide stroller came our way and Dex took my hand and pulled me toward the buildings to let her by.

“Dex,” I said, surprised by his quick move, pulling me off balance.

He turned me into the picture window of a restaurant that was only open for breakfast and lunch. His hands rested on the glass on either side of my head.

I blinked up at him. “What are you—”

“Shh,” he said, resting a finger over my lips. His eyes focused on the action.

“I’m not going to tell you to slow down or calm down, but woman, the list can wait. Your boss will understand.” His voice was deep and rumbly, and I felt controlled, but oddly protected.

He pulled his finger away.

“That may be so, but it’s all in my head,” I told him. “I can’t stop thinking about—”

He put his finger over my lip again.

“I know what the problem is,” he said.

I frowned and grabbed his wrist to take his hand away. He was warm and I felt his strength even in his forearm. “That my house has a few extra holes in it?”

He shook his head.

“That I have too much to do?”

He continued to shake his head.

“What then?”

“You need someone to make you forget that list. And your name.”

“I don’t need—”

“Yes, you do.”

Then he kissed me.

Holy shit, Dex was kissing me. His mouth on mine wasn't anything like the playful, easygoing man I knew. No, this was a Dex that took what he wanted. He'd been patient, but no longer. I gasped in surprise, and he took advantage, angling his head and stroking his tongue to meet mine with long licks. Big hands cupped my face, held me where he wanted the kiss to go.

I lost track of time. Of where we were.

“Fuck, sugar. Just as sweet as I imagined.”

After a moment I opened my eyes and stared up at him wondering why he stopped. Oh yeah, Main Street. People.

He kissed my forehead and fuck me, if that wasn't hot in itself.

“While I want to eat you for dinner, come on.” He took my hand and led me down the block. We followed the aroma of garlic to the pizza restaurant. I was in a kiss-fueled daze.

My lips tingled and my pussy ached to be eaten like he wanted.

Dex didn't let go of my hand as he held the door for me and while we stood at the counter to order. There was a large menu on the wall over the industrial oven, but I didn't need to look at it. It was a great pizza place and I got takeout often enough to know what I liked.

“Hi Otis,” I said to the owner. He was sliding a pizza into a to-go box, closing the lid and handing it off to one of the teenagers who did bike deliveries for him during summer break.

Otis turned with a smile, but it slipped when he saw me. “Lindy. Man, I heard about your house. I’m glad you’re okay.”

He came over to stand behind the counter right in front of us.

Dex gave my hand a squeeze. I wasn’t sure if it was in comfort or because he didn’t like a guy talking to me. He’d made that obvious with Gant from the fire crew.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I told Otis. He was the first in a long line of people I was going to have to tell, so I needed to work on what I’d say. “The insurance company’s on it.”

They weren’t. Not yet, but they would. I’d get it figured out, just like I did everything else.

I wished the fixes could move as quickly as the news about what happened spread across Hunter Valley. I hadn’t called Bridget yet. I didn’t want to think of what she and Mav were up to where they didn’t know.

“Good.” Otis was a few years younger than me, but I knew him because his sister was my yoga instructor. Her studio was on the second floor of this old building.

His gaze shifted from me to Dex, who stood to my right.

“This is Dex. Bridget’s boyfriend’s bro—”

“Wow. Yeah. I know who Dex is.” Otis reached out his hand for Dex to shake and introduced himself.

Which he finally let go of mine to do.

“Good to meet you,” Dex offered.

Otis stared at him the same way Dex sometimes—most of the time—stared at me. In awe. Like he couldn’t tear his gaze away.

Weird. And still weird as he kept right on staring.

“Wow, yeah. Um, what can I get for you two?” he finally asked.

“You like mushrooms and sausage, sugar?” Dex asked, looking down at me with *that look*.

I nodded.

“Great. A large with mushrooms and sausage and a Greek salad,” Dex requested.

My cell rang as Otis entered the order into the point of service system. I pulled it from my purse. I held up the screen so Dex could see it was Bridget. One call I couldn't ignore.

“Make that two larges and box it to go,” I heard Dex tell Otis as I answered the call.



LINDY

MAV AND BRIDGET were sitting on the stoop of Dex's house when we walked up with our carry out order. I only ended our call at the pizza place less than ten minutes earlier—or whatever it was to walk back to Dex's house—so they must have been close by. My guess, checking out our house which was less than a mile away.

Bridget popped to her feet and came over, giving me a fierce hug. Scout, Mav's dog that he adopted from the local shelter after the pet parade on the Fourth of July, joined her. His little nose bumped my bare calf and his tail wagged so hard the back half of his short body wiggled.

She had on a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a green tank top. Her hair was up in a sloppy bun. If I looked like that, it meant I was cleaning behind the furnace in the basement. For Bridget, it was her usual look. One Mav didn't seem to mind.

Over her shoulder I watched Mav rise to his full lumberjack-sized height. Dex was a big guy, but Mav was bigger. He eyed me with a look that was all, *are you okay?*

without saying a word. I offered him a small smile as I had the air squeezed from my lungs.

His gaze shifted to Bridget, and it was clear he was worried about her. It wasn't every day a house was damaged like ours had been. Fire, maybe. Too much snow and the roof collapsed under the weight, definitely. But a fallen tree in Montana? A very rare occurrence.

“When I heard what happened, I freaked,” Bridget said, letting me go but not stepping back. “What if you'd been inside?”

“I wasn't,” I reassured, reaching down and giving Scout a pet. His tongue hung out of his mouth, and he smiled up at me. Or it looked like he did. “I was at the store getting groceries and Mr. VanMeyer those brownies he likes.”

She sighed. “You were lucky then.”

I didn't want to tell her I was working at the kitchen table, right where the tree came through, before I left.

“We drove by the house and I can't believe it. Well, I can with the things Mr. VanMeyer does. What was he thinking?” She ran a hand over her hair and blew out a breath. “I mean there's only one outcome with the physics behind where he cut the tree. Falling right on our house.”

I was sure she studied what he'd done as well as the damage.

“Take pictures,” I said. “Share them with your science class this fall. That'll grab their attention more than anything else will.”

She rolled her eyes, then pushed her glasses up. I'd been telling her since eleventh grade to get contacts, but she always refused. “Physics isn't that boring.”

Yes, it so was.

“Besides, I only turned in my application,” she continued. “Who knows if I’ll get the job.”

Mallory had been pushing Bridget to apply for a long-term substitute position at the high school teaching physics. She consistently downplayed her interest in it, but I secretly believed she was excited about the opportunity. She’d be really good at it and the kids would respond to her well, especially if she shared pics of our personal Physics-in-Action lesson.

The school district would have to tell her soon since school started in about six weeks. In the meantime, she was working with Mav on the James Inn project where they met.

“You’re redirecting, Lind. Why didn’t you call and tell me what happened?”

I *was* totally redirecting but unfortunately, she was too smart for her own good. Or not ten any longer.

I let out a sigh, because really, I needed to. That’s what Aspen, my yoga teacher, would have me do. Breathe.

“I was dealing with the fire department and the insurance company and there was no reason for you to have to deal with any of that.”

She gave me a look. The same one I saw every time I told her something she didn’t like. Which, when she was thirteen, was everything out of my mouth. “So you were just going to hide the fact that our house got taken out by a tree to protect me?”

“Bridge—”

“Um, yeah, you should have called. It’s my house, too. I can deal with the insurance company for you.” She pushed her glasses up her nose. “My boss will give me all the time I need to help out.”

Her boss was Mav and he’d give her anything.

“Yes, you can, but you don’t need to. I’m sorry I didn’t call you right away.” I frowned and thought for a moment. “Wait, how did you find out anyway?”

“Dex texted Mav.”

Now I really frowned. And turned to look at Dex. Who was looking at me. I narrowed my eyes at the guy who was... what? Butting in? Being helpful?

“Don’t give him that look,” she said, tugging on my arm so I’d spin back around. “He told Mav you were fine, the house was damaged but it’s fixable. That you’d call me when you could.”

I was surprised. That was exactly the right thing to say.

“But I couldn’t wait,” she added. Thus, the call at the pizza place.

“Well, good then. I’m um... glad he texted Mav. It’s been crazy. Obviously. Dex and I got some of my things since my room is missing a wall and a ceiling and there’s a branch in my bed. Then we came here and then food and—”

She spun about, noticed the guys were talking by the front door, then took my wrist and tugged me across the small front yard to the sidewalk.

“What’s up with you with Dex?” she whispered when we were another twenty feet away from Dex and Mav.

“Nothing,” I whispered back. “I ran into him at the grocery store, and he was behind me in the checkout line when Mr. VanMeyer called about the house. He drove me home and, well... helped.”

She glanced at the guys again. Scout abandoned us, ran over and plopped to his butt beside Mav.

“Helped? Helped you out of your panties you mean?”

My flush was instant. And hot. It was my turn to tug her further away from the guys. “Bridget Beckett.”

“What? I’m not ten. It’s okay to talk about sex.”

“Yes, we can talk about sex. But what do you mean me and Dex? It’s not like that.”

I didn’t mention the kiss. No way. And I wasn’t going to mention I was attracted to Dex. That I thought about him in the Biblical sense. If the Bible was filled with naughty, filthy things.

“Really?” She cocked her head to the side to sneak a peek over my shoulder. “Then why is he staring at you the way Mav stares at me when he wants to get his hands on me?”

I swiveled around, feeling like I was being watched. There was Dex, eyeing me like he really did want to get his hands on me. Again. He winked.

“See?” she hisses. “He wants you.”

“Because he winked?”

“Because he hasn’t stopped looking at you since I pulled you away. Since he’s practically licking his lips like he’s a tiger and you’re a piece of meat.”

I couldn't help but laugh because she was insane. I didn't know how to respond because I wasn't used to a guy thinking I was that edible. Then my brain returned to the kiss.

Yeah, he wanted me. I'd felt every hard inch of him as he pressed me into the glass.

"It doesn't matter. Nothing's going to happen." *Except for kissing on Main Street.*

"Why not?" she asked, looking as confused as I'd be if she showed me one of those big math problems she worked on at MIT. "He's great."

"I'm almost ten years older than he is."

"You say that as if you're menopausal and going off on field trips with the senior center."

I was thirteen years older than Bridget. Sometimes with her, I felt that old.

"Fine," I countered. "I'll spin it around the other way. He's almost ten years younger than me."

"Whatever." She waved her hand through the air. "You've been looking for Mr. Right. Maybe he's right here, right now. Mr. Right Now."

I highly doubted that. All I knew from being with Dex was that my libido was in working order. If my panties didn't get wet looking at—let alone kissing—Dex James, then I'd need to go to the doctor.

"I don't want Mr. Right Now," I countered. "I can't waste my time on that. I want a solid relationship. A husband. Kids. You know all of this. Dex barely checks off any of the boxes on my man list."

"The one you have taped to the bottom of the toaster?"

“Yes, that one.” I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling attacked. “I made that list with Mom. Things I wanted in a man. Values.”

“I know all about this, Lind. Sheesh, you made me make one when I was fourteen.”

“And did it work with Mav?” I countered, cocking an eyebrow.

“Definitely. But I never taped mine to a kitchen appliance.”

“Mom wanted to put it on the fridge so I’d always see it. I thought I’d die of embarrassment so I stuck it to the bottom of the toaster instead.”

“That’s kind of cute,” she replied with a sappy smile.

“Don’t mock me. Or the list. Or the toaster. I have standards.”

This time, she set her hand on my arm and gave me a soft smile. “I’m not mocking you. I’m proud of you for holding out for Mr. Right. Okay? But I’ve seen that list. Dex seems to have everything on it. And he’s sexy. Don’t tell Mav I think his brother’s hot.”

Her words placated me, a little. Not the part about how she thought Dex was sexy. She got Mav. She couldn’t have Dex too.

“I have a date tomorrow night with hopefully Mr. Right.”

She frowned. “But... there’s Dex pretty much eye fucking you across the yard. Maybe it’s okay to have a little fun with Mr. Right Now.” Her eyebrows went up and down behind her glasses and she offered a sly smile. She wanted me to sleep with Dex, regardless of the fact that he would be a fling. Same

went with Lucy on our writing sprint video call earlier. She wanted me to use him as my muse.

I had to admit, my scenes were hotter and getting down onto the page faster than ever since I met him. Still... I wasn't one to fuck and forget and I had a feeling sleeping with Dex was something I definitely would never forget.

"Let's go have some pizza," I said, cutting her off. Discussion about my dating life and anything that she saw happening between me and Dex was over.

"Sure. Okay. Fine. There are four guest rooms at Mav's place. You can pick any one you want."

"I'm staying here."

She stared at me, wide eyed. "Here? With Dex?"

I nodded and a slow grin spread across her face.

"Ha! You do want him."

I put my hand over her mouth and stepped in close. "Shh! I really, really don't want to be in the same house with you and Mav. You want to talk about sex, fine. I just don't need to hear it."

That gave Bridget pause and I dropped my hand. She nodded. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"Dex offered and his guest bedroom is better than a hotel."

She studied me some more, then shook her head, in a sad, sorry manner. "If all you've got to say about staying with the sexy Dex James is that he's only *better than a hotel*, then there's no hope for you." She tugged my hand again, this time back toward the guys. "Come on, old lady, let's get some pizza before your eight o'clock bedtime."



DEX

“BRIDGET WILL STAY WITH ME, but Lindy won’t be back in that house for a while,” Mav said as I watched Lindy.

She seemed to be fine, but her house had been seriously damaged. That was stressful and heartbreaking since she said she grew up in the place. It was literally the only home she ever knew. There had been no tears, only a spine of steel as she tackled the fire department, the utilities guy, and an insurance call like a general leading her troops. Her list, which she always seemed to have from the sound of it, just got a hell of a lot longer.

That was why she needed a distraction. And not just from this, but from life. Everyone needed to shut their shit down every once in a while. Some went running. Or to yoga. Or skydiving. A cruise. Sex. I wasn’t sure what Lindy did, but I didn’t think she was getting many orgasms.

I didn’t even want to think about who’d be giving them to her. No fucking way was another guy pleasuring her. And if she took things into her own hands, well, that was fine, but it didn’t seem to be enough.

From what I could tell—and I'd been observing really fucking closely—Lindy Beckett was a straight-laced perfectionist.

Who needed to be kissed and touched. Licked and fucked.

Nothing would help with a tree falling through her house more than my dick in her pussy. Because that kiss? Foreplay.

She'd been surprised at first, then she'd let go. The second she melted against that window, fuck, it had been incredible. The fight, every thought in her head, just vanished. If a kiss did that, then getting her beneath me would make her forget her own name. Every woman deserved that kind of pleasure.

Mav and I watched as Bridget tugged Lindy across the yard and were now in a deep conversation in hushed voices. I assumed it was about the house, but who knew with women.

“She's staying here,” I finally told Mav.

I held the pizza boxes and shifted it so the side of them rested against my hip. The to-go container of salad sat on top.

“Here? With you?” He sounded surprised.

“With me.”

He was quiet as Lindy whipped her head around and gave me a death glare. I winked in return. They definitely weren't talking about the house if I got that look. And I definitely needed to get my hands, and mouth and other things, on her so her entire attitude changed.

She would soon be begging me to do things to her. I'd get her to burn for me, turning that list to ash. I had a list of my own with everything I planned on doing to, and with, her. It was really fucking long. Longer than the one I had in my phone.

She spun back around and returned to their conversation, then slapped her hand over her sister's mouth.

"It's like that?" he asked.

"She's mine." That kiss proved it. Clinched it. No trade backs.

"Lindy Beckett?"

I finally looked away from my woman and at Mav. "Say her name that way again and I'll rip your head off. I may not be as big as you, but I'm younger and can fight dirty, even on ice."

His eyebrows went up at my I'm-not-fucking-around tone.

He held up his hands as if to keep me from jumping him. "I'm just surprised. She's a lot older than you."

"That's what you're going with?" I asked, surprised.

"Good point." He was almost fifteen years older than Bridget. An age gap should be the last thing he considered an issue.

"You're right. She's just... high maintenance and high strung. Didn't picture you with her, that's all."

I couldn't argue with either of those observations. Standing side-by-side, one sister looked like she was ready for a summer picnic at the lake, the other looked like she was ready for the interview portion of the Miss America pageant. One dark, the other fair. One petite, the other tall.

"Yeah, well, you haven't seen a picture of me with anyone."

"Except in that bar fight," he reminded, much to my annoyance.

I clenched my jaw. Nothing came from the incident. No issues with the team or the league because they knew the truth, that the guy had been drunk, handsy and an asshole. Team players who'd witnessed it backed me. Even the woman I'd protected had spoken out in my favor. Except the media didn't care about that, only click bait.

"The media will find something else to report about soon enough. I'm just a hockey player."

He tilted his head and gave me his serious look. "You're *just* a hockey player? Right. That's what Lindy thinks?"

I flicked my gaze to Lindy, then back to him. "She doesn't know I play hockey."

He laughed once, probably surprising himself. "What do you mean she doesn't know? How is that possible?"

I shrugged. "She doesn't watch sports? Not everyone recognizes me." I thought of Otis at the pizza place, who did, not even an hour ago.

"Aren't you going to tell her? I mean, that's not just your job, it's your life."

"Sure. Eventually. I like being just Dex with her."

"Well, Just Dex, if she looks you up or someone tells her about you—which you know is going to happen—she'll find everything about the bar fight from the tabloid's perspective."

That was completely true, which was why I wanted as much time as possible with her before she found out who I really was before having to slog through media lies. Maybe then she'd doubt what she found.

"The guy deserved it. The media can suck my dick," I said.

“Sounds like you’ve already got someone else you want doing that.”

“Careful,” I warned again. I got myself off thinking about Lindy’s mouth around me. But that didn’t mean I wanted Mav to talk about her that way. “That shit show aside, you don’t see me online with women.”

“Haven’t in years.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he validated what I just said. “It’s rare to see you on social media with a woman, but in any I’ve seen it’s easy to tell you’re not into her.”

After a game, the team went out to dinner as a group. Sometimes, we continued on to a bar or two. It was impossible to avoid clingy puck bunnies and being photographed and ending up online. A photo didn’t tell the truth though, just like with the bar fight.

“I wasn’t aware you even knew how to use social media,” I countered.

“If I said Bridget shows me, that’ll make me sound really fucking old. So I’ll say Bradley does and gives me the highlights of anything important.”

Dex was CEO of James Corp and had too much to do to tackle apps. The fact that he was reorg-ing his schedule to stay here in Hunter Valley with Bridget said plenty about the seriousness of their relationship. Silas was picking up the slack at corporate.

“Well, he’s really good at his job because I’m not into any of those women,” I insisted. “You think I want to be like Dad? Fuck ‘em and leave ‘em?”

His face went hard, and he took a small step closer, leaned in. “That’s what you think? That if you want to get your dick

wet that means you're like him?"

I shook my head, although I did. A little. A lot.

"He'd drop me off at the rink, find a willing mom and fuck her while I had practice. Caught him once coming out of a supply closet zipping up his pants followed by one of the snack bar attendants, then learned the signs. The messed-up hair, a smudge of lipstick on his neck, the way Mrs. Troncher gave us a finger wave after the state PeeWee championships in sixth grade."

His jaw clenched so tightly the muscle ticked. He ran a hand over his hair. "Fuck, I didn't know that."

I'd been twelve when he fucked a teammate's mother. Mav had been twenty-two and already out of college. He hadn't lived at home in four years at that point. I had a lot of stories he didn't know about.

"So you associate hockey with him being a manwhore asshole and since you play, you're one too?"

I shook my head. "No, Jesus, you sound like a therapist. He's everything I don't want to be. He's my role model for how not to live. I steer clear of flings not because I'm afraid I'll be a manwhore, but because I don't want *meaningless*."

Nothing had held value to the man. Not his marriage vows. Not his kids. Not even his company. He used the money he made to fund his never ending, shallow fun.

"I do think I associate him with assholes and will defend women who have to deal with them." Like the woman at that Denver bar.

"You're nothing like him. Nothing." His voice was low, but deadly. "Neither am I, even though Bridget's so fucking

young and Dad liked them that way. It's not the same." He pointed to himself, then me. "We're not the same."

I only nodded because the last thing either of us wanted to talk about anymore was that asshole.

"Lindy will be lucky to have you, brother. She's smart. She'll see the real you no matter what she reads."

Scout barked in what I assumed was agreement. I glanced down at him.

I offered him a smile at his encouragement, although I had no idea how he knew what we were talking about.

Bridget and Lindy started to come our way.

Mav leaned in. "Wait. How can she stay here if you only have furniture in one bedroom?"

When I decided to relocate from Mav and Bridget's supersized fuck pad, Bradley had it furnished enough only for me to live in. Meaning the second bedroom was completely empty because it hadn't been necessary. It still wasn't.

I gave him a look that told him everything without saying a word. When it came to making Lindy mine, I'd take whatever advantage I could. I planned to get her in my bed sooner than later. I wouldn't say the tree falling on her house was a good thing, but it definitely moved things along.

He slapped me on the shoulder and grinned. "She doesn't know about this either?"

"Not yet." She also didn't know I bought a ring in Denver.

Mav only shook his head and went inside, Scout hot on his heels. The ladies caught up to us. I took the rear, carrying the pizza and salad.

Lindy was staying with me. She just didn't know she'd be sharing my bed.



DEX

BY THE TIME Mav and Bridge left, it was after eight. Lindy had stood in the middle of the small living area, lost as to what to do. I knew her list and most of it couldn't be accomplished before tomorrow. But I knew she had to work. She mentioned it more than once. So I'd snagged her laptop from her and set her up at the dining table, plugging the power cord into the wall by the medium sized house plant Bradley had included when he'd had the place furnished.

A houseplant.

Whatever.

Lindy had settled into her work, typing with a speed of a sixties' steno pool. I grabbed the book I'd been reading earlier and flopped down on the sectional. With my feet propped up on the coffee table, I read the same chapter about forty times as I watched her work.

I didn't know her job requirements or anything about the environment of an accounting firm, but she worked too many extra hours. Was it tax season? Were reports or special filings

due? I had no clue since I had... yup, an accountant to take care of it for me.

Still, it was Saturday night—like last weekend in Denver—and she had been at it for almost two hours.

At this point, I wanted to take the laptop and run over it with my car, but I didn't think that would go over well. But working after ten on a weekend was where I drew the line.

I stuck the bookmark between the unread pages and stood. She looked up, blinked, then slammed the lid shut when I approached.

For some reason, she looked panicked. Almost guilty looking, as if I would find porn on her screen.

I didn't have an issue with her watching porn. I wanted to know what kind, watch it with her and then reenact every one of those fantasies. Except if it involved a threesome. I wasn't sharing her with another man, or woman.

“All done?” I asked.

“Almost.”

“Do you always work this much?” I wondered, carrying the empty glass she'd had beside her to the sink.

She licked her lips with a flick of her pink tongue, and I felt that in my dick. “Usually.”

“Is there a shortage of people at your office or something?”

“Or something.” She gave me a small shrug to go with it. I didn't know why she was being evasive about bookkeeping and taxes, but now wasn't the time to push.

“Time for bed, sugar. Enough for one night.”

She nodded.

“I’ll take the bathroom first while you finish up.” I pointed at her laptop. “Be done when I get out.”

She gave me a look that screamed I should try and separate her from her laptop and see what happened. But there was no way in hell I was letting her keep on working like this. She deserved a break. Some fun.

I wanted to have a little talk with her boss. I doubted the person was working right now.

I stripped in the bathroom, noticing all the lotions and bottles of... stuff on the vanity and smiled. I liked seeing her things mixed with mine. Our toothbrushes were side by side in the little holder. I picked up a little bottle. A serum, the label read. Truth serum? I took a quick shower, brushed my teeth and settled into bed with the book I was only pretending to read.

To wait for Lindy. Because the only place she was sleeping tonight was beside me.



LINDY

SINCE MY BLUE bag was still in the bathroom, I changed into my nightie in there. The space was humid from Dex's earlier shower. I'd heard the water turn on and imagined him naked and soaping himself up. Imagined the spray washing away all those bubbles that ran over all of his hard muscles. I didn't get any more words down from then on, only fantasizing while waiting for him to finish up and go into his bedroom.

Then I took my turn. Brushed my teeth. Flossed. Washed my face. Moisturized. Plucked stray eyebrow hairs. Put on lip balm. Smoothed on lotion to my heels and legs.

I was finally ready to climb into bed and forget all about the house problems. Until tomorrow when they would be waiting for me. I started thinking of what I had to do as I left the bathroom.

Get the food out of the fridge and bring it here first thing. Then hopefully connect with a tree service. Answer all the messages I hadn't gotten back to from friends and neighbors who heard what happened. It wasn't as if it was big news, but it wasn't too often a tree fell on a house. Word spread in

Hunter Valley. I had a feeling everyone in town would drive by to check it out like it was December and it was the annual holiday lights tour.

I padded down the short hallway and opened the guest bedroom door, flipped the switch and stared. The room was empty. Not one piece of furniture. Only bare white walls and pine floors. Not even curtains on the windows.

Turning around, I crossed the hall to the other bedroom.

“There’s no furniture,” I said, stepping into the room, then my mind blanked out.

Because there Dex was, lying on the bed, propped up with a few pillows behind his back. Reading. In only a pair of very snug, black boxer briefs.

Holy shit.

Those thighs, bulging with muscle.

Then there was his abs. A six pack. No.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

Eight. He had an *eight* pack.

And arm porn. The sinewy and corded muscles and bulging veins that made my ovaries pop out eggs spontaneously.

He was literally the epitome of a romance book hero. Tall, dark, handsome, muscled, those big hands and even bigger... squash.

“Oh fuck,” he murmured, which had me giving his body a break from ogling and I worked my way up to his face.

His eyes were heated. Dark. Intense. And they weren't meeting mine. No, they raked over my body in my...

Oh fuck was right because when I looked down at myself, I remembered what I was wearing. My tiny pale blue nightie that didn't hide how hard my nipples were. Or most of my body.

I always wore nighties to bed. Short ones because the long ones tangled around my legs and woke me up.

I crossed my arms over my chest, which only made him growl. Yeah, he *growled*. For some reason, he looked angry. No, he looked... intensely aroused. And maybe hating himself for it.

“There's only one bed,” I commented, stating the obvious.

With his gaze on my bare thighs, he patted the space beside him. “We're sharing.”

“What?”

“One bed.”

“Why isn't the other room furnished?” Out of all the questions to ask, like *Why didn't you tell me this before so I could have stayed in a hotel?* or *Where are your pajamas?* or *Can I feel all of those muscles?*, that was what came out.

“Because Bradley found this place. It was unfurnished and since it was just me, he only had the bare essentials delivered.”

It must have been pretty nice having an assistant do all kinds of things for you. I could only imagine having one. He'd take my list and have everything accomplished before lunch. Or maybe before I had my coffee in the morning if he was as good as Bradley seemed. Like the snap of my fingers... Done!

I needed one of those. I'd add it to my list.

"There's a plant in the living room," I prompted, because the man's priorities were skewed. Bradley's, although maybe Dex's, too. "That's more essential than a guest bed?" I didn't know the assistant, but he needed a talking to.

"Seems that way."

"I'll just take the couch." I thumbed over my shoulder. It was a leather sectional. It was big enough, but it would be slippery and chilly.

"Not happening."

"I'll go to a hotel."

"Definitely not happening."

"I'm not sharing that bed!" I pointed at it as if I were a prudish maiden. Or nun. Or prudish maiden nun.

"Come to bed, sugar. To sleep," he added. It was an important clarification. For my brain. And my vagina. Because my vagina liked the *come to bed, sugar* part and my brain snagged on *to sleep* like a fish on a hook.

"You sure about that?" I pointed at him again. This time at the front of his boxer briefs and the thick—very thick—outline of his dick pressed against the fabric. I couldn't believe that was real. If it didn't just pulse and—did it just grow larger?—beneath the cotton, I'd have wondered.

He must have inwardly laughed when I mocked the size of it in the produce section earlier because boxer briefs left no one wondering. About anything dick related.

“You’re wearing a little scrap of nightgown and it’s more of a tease than if you were naked. I’d have to turn in my man card if I didn’t get hard seeing you like that.”

“What?” I wasn’t pretending to be that prudish nun, but a guy hadn’t seen me undressed in a long time. And a guy like Dex found me hot?

“Fuck, woman, you’re gorgeous. Now come to bed. No funny business.”

I gave him a look. I *wanted* funny business. All kinds of it. I owed it to myself, and women the world over, to have every kind of funny business that existed with Dex James. Who was aroused because of me.

Maybe it was the hit of power I felt at learning that, but I went around to the far side of the queen-sized bed. I tugged the quilt and sheet back, then grabbed a pillow and shoved it in the center against Dex’s hip.

Then I climbed in, pulled the blankets over me.

“What the hell is this?” he asked, propping himself up on an elbow and looking at me over the hump beneath the quilt.

“A berm.”

“A berm?” He stared at the pillow as if it was offending him.

“We might be sharing a bed, but that’s all we’re sharing.” Because I was looking for Mr. Right.

Mr. Right, where the hell were you? I only had so much willpower to find you when I had to share a queen sized bed

with Dex.

“What about that kiss earlier?” he asked. “I’d like to do it again. And again.”

Yeah, that kiss. The berm was in place because of that smoldering kiss. Maybe a second pillow was needed for fortification. The kiss had melted my panties and I knew what would happen if there was another. If I was wearing panties. Shit. I was in bed with Dex without panties!

“I won’t say it was a mistake, but it shouldn’t have happened,” I told him, climbing beneath the covers. And myself. Because I was barely controlling myself where an almost naked Dex was concerned. I had good reasons to avoid him, although staying here was making that really difficult.

“Because...” he prompted.

“You’re too young—”

He rolled his eyes. “Not that again.”

“—and you’re on vacation.” I turned onto my side to face him. “You live in Denver. I won’t be a vacation fuck.”

His jaw clenched. “You’re not a vacation fuck.”

“Or a pity fuck because my house got destroyed.”

“Pity fuck? Are you serious right now?”

“Fine. A fling. I don’t want to be a fling. You don’t even have guest bedroom furniture. If that doesn’t say temporary, I don’t know what does.”

He studied me for a moment, then waited until I met his dark eyes. “I told you in the car, I don’t want temporary with you.”

I blinked, not understanding. “What?” I whispered, thinking earlier he was all talk. Or something. Or I’d been in shock from the whole tree thing. But now? I was hearing, and seeing, him clearly.

“I don’t want temporary. I want to see where this goes.”

“This? Where it goes? It goes nowhere. Or back to Denver. I’m thirty-five years old, Dex. I want to get married. Have kids. The picket fence. A house without holes in it.”

“Good, because I want that too. With you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh because he was clearly insane.

“We barely know each other.”

He shrugged his shoulder. “So? Mav and Bridget barely know each other and they’re in it for the long haul.”

“You don’t live here,” I said, enunciating each and every word clearly and concisely so he understood. “It’s pretty hard to make babies if you live in a different state.”

“It’s also hard with this berm,” he grumbled, eyeing the offending hump.

“I’m dating local guys. My age,” I added.

“How’s that working for you?”

I narrowed my eyes because that felt like a cheap shot, then rolled over to face away from him, tugged the blankets up to my chin and said, “Goodnight, Dex.”

Barely breathing, I held myself still because I wasn’t talking to him anymore. Yeah, local dating was shit. He knew how bad it was because I was lying in bed with him with a berm between us. Not getting all hot and sweaty with a boyfriend or lover or husband.

No, I got hot and heavy kissing him on the street.

Inwardly, I screamed. AAAHHH!

My life plans went to hell when my parents died. I'd been a mess and so had Bridget and we'd made do as best we could. Days turned into months and months turned into years. Bridget grew up, went off to college. Was now living her life. I was living my life, too, but not the one I'd dreamed of. I was exactly where I was when I was twenty-three.

Nothing ever went as planned. Even when I had a master plan.



DEX

I HADN'T THOUGHT my idea through very well. I pictured Lindy in bed with me, but I didn't picture a pillow between us.

A fucking berm.

That was a surmountable problem.

But I hadn't imagined Lindy coming to bed in a tiny baby blue nightgown that barely covered her. It wasn't lingerie because it had no lace or silk or cutouts or anything sexy. No. It had little spaghetti straps that showed off her slim shoulders. A rounded neckline, cut low enough that it showed off the top swells of her pert, perfect tits. And the rest of them because the cotton was thin enough I couldn't miss her nipples. Even those little dots that circled the hard tips were highlighted. And the length of the fucking thing? Mid-thigh. And it had—for no fucking reason—a little slit on the right leg.

Was she wearing panties beneath it because I sure as hell couldn't see any panty lines.

No. I saw the fullness of her tits, the tapered waist, the flare of her hips. Her ass. Her legs. Every fucking inch of her

was either exposed or outlined.

Except for her pussy which I was sure was as perfect as the rest of her.

When she pointed out that I was hard, yeah, well, no shit.

I had to be dead not to be hard seeing her in those little pajamas or whatever the hell they were called. All I knew was now I was in bed with Lindy who was sexier than ever.

I was rock-hard, sweating and probably going to succumb from blue balls by midnight.

I wanted to yank that pillow away, tug her to me and settle the panty question once and for all.

Instead, I had to lie here and listen to her even breathing while I couldn't do a thing about my raging hard on.



LINDY

THIS BED WAS SO COZY, I rubbed my face against my pillow. My oddly warm, slightly hairy and very firm pillow.

My eyes popped open the second I remembered where I was. In bed, with Dex.

Not with him.

On him.

I was sprawled across his bare chest like a human blanket, one of my legs nestled between his. My head was tucked into the crook of his shoulder. One of Dex's hands was on my thigh, the other was—

“Don't move, sugar. You were doing just fine.”

“Your hand is on my butt.”

That hand gave my bare ass a gentle squeeze.

Oh. My. God.

“Sure is.”

“Why is it on my butt?”

“Woke up with it there. Why aren’t you wearing panties?”

“I’m of the ‘gotta let things air out’ camp.”

He growled. “Fuck. I didn’t know there were options.”

“Panties or no panties to bed. I’m for no panties,” I explained.

“Me, too. Fuck, *me too*.”

I wasn’t going to keep on this topic, especially since he wasn’t moving. His hand, his body, or me. “Why am I on top of you?”

“No idea.” His voice was rough from sleep. “You snuggled up to me in the middle of the night, then settled right on me.”

Well, fuck. I always moved around in my sleep, but never climbed on top of someone.

“Not that I’m complaining,” he added.

“How did I get over the berm?” I practically snapped.

“Don’t know. It’s not on the floor over here, so I think you moved it in the middle of the night.”

“I wouldn’t have taken that pillow away because it was there for just this reason.”

“Maybe you want me in your sleep more than when you’re awake,” he said as if that made complete sense. “You are on my side of the bed.”

The jerk just *had* to point that out.

“Why do you sound so happy about a woman drawn to you when she’s unconscious?”

“Because it means if you stop thinking so damned hard, maybe we’ll both get what we want.”

“Let me up,” I said, with a morning breath growl.

“Just a little longer.”

“If your dick gets a little longer then we’re going to have a different kind of problem,” I said, hoping he’d pick up that my voice was full of sass and sarcasm.

“Don’t worry. We’re not having sex. Not now, at least.”

I stiffened and made a move to get off him, but he gave my butt a little swat.

I gasped.

Then stilled. He spanked me! Sure, it wasn’t a serious spank or anything, but no one, ever, had done that. I couldn’t help but squirm just a little because it tingled. There and *other places*.

He groaned.

“You want me.”

“Right,” I huffed.

“Sugar, if you didn’t, you’d have jumped off of me within a few seconds of waking up. I’d have let you up. Then or now. I’m not holding you here.”

“You spanked me.”

“I gave you a swat. And you liked it.”

Shit.

“I want you wet and willing, sugar.”

I was getting wetter by the second and my willpower was struggling. I felt how big he was. How muscly. How warm. How hard. He made other men seem scrawny. Weak. Small.

That was because Dex James was huge and had pheromones pumping off him in waves.

“You know what I’ve thought about since I woke up and discovered you don’t wear panties to bed?”

I stayed quiet because I had a feeling he was going to tell me. And I—and my hormones—were going to like it.

“How soft and plush your pussy would feel against my fingertips.”

Oh. My. God. He was a talking romance hero. The words and tone and feel and scent and everything about him went right to my vagina. If we stayed like this too much longer, my arousal would be coating his thigh.

“This...” I had to clear my throat because it was bone dry all of a sudden. All moisture in my body relocated to my pussy. “...is going to be a problem.”

I wasn’t relaxed any longer, but tense and... well, never so aroused in my life. Because Dex and his big dick energy felt *good*. Soft skin over hard muscles. He was big and even sprawled across him, I felt small. And while his hand was on my butt, I felt protected. Like the world outside of this bed could wait.

Which was a big problem. Because he wasn’t permanent. This wasn’t going anywhere.

“You call it a problem. I call it something else.” He followed that with another roll of his hips.

While he was pretty amazing—the weakest adjective to describe Dex, ever—in the fling category, I didn’t want one. God, all I had to do was sit up, tug down those boxer briefs and take him for a ride.

No.

No! It would be a quickie, although maybe *quickie* wasn't the right word with Dex. I had a feeling he had a lot of endurance. When he was done with me, I'd probably be sore in lots of delicious ways and walk funny for a few days, and I'd want more. I wasn't an idiot. One time wasn't going to be enough of Dex James.

I was more aroused from his dirty talk and his hand on my ass than I had with any man before him.

If I did it again, and again, I'd get attached. Then he'd leave. I'd be exactly where I was now—not literally—and with a broken heart. And ruined for all other men, including Mr. Right.

“I have to get up,” I said.

“No, you don't.”

“Dex.”

“Lindy.”

“I have a li—”

“List. I know,” he murmured. “I'll help.”

I lifted my head, met his dark eyes.

“You will?”

His hair was sleep tousled and just waking up he looked younger. Softer, although that sounded ridiculous when describing him.

“It's in my phone. Your list. We'll work our way through it.”

I frowned down at him. “Don't you want to... I don't know, go mountain biking or something?”

“I’m not leaving you with a treehouse to go off and play.”

“Dex.”

“Sugar.” He gave my butt another little swat, this one more of a reminder than sexy times fun. Either way, I liked it and the way his eyes were studying me so closely, he knew.

“You’re killing me here, sugar.”

“What am I doing?”

“Besides now knowing you like your ass spanked? Your nipples are hard little points against my chest.”

I pushed up and that only gave him a view of my breasts down the front of my skimpy nightie.

He growled, gaze snagged on my chest.

“Dex,” I said, shifting off him.

“*Sugar.*” He sounded so sad, like a little boy who’d had his favorite toy taken from him.

I was his toy and I wanted him to play. So bad, but it wasn’t enough. He wasn’t Mr. Right.

His hands dropped from me, and I pushed up, climbed from the bed. I wasn’t sure if I was making a smart decision or the dumbest one ever.



DEX

“I NEED YOU BACK HERE,” my agent, Scott Smith, said.

He was as straightlaced as his name. I didn’t tease him, much, about it because I paid him to represent me. He was the one who crafted the contract with my team, ensuring I stayed in Colorado near my family. It was his talent that got me sponsorship deals. Of course, the more money he made off me, the more he made. He wasn’t complaining.

Although I was right now.

“Not happening this week.”

I was up and ready in ten minutes—to-go coffee mug in hand—to drive Lindy back to her house to meet with the insurance adjuster, but she moved into my bathroom and took forty-five minutes to come out.

I, though, only ran a hand through my tousled hair, threw on clean clothes and brushed my teeth. Lindy had showered—I’d heard it come on which had me fantasizing about her in there naked—then done other female magic so she looked

perfect in a pair of tan shorts and a Hunter Valley Ski Resort t-shirt.

We were on her front lawn, and she was talking with the adjustor who kept staring at her tits. I was giving her room to handle the guy, but I was seconds away from poking his eyes out from a stick I ripped off the tree he was to get removed from her house.

“It’s OutdoorNow.”

I closed my eyes, pumped my fist. “Fuck, yes.”

I’d had my eyes on working with them for two years. They were in every mall selling outdoor gear from puffy coats to ice picks. The only ice I tackled was beneath my skates. They were also hard-core philanthropists. A large chunk of their profits went back into communities, getting kids outside, which matched my charity’s focus. Hockey saved me and if I could turn around and help some other kid to be saved in a similar way, I was all for it. Working with OutdoorNow would make that even more possible.

“But they want to meet with you on Tuesday.”

I watched as the adjustor took a step closer to Lindy. She retreated and then pointed to the house. The guy’s eyes didn’t follow.

I was a second away from killing him. If the insurance guy was an asshole, then what would the contractors be like? I wasn’t going to stand for anyone giving her shit. It was her fucking house that got destroyed. This wasn’t a singles bar.

She needed me here.

“Hang on,” I told Scott, then stalked across the front yard to the adjuster, gripping my cell hard enough that I wouldn’t be surprised if it cracked.

“Look, asshole, it’s pretty hard to assess the damage to the house when you’re ogling her tits.”

The guy clenched his jaw in anger and flushed a tomato red at being called out, then awareness lit his eyes. “You’re—”

Shit, he knew who I was.

“The man who’s going to punch your face in if you don’t treat this woman with some respect. She’s your client and her house is a fucking block of Swiss cheese.”

Now he turned even redder and took a step back.

Lindy crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. I wasn’t sure if it was because I stepped in or because the guy was a creep. Either way, it didn’t matter. He was going to do his job or end up unemployed.

“Right. Sorry,” he stuttered, then glanced at Lindy for the briefest of seconds. Then back at me, as if I was much more interesting than Lindy’s tits.

“Think you can handle that?” I pushed.

“Right. Yes. Um, definitely.” He looked down at the grass at his feet.

I glanced at Lindy who offered me—finally—a small smile.

“I’ve got a tree trimming service and a contractor coming later this week, so you’ll need to move your belongings either to the front side of the house away from the damage or get one of those pods to store everything—”

The man’s voice was all professional and his gaze was on the house, not on Lindy. I had a feeling he wasn’t going to look at her again.

“The insurance should cover movers tackling this effort,” I said. “Not two women who weigh two hundred pounds combined.” No way should Lindy or Bridget have to lift a finger.

Lindy turned to me with that one and whispered, “I don’t want some random movers to tackle my underwear drawer.”

Fair point. “They can tackle the big things then.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Your neighbor’s insurance needs to pay for all this. It’s his tree.”

Oh, I hated this guy. When I was about to let into him again, Lindy held up her hand.

“I agree with you completely, but from the moment the damage was made, you are responsible for immediate assistance. It’s your job to tackle being reimbursed by not only workmen but other insurance companies. Isn’t that correct?”

Lindy looked down her nose at the guy in the same way she did me in Denver. As if she were too good for everyone else. Now I saw it as a protective measure, a way to be seen *and* heard.

“Yes, ma’am.” The guy refused to meet her gaze.

“Then stop being passive aggressive about what you have to do. Just get it done.”

He gave me a glance to see if I was going to shut the *little woman* up.

Hell, the fuck, no.

I kissed her temple and stepped away.

She was good. Amazing. And I might just let her boss me around when we climbed in bed tonight.

I forgot about Scott. “Still there?” I asked, putting the phone to my ear.

“Yup. What the hell’s going on up there?” he asked. “I thought Montana was all big sky and cows.”

“Haven’t seen a cow, but you’re right about the sky.” I glanced up and appreciated how blue it was. How perfect the weather was, which was good since Lindy’s roof had a few holes in it. “So Tuesday. Not happening,” I told him, even though this sponsorship opportunity was what I was waiting for. I belonged here. With Lindy.

“This about the woman with the tits?” he asked.

I growled.

“Don’t fire me,” he said, verbally backpedaling. “All women have tits.”

“I’m marrying those tits,” I told him.

He was quiet for a moment. “Whoa. Wow. Okay. You’ve been there... what? About a week? Want to tell me her name?”

“Lindy.”

“Lindy. Congratulations.”

“Don’t send place settings of china just yet.”

He returned to business. “So I’ll tell OutdoorNow no to Tuesday. You have that exhibition game in Finland Sunday. I’ll route your flights through Chicago on Friday, and you can meet them then, but you might miss a warmup practice or two. Combine two trips into one.”

I hadn't forgotten about the exhibition game, but I'd put it to the back of my mind since I met Lindy. The best players in the league were handpicked to play a game there. The best of the best faced off. In Helsinki.

I'd known about it for six months and it was in my contract that I attended this one and any others I was chosen for, plus charity events anytime of the year.

"Sounds good. Thanks." I appreciated his adjustment for me, and I was fine with missing a practice if it meant staying here a little longer.

"I'll email you all the details."

He ended the call and I sighed. Finland. Next weekend.

I glanced over at Lindy. The adjuster was cutting across the lawn toward the neighbor's house, my guess to get his insurance company's name to ensure they were working to cover the claim, which should be the whole thing.

Lindy was standing at her open mailbox, flipping through some letters. It was Sunday, but she must not have collected it the day before. I took in every inch of her. I knew what her curves felt like. What her mouth tasted like. What that toned ass felt like. Bare.

I wanted her more than ever. Not just her body, but her. To stand beside her and help her deal with her problems, which today were many. And leering men. She'd handled herself fine, but why should she have to deal with sketchy dudes like that one when she was somewhat at his mercy.

He could be a dick and deny her claim or lowball her reimbursement or... anything.

Shit. I didn't want to leave her next week, and this was for one game. Five days away. What was it going to be like when

I had to return to Denver for training? For the entire season?

It was going to fucking suck.



LINDY

I WAS EMPTYING my fridge into reusable grocery bags when Bridget came through the front door. It was wide open since it was futile to try to keep any bugs out. The open exterior wall behind me would do that easily enough.

“Lind?”

“Back here!” I called after pulling my head out of the crisper drawer, a bunch of cilantro in my hand I didn’t remember buying. Dex was at his house stowing the frozen items safely in his freezer right now.

As she came to the doorway, a chainsaw revved to life.

My eyes widened in fear of what our neighbor might be up to.

Bridge held up her hand as Scout ran up to me, tongue hanging out and tail wagging. Since I was squatting, I was right at his short height and gave him a good pet as he sniffed the cilantro.

“It’s not Mr. VanMeyer. The tree service is here,” Bridget explained.

I frowned, thought of what time it was. It couldn't be much past nine. "The adjuster said later in the week. I guess Dex scared him into action." Scout licked my hand when I stopped giving him attention.

"Mav called them," she replied.

Now my eyes widened even more. "Mav?"

Scout nudged me with his nose, and I gave him a little more attention, then stood. I cut past her—cilantro in hand—and went out onto the front lawn, Scout on my heels. Parked at the curb were two big tree trimming trucks, one towing a chipper.

The guy with the dark green t-shirt, jeans and work boots cut off the chainsaw's motor. He had on a yellow safety hat with an eye protecting visor on the front that was tipped up in the air. He had on what looked like chaps over his jeans, but I assumed were some kind of safety gear so he didn't chop a leg off.

Beside him were three other guys, pulling out rope and whatever they needed to get to work on removing the tree.

Mav was coming up the walk holding a compostable tray with four coffees. Between the script on the cups and the pink t-shirt he wore with Steaming Hotties across his massive chest, I knew where they'd just been.

Scout ran over and settled beside him, knowing who his person was.

If Mav put on a flannel and grabbed the chainsaw from the tree guy, he could pose for a lumberjack calendar. Maybe he'd grow a beard this winter and *then* the look would be complete. The fact that he had a little mutt as a sidekick was endearing and amusing.

“We were over here early this morning,” he said, glancing about at the mess, then meeting my eyes with his dark ones. “Bridget was up for her run.”

I looked him over in his jeans and ridiculous pink t-shirt, one which he seemed confident in wearing. I didn't see him as a runner, although I'd been mistaken about the man more than once. But he knew her routine and wasn't fazed by her early hours. But, being a CEO of a huge corporation, I didn't expect him to sleep in.

“We decided to get this project moving along,” he continued, grabbing a coffee and handing it to me. “I guess Bridge went to school with this guy?” He angled his head toward the man with the chainsaw and I gave him a second look.

“Wow, yeah. I didn't recognize him with facial hair.” I hadn't seen many of her friends since they graduated. Four years ago. “His father isn't much older than me. Had him—Daniel—right out of high school.” If Daniel was twenty-two, then Case was around forty. “I do their business taxes.”

Mav ran his free hand over the back of his neck, and I could tell he was feeling old. Bridget was friends with a guy whose dad was about the same age as him.

“Bridget suggested the company and I gave them a call. They—along with probably everyone else in town—heard all about it,” Mav said. “Decided to put your project to the top of their list.”

I wasn't sure how that had been accomplished, if the Pearson Tree Service didn't have many customers, which seemed unlikely in July, or if they felt ridiculously sorry for us and considered our project an emergency. Like triaging patients in a major pileup. The Becketts were the worst of the

worst when it came to tree problems and got taken care of first.

I hadn't heard of any other tree destroying a house, so that was probably accurate.

"You're not mad, are you?" Bridget asked, setting one of the filled reusable grocery bags at her feet. She must have finished filling it. "Daniel's dad—" the man who ran Pearson's Tree Service "—said all we have to do is give him the insurance guy's info and he'll send him the bill directly."

God, that made it simple and one less conversation with the sleazy adjuster.

"Mad? That you did this?" I asked. "Of course not. One thing off my list. Thank you."

Dex pulled up and parked across the street. When he climbed out, I couldn't help but stare.

"I know how you like your lists and all, doing things a certain way."

Mav's words startled me from checking out the way Dex's leg muscles flexed as he walked. Or the way his hair glinted in the morning sun. Or—

Shit. I was looking at him like he was James Bond coming out of the sea in sexy little swim trunks. He was in nylon gym shorts instead, but those things should be illegal. They were the summertime version of winter's gray sweatpants, where while everything was covered, nothing was hidden because... bulging.

I licked my lips, worried I had drooled. Who knew a hint of a bulging dick would be mesmerizing.

"Earth to Lind." Dex winked.

“Sorry. What? Lists... right.” My face was flaming with embarrassment. “Perishable food first. We then need to move things out of the rooms with the tree in it so they can chop it all up without anything else breaking. The adjuster said we can either move it to the undamaged part of the house or we have to get a pod.”

“The tree guys will start with the part in Mr. VanMeyer’s backyard. We’ll do the rest of the food from the fridge, and you can start on your bedroom,” Bridget offered, pushing her glasses up her nose. “I think it took the worst of it, besides the kitchen. When Mav and I get back, we can start in there on emptying the cabinets.” She glanced from me to Dex. “Don’t you have that date tonight?”

I closed my eyes and took a breath. Let the soft morning air try to calm me along with a few deep yoga breaths. A date. Fuck. Yes, I wanted to meet Mr. Right, but God. On top of everything else I had to go meet a stranger and hope for the best. Then there was Dex, whose hand had been on my bare ass this morning and now knew the idea of me being bent over his knee was a turn on.

I flicked my gaze toward him. He said nothing, but I couldn’t miss the clenched jaw or the way his broad shoulders tensed.

“Yup. Alan, a dentist who lives by the ski resort.” I tried to sound upbeat because the guy had a job. One that wasn’t ever going to go run out of clients. He was solid. Sturdy.

Then there was Dex, who was only physically solid and sturdy. He was temporary. A roamer.

Neither man said anything. Mav traded Dex the coffees for the empty reusable shopping bags and headed for the kitchen,

Scout sticking close. Bridget twisted her lips into something like a fucked-up smile and followed.

“I’ll help you with your room,” Dex offered, then stomped inside.

I followed, not sure if he was mad or not. How could he be? I made it more than clear where I stood with him.

Glancing over his shoulder, he said, “I call dibs on your panty drawer.”

He dashed up the stairs and I sprinted after him, because knowing Dex, he was serious.



DEX

“HOW’S THE WHOLE *GET-LINDY-TO-MARRY-ME-THING* GOING?” Mallory asked, coming in through the wide-open front door. She was one of many who’d been in and out.

I set down the chair I carried in the corner of the living room. I’d flipped the coffee table onto the couch to make room for the relocated furniture which already included the kitchen table and the other three chairs that went with it. This was the last one and then the kitchen would be done.

After a debate, everything in the cabinets stayed in place, but things on the counters were moved out and anything breakable was wrapped in towels and sheets from the linen closet and stored in laundry baskets. I had no idea how two women could have so many linens, but they fucking did.

Mallory plopped down on the arm of the couch and waited for me to respond.

Glancing at the ceiling as if I could see Lindy through it, I put my finger to my lips to shush her. “Jesus, she’s upstairs and could hear you,” I whispered. The last thing I wanted to

do was have Lindy learn how obsessed I was from Mallory's loud mouth. I told her I wanted her. I put it out there more than once. Followed it up with a kiss. I made myself clear, although I didn't mention marriage.

Mallory rolled her eyes. "Please, you should thank me for moving things along." Her dark eyes raked over me as if inspecting a Christmas tree in a lot. "From the looks of you, you haven't gotten very far. Definitely didn't get lucky."

I wanted to put my hand over her mouth to shut her up, but instead gently took hold of her wrist and tugged her outside. Since Lindy had worked the night we were in Denver, Mallory and I had gone out to dinner and for drinks. I considered her a friend. Especially since she was the only one who helped pick out the wedding ring that was ready and waiting for Lindy.

She was on Team Dex, but perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

"Hey, don't worry, she can't hear you," she said. "She's in her room boxing up all her sex toys."

That stopped me in my tracks, and I tugged her around to face me.

"Say what?"

My dick was instantly hard discovering Lindy had sex toys, and enough to fill a box.

"Sex toys. You know, the things that look like huge, purple magical dicks?" She glanced down at my crotch and I immediately shifted to hide my own. "I'm sure yours is huge, but I doubt it's purple or vibrates."

Purple, no. But I'd been sporting some blue balls for over a week and a half.

“She won’t need those toys any longer,” I practically growled. “You just got here. How the hell do you know what she’s up to?”

She shrugged. “Every woman’s got a drawer of toys. Knowing Lindy, she’s not going to leave them anywhere a bunch of tree guys or contractors can find. Besides, she might want them if you’re not going to satisfy her.”

“I’m definitely going to satisfy her,” I confirmed. *Just not yet.* “She won’t need toys with me.”

She held up a hand. “Okay, caveman. I might be a first-grade teacher, but I know future tense when I hear it. I’m guessing then that you’ve never had a little three-way fun with a woman *and* her toys before.”

“Do you really want to talk about my sex life?”

“Yes,” she replied immediately. “I definitely want to know about a gorgeous professional hockey player’s sex life.”

Jesus. She was just like every other woman in America—the world—who read those trashy magazines.

“Fine. My sex life? It’s me and my hand until Lindy decides otherwise.”

She frowned and I could have sworn I saw a tear in her eye. “That’s so sad.”

She didn’t have to tell me that.

“Okay, so how can I help?” she asked.

Mallory was pretty in an overly perky, extroverted way. I wouldn’t consider her... subtle. She had long dark hair pulled up in a ponytail, cutoff jean shorts and a Steaming Hotties t-shirt like Mav’s, only hers was pale blue. After the fiasco where Bridget accidentally sent Mav her answers to a sex quiz

Mallory made up for a girls' night, I knew to be cautious with her. She took things far. Maybe too far. And when it came to sex—

“Not interested, but thanks for the offer.”

“I'm not offering to help you get off.” She rolled her eyes. “I mean with Lindy.”

Mav also wanted to help with Lindy, but in a more hands off sort of way. Guys didn't actually *help* each other when it came to being a wingman, we more or less sat around and watched it all play out. To be there with a bottle of tequila if shit went south.

“She's in my bed which is a start.”

Mallory's eyes widened and she clapped her hands with an odd sort of glee. “I knew you were a stud.”

“There's only one bed in the house,” I clarified. “She made it clear where we stand. Or lay. There's a pillow berm down the middle.”

Her glee disappeared as if I told her there was no such thing as the Easter Bunny.

“Oh.”

“She says I'm too young.”

“I can't help with that.”

“She doesn't know what I do for a living,” I said, pushing on.

“That's easy. Tell her.”

I shook my head. “I like her seeing me as just a guy. Nothing more. Besides, if I do tell her, she'll look me up

online and see all the bad press from the bar fight that went viral.”

She knew all about it. “She’s no dummy. She’ll see how you protected that woman.”

I shrugged. “I don’t want to risk it.”

“If she sees you the way the tabloids picture you, then she’s not the Lindy I know.”

With her hands tucked on her hips, Mallory looked a little fierce, as if she wanted to storm over to Lindy and set her straight for something she didn’t even know about.

“That’s not all.”

She stared up at me all blinky-eyed and waited.

“She has a date tonight. With another guy. I kissed her on the street and she’s in my bed and yet she’s—”

“You kissed?” she practically screeched.

“Once. It was... fuck. Yeah, but even with that and us living together and sharing a bed, she’s going out with someone else. A dentist.” It was my turn to frown.

Mallory perked back up and waved her hand through the air. “Forget about him.”

“The woman I’m going to marry is going out with another man.”

“He’s a dentist. No offense to dentists, but they’re too stable for her. If there’s a picture of stable and consistent in the dictionary, Lindy’s photo would be next to it. There are never couples photos in the dictionary because that relationship would be boring as hell.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

“She doesn’t want a stable guy, no matter how much she thinks so. She needs someone who’s exciting. Who’ll take her out for fun. Go crazy. Hell, get her to move away from home for the first time in her life. Meaning you.”

“That’s all fine and good, but she’s *still* going out with the guy.”

“Let her.”

My mind was boggled. “*Let her?*”

She nodded, her ponytail swaying. “Let her go. Let her learn for herself the guy’s a dud. If I tell her, or Bridget, or you, she’ll push back and probably sleep with the loser just to prove a point.”

I practically growled at the idea of Lindy fucking some other man.

“So let her,” she forged on. “Tell her she’s pretty and send her on her way to the date. She’s coming home to you and your pillow berm. Trust me. A Hunter Valley dentist versus you? There’s no competition.”

I scratched the back of my neck and glanced down at the grass. “What if you’re wrong?”

“Then you can kidnap Lindy and her sex toys and show her who’s boss.”

My dick and I both liked that idea. I looked to Mallory and asked with words full of hope, “Can’t I just do that and skip the rest?”

She pursed her lips and thought for a moment. “Make that Plan B.”

Plan B. Fuck. I liked Plan B a hell of a lot better than Plan A. But I wanted Lindy to want me, to *beg* me to fuck her. To

tell me about why she never moved out of the house she grew up in, or why she let her boss give her ridiculous amounts of work or why she was so hell bent on finding a man when I was right in front of her.

I didn't want her orgasms because I kidnapped her and her battery-operated boyfriends. I wanted her heart, freely given, and nothing less.

“Fine,” I grumbled like a grouchy teenager. “A date with a dentist it is.”

Fuck.



LINDY

“—BEFORE we even got out the drill. We got the dental dam in to expose only the back molar and—”

Alan Isaacson was handsome. Well dressed. Attentive. But boring as hell. He started on about his top three craziest patients right after we placed our order and hadn't stopped.

His longwindedness was partially my fault, me learning more than I ever wanted about halitosis and gum grafts, because I hadn't shared much myself. He was holding up first date small talk on his own because I'd been distracted ever since I left the house.

Dex's house.

After we finished moving things around at the house—mine and Bridget's—the four of us sat on the front yard and watched the tree trimmers invade the only home I'd ever known with revving chainsaws. They'd gone after the branches inside, slicing them into manageable chunks and tossing them out the jagged openings the tree had made. Piece by piece, they

dismantled the entire thing into nothing but a big pile. Scout had grabbed a stick from it and kept it in his mouth.

Dex and I didn't linger when they powered up the woodchipper, but Bridget and Mav did. I should have been the one to stay and ensured everything was done right, but they promised they'd see it done. Mav had his arm around Bridget's waist and the one thing I'd learned about the guy—and appreciated—was that he took care of what was his.

Bridget was his.

Maybe I left because I felt the same recurring bout of envy whenever I saw the two of them together. Mav took care of Bridget. Shouldered her problems. A tree fell on her house? He'd move mountains—or a dead cottonwood—to make her happy.

I wanted that. For someone to take care of things with me. *For me.*

Ever since our parents were killed, I'd been the one taking care of everything. Putting my life plans on hold, raising Bridget.

Today, for once, I walked away. Why? Because I had this date with Alan the dentist, hoping he might be Mr. Right.

Clearly, he wasn't. That didn't bother me that much. I was used to man after man not being the guy for me. What irked me was Dex.

The frustrating man! Gah!

He didn't say one word—one word!—about the date, only settled on the couch with that book of his and started reading. He'd even let me take over his bathroom for an hour to get ready. Then, when it was time to leave to meet Alan at the

restaurant, he told me I looked pretty, waved me off with his quick grin and a light and breezy, “Have fun!”

Have fun?

It made no sense. I was staying in his house. In his bed. I woke up on top of him. His hand had been on my bare butt!

And his response was *have fun?*

“I was filling the needle with novocaine and he took one look at it and bolted from the chair as if he’d been shocked by a cattle prod.” Alan laughed at the memory and pushed on, straightening his silverware on the white cloth as he did so. “Ran from the building as if it was on fire. Dental dam still in his mouth.”

I offered him a smile and swallowed a big sip of white wine.

I took a deep breath and pushed thoughts of Dex in his athletic shorts and snug t-shirt to the side.

Or up. I imagined pushing that t-shirt up, seeing his steely abs. Feeling the ridges of his hard muscles with my palms. Licking each one.

Shit. I had more wine. “So, Alan, tell me what you like to do when you aren’t working.” Hopefully he’d talk about something else besides oral hygiene because it was far from interesting. Or sexy.

“I’m in a pickleball league on Tuesdays,” he replied. “The community center has courts and everything. Next week is the championships for the summer season. Sundays, I meal prep for the week.” He patted his flat stomach beneath the blue button up he wore. He probably had toned abs, but I didn’t have any interest in licking them. “I eat Keto, but I’m also gluten free.”

“Do you have celiac disease?” I wondered. It was a horrible thing to have and made contact with any kind of wheat product life threatening.

He shook his head. “No. It gives my meals boundaries when I don’t include wheat products.”

“Oh.” I finished my wine wondering what food boundaries were.

“I have a cabin on the far side of Hunter Mountain and go there for a week every Memorial Day and Labor Day. Fourth of July is spent at the lake.”

“And Christmas?” I asked.

“Ten o’clock present opening at my parents’ house in Missoula.”

I wasn’t sure if he was serious about the precise timing, but I didn’t push for the answer because the waitress arrived with our entrees. His plate was spartan with a piece of grilled chicken, steamed vegetables and small side salad. He’d had to special request the lettuce mix—no dressing—instead of whipped potatoes. Oh, and no marsala sauce either.

In front of me, I had the chicken picatta, loaded with lemony butter goodness. And a side of pasta. A big, huge, wheat filled pile of it. My food boundaries were the size of the plate.

“What about you?” he asked, picking up his silverware.

I glanced up at him from how I was twirling pasta on my fork. “What about me?”

“You’re an accountant. Very... structured.”

Meaning boring. He probably found my job as dull as I found his. I dealt with calculators and the IRS. He dealt in spit.

“What do you do for fun?” he asked.

I raised my fork and before I shoved the saucy noodles into my mouth, I said, “I eat gluten.”

Petty? Maybe.

But looking at Alan, with his crisp clothes, perfectly combed hair and exacting dinner, I felt like I was staring at myself. A male version of Lindy Beckett. As I chewed on the tangy bite, I realized Alan was me. He had a boring job that never changed. Mouth after mouth of teeth, day in and day out until retirement. If the only excitement from his work was scaring a patient out the door, then it had to be monotonous. Specifically—and consistently—planned vacations to the same place year after year, traditions down to an exact time...

Me.

While I didn't cook all my meals on Sunday, Saturday was my shopping day. Sunday I did laundry and ensured my clothes were ready for the week. I cut the grass on Monday nights because it was cooler, and I liked being outdoors after a day at the office. Yoga was Tuesday and Thursday mornings. I kept lists. Even pulled Dex into making one.

Who was I to judge Alan when I was the female version of him? Except he met every single requirement on my man list that I'd taped on the bottom side of the toaster. Employed, well mannered, well kept, solid family. It was eye opening, and depressing. Was this how everyone saw me? Bland and boring as a keto, gluten free meal? Was this how *Dex* saw me? Was he humoring me by keeping track of all my to-dos? Was my man list bad?

Suddenly, the pasta in my mouth tasted like saw dust. No wonder Dex had been happy to wave me off on my date. He

wasn't interested. Sure, he'd kissed me, but... well, that made no sense. And the waking up on top of him thing? He hadn't initiated it. I'd gotten past the berm and ended up on top of him on his side of the bed. I'd practically molested him.

"Those capers will get stuck in your teeth." Alan pointed to the little green bits of tangy yumminess on my plate. "Be sure to floss later. And use a different spot on the thread with each tooth so you don't spread bacteria."

I swallowed, wiped my lips, then stood.

"Alan, I have to go."

I had to get away from him. From this. From me. From being so consistent in my life that it was comforting. I wondered how Alan had sex. With his socks on? Scheduled? Did he count in and out strokes and ensure he was consistent each time? Three minutes of foreplay, thirty-seven missionary-style thrusts and a mediocre orgasm? No sweaty rolling around. No wet spot. God, did he use a dental dam for oral? I wasn't being all that nice to Alan because... because he was a perfectly nice guy.

I didn't want *nice*. I didn't want to be a dull, boring accountant any longer. I wanted to be a romance writer and I was just... floundering. I wanted fun and excitement and to be kissed because a guy couldn't resist.

I wanted more than what I was living now.

He stared up at me, a piece of steamed zucchini jabbed onto his fork.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. This isn't going to work. Good luck with your pickleball. I'm sure your team will destroy the others next week."



DEX

“WHAT THE FUCK is going on up there?” Theo asked.
“Something about a tree in a house?”

I lay sideways on the couch, a decorative throw pillow propped behind my head. While I was holding the paperback, I hadn't read more than three pages since Lindy and I got back from her house. That had been two hours ago. In fact, I hadn't read any of it since running into Lindy the day before.

When Theo called, I was thrilled for the interruption into my insanity. I was remaining on the couch solely because of Mallory's advice. To let Lindy go on the date and discover I was what she wanted. I wasn't sure how that was going to work, but Mallory was a woman and knew Lindy. Two things I wasn't: female and knowledgeable about my girl.

“Yeah, Lindy's house got taken out with a tree by a crazy neighbor and a chainsaw. She's staying with me until it's fixed.” I stuck my arm out and dropped the neglected paperback on the coffee table.

“Jesus. Mav left a text and said everyone was okay, but something like that usually involves me patching up a few patients.”

He was a trauma surgeon, so he wasn't joking. Not that he did much of that. Joke. Ever. Out of the four of us, he was the most serious. That said a lot since Mav wasn't all rainbows and unicorns. Until he met Bridget, he was a workaholic. Silas worked beside him and wasn't far behind, but at least he had some work/life boundaries. But in less than two weeks, Mav's whole perspective changed. He had a different focus now. Bridget and her problems.

He'd told me his focus—probably besides satisfying her with as many orgasms as possible—was to nail the MIT professor who had screwed her over. Now, it was also to get their house back together. Both redirected his time away from James Corp. I had to wonder if Mav would ever go back to his corner office in Denver. He'd probably stay in Hunter Valley and run the James Inn that was under construction if I had my guess. Or retire and have lots of lumberjack-sized babies with nerdy glasses.

“No one was home,” I told him. The thought of Lindy being inside when that tree came down made me feel slightly panicky. That she chose to go to the grocery store then... “The house is in rough shape, but fixable.”

“Good. What's this I hear about you and Bridget's sister?”

“You don't want to know about how they dismantled an entire tree from their house and shoved it all in a woodchipper? I think Mav took photos for the insurance company.”

“You won't believe how dangerous those fuckers are,” he murmured. I could imagine him rubbing his brow and

envisioning all the missing limbs.

“Do you analyze everything you see and hear based on some kind of life threat scale?” I wondered, getting up and heading into the kitchen for a drink. “I mean, how do you even get in a car or get near the shallow end of a pool? What about a hair dryer in a bathroom? Do you freak every time you see me in a pair of skates because those things are fucking sharp.”

“Fuck off, Dex.”

For some reason, his voice was more growl than grump. I grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water from the faucet. “Whoa, dude. You need to get laid. Maude too busy looking at other men’s bunions to be hot for yours?”

His girlfriend was a podiatrist who worked at the same hospital. I’d met her once at a charity event he’d brought her to, but she hadn’t wowed me. That was being generous. She was beautiful in a frosty, stick up the ass kind of way. I had no idea what Theo saw in her besides a banging body and perhaps the ability for quickies in the doctor’s break room.

“Something like that.”

“Huh?” I asked, then took a big gulp.

“I found her foot fucking one of the colorectal residents.”

I almost spit the water out across the counter. “Foot fucking? I... I don’t even know what that means.”

“She had her feet on his dick. Like a hand job but with her feet.”

I couldn’t help the laugh that escaped and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “That’s a thing?” I wondered. I knew everyone had their kink and fantasies, and I had plenty of them, especially with Lindy in mind. Not that though. Hell,

no. I didn't want Lindy's feet on my dick. Her hands, sure. Her mouth, definitely. Her pussy, abso-fucking-lutely. If she was as naughty as I thought, maybe even her ass.

"For her it is," he finally replied.

"I figured the guy'd be more into anal."

That had Theo finally lightening up. I may have even heard a chuckle. "You're right. Fuck."

While he sounded more pissed off than sad about this situation, I was fucking thrilled. Bye bye Maude and her foot obsession. I had a feeling Silas and Mav wouldn't be sad to see her go either.

"Look, take some time off," I advised. "Get away from the footsie action at work. Come back to Hunter Valley." I glanced out the window over the sink that overlooked the backyard. Since this was the older section of town, the houses were close together, but the landscaping was old and well established. A large shrub blocked out the back fence with its thick greenery and a shocking display of bright pink flowers.

"I—"

I cut him off before he gave me any of his usual excuses about saving lives. "Don't tell me you can't." I poured the rest of the water into the sink and opened the dishwasher to put the glass in the top rack. I might be a bachelor, but I wasn't a slob. "You're the attending or lead fellow trauma surgeon or whatever the hell your title is. I don't know how vacation time is accrued, if you earn it by the number of lives saved or what, but you must have like three months or something. A punch card like at the smoothie shop. Ten lives saved, get a day off."

"You're an idiot," he said, although without any heat behind it. "I'll think about it."

Usually he said no and that was it. Any other answer, especially *I'll think about it*, meant he'd already been considering the possibility himself.

“Now let's circle back to you and Bridget's sister.”

“Her name's Lindy.” A lipstick of hers was on the counter and I picked it up and twisted it up so I could see the color. Imagined it smeared on her face and around my dick. “I'm going to marry her.”

There was a pause and I wondered if he got disconnected. “Say that again.”

“I'm going to marry her.”

I put the top back on and set it down.

“She know that?”

“Working on it.”

I wasn't going to tell him that I went and bought a ring for her in Denver. Mallory and I had gone after I split from him and Silas after Mav's fake wedding. Saying I was marrying a woman I just met was one thing. Getting a ring? He might send a psych resident or something up to evaluate me.

“Although not very well since she's out on a date with some dentist right now,” I grumbled.

“Let me get this straight. Lindy, the woman you want to marry, is staying in your house since hers got destroyed by a fallen tree and is out on a date with another man.”

“Yes.”

“You *let* her go out with a dentist? Did they take your fucking man card away?”

It felt like it. I ran a hand over my face. “Mallory said I should.”

“Mallory. Bridget’s friend.” They’d met when we—me, Silas and Theo—flew up to Hunter Valley to check on Mav because he was being weird about a woman. Go figure.

“Yes.”

“Explain.”

So I did. I told him about Lindy and her need for consistency, for solving her own problems. That if I pushed her not to go on the date, she’d dig in those sexy-as-fuck heels, and I’d never get her.

“I guess that makes sense. The little teacher is pretty smart.”

“It sucks,” I admitted. “I want to go to that restaurant, toss her over my shoulder and drag her the hell out of there, growling mine as I go.”

“Ah, there’s your man card. Be sure to whip out your dick to ensure yours is bigger than the dentist’s, then pee on her. And do it without drawing anyone’s attention and going viral on social media.”

The fucker.

“Just wait. You find a woman who’s not into cheating and foot fetishes and you’ll turn into fucking cavemen like me and Mav.”

He mumbled about something in the water in Hunter Valley, then said, “You’re right. This I have to see. I’ll be there soon.”

He hung up and not thirty seconds later, Lindy stormed in the front door.



LINDY

“YOU OKAY?” Dex asked as I set my purse down on the small dining table. My keys landed beside it with a clatter.

I sighed, feeling confused, frustrated and annoyed and well, horny.

“Great,” I muttered. Another date, another dud.

“That doesn’t sound like you’re great,” he replied. He took a step back as if he was scared of me or scared he may have said the wrong thing and I might attack like a viral plague.

“Do you eat wheat?” I asked.

He frowned. “You mean like from the stalk?”

The stalk? “No, like pasta. Bread. Gluten.”

“Yes.” He answered that slowly, indicating he was still wary.

“What about flossing. Do you floss?”

“Sugar, what’s this all about?”

“Do you?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes.”

“Yesterday, on the street. Why did you kiss me?” I asked, moving on to what I wanted to know.

His broad shoulders rolled back, and it seemed as if he grew an inch or two before my eyes. It was as if the first two questions baffled him, but this one he was confident in answering. “Because I wanted to ever since I met you last week.”

“Why?” I pushed. I had the entire drive back from the restaurant for my thoughts to stew.

“Why?” he repeated.

I nodded. Reaching down, I undid the clasp on the strap of my heeled sandal, kicked it off, then removed the other. Dex didn’t say anything as I did so, just watched.

“Because I wanted to know how soft your lips are. How you taste. Because I couldn’t help myself.”

Butterflies swirled in my stomach at his answer because it was a good one. But it made me doubt.

“Look at you.” I waved my hand in his direction and he glanced down at himself. Big, hard body, gorgeous face, hair, sturdy thighs. I didn’t know what he did for exercise, but it was working.

“Okay.”

“You can’t be that hard up that you settle for me.” I set my hand on my chest.

His eyes narrowed and a stillness fell over him. Then he moved with a swiftness that caught me by surprise.

I was spun about and bent over the table before I could blink. One big hand pressed into my upper back holding me down while the other flipped the hem of my sundress over my waist. His hand came down on my ass with a loud crack. It took a second and the sting followed.

“Dex!” My fingers scrabbled for purchase on the wood, but he wasn’t letting me up.

“I’m starting to learn all kinds of things about you. Like how you don’t wear panties to bed, but I didn’t realize until now that you love to get your ass spanked.”

“I don’t!”

“You do,” he said, his voice low and calm. His palm against my back was warm. Unyielding but oddly reassuring. “Because you wouldn’t be talking shit about yourself like that otherwise.”

He was spanking me because I put myself down?

His palm came down again, this time to the other side. Since I was wearing a thong, there wasn’t even lace or satin to soften the sting.

He yanked me back up with a pull of my elbow and I looked up into Dex’s dark gaze. My dress fell back over my thighs, but my butt was stinging and hot. I was breathing hard and I was so very confused, not sure if I was aroused or mad at him for manhandling me. I’d never, ever, been touched like that.

Okay. I was aroused. Really aroused. I was wet and there was no doubt he probably saw a little wet spot on my panties. But he wasn’t doing anything about it. Or the hard-on I couldn’t miss that was practically tenting his shorts.

“You’re being an overbearing Neanderthal,” I countered.

He shrugged, the stupid, calm asshole.

“I’m taking care of what’s mine.” He studied me, his dark eyes raking over my flushed cheeks and wild hair, my green dress, my bare feet.

“Yours?”

Lifting his hand, he ran a knuckle down my cheek. “I now see why you were so... angry in Denver.”

I set my hands on my hips. “Oh? Tell me.”

“Things were out of control. There’s a new normal with Bridget. One that doesn’t include you.”

I hated that his words hit right on target, perhaps picking up on it even better than me.

“New? Bridget was away at school for almost four years,” I countered.

“That’s different.” His knuckle slid over my shoulder and down my bare arm as if trying to calm me. “You always knew she was going to college. Had it in your head and were prepared for it. But Mav? Her falling for a guy, let alone one like Mav, is a big change. Came out of nowhere.”

“He’s thirty-seven!” I stepped back and began to pace. “Pretty much my age. She’s twenty-two. It’s not fair she found a guy and I—”

I was mortified that I admitted that aloud. I spun around, turned away from Dex.

“I get that your life is busy. That you have to work ridiculous hours. I get that the tree really fucked up the only place you’ve ever lived. That Bridget is doing a happily ever after with my brother. But that doesn’t mean you’re not perfect, sugar.”

“Perfect? I don’t want to be perfect,” I admitted, thinking of Alan and his neat and tidy life. About how I was just like him. “It’s really boring.”

“Fine, not perfect. But I see why you make lists and crave structure. I’ll help give that to you.”

“You will?” I turned back around, stunned. “By spanking me?”

He nodded once. “Absolutely. Now you know I won’t stand for that shit. My dad used to put down my mom. And me. We could never be good enough, no matter what we did. Then I started to believe his words and I thought shit about myself. I snapped out of it once I was old enough to see the man for what he was. An asshole and a bully. You’re my woman and no one disrespects you. Even you.”

My mouth fell open. I didn’t like the idea of him having a dick for a father or being treated badly, but I’d have to question him about that later. It was what else he said that had me a little stunned.

“I’m... I’m your woman?”

“I told you that yesterday in the car. That I want more than temporary with you.”

“You kissed me once. Once! You had me bent over the table.” I pointed to the dinette where I was always going to remember where I got spanked. “I’m not twenty-two. I’m not a good little girl you have to be careful with. You could have fucked me this morning in bed, but you didn’t. I’m not talking bad about myself, but that explains a hell of a lot. You don’t really want me. I went off on a date with another man and you only said, *Have fun!*”

He crossed his arms over his chest, which was disappointing because I wanted them around me. His hands on me. Touching me. Hell, even spanking me again.

“Exactly. I’ve made myself clear. I want you. You, Lindy Beckett. But like you said, you just came back from a date with another man. I’ll share a bed with you and spank your ass if needed, but you’re not getting my mouth or my dick until you beg.”

“Beg?”

“Beg. I’ve never treated you like a little girl, but I take care of what’s mine.” He stepped close, stroked a hand over my hair and leaned down to murmur in my ear. His breath fanned my neck and I shivered. “I need to know you’re all in. No more dates with dentists or whoever else you swipe right on in those dating apps. That you know it’s my dick you’re riding. That it’s my name you’re screaming when you come. I promise you, I won’t be careful with you. I’ll be as rough and as wild as you need.”



DEX

MALLORY WAS RIGHT. The date didn't go well, and Lindy was back within an hour. She didn't jump in my arms and proclaim her undying love for me. Instead, she came back with a doggy bag of low self-esteem and weird questions about wheat.

I didn't know if I should go visit every dentist's office in town to find the asshole for making her feel like shit, or if I should be thanking him for being Mr. Wrong.

Hearing her talk shit about herself pissed me off. No way was I letting that fly. While I couldn't picture Lindy with Mav, I understood how an eligible, similarly aged bachelor choosing her sister over her would be tough to handle.

So she went on another failed date and was disappointed. But I was her man. Her Mr. Right. I'd stood in front of her and she couldn't see what was happening. Hell, right now I was literally right in fucking front of her.

At three thirty-two in the morning—I knew the exact time because I'd slept like shit—Lindy had pushed away the fucking pillow berm she'd put back in place and cuddled up behind me

because in her sleep, she was drawn to me. Felt safe. Protected. Desired. She flung her arm over my waist and her hand settled on my lower belly, her fingertips brushing the top of my dick.

That had been three hours ago, and I was in heaven and the worst hell ever. My woman was a cuddler. I was the little spoon in the drawer and she was still—*still!*—touching my dick.

If those fingers encircling the sensitive ridge without doing a fucking thing wasn't torture enough, I loved the feel of her pressed against my back, every soft, plush inch of her. Her little nightie—this one was yellow cotton with white lace edging—was clumped about her waist. I felt the material against my back, which meant her bare pussy was pressed against my ass.

God bless airing things out, whatever the hell that meant.

She started to stir, and I knew the second she came awake because she tensed. That had her fingers gripping the head of my dick. Pre-cum spurted and wet my boxers.

She let go because she probably felt it. I took hold of her wrist and kept her from rolling away. Wanted to feel her against me just a moment longer.

“Morning, sugar.”

“Dex. Oh my God.” Her breath heated my back and made even more pre-cum escape.

“You crave a big dick, don't you? Is that why you're over here, gripping me? Want it buried deep? Remember, gotta beg.” With that, I raised her knuckles to my mouth, kissed them, then reluctantly—perhaps the hardest thing I've ever done—climbed from bed, not looking back. If I did, I would

have gotten her beneath me and given her everything she needed. Because Lindy was so fucking hard to resist.



LINDY

I WAS AT WORK. I had been for two hours. I'd accomplished nothing except open a client's files on my computer and stare at them. All I could think about was Dex's dick. How big it had been in my hand. How hard it was. How much I wanted it.

Squash had nothing on Dex, that was for fucking sure.

God, I'd never been so... horny in my life. Alan the Dentist never stood a chance with Dex in the picture. With me in Dex's house. His bed. With my hand on Dex's dick.

I'd jumped the berm, snuggled up behind Dex and accosted him.

Again!

I hopped from my desk chair, paced and made a cross between a groan and a screech of frustration. What was I going to do?

I wanted Dex. Clearly since I kept mounting him like a fucking stallion in my sleep. He wanted it and I knew it first-hand. Literally.

We kissed. Once. That had been a teaser. A cruel, sweet reminder of what I could have if I just begged.

Begged!

How could he be so calm? So unbothered? Yes, he wanted me. He said as much. I'd felt as much. I wasn't sure if I wanted to rip his clothes off or strangle him or—

“Lindy, good, you're here.”

I spun about at my friend's harried voice. It was Aspen.

“Hey. What's the matter? I don't think there's any issue with your bookkeeping this month.”

She was practically vibrating as if fueled by too much caffeine, although I knew she stuck to green tea since she didn't drink stimulants. She owned the town's only yoga studio and was dressed as if she'd just come from leading a class.

She waved a hand and gave me a look like she didn't care about her finances.

“Do you think your boyfriend would coach Sierra's PeeWee team this week? The regular coach is in Florida because his mother fell and broke her hip.”

I frowned, then tried to imagine Alan on skates. “Um, that date didn't go well, and I really don't think Alan plays hockey, let alone knows where the rink is.”

Maybe that was harsh, but from what he said the night before, a trip to the winter sports complex wasn't on his schedule.

“Who's Alan?” She did the arm thing again, as if swatting away a fly. Or the idea of Alan being my boyfriend. “I mean Dex James.”

At the mention of him, my heart flip flopped and my ovaries perked up.

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I stated clearly.

“You’re living with him.”

“My house got taken out by a tree.”

“You’re living with him.”

That sentence proved that small town life was sometimes—a lot of the time—really annoying. The yoga class I always attended was tomorrow morning, so she hadn’t heard anything from me about the tree fiasco and my living arrangements. Bridget hated yoga, called it boring and too zen for her, so she wasn’t the source.

But in Hunter Valley, everyone was the source. Otis at the pizza place, Mr. VanMeyer, any other neighbor who’d dropped in to watch the tree removal spectacle yesterday. Anyone walking on Main Street and saw us kissing.

She studied me as if trying to read my chakras or if I was doing proper three-part breathing, then stepped into my office and shut the door. “Please tell me you’re doing all naked kinds of things with that huge piece of man candy.”

Oh, I was doing all kinds of things with him, like climbing him like a tree in my sleep. I wasn’t telling her that because how could I explain I did it while I was unconscious? Obviously she hadn’t heard about the street make out session.

“Why would he coach Sierra’s team?” I asked.

Aspen’s daughter was nine and she played ice hockey at the winter complex up by the ski resort. Besides several hockey rinks, it had indoor turf fields.

“Why wouldn’t he? Is he an asshole?” she whispered, appearing equally curious and horrified. “That would be a shame.”

I frowned and dropped into my chair feeling defeated. “No, he’s not an asshole.” The opposite, really. In every way.

“Then he might do it. Ask him.” Now hope shone in her gaze, but it made no sense.

I stared at her, completely confused. “Why?”

“Why? Why what?”

“Why ask *him* specifically? I know he’s here on vacation and all,” I said.

“Because he’s a professional hockey player with the Colorado Silvermines.”

My mouth fell open as I put together what Aspen said with what I knew about Dex.

I spun my chair around so I faced my desk, went to a browser on my computer and typed in his name. A flood of photos and articles came up. Over a... holy shit. Over a million.

I gasped.

“You didn’t know?” Aspen wondered, stepping close and leaning over my shoulder. While she was a single mom whose daughter was obsessed with ice hockey, which meant Aspen knew tons about the sport, I was clueless. “He’s one of the best players in the league. Highest paid and in an eight-year contract. I mean, he’s on the first line and is a top scorer, not just for his team but the entire league! I’d say he’s the most well-rounded player we’ve seen in a long time, even with all the attention that bar fight got. His stats alone—”

I tuned Aspen out because I was a little cranky that she knew more about Dex than I did. Hell, the *entire world* knew more about him than me. And I was in his bed every night.

I grabbed my cell off the desk and pulled up his number, the one he'd given me in Denver last weekend so we could coordinate the return trip on his private jet.

"Hey, sugar." The sound of his deep, smooth voice had me heating up like a menopausal woman. "I'm at Steaming Hotties with Mav. Want me to pick you up a drink? I can swing it by and—"

"You are a professional hockey player," I said, cutting him off because he was being all nice and stuff.

There was a slight pause.

"Yes."

"You play for the Colorado Silvermines."

"Yes." He should have said *duh* since it seemed I was the only one who didn't know.

I glanced over my shoulder at Aspen, whose eyes were bugging out of her head. *You really didn't know?* she mouthed.

I clicked on the link for the Silvermine's web page. Front and center was Dex in full uniform. The site was practically sparkling with green and blue, clearly the team's colors, with his name in fancy lettering and a cool logo of a minecart with hockey pucks piled in it.

"My friend Aspen wants to know if you'll coach her daughter's PeeWee hockey team while the coach is out of town."

"Sure. I have to go out of town this weekend, but I can until then and then when I'm back. What time today?"

Holy shit. Dex wasn't unemployed like I thought. He wasn't a slacker playboy. He wasn't living off a trust fund or hiking his summer away. He was hot as hell in a hockey uniform. All that padding, the skates. The helmet... Aspen was right. He was the most amazing piece of man candy. Ever.

Which was really bad for my willpower because I was going to break down and beg. It was only a matter of time.



LINDY

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you didn’t tell me you were a hockey player,” I said, dropping onto the metal bench beside Dex. We sat just outside one of the indoor rinks at the winter complex. He was leaning down and lacing up his skates. His professional hockey skates he told me he brought with him to Montana. Because supposedly professional hockey players didn’t leave home without them, even on a vacation.

No rentals for him.

I didn’t linger at work like I normally would. I held no illusion of accomplishing anything whatsoever after Aspen and I got off the phone with Dex this morning. So I cut out early and showed up for Sierra’s team practice. To see Dex. To confront him as to why he hadn’t told me about his job. No, it wasn’t just a job. A job was me being an accountant, making money to pay the bills. The contract he had was public knowledge and for the sum he was making, he didn’t play hockey to pay his electric bill. They gave him millions, hundreds of millions, because of talent. A skill only a few had.

It was blowing my mind.

He angled his head and looked up at me, kept tugging on the long laces. “You never asked.”

I sputtered. “Didn’t ask? You could have shared it! I mean, it’s a big deal. Something like, *By the way, Lindy, I’m a professional hockey player. The best in the league.*”

He finished the lace, then sat up. Eyed me with a smirk. “Is it a big deal?”

“Yes! I thought you were a lazy trust fund kid.” I looked away because it was a truth that didn’t sit well now. I’d made assumptions about him that clearly weren’t accurate. If what I’d found online about him, he didn’t need the James billions. He was a self-made man, wealthy on his own. His contract with the Silvermines was astronomical. “I’m sorry about that.”

He leaned in, even though there was music playing and sticks slapping. All kinds of noise, but he didn’t want anyone else to hear. “I’m not a kid. You know I’m all man from when you had your hand wrapped around my dick this morning.”

I blushed and there was no way he could miss it beneath the harsh lighting.

“I thought... I thought—”

“I know what you thought, sugar.”

“Why didn’t you correct me? I was hurtful to you.”

“I can’t control what people think of me. Of what’s on social media. I’m sure you learned all kinds of things about me, didn’t you?”

I had, and he was right. What I knew of Dex James from the past two days and what was written about him weren’t the same. The photos didn’t match either. There were images of him during a game. Before or after a game in a suit; I needed

to see him dressed up so bad. Out partying. Years ago when he was younger. Even photos of him playing as a kid. It was all up on the internet. Even the bar fight earlier in the summer when they said if he was going to play enforcer off the ice, he should take on that role on it, too. It wasn't the real Dex at all.

“Because I want you to want me,” he admitted, then set his hand on his chest. “Dex James. The man. Not the famous hockey player.”

It made sense. If I knew who he was by what I read online before getting to know him, I'd have had completely different assumptions about him. A brawler. Cocky. An asshole, even.

But here in Hunter Valley, with me at least, he was just Dex. It was... simple.

Little kids cut past us in their hockey gear and started to skate. Moms and a few dads filled the stands around us doing whatever parents did waiting through a sports practice.

“What does it matter?” I asked. “With me, I mean.”

His dark gaze raked over me, then settled on my mouth. “Often when I'm out with the team, a woman, whose name I don't even know, will give me her panties along with a phone number written on a napkin. She's down for giving me a BJ in a bar bathroom just to say she's been with a pro player.”

I scrunched up my nose. “Lovely.”

“I can't tell when a woman's being real.”

I never thought about that aspect. I struggled with men liking me for what I was without being famous. Having the media add their spin would make it so hard for him.

He stood and with his skates on, towered over me.

“With you though, sugar. I know it's real.”

For some reason, those words seemed important. As if he'd been testing me and now had his answer. "How?"

He bent down, extra low because the skates gave him a few extra inches. "Because you'd have ridden my dick by now. Even if you're playing the long game, you'd want a piece of me like everyone else. Instead, you've been flaunting that hot little body of yours in those sweet as sin nighties and climbing all over me in bed and yet date other men. You've got the dentist."

The dentist. Alan, the perfect man list man. Except I had zero—less than zero—interest in him.

"I don't want the dentist. I want—"

I bit my lip, realizing I was about to say I wanted him.

"What, sugar?" He took my hand and tugged me to my feet. Put his hand on my hip and squeezed with an urgency that had me meeting his gaze. "What do you want?"

"He's here!"

"It's really him."

"I'm going to marry him."

"Do you think he'll sign my helmet?"

"He's going to sign my forehead."

We were interrupted as a gaggle of giggling and squealing little girls in head-to-toe hockey gear surrounded Dex. Skates, pads, uniform, helmets. And they were oohing and aahing over him like they were in the presence of a famous movie star. They reminded me of Bridget and her friends when she was that age, which was right before our parents died.

“Hey, girls,” Dex said. He raised a hand and impressively, they quieted right down. “Warm up is two laps and I’ll bring out the cones to do drills. On three, say, polar bears. One, two, three—”

“POLAR BEARS!” the girls shouted in unison, then poured onto the ice and began their laps, clearly not wanting to let Dex down.

He turned back to me.

“Am I the only one who doesn’t know who you are?” I asked, seeing adults in the stands aiming their cell phones our way, taking photos of Dex, of course, because they definitely weren’t taking any of me.

He took my chin and lifted it with his fingers so I had to meet his gaze. I felt like an idiot for being so clueless. “Sugar, I think you’re the only one who really knows who I am.”

With that, he grabbed a helmet and mini-cones that were stacked on the half wall and stepped onto the rink. He skated off in an effortless way that showed he was almost more comfortable on the ice than off.

Flustered and confused, I watched him drop cones onto the ice in two long lines before I spun around and looked for Aspen in the stands. She waved and I saw that Bridget was beside her. Good. I didn’t have to wait to yell at my sister.

I climbed up the bleachers to join them. I flopped down onto the cold metal as the clack of skates and sticks on the ice rang through the lofty arena. It was chilly in here, twenty or more degrees colder than outside. Dex was doing the second lap with the girls but going backwards. Show off.

“What are you doing here?” I asked Bridget, keeping my eyes on Dex.

“Dex talked to Mav earlier and told him about coaching. I thought I would come and watch because Mav’s doing CEO stuff. And before you ask, the contractors are busy at the house and have my number. And Mav’s.”

She thought of everything and shut down every option of more questions. Except one.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me Dex played hockey. How could you?” I asked even when I could tear my eyes away from the man in question.

“You didn’t know?” she asked, leaning around Aspen to stare at me, wide eyed. She pushed her glasses up.

“Everyone knows Dex James,” Aspen added, making me feel even more of an idiot.

“Well, I don’t. I don’t follow hockey.”

Or any sports.

“He’s been in *People’s* sexiest men list three years in a row! *Sport Illustrated*. ESPN. I mean, how could you not?” Bridget asked.

“Did you seriously know before you met Mav?” I asked her. “You know as much about sports as me.”

She looked away, guiltily.

“Well, I did,” Aspen said.

Dex pointed to the girls and they formed two lines, then he demonstrated what he wanted them to do, borrowing a stick that looked much too small for him. He moved with such precision through the drill he made it look easy. If I got out there, I’d look like Bambi on ice.

“I don’t follow hockey. I don’t read *People* or *Sports Illustrated*, okay? But he’s been around almost as long as Mav and there’s been ample time to spill. Why do you keep the important things from me?”

Bridget winced, then took a deep breath and stood. “Aspen, trade spots.”

They did a little shuffle and swapped seats so Bridget was right next to me. Her dark hair was back in the usual ponytail and she had on jeans and a hoodie.

“You’re still mad about MIT.” She didn’t make it a question, but fact. She only told me last week that she hadn’t dropped out but had actually been expelled from the university for plagiarism, when in fact her professor had seduced her to steal her notes and rough draft and used them to publish a paper as his own. For six months I thought she just gave up, which was how she explained her return.

That had me making assumptions of her. Wrong ones. Just like Dex and not giving me the full picture. I made bad assumptions with him, too.

“I’m mad that no one thinks to share things with me.”

Bridget cocked her head and gave me a smile that screamed pity. A pity smile.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about MIT,” she admitted. “I am. But this was a problem I brought on myself.”

“Men are assholes. You didn’t have to do it alone.”

On the ice, the girls ran the drill, weaving around the cones pushing a puck with their stick.

“I’m not. Mav is helping. He’s got a private investigator and a lawyer all over the situation like a bad rash.”

Mav. She was sharing her problems with her man.

Shit.

“You were home for six months before you met him.”

“I know and I said I was sorry. And doing it alone, hello pot, kettle, or whatever that saying is,” she said, sarcasm lacing her words.

“What are you talking about?” I wondered.

Aspen sputtered out a laugh, but she was watching the girls’ practice. Or Dex.

“You.” Bridget poked me in the shoulder. “You do everything alone. You didn’t call me about the tree falling on the house. You took on the insurance company on your own. You were going to do it all by yourself as if it’s only your problem. If you had your way, the place would have been fixed before you even told me about it.”

“It’s my house.” When Bridget gave me another look, I added, “It’s your house too, but I’m the grown up. I’m the one who takes care of stuff like that.”

“I’m not ten any longer.”

I pursed my lips, but she wasn’t done.

“The broken toilet earlier in the year. I could have looked up online how to fix it just as easily as you did. The groceries. I know how to shop for food. The... do you really want me to go backwards and list it all?”

“Definitely not.” I crossed my arms over my chest which screamed defensive posture, which I couldn’t help.

“You’re not cranky right now because of me,” she pushed on. “You’re mad at Dex for not telling you he plays pro

hockey.”

“His job explains why his butt is so fucking perfect,” Aspen added wistfully. She raised her hands and made a squeezing gesture which I assumed meant she was grabbing his butt.

Which I knew was perfect. And those thighs. Like steel.

“Did he say why he didn’t tell you?” Bridget pushed on after laughing at Aspen.

“He wants me to like him for him, not being famous.”

Aspen turned to look at me and she and Bridget shared matching expressions of awe and... lust?

Bridget sighed. “Don’t tell Mav, but Dex is pretty much perfect.”

“This is maybe the third time you’ve started a sentence with *Don’t tell Mav*.”

“That’s because we’re talking about his hot brother.”

We were all quiet for a moment as Dex set one of the cones on his head and led the girls on some kind of Follow The Leader where he did a few S turns, spun backwards and circled the net and kept going. I could hear their squeals and giggles from here as they tried to keep up.

“Speaking of not doing things alone,” Bridget began. “It’s time you got laid.”

“Totally,” Aspen added.

I glanced around in panic, hoping no other moms heard that. I saw that Dex had rearranged the cones and the girls had moved onto a new drill.

“I don’t need—”

“Yes, you do,” they said in unison.

“A vibrator is no substitute for Dex James,” Bridget said.

“God, no,” Aspen added.

“Here’s the problem. He has a job,” I pointed out. “No, a *career*. In Denver. That starts up again soon. In Denver. I don’t need to know anything about the sport to know that teams travel to games all the time. Away from Denver. I told you the other night he was temporary when I didn’t even know what he did. Now? It’s official. He’s definitely not permanent, not even in—”

“Denver,” Bridget finished. “So?”

“So... I’m looking for permanent.”

“Girlfriend, you should be looking for orgasms,” Aspen said. “And with Dex James. You literally owe it to me, and all women in the world, to fuck that man.”

I had to laugh at Aspen. She’d been divorced for a few years and as long as I’d been taking her classes, hadn’t been in a serious relationship.

“You can have him.” As soon as I said that I wanted to yank the words back because of a fierce need to keep Dex as all mine.

“He wants *you*,” Aspen pointed out.

Bridget nodded. “He does and don’t tell me he hasn’t made that clear.”

I nodded. “He has.”

You’re my woman.

I’ll share a bed with you and spank your ass if needed, but you’re not getting my mouth or my dick until you beg.

I squirmed on the hard metal bleachers at the thought of Dex bending me over that table again and spanking me some more, then tugging down my thong and thrusting into me so—

“And you’ve turned him down? What is wrong with you?” Bridget winced again. “Sorry. Sorry! That was insensitive. There’s nothing wrong with you. But why, Lind, are you holding him off? He’s nice. Sweet. Gorgeous. Successful. Everything you have on your man list.”

It was true. He did fit everything on the list.

“I don’t know what this man list is, but he can probably go all night. And go at it hard. Rough. Whatever you want.”

I did want it hard and rough. Gah!

“He’s not staying in town!” I tossed my hands up. “Why should I waste time with Dex when he’s not Mr. Right?” I raised my voice, and I knew it was filled with frustration.

“Forget about Mr. Right. Go for Mr. Right Now,” Bridget advised. “Seriously. If he wants you and you want him, *do* him. Every which way. Have a fling, Lind. Have fun. You’ve earned it.”

“Hell, yes. You’ve totally earned Dex James and his magical dick.” Aspen sighed. “I know it’s magical. It has to be.”

I felt it just this morning. It was. It *so* was. Did I go for it? Go for Dex? I was sleeping in his bed, so why not have a fling. I could have the full Dex James experience and when he left, I’d be a few dozen—most likely, hopefully—orgasms richer. I could handle that, right? But what about online, when I saw him in the winter with other women? Could I handle it? Could I give up that magical dick? I had to.

So sex and lots of it for the next few weeks. I could do it. I wanted to soooo bad.

I looked to Aspen and Bridget, who nodded.

Okay.

I could do this. I wanted to. I *needed* to. It was time to fuck Mr. Right Now.



DEX

WORD TRAVELED that I was at the rink because after the girls' practice, a Bantam team had the ice next. The coach asked if I would stay and run their practice as well. I couldn't turn down a group of fourteen-year-old boys. I remembered when I was that age, and I was always up for giving back. One of them may be drafted in a few years and if I could help with that, I was all in.

Besides, it was fun to be on the ice again. No one commented on the bar fight or anything about it playing out in the media. People took photos with me, and I signed jerseys, helmets and even the back of a grocery store receipt before I was allowed off the ice where Lindy was waiting for me.

I'd tried to keep track of her throughout the two practices, seeing her first with her sister and another woman during the girls' practice, then alone in the stands for the boys'. While I watched the kids run through drills and scrimmage, I wondered if she was still mad. If she would leave the house and go stay with Mav and Bridget or even a hotel. If all the time we'd spent together meant nothing.

If I'd blown everything.

Except when I skated off the ice and to her, where she stood at the opening in the boards, she didn't knee me in the balls or tell me to fuck off. Instead, she went up on her tiptoes—since I was in my skates—and whispered in my ear.

“I'm ready to beg.”

Holy fuck. What?

My dick went instantly hard, and I pulled back enough to meet her eyes. There, holy shit, I didn't see anger. They held heat. Need. Her cheeks weren't flushed from the cold. No. She wanted me. Us.

“I hear you, but I need you to spell it out for me so I'm clear,” I murmured.

She swallowed and I watched her throat work. I immediately thought of her doing that because my dick was so fucking deep.

“I want you to fuck me, Dex. All the ways you imagined.”

I set my hand on her hip and pulled her close. Not as close as I wanted, which was with her legs wrapped around my waist and my dick buried deep, because the next group of kids had taken the ice for their practice time.

Staring at her, there were no parents killing time in the bleachers. No scents of popcorn and hot dogs coming from the food stand. No whistles or slapping sticks. No buzzers or cold air. All I could see and feel was Lindy. Those blue eyes. That fuckable mouth. Her soft curves.

“Jesus,” I murmured. “That word coming out of your mouth... it's like the good girl got tarnished.”

She glanced away as if ashamed. I pushed on.

“No. I have a feeling that you, sugar, beneath that perfect exterior in your pretty dresses and matching shoes, are actually a bad girl. I got a glimpse of her last night bent over the table, skirt flipped up and showing me how pretty my handprint looks on your ass. A very, very bad girl.”

And she was sharing her with me.

Her eyes returned to mine, her lips parted in surprise. Maybe she never thought about it before. Maybe I scandalized her. Maybe her pussy was soaked.

“Are you a bad girl?”

She sucked in a breath and her breasts bumped my chest.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

Fuck. Me. I knew she was perfect.



LINDY

DEX HAD his skates off and tossed over his shoulder in record time. He was nice to anyone who approached us on the way out for an autograph—now I knew why Otis looked so smitten with him the other day—but didn’t linger as we cut through the building and to his car. He held my hand, practically pulling me along in his eagerness.

He wanted me and he wanted me right now. Now that I finally said yes, I was just as eager.

“Lindy!”

Dex stopped at my name being called—because it had been his and only his up until now—and I bumped into him before turning.

“Who’s that?” he asked, leaning down to murmur in my ear.

Panic flared because it was Claudia. Shit.

“My boss,” I said back, pasting a smile on my face. She was really great, but that wasn’t why I was freaking out.

“I dropped off Justin for his practice and he heard through whatever ways kids do these days that Dex James was here.” She said all that but ignored me and looked over my shoulder at Dex. “Which he is.”

Dex shifted slightly so he wasn't completely behind me, dropped my hand and held it out for Claudia to take.

“Claudia Crummer.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“I didn't know you knew each other.”

Claudia didn't miss the way Dex's hand settled on my shoulder.

“Yes, um... Bridget is dating his brother.”

“We're dating.”

Dex and I spoke at the same time but said two completely different things.

She looked between us and gave a little laugh, clearly amused.

“Lindy must be an invaluable employee working all those hours,” Dex continued.

That right there was why I was my concern. Dex let me think he was a slacker billionaire and I let him think this woman had me working sixty hours a week.

Claudia frowned slightly, but her smile didn't slip at Dex's comment.

Shit. This was bad. It was time to go. Claudia didn't know I was writing romance on the side. Not that she'd have a problem with it. I worked for her—and her father before her—for over a decade and I considered her a friend. They ran a casual,

relaxed office which had worked well for me when Bridget was younger, and I had to work my schedule around hers. Claudia had three kids—Justin was her oldest and played hockey—and she did the same.

But I'd pretty much lied to Dex about my writing time at night, letting him think I was doing accounting work when I wasn't.

I was just about to have sex with Dex. A fling. I didn't want to know what he would think of me if he found out I wrote word porn on the side. Not that it mattered since he was leaving soon, but still.

This was supposed to be fun, dirty, wild sex. That was what Bridget and Aspen said I was to have with him. It was what I wanted. I didn't need to share all my secrets. Including this one.

So I had to separate these two pronto.

"She is," Claudia agreed. "We balance work and family life, so we stick to normal business hours."

"Really?" Dex commented, as if what she was saying was fascinating.

"We should go. We have that *thing* you wanted to do," I said, shifting and turning toward the door, making it *very* clear I was ready to leave. And end this conversation.

"So no tax season crush right now?" Dex asked Claudia.

She sighed and offered a relieved smile. "After June fifteenth, it's quiet for the rest of the summer."

"Dex, you didn't want to be late," I urged, taking his hand and practically tugging.

“Is that so?” he asked Claudia, not budging and pretty much ignoring me and everyone around us. We were in the middle of the complex’s large, busy lobby with kids lugging sports equipment followed by harried parents.

Claudia took in our joined hands and said, “I don’t mean to keep you and I’ve got to stop at the store while Justin’s in practice. Nice meeting you, Dex.”

She strode past us toward the exit, weaving around a woman with a screaming toddler.

I tugged on his hand once more to go.

“Not so fast, sugar.”

“Please.” I was begging, but for a completely different reason than a few minutes earlier.

He pulled me close, stroked my hair. “What are you working on at night, hmm?” His words were gentle and curious, not angry.

“You want to talk about work? Now?” I set my hand on his rock-hard chest and leaned in. Met his gaze squarely with mine. “I just told you I wanted you to fuck me, and you want to talk accounting?”

He studied my face and probably saw the hint of desperation, and not for his dick.

“Good point. Fuck first, talk later.”



DEX

I SPENT ABOUT thirty seconds on the way back to the house wondering what Lindy was up to at night if it wasn't for her accounting job. The past two nights she'd typed non-stop on her laptop. Her fingers had flown over the keys at an impressive pace and she'd been so focused, I doubted if I'd cut past her naked to get a drink from the fridge she would have noticed.

What she was up to wasn't phone sex or video porn. She kept her clothes on, didn't talk, only typed. A lot. The idea of either only made me harder, except for if she was doing it with someone else. If she was into either of those things, I'd do them with her. Gladly.

But that wasn't it. While I said Lindy wanted to be a bad girl, she really was good. So it couldn't be awful like organizing a drug ring. My mind was going crazy places with the possibilities. Whatever it was, she was serious about it. And nervous about me knowing what it was.

So I'd get the info out of her, but like she said... later.

Because the second we were in the house and the front door was closed—and locked—I wasn't thinking of anything except seeing Lindy bare, feeling her and being inside of her for the first time.

I took her hand and pulled her close. Leaned down and kissed her. It had been two days since I had my mouth on her last. Two days. That was too fucking long.

I wasn't the only one feeling the need because Lindy was right there with me, kissing me right back. Her fingers were in my shirt, holding on. One of my hands slid down her back to cup her perfect ass as the other tangled in her hair at her nape and tugged.

She gasped and I deepened the kiss, my tongue finding hers.

“Like that?” I breathed against her lips, pulling her hair a little harder.

“Yes,” she said, dragging the one word out like a hiss of satisfaction.

I spun us both to press her into the door and wedged a leg between hers. Lifted. I felt all of her, soft and perfect.

I couldn't not touch her so I let my hands roam. “Thank fuck for your little dresses,” I said, my fingers catching on the hem of her work outfit. It was an accounting office appropriate dress with short sleeves and little buttons running down the front. It hit her just above the knee, the perfect length for me to snag and lift. Higher and higher until I pushed back enough to get it up and over her head.

She helped by raising her arms. I tossed it over my shoulder and took in my woman in her matching bra and panties. I stared and stared some more, just memorizing her.

The set was pale yellow lace. And small. The bra was one of those half ones, whatever they were called, where the lace was only on the bottom half of her perfect tits leaving the tops of the soft swells bare. The lacy edge barely covered her nipples. I cocked my head to the side and took in the panties, or what there was of them. A little wispy triangle of lace in the front and nothing but bare ass cheeks in the back, a little line of yellow lace disappearing between them.

“You wear this for me?” I asked, unable to resist running a finger along the soft swells of her tits. Her breath came in short little pants, pushing her warm flesh against my fingertip with each inhale.

She nodded and I had to adjust my dick in my track pants. Thank fuck the fabric was loose.

Her small hand settled over me, feeling me through my pants. “Fuck,” I growled, rolling my hips into her, but immediately took her hand away.

She frowned.

“You do that and this will be over too fucking soon. You still good with me fucking you all the ways I’ve imagined?”

She put her palm on my dick voluntarily just now, so I’d say that was a green light, but I wanted to check. I needed to know she was right here with me.

“Please.”

I took her hand and guided her to the couch. I dropped down on it, then pulled her onto my lap so she straddled me. Her tits jiggled with the motion and a dainty strap slipped from her shoulder. I couldn’t wait a second longer to get my mouth on her so I tucked my finger into the lacy edging, pulled down

and her nipple popped free. I took it in my mouth and sucked, feeling the tip go hard against my tongue.

“Dex,” she cried, her fingers tangling in my hair.

I shifted from one nipple to the other, her bra tucked beneath those soft swells.

Her skin was like silk as I gripped her hips, her skin warm and fragrant.

She began to writhe on my lap, her pussy rubbing right over my dick.

Fuck was she responsive.

“Look at you. So fucking perfect.”

Her lipstick was smeared, her hair tousled. Her bra was askew, and her tits were lifted with hard little tips all red and shiny from my mouth.

She rolled her hips again.

I lifted my head, took in her blue eyes, blurry with need. “Got a needy pussy? You are a bad girl rubbing it all over my dick.”

“Oh my God. You’re a dirty talker.” She said it like it was a revelation. That it was something she liked and never got before.

I shifted my hips and fell back so I laid sideways on the couch with her still over me. I stroked her hips, her waist, cupped her tits, then moved back down.

“I know a way you can get me to stop talking. Sit on my face, sugar.”



LINDY

“WHA—”

Without any effort, Dex lifted me up and over his face.

OVER. HIS. FACE.

He might call me a bad girl, but I’d never done this.

My knees settled on either side of his head, but I sat back on his chest because this was a whole new level of naughty.

“Sit on my face,” he repeated.

“Holy shit, Dex, I’ve never done that before. Ever.”

Dex, sprawled on the couch, *dressed*, was hot as hell. His chest was so broad my knees barely touched the couch. His hair was tousled, his eyes hooded. The way he moved me, his strength was obvious, but his touch was gentle. Reverent even, which was odd considering this... encounter was far from sweet.

There were no rose petals or champagne. Not even a bed. We’d barely made it ten feet in the door because he wanted me that much.

Why was I pausing? Why was I even thinking right now?

“I love that you’re just bad for me,” he said, his voice somehow deeper than usual. “Sugar, if you don’t–”

No, I did. I wasn’t going to hold back now. I couldn’t. Like Aspen said, I owed it to women everywhere.

No. Forget that. I owed it to myself. Dex wanted me. Wanted me to sit on his face.

So I was going to sit on his gorgeous face.

I lifted up onto my knees and looked straight down at him. My bra was tucked under my breasts, and I looked at him past my hard nipples.

“You’re right. You need to stop talking.”

Setting my hands on the arm of the couch above his head, I shifted forward and then did as he requested.

I settled right over Dex James’ mouth.

He groaned. I moaned.

His hot breath fanned my pussy, even through the lace panties. His nose slid up and down as if he was breathing in my scent.

Please smell good. Please smell good. As a woman, I had a moment of panic.

He lifted me slightly, used a finger to slide my thong to the side. There wasn’t much to it so it was easy for him to bare me.

“Fuck. You’re gorgeous. So pink. So wet.”

His fingers tightened as he pulled me down and went to town.

As in downtown. Right downtown. The man didn't need directions. Or a map. No compass. His sense of direction on finding my clit was perfect.

"Oh fuck," I cried when he did this suction kind of tugging thing. Then a swirl. Was that a twist of his tongue?

I couldn't hold myself up and dropped my weight to my forearms on the arm rest. That angle shift had his mouth focused solely on my clit as he slid his fingers through my folds.

Then into me.

I arched my back and moaned. No, it was a cry. A gasp. It probably sounded like a sick whale who'd beached himself, but I'd make that sound all day long if he kept at it.

"Don't stop. Don't stop. Dex, don't you fucking dare stop."

Did I feel his lips shift into a smile as he mouth and finger fucked me?

He should because he was skilled. So skilled that when he did some kind of rubbing thing with his fingers along with a twirly, licking, swirling thing with his tongue, I came.

I screamed. Shook. Clenched. Went completely and totally blank.

I wasn't sure how long it took before I realized I might be smothering him, because not only was my pussy in his face, but my thighs were clamped tight against his ears. I scooped back and down his chest with zero finesse.

He licked his lips and smiled, then reached up and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

I had no idea why that was such a turn on, but even though I just came, I was ready for more. I was energized for round two. Sliding back even further, I moved below his hips and started tugging on his track pants.

“Condom, sugar.”

I looked up his fully clothed body—why was he still dressed?—and shook my head. “Not for what I have in mind.”

His fingers slipped into my hair and held me in place when I tried to get my mouth on him in return.

His dark eyes met mine. Held. Pierced. “The first time I come it’s going to be in that sweet pussy. And I know how sweet it is.”

I clenched down on nothing at his words and replied with a breathy, “Hurry.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, he groaned, then I was lifted again and set on my feet between the couch and the coffee table. Dex sat up, leaned forward and tossed me over his shoulder. I bounced as he strode into the bedroom and dropped me on the bed.

“Dex!” I said, laughing.

With one hand behind his neck, he pulled off his long-sleeved shirt, at the same time as he toed off his running shoes. I stared at the expanse of perfect muscular chest.

“Condom, sugar. In the drawer.” He tipped his head in that direction.

As I crawled across the bed and opened the drawer, I realized he’d done this before. Here, in this little house he just rented. If he kept condoms in the drawer, where all guys kept

them for easy access, then I wasn't his first on this vacation of his.

I didn't like that sick feeling, but this was a fling. A fling! I should be thankful he was prepared because I hadn't even considered condoms.

With the drawer opened, I expected to see a few stray condom packets, but there was a box, still wrapped in plastic. I pulled it out, then sat on the bed.

"Are all these for me?" I asked.

He winked, then pushed down his pants and boxers at the same time. He stepped out of them—and toed off his socks quickly—then rose to his full height.

Gripping the base of his dick, he gave it a slow pump.

I blinked and stared. And watched the sight before me. His long fingers wrapped around his impressive length. The flared head was a plum color and with each stroke a bead of cum seeped from the slit at the top.

"I got them after I met you. Hoping. No one else, sugar."

His gaze raked me over.

"The sight of you in my bed, that bra barely on and those panties pulled to the side so I can see how pink and eager you are for me, is hot as fuck. I can jack off to it, but I'd rather you get that box open and you protected so I can fuck you like we both need."

"Oh," I said, then worked the plastic from the package.

I tore one wrapper from the long strip, then crawled across the bed.

He tipped his head. "Put it on me."

With my teeth, I ripped the condom open, and he moved his hand away. Instead of sliding it on, I leaned forward and took the flared crown into my mouth.

“Fuck!” he shouted, his hand going immediately into my hair. He pushed me onto him so I took him deep into my mouth, then pulled me off.

His breathing was ragged, and his cheeks were flushed.

“Holy shit, you’re a bad girl,” he growled.

I smiled triumphantly because I’d made the big, brawny Dex James lose control.

He took the condom from me and quickly slid it on. Then he studied me for less than a second before he grabbed me and moved me as he wanted, this time over the edge of the bed. I was stomach down, my toes touching the wood floor. He wasn’t too rough, but he sure as hell wasn’t gentle. Mr. Man Candy liked to manhandle.

“You’re going to get fucked good and hard.” Setting a hand by my head on the bed, he leaned over me. “You want that?”

I nodded against the blanket.

“I need to hear the words, sugar,” he said as he nudged my legs wider with a knee.

“Yes,” I replied, squirming.

I couldn’t see, but I felt his knuckles and the latex-covered tip of his dick as he slid it up and down through my folds.

“Yes, what? Tell me how my bad girl wants me to fuck her for the first time.”

Oh God. His dirty talk had me close to coming again. He was dominant, bossy, and a little bit of a tease. “Why don’t you just fuck me?” I whined.

He pulled his dick away and spanked me. The crack of it was loud, but it wasn’t too hard, just enough to feel a sting and to make my clit throb. “Those aren’t the right words. Say them and you’ll get every inch crammed deep.”

“Oh fuck,” I whispered. My pussy ached for him. I tried to catch my breath, but it was no use. “Please, Dex. I need it. Hard.”

“My dick?”

“Yes, your dick. All of it. In me. So deep. Hurry.”

I squirmed some more until I felt him nudging my entrance. His hand went to my hip and gripped tight as he thrust deep. Sooo deep.

“Dex!” I cried. If the windows were open anywhere in the house, people walking by would know exactly what was going on in here.

Dex growled and held himself still. I wiggled, trying to adjust to being so full. It didn’t hurt, but he was big. Like really big.

He was right. I was crammed deep.

He pulled back, then started to fuck me. In. Out. His hips slapped into mine. His hand slid down my thigh and grabbed my knee, brought it up so I had one leg on the bed, one foot on the floor. Completely wide open.

As he took me, he didn’t stop talking. *Good girls don’t get fucked like this. Daylight, ass up. My handprint looks like I claimed you. Such a tight pussy, squeezing me and trying to*

keep me deep in you. That's right, scream my name. This naughty body was made just for me. Didn't even get your panties off and you needed me in you.

He pulled out, flipped me over, grabbed my ankles and set them on his shoulders. God, he was moving me around as he wanted, and I loved it. I had to come so I reached down to rub my clit. It was slick with my arousal and so swollen.

He batted my hand away. "Bad girl. You didn't ask."

My eyes flared.

"There's no fucking way you're coming with your fingers if you're with me. You need to come?"

I nodded, clenched down.

He pulled out, bent down so my legs stayed over his shoulders and his mouth latched onto my clit.

"Ohmygod."

The fact that I was empty after being so thoroughly... pummeled was a tease and the heat of his mouth on my clit was so intense, I came on a scream.

He stood and filled me again as I kept right on coming, fucking me hard so that I slid back across the bed.

"Fuck, Lindy. Sugar. Fuck."

He thrust deep and came, a guttural sound escaping his chest.

Wow. Holy... wow.

That had been intense. Insane. Crazy good my body was humming.

Dex caught his breath and pulled out, shifting me so I was fully on the bed. "Don't go anywhere, sugar," he said as he

strode to the bathroom to take care of the condom. “That was just pregaming.”

I licked my dry lips. “Pregaming?” I called, staring at the ceiling.

“We’ve barely touched that box of condoms. And all the things I have planned.”



DEX

“How come you never married one of the women in the photos?” she asked.

We were in bed eating pizza directly from the box. While we got it from the amazing place on Main Street, we had it delivered this time. Lindy was in one of my t-shirts nibbling on a crust. If she stayed naked, I was going to fuck her again. We did it twice back-to-back and I was sure her pussy needed a break.

A short one because I had plenty on my own special list to check off.

“You looked me up.”

It wasn't a question. It was only a matter of time before she did. When we talked at the rink, I knew she'd learned some things about me, but the gossip photos... yeah, a sore spot.

“When Aspen told me who you are—”

I set my hand on her bare calf. “Sugar, you know who I am.”

She cocked her head and smiled. “What you do, that you’re a hockey player, she was so surprised I had no clue.”

“You don’t follow sports. It’s okay.”

“She was surprised not because I live in a sports-free bubble, but because you’re so popular. So good at what you do.”

“It takes an entire team to win a game,” I said. Sure, I was good, but the league was filled with talented athletes. I wasn’t going to start spouting things like *There is no I in TEAM* or inspirational shit like that, but hockey was a team sport.

“I’m sure the entire team then has social media followings like yours. Game photos. Locker room shots. Interviews. Magazine covers. I didn’t even know you were one of the Sexiest Men of the Year.”

“As long as *you* think I’m sexy.”

She looked me over where I was sprawled on the bed, propped up on my elbow in just my boxers.

“You’ll do.”

I leaned forward and gave her bare ass—which was only partially covered by my shirt the way she was sitting—a playful swat.

She giggled. I smiled, loving her this way. Relaxed. Smiling. Bare except an article of my clothing. Her hair wild and messy.

“Nothing happened with any of those women.”

Her smile slipped and she tossed the crust onto the open box between us. “It’s none of my business.”

Just like any man in her life who came before me. Lindy wasn't young like her sister, who didn't have a long history of lovers. She was thirty-five. I wasn't naïve to think she hadn't had her fair share of guys in her bed.

"It is. I want you to know the truth, not what you read or see online."

She studied me. "Okay. Tell me."

"I'm not sure if you heard anything from Bridget, but my father—Mav's father, too—was an asshole. If cheating was a sport, he'd be an Olympic champion. My brothers are close in age, then there's me, a few years younger even than Theo. He left for college when I was in sixth grade. I was the only child really for years. I wanted my dad's attention. His affection. When he took me to my hockey practices or games—instead of the family driver—I was thrilled, thinking this would be it. Dad wants to be with me. That he'll cheer me on like other parents."

I ran my fingers over the pattern in the blanket, remembering clearly everything I was sharing. How pleased and special I felt. Then hurt.

"He'd drop me off and disappear. From the bench, or sometimes even from the ice, I'd see him flirting with women. Young ones. Not illegal or anything, but not his age. When I got older, I realized he was going off somewhere in the building and fucking them. He used the rink as his prowling area."

She crinkled her nose. "That's pretty gross. Why didn't your mom divorce him?"

I shrugged. "I don't know the answer to that. He died a few years ago. I don't miss him. Neither do my brothers. I

don't think my mom does either. But none of us have asked her why she stayed. It's not our business."

"I'm sorry he was a jerk."

I chuckled. "Hockey was my escape from the house. Silas took me with him one time to free skate, just for fun. I was six. I saw kids playing hockey and I wanted to do it. So I started. Then it became my life. On the rink I could leave my life behind. I just skated. Played. People said I was dedicated, but I only wanted to forget. I got a full ride to play in Minnesota, but I wasn't there a semester before I was drafted. At eighteen, I wasn't prepared for the life. The games, the drinking. On the road all the time. Partying. Women. It's exactly what you think, and it didn't make a difference I was so young. The only thing I was used to was the money. Some guys get money blind, or spend like crazy, but I came from it so I didn't lose my shit. I won't lie and say I didn't party or work my way through a lot of hockey bunnies, but I quickly started seeing my dad in me. Being at a rink or a bar and not even getting a name."

"You were a teenager. I'd be surprised if you didn't want to sleep around. And if women were throwing themselves at you? How could they resist?"

I grinned.

"I stopped. Cold turkey. I always wanted a family. A *real* family. Wife. Kids. Everything I didn't get growing up. Then I met you. The only woman who *didn't* throw herself at me. In fact, the only woman who built a pillow berm in bed to keep me away."

She flushed and glanced away, but the corner of her mouth turned up.

“I want a family, too,” she admitted. “I’ve been dating. A lot.”

“Like the dentist.” The guy she left to come home to me.

She nodded.

“No serious relationships at all?”

I found that surprising. She was gorgeous. Smart. Funny. Sexy as hell.

“I had a serious boyfriend the last year of college,” she admitted. I did the math. That was over ten years ago. “He was also from the area, and I thought he was the one.”

“What happened?”

Her mouth turned down. “My parents died. I became Bridget’s guardian. Overnight, I became a parent of a ten-year old girl. Carpool. Swimming lessons. Homework. Chore charts. I took the job at the accounting office because bills had to be paid. Brandon didn’t want any of that.”

I frowned, flipped the lid closed on the pizza box, took her hand and pulled her into me so I had her—albeit awkwardly—in my arms. “He ditched you when your parents died?”

“Yeah.”

“You were twenty-four?”

“Twenty-three.”

A twenty-three-year-old losing both her parents and having to raise a little girl on her own. And he was asshole enough to abandon her?

“He’s a loser,” I said. “Give me his name and the fourth line enforcers will take care of him.”

She laughed and I couldn't help but smile. "I don't know what a fourth line is but thank you."

"So you've never moved away from home?"

She snuggled into me. "I went to college in Missoula, but that's not very far. I guess... no."

"Same house. Same job."

I thought of bumping into her boss at the rink earlier and learning she wasn't spending extra hours on work-work, but something else. My little bad girl was up to something. It couldn't be all that sinister, but she was keeping it a secret. And she was serious about it with the amount of time she put in.

"Speaking of. Your job."

She stiffened, then pulled away. I let her go.

"I'm an accountant."

"Yup. That's great. You're not doing people's taxes at night. What are you doing? Moonlighting for another company?"

"No!" She looked at me with such horror like I asked her if she was running a prostitution ring out of her kitchen.

It was definitely a touchy subject, something she didn't want to share.

Tough.

"Then what? You had your laptop in Denver. Worked instead of going out with me and Mallory. Then the past two nights. What are you working on?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

She finally glanced my way. “Nothing.”

“Then I’ll ask Claudia.”

Launching herself, she jumped me, pinned my shoulders down. I was so stunned, I laughed. Moving her would be easy. She found that out when I bent her over the bed, then flipped her around like she was my little fuck doll. But I stayed still. She held me down for a reason and I wanted to find out what it was.

“Don’t ask Claudia. She doesn’t know.” She sounded panicked. Frightened even.

“Know what, sugar?” I asked, my voice soft.

Whatever it was, it was big. Important.

“Are you in trouble?” I asked, setting my hands on her hips. Her pussy was right over my dick. Only my boxers separated us, and I felt the heat of her. But if she was caught in a difficult situation, I needed to know.

“No!” she said. “It’s... embarrassing.”

I frowned and looked up at her. Studied her.

She tucked her tangled hair behind her ear. Wouldn’t look my way.

“Embarrassing? Sugar, does someone have something on you? Are you—”

“What? Why would you... oh. You’re famous and people spin things around. Has that happened to you?”

“Not me, but another player.”

“It’s nothing like that.”

“Then tell me.” I’d had enough. It was time to pull out the big threat. “Do you want me to spank it out of you?”

Her eyes flared. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would, even though I can tell that you would like it.”

She sighed. Heavily. Glanced around the room as if it was fascinating. “Ugh. Fine. Fine! I... I’m a romance author. Or I’m trying to be.”

I blinked. Processed. Grinned. “Yeah?”

Her eyes met mine, but warily. “Yeah.”

“You have anything published?”

She nodded. “I self-publish so it’s not through a big publisher or anything.”

“Holy shit, sugar, that’s awesome.” I jackknifed up so she was in my lap still, but I could kiss her.

“You think so?” She sounded so unsure.

“Why keep it a secret? I think it’s awesome.”

“Because I write steamy stuff.”

“How steamy?”

“Steamy.” She didn’t clarify and I used my imagination.

“People will think it’s word porn and I’ll be *that* pervy woman in Hunter Valley.”

“You are a pervy woman in Hunter Valley. *My* pervy woman.”

“In private. If people found out, it would be like you and the social media sites. People making their own opinions.”

“Like I said, I don’t care what other people think.”

“That’s because you don’t live in a small town where everyone knows your business. You’re a big-time hockey player with probably a PR company.”

“I do have a PR company, but sugar, I’m just a guy. I have feelings. If I let it get to me, I’d never be able to leave the house. But you... this is really cool.”

She rolled her eyes, but her blush gave away that she liked the praise. “I don’t want to be an accountant. Never have, but there wasn’t a chance to do anything else with Bridget and all. Imagine what her classmates or their mothers would say. So I waited until she was at college. It’s an afterhours thing. *My* thing.”

“What does Bridget think?”

“She doesn’t know. No one knows.”

“I understand your feelings on this. I do, more than anyone probably.”

“Yeah, maybe you do. Then you understand why I want it a secret.”

“Okay, it can be a secret, but not from me. No secrets for us. Can I read it?”

Her eyes flared. “No!”

“No? You *are* a bad girl. You’re corrupting me, you know. I’m young and impressionable.”

Now she rolled her eyes. She shifted and I let her go. Picking up the pizza box, she turned and set it on the floor on the side of the bed. Then she came back to me, leaned down. Kissed me.

“I want to corrupt you some more then.” She bit her lip and her eyes took on a playful look.

“Yes, ma’am.” I grabbed her and pulled her beneath me. I’d learn more about this romance writing thing. Not now. She wanted to corrupt me? Game fucking on.



LINDY

I DIDN'T BUILD a berm when we went to sleep. If I was a more fanciful, complicated writer, I'd think of the berm as some kind of metaphor for my resistance to Dex. As soon as I gave in to the idea of a fling, the berm disappeared.

My emotional berm was gone. It was oddly liberating.

Had I been so controlling over what I wanted that I ignored the here and now? Was I looking to the future and not enjoying the present?

The answer was definitely yes, but with a big asterisk. I was enjoying the now, knowing that it was temporary. That I'd deal with the emotional fallout later, because there would be one. I'd been able to miss everything about the hockey world until now, but I had a feeling I'd be seeing Dex everywhere. With a town like Hunter Valley thinking we were dating, or even living together as Aspen mentioned, there were going to be questions.

I wasn't the only one who was going to be disappointed Dex left. The entire flipping town was going to miss him.

But that was later. I was in fling-time and people in flings were carefree and orgasm-sated. That was me. All week.

Tuesday morning, I woke on top of Dex. Then I was *on top* of Dex. Riding him. I skipped my yoga workout for a much more pleasurable kind. There was still a lot of deep breathing and panting. And sweating. And being bent into lots of weird positions.

Wednesday morning, I woke with Dex's head between my thighs, licking me to orgasm. I was late for work, and I didn't even panic because I was too satisfied to really care.

Thursday morning, I woke to him behind me, but he pushed me onto my stomach and took me from behind. I skipped yoga. Again. Aspen would understand.

Friday morning, I woke to him packing.

"Where are you going?" I asked, my voice soft as I wrapped around my arms around my pillow.

"Finland," he said, tossing some gym socks into a duffel.

I sat up, adjusting the strap on my nightie. For some reason, Dex didn't want me naked in his bed while we slept. He liked the little outfits I wore, found them sexy. He didn't take them off me when he fucked me, and I felt... ravaged. At first, I felt like he didn't want to see me naked, but he saw everything anyway. It was often gathered around my waist as we fucked, as if he couldn't wait another second for me to take it off for him to be in me.

"*Finland?* Why?"

"Exhibition game on Sunday."

"Exhibition game. That means you're playing a hockey game for fun... in Finland."

He looked up, gave me a smile. Outside of the photos online, he was dressed in the nicest clothes yet. Dress pants and a button up shirt. He looked hot. Or I was in withdrawal from lack of morning sex. “Pretty much.”

“In Finland? Can’t you do it somewhere closer?”

He shrugged. “I’ve done one in Orlando. Edmonton. Stockholm. The best players in the league are invited to play. It’s a special game that fans love, especially in the off season. The advertisers do too because it makes them a lot of money. It’s in all players’ contracts to participate if chosen.”

“From all the fans.”

“Right.”

“The league is showing you off.”

He full out grinned now. “Pretty much.”

“That’s cool you’re invited. You’re special.”

He came around the bed, sat on the edge, stroked my hair back. “All I care about is if you think I’m special.”

When he said things like that, when he touched me gently and almost reverently, it made that berm I carefully built around my heart begin to weaken.

“How long will you be gone?” Did I sound needy and clingy because I felt it. A few days in his bed without a berm and I craved him.

This was a problem.

“I have a meeting later this morning with a potential sponsor in Chicago. OutdoorNow wants me to be their spokesperson.”

“OutdoorNow? Wow. That’s... wow.” It was the biggest outdoor company around. That they wanted Dex to represent them was really cool. Daunting. A little crazy. I could feel the excitement in him for it.

“Do they want you to model in your underwear?” I teased.

“Only for you, sugar. I don’t have the deal yet. After the meeting, I’m on the overnight flight to Finland. I’ll be back on Monday night.”

Monday. As in three days from now. I felt a pang of loneliness, of missing him, and he was right here.

He was leaving. Just as I told Bridget and Aspen he would.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner?”

“Sugar, in the mornings, you’ve had my mouth too busy to tell you. Then you work all day and I’ve been coaching while you’re writing at night.”

It was true. We’ve been busy. Once word spread that Dex had coached Aspen’s Polar Bears and had been swayed to help with the boys’ team after, all the kid teams wanted him to help out and he didn’t say no. He was there from three until after nine ever since.

“This isn’t me giving you updates on my house construction,” I reminded. “It’s Finland, not Fargo.”

His shoulders drooped and he gave me a slightly sheepish look. “Okay. Right, I’m sorry. I pushed it off because I want to be here with you with nothing else in the way. Besides, you’re keeping your writing a secret.”

“I told you about it,” I countered. “And I don’t do that work from Finland.”

He gave me a look for that added sass on the end. “You’re still not letting me read it.”

“No way.” The latest book was hotter and more intense than the others I wrote. I was happy with what I typed, but what would Dex think? He said I was a bad girl, but that was all part of sexy times. I was so far from bad that it was ridiculous. Besides, it didn’t matter if I shared my latest story with him or not. He was going to Finland. And then back to Denver and all the trips that went with the hockey season.

Why should I show him my story if he wasn’t sticking?

“You’ll be back in Hunter Valley, on Monday, or Denver?”

“Here. In this bed with you.” He patted the empty spot beside me.

I flushed thinking of all the things we’ve done in this bed.

He sighed. “I’ve got to go. Plane’s waiting. It’s still early so go back to sleep.”

He leaned in, kissed me, but I turned my head away. “Dex! No! I’ve got horrible morning breath.” While his smelled minty fresh.

He laughed, then kissed my forehead.

“I’ll call you from Finland. Be good. You can be bad when I get back.”



DEX

“FOR THE PAST YEAR, we’ve thought you’d be a great fit with our company.”

Ellen Masters, the CEO of OutdoorNow sat across from me at a huge conference table in the corporate office in Chicago. Three colleagues sat with her along one side, and I was on the other. My agent, Scott, was beside me.

The high-rise view out the wall-to-wall windows was pretty spectacular. After spending over a week in Montana, I missed all the green. The open spaces. The lack of people.

Hunter Valley was changing my perspective.

For a business that built their brand on adventure, they looked far from outdoorsy in their crisp corporate attire. I didn’t look much like a hockey player in my own suit. This was business though. Big business. The number they were proposing in the contract would be greater than the one I had with the Silvermines.

I sat up straighter and adjusted my suit at her words.

“But the bar incident in June really had us thinking twice.” She glanced at the others who nodded.

I looked to Scott, who didn’t even blink. He’d told me in the elevator that I’d have to withstand their thoughts and opinions on the fight to get through the meeting.

“While I’d like to apologize for what happened, I won’t,” I said.

One of the women to Ellen’s right sucked in a breath, clearly surprised.

I held up my hand hoping they’d let me finish what I had to say on the topic. “I’m not denying responsibility or diminishing what happened, but the unvarnished truth—without any kind of media spin—is that a woman was being bullied and harassed. Verbally, but the words were sexually threatening. I won’t stand by and let this happen. The man refused to back down or listen to reason, which I tried first. He threw the first punch, and I threw the second.”

I paused and out of the corner watched Scott’s jaw clench. His commission was on the line.

“You’re saying you condone violence,” Ellen stated, her words spoken carefully.

I shook my head. “No. I defend myself if attacked and I defend those who are not as strong as me. Note, I didn’t say weak. The woman at the center of this wasn’t—*isn’t*—weak. She was being threatened by someone bigger and a danger to her. I stood up to her bully for her. There’s nothing I can do about how it went viral on social media, without context I might add, and how I was turned into an enforcer off the ice.”

“Which is why we question you for a partnership. You’d be joining our family and our customers will believe what they

see online and in the media.”

“I won’t stop protecting others, sponsorship or not. You should respect that about me. My teammates and others who were there do.”

I held my breath because this was the moment.

Ellen took a moment, as if she was making her final decision, or just torturing me.

“Which is why the latest round of news about you is what we feel is the actual Dex James.”

I frowned and glanced at Scott, gave him a, *What’s she talking about?* look.

“Haven’t seen the latest?” Ellen asked, sounding amused.

“I’ve been in Montana.” I made it seem like the state had no internet or social media access.

Scott pulled out his cell, swiped on it a few times, then handed it to me. He must’ve screen captured articles and posts because one after the other were photos of me on the ice with the kids at the winter complex. In one, I had a cone on my head and led the girls through a fun skating drill. I couldn’t help but smile at the photo. Another was where I was high fiving a line of boys as they left the ice at the end of practice. Fuck yeah, that had been a good time.

“Yes, we know,” Ellen added.

I kept scrolling. Oh shit.

There were the ones of me and Lindy. Nothing racy at all because we’d never once kissed in public. There was one where we were holding hands outside the complex. Another with us sitting on the bench together by the rink. I was smiling

at her in a way that anyone could see meant I was into her. I scanned the headlines.

Does Dex have a Dame?

Sexy Dexy and the Montana Mystery Woman

Dex James: Brawler or Boyfriend?

Sexy Dexy. Fuck, I hated that. It sounded like I was a porn star or in an all-male revue.

Besides that, I was fine being plastered all over social media, but Lindy wasn't. It was to be expected though, people speculating about a woman in my life. I didn't imagine it would happen this fast, or without me even realizing. Paparazzi hadn't swarmed us. I hadn't even seen one flash, but that meant nothing these days.

I should have known. I'd been in bed with Lindy this morning and she hadn't known anything about this then, because she totally would have said something. So it was either new, or she didn't do much social media. Maybe both. Except Mallory did and I had no doubt knew all about this. I had to wonder why she'd stayed quiet. Giving me a chance with Lindy, perhaps?

What was she going to think when she saw it? Panic? Get angry? Hide? She didn't want anyone to know she was a romance author and now her life was going to be splashed all over the world. If the media went digging...

"It seems you've turned your image around," Ellen added. "A special woman?"

I didn't even take a breath before responding. "Yes, I have a special woman in my life now. Hopefully she wants to keep me because I sure as hell plan to keep her. Ellen, I'm the same person I've always been, girlfriend or not," I countered, then

set the phone down and looked at the four across the table. “I want to work with OutdoorNow. I have for a long time. Your business and philanthropic goals align with mine and I see a long-term future together, one where we can hopefully make some kids lives better. I hope you do, too.”

Ellen finally—*finally!*—smiled. “We do as well. I understand you are off to Finland for an exhibition game. We don’t want you to miss your flight. We’ll work the details out with Scott.”

That was it? Grill, grill, grill and then go? She’d already made up her mind about me but seemed to want to hear what I had to say. A reasonable action, although she could have said we were a go before the cross examination.

I stood, buttoned my suit jacket.

“Welcome to the team,” she said, standing as well and holding out her hand.

Reaching across the table, I shook it and grinned, finally at ease. Except what about Lindy and the media? I couldn’t return to Montana and shield her. I was off to fucking Finland.



LINDY

I KNOCKED on the door of Mav's rental house. Bridget texted mid-afternoon telling me to come over for dinner and if I didn't show up, they'd send Scout out to find me.

I laughed at my desk because Scout was so smart he'd definitely find me, but with his little dog legs, he might take a while.

Mav opened the door, dish towel slung over his shoulder. He had on the Steaming Hotties t-shirt. Again.

"I think you have a thing for pink," I said as I stepped past him into the house. Scout appeared with too much speed and slid into my calves. I gave him a pet.

"I have a thing for your sister and this shirt reminds me of her."

I glanced up at him from my crouch. "Seriously?"

"I lost a bet with Theo," he admitted, a soft smile turning up the corner of his mouth.

The place was massive, probably three times the size of my little house. While Mav was built like a TV wrestler and needed things supersized, no one person needed six or seven bedrooms. Even temporarily.

But I didn't have a house either at the moment, so I wasn't one to say anything about temporary housing.

I followed voices into the kitchen while Mav and Scout veered toward open French doors and a patio beyond. The scent of grilled meat made my mouth water so I assumed he was grill master. Bridget was at the center island slicing tomatoes and a man was settled on a stool across from her. He was attractive with light brown hair and fair eyes. There was a half-finished glass of beer in front of him which meant he'd been here for a bit.

"Hey!" Bridget said, turning her brilliant smile on me. She used the back of her hand to push her glasses up. "This is Theo, one of Mav's other brothers."

Theo stood, nodded in greeting. "Hi."

"This is Lindy, my sister," Bridget said, making introductions.

"The doctor," I said, as if I could tell the four apart by their professions. "Nice to meet you."

Theo looked nothing like Dex. Or Mav. He was tall, over six feet, and solid, he didn't have the bulk of the other two. I knew there was one more brother, Silas, but hadn't met or seen a photo of him.

He studied me and I tried not to squirm. Was he always this intense? "Lindy. Ah, it all makes sense now."

I frowned because I had no idea what that meant.

“You mean her and Dex? I know, right?” Bridget said, putting the slices on a plate.

“Know what?” I asked, glancing between them.

Bridget set the knife down and turned to lean a hip against the counter and put a hand on her hip. “Know that you and Dex have been very *busy* this week. That’s why I didn’t even text you. You should be proud I showed such restraint.”

I hadn’t even thought about it. Or much else since we’d been *busy*.

“Yes, I had work and Dex got roped into coaching every kids’ hockey team in town.”

“Not that.” She rolled her eyes, then waggled them. “I mean you took my advice.”

I blushed, remembering what she and Aspen had pushed for on Monday during Sierra’s practice. It was impossible not to. The things that Dex and I did since I told him I wanted him to fuck me were naughty and extensive.

“And what I said stands, too. He’s temporary,” I reminded her, again. “On his way to Finland right now. Finland! I mean, I’m sure it’s a lovely country and all, but that proves my point even more.”

“Finland’s great though. Amazing saunas. Ever been?” Theo asked.

“To a sauna or Finland? No to both,” I replied. I wanted to travel, but that country wasn’t that high on my list.

“You could’ve gone with him,” Bridget prodded.

“To Finland?” I asked, a little surprised. “He told me this morning about three minutes before he left.”

“No kidding. I came up to hang with him and he never told me he was headed out of town. I can see why now.”

I frowned and pushed on. “I have a job. I can’t just go to Finland.”

How many times did I say Finland?

Bridget narrowed her eyes. “He’s coming back... Sunday?”

“Monday.” Even longer. He only left this morning, and I was counting the hours. This feeling I had... longing, was a big problem. I wasn’t supposed to be so... needy with a fling.

“Still...”

“He has training camp or preseason or whatever in September,” I told her, pointing out his upcoming schedule.

“It’s July!” Bridget said, as if I needed a reminder.

“It’s not Hunter Valley.”

“He meets everything under the toaster,” she reminded, referring to my man list.

“Except he won’t be here.”

“Toaster? Are you talking in girl code?” Theo asked.

We turned to look at him. I wasn’t sure if the guy was aloof or serious or intense or what. I thought Mav was like a block of ice, keeping his emotions and words in check, but Mav was a stand-up comedian in comparison to his brother.

Bridget glanced at me, then gave Theo a smile. “Yes.”

I was relieved she wasn’t going to tell him that I was fucking the cum from his little brother’s balls. God, I was starting to think like I wrote in my books. *Cum from Dex’s balls?*

Hmm... I should write that down for later.

“Dex told me you’re an accountant.”

I came out of my sexy story thoughts and stared at Theo.
“Yes, that’s right.”

Bridget went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of wine.

“What else did he say about me?”

“I’d tell you, but it was all in boy code.”

Bridget put a glass of wine in my hand as I smirked at Theo. He smirked back. So he did smile. Barely.

“I’m here!”

Mallory’s shout was followed by a door slam. Scout dashed from the patio across the living room and to the front door and followed it with a loud bark.

“Who’s a good boy?” Mallory crooned, praising Scout.
“Oh, yes you are. You are such a good boy. You want scratches? Right there. Oh, you like that, don’t you?” Then she laughed. “You’re such a licker! God, Scout, that tongue is insane.”

Theo cleared his throat and I glanced at Bridget who rolled her eyes at the way her best friend was talking to a dog. It almost sounded... naughty.

“Bridge, I’ve been keeping tabs on all the articles about your sister and D—”

Mallory finally gave up on petting Scout and came into the kitchen. Froze. So did her words. It was clear she wasn’t expecting me, but the way she was staring at Theo, he was a bigger surprise and the one to shut her up.

As a first-grade teacher, she had her summers off and definitely made the most of them. I'd known her since she and Bridget met in kindergarten and she was the most outgoing, extraverted person I knew. It was good because Bridget was the opposite and after our parents died, she'd really helped Bridget. I loved her like she was a second little sister.

Except now when she was keeping tabs on me and Dex. As in together.

"Theo," she whispered, and a flush crept up her neck as she patted her hair.

I glanced at Bridget again and she gave me a wink.

"Mallory," Theo replied. The look in his eyes was subdued, because the guy was super chill, but I couldn't miss the way he took in every inch of her.

Hmm...

"I... I didn't know you were in town," Mallory said, bouncing back from her surprise and settling into a stool next to Theo. *Right* next to him.

"Yes. Took the weekend off. Dex has been telling me on the phone how amazing things are up here and I had to see for myself."

"But you were just here... what? Last week?"

Theo flicked his gaze to me, and Mallory tracked it.

"Oh. *Oh!* How's everything going with the house, Lindy? Have to stay with Dex for much longer?"

"Mav got Bixby as contractor," Bridget explained, even though Mallory's question was directed at me. "He's been working the James Inn job but since all that's happening there right now is the last of the framing, he's taking care of our

house. Coordinating with the roofers and whoever else needs to be involved.”

I nodded because on Monday, Mav had offered his person’s services and I had no intention of turning him down. I had to admit—to myself—that having someone else take care of this problem was a relief. Especially since my free time, which wasn’t much, was spent in bed with Dex.

“Yes. He calls me with daily updates,” I said. Progress was being made. Power and gas were turned back on and the framing to the hole in the roof was complete. Shingles were next and then they’d move on to the holes in the side of the house, which were boarded up. A new stove was on order along with replacement windows.

“So you’re doing okay out of the house?” she prodded.

“Managing,” I replied neutrally.

She arched a brow, then pulled out her cell. “Well, it seems you’re *managing* really well.” She turned her phone around to face us, but neither Bridget nor I could read it. I went around the expansive counter to take it from her. “I set an alert for Dex’s name.”

I scrolled through the latest and there I was. On social media. And a sports website. And... “I’m in *Right Now* magazine?”

I leafed through a copy at the hairdresser and now I was *in it?*

Mallory clapped her hands with glee. “It’s insane, right? I’d say Dex is *In A Relationship*.”

I glanced at Bridget. “Did you know about this?”

She smiled. “Only after Mallory pointed it out. But it’s all good. Cute.”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I said, scanning one of the articles.

Mav came in with a platter of burgers, set them on the island next to a bag of rolls.

“You sure about that?” he asked.

“Dex seems to think you’re special,” Theo added.

I stared at all of them, and they were eyeing me with... expectation?

“How many times do I have to say the same thing?” I asked to no one in particular. No, to all of them, because I felt ganged up on.

“His age shouldn’t matter,” Mallory pointed out.

I waved her off. “Yeah, I’ve let that one go.” That happened when he had the endurance to fuck me three different ways before he came that first time. “But can I just narrow down my issues to say he travels for work? I can’t be in a relationship with a man who’s never around. I want kids. It’s pretty hard to get pregnant when you’re three thousand miles apart.”

“You’re trying to get pregnant with Dex? That was fast. Can I be Auntie Mallory?”

I spun around and glared at Mallory. It was the mother-deathray glare she was very familiar with. From times like when she and Bridget cut each other’s bangs in fifth grade to the time they walked home from a tenth-grade party drunk.

I hadn’t even thought about kids with Dex. My children were non-existent, amorphous blobs of my future. Seeing Dex

with the hockey kids, I knew he'd be good with them. But I was sticking with what I said. Dex wasn't in the running because he was a fling. And I didn't have children with a fling. Especially when his dick was four thousand miles away. Sure, I could get off with one of my sex toys, but the last I heard, they didn't inseminate you.

“What did I tell you Mallory Mornay about this when you and Bridget were fourteen.”

She rolled her eyes.

“You never want to be a Baby Mama,” she and Bridget said at the same time.

I pointed at her and kept the glare. “Exactly.”

“Babies aside, if you want to be together, you make it work,” Mav said. He gave Bridget a sweet glance.

I frowned. “He's on a plane to Finland right now. It's not like he can quit the Silvermines, move to Hunter Valley and coach kids' hockey. He has a contract. And I wouldn't want him to quit for me anyway. It's his thing. His passion. I would never expect him to choose.”

Just like I had to give up my dream when our parents died. I'd given up the idea of being an author because it wasn't stable. There was no guaranteed income. No health benefits or retirement plan. I had to let it go for a stable job and while I never regretted taking care of Bridget, I put my life on hold. Only now was I starting to get it back and with this latest book, with how the words were really coming and I was excited about the story, I understood what it was like to have a *thing*.

“You could quit,” Theo tossed out there.

“Quit my job?” I asked. “How am I going to pay my bills?”

I didn't have a James fortune or a contract with a professional hockey team. Sure, I wanted to become successful enough with my writing to quit, but that didn't seem like it was going to happen anytime soon, no matter how fast I typed.

Bridget gave me a soft smile and nodded. She understood, even though she was living in this big fancy house now. Mav would take care of her financially, no question. She wanted to work, to make her mark. She was still waiting to hear about the long-term sub job at the high school. She wanted to work no matter how many zeroes she'd have in her bank account once she and Mav married.

Because they were going to. I knew it. They knew it. Scout probably even knew it.

Mallory frowned. “Well, that sucks. But please tell me you're having one hell of a fling with Dex and his hockey stick. That he's scored. Again and again. Maybe he's been rough, and you've allowed him into your penalty bo—”

“Okay then,” Theo said, hopping to his feet. “Hamburger, anyone?”



DEX

THE TIME DIFFERENCE between Finland and Montana was a bitch. When I arrived, Lindy was asleep. In my bed. I didn't text because I didn't want to wake her. I went right to the rink where the exhibition game was going to happen and I connected with my team. We had hours of practice before media time.

Lined up outside the boards were news outlets from all over the world, ready to interview players. It was like a receiving line at a wedding, but we were hockey players in our home team's uniforms and skates.

Sports Now was first.

"How's the off season going?" the guy asked. He was American and had on jeans and a t-shirt with his company's logo on it. It reminded me of Mav in the coffee shop shirt.

"It's great to be here with so many talented players," I said.

"Back in June, you were keeping that right hook warmed up for the ice."

“You mean the incident that’s spread across social media.”
I was being clear on what he was talking about.

“That’s right.”

“I made my statement after it happened, and I stand by it.”
I wasn’t giving him anything new. I protected a woman, and she didn’t need to be dragged back into the spotlight over something so minor as a douchebag’s broken nose. If I wasn’t Dex James, the incident would have been nothing more than a little action for the bar’s bouncers instead of making sports news.

“You must be feeling pretty lucky your girlfriend—the one we’ve all seen you with in Montana, of all places—doesn’t mind you’re an enforcer off the ice.”

Enforcers were usually fourth line and took care of any opposing team players who wanted to fuck with a first or even second line guy like me, or the goalie. They were the ones who had the on-ice fights. I never got into them because no one wanted risking me getting hurt by a sucker punch or a broken hand. My job was to score, not fight. But off ice?

The guy’s question was a double middle finger to me. He was calling out my personal life and the bullshit spin the media put on the bar fight.

I bristled, but I was being filmed. Every nuance of my demeanor, my tone, my words, were going to be scrutinized. He was trying to stir up shit because there was nothing else on me. He knew it.

I did interviews all the time during the season. There was a Silvermines PR person who worked with all the players on how to talk to the press and I used everything I’d learned over the years. *Stay calm, stay positive, be brief, don’t rant, tell the*

truth. I grinned and pointed at myself. “My woman, lucky? Hell, I’m the lucky one. It’s better than the draft, being a first-round pick by someone as perfect as she is.”



LINDY

I SPENT all day Saturday writing. I even put on my noise canceling headphones to block out the world. While Dex's neighbors didn't have any tall trees, I wasn't taking any chances with any kind of distraction. I hadn't gotten as far as I wanted in my story this week, and I needed to get through as much as I could. Since Dex now knew what I was up to, I'd been waiting for him to somehow read my draft. But other than him mentioning it once in bed, he hadn't pushed.

With Dex away, I got into the zone and wrote, although my muse was with me and telling me all the naughty things to add. I didn't even go to the grocery store with my list, just ate leftover pizza from the other night. On Sunday, Lucy joined me in a writing sprint on the video chat after she dropped off her daughter at a birthday party.

"Top of the hour. Share," she said, her face in a little window in the bottom corner of my laptop. We wrote in thirty-minute intervals, then took a break.

I sat back, rubbed my eyes. "Chapter fourteen," I told her. "I'm getting a snack."

Climbing from the chair, I stretched and went to the counter and grabbed a banana from the bunch in a bowl.

“Holy shit, Lind. That’s... wow. So good. I’m loving this story. And it’s hot as hell.”

I dropped into the seat. Her praise meant so much because our author-friend rule had always been to be brutally honest. There were so many chapters and scenes we’d tweaked or cut entirely because of each other’s advice.

“Thanks,” I said, peeling the banana. “It’s been quick to write. I’ll definitely be able to finish for the editor in time and I don’t have to panic about the pre-order.”

“You’ve definitely gotten the words in since last week, but I can’t believe all that’s happened. I mean, right after we talked that tree fell on your house!”

While we hadn’t video chatted or written together since last Saturday, we emailed and I told her about the house.

“Yeah, God. It’s crazy. Mav—that’s Bridget’s boyfriend—has pretty much taken over getting everything fixed.”

“He seems like a really great guy. But I don’t want to hear about him. I want to hear about his brother. I told you he was your muse. The guy who put that smile on your face and inspiration to write the sexiest sex scene in the West.” She fanned herself and laughed.

“He’s... inspirational,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

“Tell me his dick’s bigger than that banana.”

I glanced at the just peeled fruit, waved it in front of the camera.

“It is.”

“And you’ve gotten your face that close to it.”

I grinned. “I have.”

“Then get off the computer and go get that big banana.”

“That big banana is in Finland.” I took a bite of the one in my hand. Definitely smaller in my mouth than Dex’s.

That thought made me feel happy, excited and aroused all at once. I was having a fling with a fun, hot man. I knew what his dick felt like in my mouth. And that made me hot. And lonely.

“For an exhibition hockey game,” I added, because clearly Lucy didn’t follow hockey any more than I did. I glanced at the clock on my screen. “Which is tonight. Or soon since they’re ahead nine hours.” Yeah, I checked the time difference.

“Oh. Then get off the phone and go watch your man in action.”

“He’s my fling, not my man,” I clarified, making sure she knew it couldn’t get serious. I was making sure *I* knew it wasn’t getting serious. Although I was sitting in his house, my bathroom products mixed in with his. Our laundry was piled together in the hamper.

“Riiiiiiight.”

A knock on the door had me looking up. Bridget and Mallory came in, arms loaded down with reusable grocery bags. Mallory, as usual, was dressed in cute shorts with a striped shirt. Her hair was half up-half down and she had on makeup. Bridget was in cut-off jean shorts, a white tank top, and her hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun. I went shopping more with Mallory when the girls were young than Bridget.

“We brought snacks for the hockey game,” Bridget announced.

“Gotta watch Sexy Dexy in action,” Mallory added.

God, that nickname was awful. But he was sexy.

I glanced at Lucy on the screen. “Mallory and Bridget are here to do that. Gotta go.”

Lucy waved at me, and I slammed the lid shut on my laptop. I popped the last piece of banana in my mouth as they put the bags on the kitchen counter.

“Chips and salsa. Hummus. Spicy barbecue chips,” Mallory listed as she pulled things out.

“Guac?” I asked.

Bridget pulled two avocados from her bag. “Happening.”

“I’ve never watched a game knowing a player before. This is so exciting,” Mallory said.

“Where are the guys?” I asked, pulling flavored seltzers from the fridge. Mav wasn’t usually far from Bridget these days.

In the week I’d been living with Dex—no, living in Dex’s house—I learned he was a partial health nut. Of course he exercised. He didn’t need to be on a pro hockey team for me to know that. I only had to get him naked and touch every inch of that hard, muscled body.

He didn’t like gratuitous sugar—his words—in things like soda and his idea of a snack was fruit.

So I’d compromise on that and have guac and seltzer with my spicy chips. Avocado was a fruit.

“Went for a hike,” Mallory said. “They’ve seen Dex play before.”

“Have you talked to him since he left?” Bridget asked.

I shook my head. “Just a few texts but not back and forth. He said they’re on a crazy schedule.”

“Did you watch his interview?” Bridget asked.

“No. Why?”

“He didn’t tell you about it?” She glanced at Mallory, just like when they were little and had a shared secret.

“Out with it.” I curled my fingers in a *gimme* gesture.

Mallory pulled out her phone and did some swiping. “Here.” She thrust it at me.

It was a sports website and I clicked on the video. A sportscaster was asking Dex a question. He was in his Silvermines uniform, helmet on his head, hockey stick in hand. He was sweaty and flushed. From playing hockey, not sex with me. Although I’d seen that sweaty and flushed look before when he was naked.

You must be feeling pretty lucky your girlfriend—the one we’ve all seen you with in Montana of all places—doesn’t mind you’re an enforcer off the ice.

I sucked in a breath and flicked my gaze at the girls.

Her, lucky? Hell, I’m the lucky one. It’s better than the draft, being a first-round pick by someone as perfect as she is.

Ohmygod. Oh. My. God.

“You sure it’s a fling?” Bridget whispered when I handed the phone back to Mallory.

I didn't answer, just went over his words again and again as I grabbed some of the snacks and settled on the couch. I busied myself by pulling up the game on a satellite sports channel while the girls finished making the guac and set the spread on the coffee table.

The game started after a bunch of fancy pregame stuff including national anthems.

"God, he's hot," Mallory said at least seventeen times through the first and second periods.

In my mind, I said it every time Dex was on the ice. I didn't know skating was sexy, but the way he moved was effortless. Like at the kids' practices, but with intensity. He shoved a guy into the boards, then he got taken out, but popped right back up. Even watching him guzzle from a water bottle on the bench was hot.

He was in his element playing hockey. Especially when he scored the third time which was something called a hat trick, per the announcer.

"Please tell me you offered him some kind of sex motivation to score three goals," Mallory urged, staring at the TV and watching Dex skate down the boards and getting gloved high fives from his teammates for the latest goal.

"What?" I asked on a laugh.

"Does he get a BJ for every goal?" Mallory asked. "For the hat trick, does he get anal?"

Bridget was taking a sip of her drink and spit it all over Mallory.

"I don't want to know about Lindy and anal, okay?" Bridget said, glancing at her BFF.

“Please, you totally gave up that hole for Mav.”

I stared at Mallory wide eyed. While I knew Bridget wasn't a virgin, it was hard for me to separate the little girl I raised with the woman who might be having anal sex.

“You need to get laid instead of thinking about Lindy's sex life,” Bridget told her.

Mallory nodded. “I do. I sooooo do. I'm waiting for Theo, obviously. If he can perform surgery on a brain or spleen or something, imagine what those hands can do with a g-spot.”

Bridget looked at me. I looked at Bridget. We laughed. And laughed.

“What? I'm not wrong,” Mallory added.

I didn't think she was. But Theo seemed to be a tough nut to crack, but if anyone could do it, it'd be her.

When I was wiping my eyes with a napkin, Mallory piped up again. “Just because he's away doesn't mean you can't do sexy times. I bet you haven't had phone sex. Or video chat sex.”

“She's been in his bed, so why does she need to phone it in?” Bridget asked, taking another sip of her drink.

“He's in Finland.” Mallory turned to face me. “I'm not getting any, Lindy. It's clear since I'm all up in your sex life. So please, please have video chat sex with that man later. He's earned it.”

She was right. The idea was hot. And would be amazing in my book. I wasn't telling either of them I was game. I shrugged, playing it cool.

“I'm so impressed with you, Lindy Beckett,” Mallory gushed.

“Why?” I scooped some guac onto a chip.

“Bagging a professional hockey player. He’s gorgeous. Nice. Talented. And he’s soooo into you. Plus, he has a magical dick,” Mallory added.

“I didn’t say that Aspen did,” I clarified while crunching on the chip. “But it’s true.”

He sooooo did.



DEX

I DROPPED onto the edge of my bed with a heavy sigh as I tugged on my tie to loosen it.

The organizers had us players busy non-stop. We weren't in the country as tourists. Even game day, we were up early and at the rink practicing. After, there was another media gauntlet. I knew most of the other players from games, some even from the Silvermines but were traded. We were all here to give the fans a good time and the competitive level of the game was lower, we played hard.

By the time it was all over, and I finally got to my hotel room, I was exhausted.

Lindy and I had texted, but never connecting. When I was on the ice, she was sleeping. When I was sleeping, she was up. It sucked.

I knew being away from her was going to be tough, but for some reason I felt it this trip. While playing hockey was my life, for the first time I felt like I left something behind. That I was being pulled.

It was going to be worse during the regular season, but there was no option. Every player who had a spouse or significant other were separated for stretches. It was part of the game, but the main reason Lindy didn't want to get serious.

She was in my house. In my bed. But that was as far as it went. She wanted permanent, forever, the picket fence and kids in Hunter Valley. I respected her decision and she had been honest about it from the start. But I felt like we were doomed and being so far away, I couldn't do anything to sway her. In fact, it was only proving her point. Even in the few months I had off, I still had commitments to the team and my contract.

I couldn't break my deal with the Silvermines even if I wanted to. I'd never even considered the possibility, until now. I felt like I was being forced to choose between hockey and Lindy. The legalese of my contract and Lindy herself said I couldn't have both.

Lindy wasn't going to leave Montana. Hell, I didn't think she'd ever leave her house.

When my cell chimed, I nabbed it. My heart raced as if I got a breakaway with the puck.

SUGAR: Great game!

I SMILED. No, fuck, I all out grinned. My brothers watched some of my games. Not all, because there were eighty-two in a season. Plus, exhibition games like the one I just played. And playoffs. They didn't stay CEOs or become doctors by sitting

around watching hockey all the time. But Lindy? It felt different, this satisfaction, knowing she'd watched.

ME: Thanks. It was fun.

I WASN'T BANGED up and bruised like a regular season game. This one didn't count toward a team's record since it was just for fun. While it was for the league and advertisers to make money, the players got to do what we all loved. Play. No pressure. There were less hits. No fights.

SUGAR: Did I wake you?

Me: I'm amped from the game.

AND HER TEXTS.

SUGAR: I have something for you for when you get home. A present for your hat trick.

NOW I WAS INTRIGUED.

ME: What is it?

THERE WAS no response right away and just when I was ready to type back some question marks, a photo appeared.

“Holy fuck.”

I was instantly hard. It was a selfie of Lindy kneeling on our bed in a turquoise nightie. It had sexy little cutouts that hinted at her bare skin, including the bottom curves of her breasts. I pressed my hand against my dick to calm it down.

ME: Now. I want my present now.

Sugar: You're not here.

FOR ONCE, I was homesick. My dick and I agreed, there was no fucking way we were waiting until we got back to Montana to unwrap that present.

ME: I'm opening a video chat. Answer.

I HIT the little movie camera icon and waited five seconds for her face to appear. Her blonde hair was down and tousled, as if she'd fluffed it with her fingers. I could see the headboard behind her and the light comforter beneath her. I longed to be there with her. Make her grip that headboard as I took her from behind.

“SUGAR,” I practically growled.

“Dex.”

“What’s my present exactly? The nightie... or you?”

She put her finger to her mouth and bit down on the tip, as if playing coy. Oh, she was so fucking bad.

“I learned a hat trick is a big deal. That means you get whatever you want.”

“Holy fuck,” I whispered again.

This woman.

I was close to coming and we hadn’t done anything. Hell, just that photo and her words had pre-cum spurting into my boxers. With my pants too tight, I opened them and pulled out my dick. Sighed. Then gripped the base and slowly stroked it with my free hand.

“Whatever I want?” I repeated.

She nodded.

“Prop the phone against the lamp so I can see my present.”

Her hand covered the camera, and the sound of fumbling came through the speaker as she did as I said.

Then she appeared again, shifting backward on the bed so she was facing the side table where she’d positioned her phone. She was on her knees in nothing but that sexy-as-fuck nightie.

“Do you want me to take it off?” she asked, reaching up to slide one thin strap off her shoulder. It drooped along her arm, the deep silk falling low on one tit.

I shook my head. “No. Stay just like that.”

A little frown formed on her pretty brow. “You don’t want me bare?”

“I love your little nightgowns. The way they cover you like a big fucking tease.” I pointed toward her, but she probably couldn’t see my arm, let alone my hand. “I can see the swells of those perfect tits. The hard nipples poking out. And you’re bare beneath, right?”

She nodded.

“You said I can have anything I want?” I asked again. I wasn’t in the same country, and I was still checking to make sure she was right there with me.

Her hands settled on her thighs, drawing my eyes down her body.

“Anything.” Her voice was breathy and even through the phone’s tiny screen I could see the way her cheeks flushed.

“Your pussy wet?”

I stroked up my dick, thumbed the crown.

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

Coming up off her heels, she knelt high on the bed. With one hand, she pulled up the hem of her nightie just enough for me to get a glimpse of her pussy, but her free hand hid it as she touched herself. Then the hem dropped, and she raised her fingers up for me to see.

They were glistening.

“Taste yourself.” Was that my voice? It sounded like I was gargling pebbles.

I was full out stroking my dick now, each time I squeezed the base to slow things down a bit, but I could do nothing

about the constant stream of pre-cum I smeared down my length.

Watching her suck her fingers coated in her pussy juices was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

“Got that box of toys, sugar?”

Her fingers froze by her mouth and her eyes widened.

“How do you know about that?” Her words were soft and I barely heard them.

So Mallory had been right. Lindy did have sex toys. Although she'd said every woman had them, but no one else mattered.

“A horny single woman like you must have a bedside drawer full of them.”

“Dex,” she breathed, dropping back onto her heels.

“What? You are horny. I know how much firsthand. Show me what you've got. I doubt you left them at your house.”

Her bedroom had been the first hit by the tree. Branches came through the ceiling and one exterior wall. I'd helped her pack and move her things to the other bedrooms. Even though I'd said I'd move her panty drawer, I hadn't touched it. I definitely hadn't seen her toys.

“I went back and got one.”

The fact that she made a special trip just to pick up a sex toy meant she really was horny. It was my job now to satisfy her and I wasn't there to do it. That fucking sucked.

“How many do you have?” I wondered. What kind of hardware did a single woman need?

“Four.”

I took a second to think about that. “Four?”

She nodded, finally loosening up from the initial embarrassment of her stash being called out.

“One’s got suction, one’s a lipstick sized one for travel. Another is just big and the last one is a combo.”

“Combo? Like fries and a drink with your vibrator?”

She laughed. “No. Like clit and g-spot stimulation at the same time.”

“Toss that one out. I do that for you now.”

She looked at me with a sly smile. “You do, but you’re not here.”

“So that’s the one you got from your house?”

She nodded.

“Show me.”

“The toy?”

I shook my head. “No. You using it. This is what I want for my hat trick. Watching you come with your toy.”

Her mouth fell open. I definitely surprised her.

“Don’t go shy on me now, sugar. You know I’ll talk you through it. Go get it. I’ll wait.”



LINDY

I WAS EMBARRASSED, nervous, and aroused all at the same time. Excited, because I'd never been like this with a man before. Naughty. Fun. Intimate. And yes, this was intimate even though he was in a different country.

But this was Dex and he made me feel pretty. Wanted. Needed.

So I dashed off the bed and went into the bathroom where I left the toy tucked in a drawer. I ran back into the bedroom and crawled across the bed.

“Okay,” I said, catching my breath.

“Lie back and show me your pussy.”

Oh my God.

I flopped onto my back and looked to the phone.

“Tilt me down a little, sugar. I want to see everything.”

I shifted, reached out to the phone and adjusted it, then settled onto the bed.

“That’s perfect.”

I stared at the ceiling, had a moment of panic. I lifted my head, looked at Dex. “You’re not recording this, are you?”

He crooked a finger and I moved—again—back to the phone.

“Sugar. I never share. And I protect what’s mine.”

Yeah, he probably did.

“Trust me?” he murmured.

His hair was tousled, his shirt ruffled, the top button undone. His tie was loose and askew. It was really late there, but he was right here with me.

I nodded. “Is this one sided?”

He laughed. “Hell no.” The camera shifted down his body and— “Oh!” There he was, rubbing one out. The camera distorted him a little, but he was big and hard and God, that was hot, seeing him all dressed up except for his dick out, which he was stroking because of me.

I didn’t say anything else, just fell back so he could see, grabbed the toy and flipped it on.

“Legs wider, sugar. Fuck,” he growled when I set my feet on the bed and moved them nice and wide. My nightie slid up so I was bare from the waist down.

“Uncover those gorgeous tits for me.”

I tucked my fingers under the edging and pulled the turquoise material beneath my breasts.

“Fuck, look at you. Show me how you play with yourself.”

I put the toy between my thighs and slid it up and down my center. It was shaped like a U and half of it I slid inside me. I was so wet it went in easily. The vibration had me moan.

“Pillow under your hips. Now.”

Reaching out, I grabbed a pillow and tucked it beneath me.

“Fuck, look how pink and wet you are. You’ve got me so hard, sugar.”

I pushed it in and out until I found the spot I liked, then shifted my hand so the little suction part settled over my clit. Wiggling my hips, it latched on.

“Oh!”

“That thing have vibration settings?” he asked.

“Yes.” My eyes were closed, and I was rolling my hips to chase the pleasure.

“Go through them.”

I licked my lips. “There’s slow and a weird rhythm like slow, slow, slow pulses then a buzz. Faster.” I gasped. “All pulses and fast. Ohhhhhh.”

“Which one is a tease?” he asked.

“The mix one.”

“Set it to that.”

“Dex,” I whined. I loved the fast speed and having a little of it and then switching it to the one that kept me hanging over and over was cruel.

“I haven’t seen you or my pussy in days. I’m not ending this in thirty seconds,” he said. “Is it like my fingers in you? Playing and then pulling out?”

“Yes!”

“And my tongue on your clit and then I switch it up?”

“Stop being mean,” I told him. I was getting into this now, settling into what he was saying as the toy buzzed and

throbbled against my g-spot and clit.

“Oh sugar, you’re over there in that sexy little nightie, legs open and showing me how good you take a vibrator and I’m mean?”

I whimpered.

“My dick has never been this hard. I’ve never craved something so much as you, sugar. I can practically taste that pussy. Feel you clenching around my fingers. That clit getting big and hard against my tongue.”

“Dex, I’m getting close.”

Sweat misted my skin and I was writhing on the pillow. I used my hand to move the toy in a rhythm that mimicked the thrusts of Dex’s huge, magical dick.

“Me, too. I’m going to make a mess of myself as I listen and watch you play. Give it to me, sugar. Give me my present.”

Oh fuck. My hips lifted off the bed as I clenched, the vibrations making me come so hard it almost hurt. I couldn’t get this kind of orgasm with Dex; his dick didn’t vibrate like this and while his mouth was perfection, this suction was powerful.

“Ah, Lindy. Fuck.”

He came on a deep growl. I looked at my phone and saw that the screen was black, his hand dropping, and the camera covered as he came undone.

It wasn’t the same. I didn’t feel the hard press of his body. The heat of him. The thick feel of him between my thighs. His breath on my neck as he said all kinds of dirty things. The way

I could watch him as he came, lost in the pleasure he found in my body.

When I became too sensitive, I pulled the toy from me, tossed it aside. Sat up.

His face filled the phone again. “Fuck, that was intense.”

His gaze was softer, his voice relaxed, soothed by a powerful release. “Thank you for the present. Be prepared for when I get back tomorrow.”

“Prepared?”

“With me, once isn’t enough. I already want you again.” He tipped the camera down to his still hard dick, then back to his face. “This was pregaming, remember?”

Pregaming. If that was a warmup, then I was in trouble. And I wanted it. All the trouble I could get.



DEX

I RETURNED to Hunter Valley as if I belonged there. Not my big, lonely penthouse in Denver. It was late when I dropped my bags at the door of the small rental and shucked my clothes as I went, climbing naked into bed with a sleeping Lindy. This was what I'd been longing for ever since we ended our video call the night before. Four thousand miles of flying later, and I was where I wanted to be. Almost.

She was warm and in another one of her sexy fucking nighties.

"You're home," she murmured as I wrapped my arm around her from behind.

I missed her soft scent, the feel of her. The video sex had been insane, but it would never compare to touching, kissing, licking and fucking Lindy's perfect body.

I'd warned her, but knowing she was here waiting for me, that she was mine, that had me feeling... longing. Contentment. Satisfaction. It ran deeper than the instant attraction and need I felt for her when I first saw her. It wasn't

instalove, like in the romances. I knew what that meant because I'd snagged a paperback at the Helsinki airport and made my way through it on the flight home.

I fell. That's what I did. I fell for her. I didn't care that she wasn't in the same place as me. I was patient and well, she was in my bed.

"This for me, sugar?" I asked, sliding my hand over the silky material.

"Mmm, you said you like them."

"On you," I added. The feel of her, the scent of her, the way she was warm beneath the covers had me so fucking hard.

"I'm sorry I fell asleep," she murmured. "I didn't know when you'd be back."

"You waited up?"

She rubbed her cheek into her pillow, then her butt into my hard dick. "Not very well. I missed you."

I missed you.

Fuck.

"I'm here."

"Dex," she breathed, shifting beneath the sheets.

I nuzzled into the crook of her neck. "What do you need?"

"You."

I reveled in her words. That all she needed was me.

"In me."

Fuck yes.

I slipped my hand under her skimpy little nightgown and cupped her breast. Plumped it, felt the nipple go hard against

my palm.

“I saw these last night and my fingers ached to do this.”

Then I switched directions and slid down her thigh, lifting it up and over mine, opening her.

“I loved how you spread your thighs so nice and wide to show me my pussy. You wet for me?” I asked, while I discovered for myself.

Her pussy was warm and soft, dripping, just like it had been the night before.

It had been days since I had my hands on her and I couldn't get enough. Couldn't wait another fucking second.

Shifting, I lined up at her slick opening and entered her. From this angle, it was a slow go and I stopped when I had her crammed full.

“Dex,” she breathed, wriggling her butt against me.

We hadn't even kissed, and I was deep inside her.

Her nightie was around her waist and I tugged a strap off her shoulder, baring one breast.

Fuck, I loved her like this, naughtily exposed as I took her from behind.

“Dex!” she cried, when I began to move. “Harder.”

In this position, I couldn't go deep or hard, so I scooped her up and rolled so she was face down, then I lifted her so her knees were beneath her. Her head was still on the warm bed as I began to take her as she wanted. I needed it hard, too.

“Like that?” I asked, gripping her hips and taking her roughly.

“Yes!”

It was so good. Too good. She was hot and slick and—
Bare.

Fuck. I groaned.

Never foregoing a condom before, she felt amazing. Skin on skin was wet and like heaven. The idea of taking her bare had my balls drawing up, my orgasm building the base of my spine.

The lady always came first, so I needed to get her there.

Now.

Licking my thumb, I reached around and worked her clit.
“Oh God. Dex. I... I need—”

“More?”

“Yes.” Her fingers curled into the bedding.

Setting my other hand at the base of her spine, my thumb slipped down into the crack of her ass, and I found that spot we hadn't yet played with. With only a brush of my thumb, she tensed and I felt the rosette clench from the contact.

“Dex!”

Her pussy milked my dick and I was so close. Too close.

“Come for me, my sweet bad girl. Fucked from behind in that little teasing outfit, clit all hard and your ass—”

Yeah, my girl loved dirty talk. I just called the plays as I saw them, and it made her come on a breathy cry as her pussy milked my bare dick.

I thrust deep once, then so fucking reluctantly, pulled out, spurting come all over her ass and back, painting her in thick stripes.

“Fuck, sugar,” I said when I finally caught my breath.
“Best welcome home I’ve ever had.”



DEX

WHEN MY PHONE WOKE ME, I was sprawled diagonally across the bed, sunlight poured through the window. Lindy was gone. When I saw that it was ten-thirty, I knew why. It was Tuesday. She was at work and I was jetlagged.

“What?” I said, grabbing the cell off the nightstand where I’d set it when I crawled in bed.

“They’re sending through the contract on Monday.”

It was Scott.

I rolled over, stared at the ceiling. I was naked and I had morning wood. Fuck, I needed Lindy again.

“Yeah? Why the delay?”

I hadn’t had much time to think about OutdoorNow once I left the meeting in Chicago. But it had been four days.

“Image. But I repeated everything you told them. They went with the amount we thought.”

He shared it and I was pleased. Not that I needed any more fucking money, but I knew my value.

“And the youth program add-on?” I asked. This was the important part.

“In there.”

I sat up, planted my feet on the floor. “Yes.”

“Ellen’s a shrewd woman. I guess she wanted to see if the story stayed the same. Ultimately, she was pleased. Between all the work you’ve done in the past and the new leaf you’ve turned—”

“New leaf?”

“Having a girlfriend. I tossed that in there when Ellen waffled. Plus, I pushed how you were doing volunteer coaching in your off season.”

I rubbed a hand over my face.

“Lindy’s not a stunt.”

“Doesn’t matter. They love you and that you met a small-town girl and fell in love.”

It was accurate, but what did Scott actually tell her? Was he spouting romance stories better than Lindy? “It does matter. I’m not with her for this contract.”

“Fine. Whatever you say. Still, a stroke of genius.”

I frowned, wondering if I liked him being my agent. He was mercenary and this deal made him a shit ton of money. I wouldn’t put it past him to pay Lindy’s neighbor to drop his dead tree on her house just to get us together. Hell, Mallory might even do it.

“Send the contract to me and my lawyer to review,” I told him.

“Will do. You’ll get it after Vegas this weekend.”

“Vegas? I’m in Montana.” I rubbed my eyes and looked out the window. No skyscrapers. No car horns or millions of people. Fuck, I really liked it in Hunter Valley.

“There was an opening at the golf invitational. Players from all sports playing for their favorite charities.”

“This weekend? I just got back last night.”

“So? You travel like this all season.”

“It’s *off* season.”

“It’s for charity,” he countered, knowing that would get me to Nevada more than any other reason. “Guaranteed donation. If you win, or place, even more.”

Fuck.

He knew how to snag me. I loved opportunities to get money to my charity of choice. This was definitely one. A sports star-studded weekend in Vegas and money went to those in need. I couldn’t turn it down.

He knew it.

“Okay. Fine.”

“I’ll get you booked out on Friday.”

I stood, scratched my balls and headed to the shower. “I’ll get there on my own.”

Now I had to tell Lindy I was leaving again.



LINDY

I HAD TO ADMIT, Mav got shit done. Maybe it was his size that intimidated people into getting stuff done. Or maybe it was his money that moved things along. Maybe it was both or neither. Whatever.

I didn't really care because the tree was long gone, and the house was enclosed. The roof and exterior walls were fixed. I'd left work to check it out.

Standing in the backyard, I could see the hole was gone in the roof and the shingles were on. The replaced section of siding was up, but it hadn't been painted yet. Replacement windows were installed in my bedroom and kitchen.

I went inside through the back door. The kitchen stove was missing, and the table and chairs were still in the living room. I went up the steps. The hall ceiling still had a hole, and I could see where a truss needed to be replaced in the attic. In my bedroom, the new mattress had been delivered. The interior walls needed insulation and drywall and the hole in the floor between my bedroom and the kitchen below was covered with a piece of plywood.

Still, it was a major difference. Repairs would continue, but I could now live in the house.

I dropped onto the mattress, tags still attached. The house was quiet. No chainsaws. Just the familiar scent and stillness that I'd known my entire life.

When Bixby called me at the office to give me my daily update, I was thrilled. Then... not thrilled. The only time I hadn't lived in that house was when I was at college. Even then, I came home often on the weekends and every summer.

This place was my home. Where I'd grown up with my parents. Where I'd raised Bridget.

But I spent over a week with Dex. Or at least in Dex's house. My ordered life shifted. I still had my list, but new things were added. I liked the new things. A lot. Like sex. I even laughed at myself thinking a stupid pillow berm was going to keep us apart.

I glanced around, took in pale yellow paint color. It had taken me two years to take over the master bedroom after my parents died, stripping off their blue striped wallpaper and painting. That transition had been hard.

But moving in with Dex, once I gave in to being with him, hadn't been. The way he got home from his trip, climbed in bed and greeted me last night, I wanted him to do that every night. God, that had been hot.

That reminded me to collect some things. More nighties, which he strangely loved so much. I smiled, wondering which one I'd wear tonight. I opened the closet door, and something leaped out at me.

I screamed.



DEX

LINDY WAS LATE. She was never late. While I didn't have too much data to trend since she'd only been in my house six days before I left for the exhibition game, I knew she was a stickler for routine. And it was five-thirty, and she wasn't back.

I wasn't worried. She said she could take care of herself and I knew it. This was Hunter Valley. The most exciting thing that had happened around here was a tree falling on a house.

And me.

And both happened to Lindy. So if something was going to go sideways, I believed it might happen to her.

More importantly, I missed her. I didn't wake up to my head between her thighs as I'd hoped. I'd had to rub one out in the shower so my dick went down.

I was at the winter complex between two practice sessions and staring at my phone.

No texts, no calls.

Fuck, I was whipped.

I set the phone back in my bag and turned back to the ice.

It rang.

I spun back, snagged it up and couldn't help the grin as I saw *Sugar* appear on the screen.

Totally whipped.

"I was just thinking about you."

"Dex, oh my God."

Her voice was shrill and shaky.

"What's the matter?" I asked, gripping the phone.

"I was attacked. I—"

I jolted and spun in a circle, then dropped onto the bench and tugged at the laces of one of my skates.

"Are you okay? Is he still there? Where are you?" I got one skate off and moved onto the next. I could run in skates, but I sure as shit couldn't drive in them. Well, maybe I could.

"No. I, God. I'm okay. It was..." She laughed. "God, Dex, I was just attacked by a squirrel."

I stilled, bent over and my fingers tangled in the laces.

"Say what?"

"I was attacked by a squirrel. It was in my closet, and I opened the door to get some more of the nighties you like and I guess it came in through one of the holes in the house and it got in my closet and one of the workers shut the door and then when I opened it—"

"Whoa, sugar, take a breath."

I needed one too. Holy shit, my adrenaline was pumping harder than when I scored the winning goal for the

championship.

I could hear her breathing hard. “I’m sorry. God, it scared the shit out of me.”

“You’re not the only one. Wait. Are you hurt? Did it bite you? Is it still in the house?”

“I’m fine. Really. I just got scratched. It bounced off my legs and I’m wearing pants today, but it jumped onto my arm which is bare, before launching itself across the room, I have little claw marks.”

Claw marks? I huffed out a laugh and ran a hand down my face.

“Okay. You’re at your house now?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes. Don’t move. And don’t open any more doors.”



DEX

“WHEN YOU SAID I should take some time off and come hang out with you and meet Lindy, this wasn’t the way I expected.”

I stood, feet spread, arms over my chest, as Theo dabbed antibiotic ointment on the thin cuts on Lindy’s arm. I didn’t like seeing anyone else touching my woman, especially my brother.

But his gaze held zero interest, only bewilderment and amusement.

In my panic, I’d called Theo from the car as I raced from the rink to Lindy’s house. He texted when he got to town, but I’d been in Finland. We hadn’t caught up since I’d been back and fortunately he was still here hanging with Mav. He must’ve had more punch cards saved up than I expected. The conversation had been—looking back—a little ridiculous.

“Lindy might have the plague,” I told him, turning out of the parking lot almost on two wheels.

“Sexual plague or just the flu?”

*“What?” I shouted, gunning it through a yellow light.
“What the hell is a sexual plague?”*

He didn’t answer, but instead said, “So the flu then. I haven’t heard of many cases lately, but I don’t follow Montana’s health department reports.”

“What? No, she doesn’t have the flu. I mean the actual plague.”

“Are you drunk?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Fuck, Theo. Get to Lindy’s house. I’m driving there now.”

I slammed on my brakes and honked my horn at a car that cut me off.

“Because she might have the plague,” he repeated, as if saying it again would make me realize I meant plague. But her fucking dentist date could take care of that, not Theo.

“Yes!” I yelled, death gripping the steering wheel. I was losing my mind. “She needs medical help.”

“The plague.”

“How many times are you going to say that?”

“Once more. The plague? It’s not 1350. Why the hell do you think she has the plague?”

“She was attacked by a squirrel.”

“Say that again.”

“A squirrel. They carry the plague, don’t they?”

He paused. “It’s possible. Around here, Yersinia pestis is more likely in prairie dogs.”

Had it been a prairie dog in her closet? Fuck!

“She said it was a squirrel, but maybe she didn’t see it right. Maybe it was a prairie dog in her closet.”

“Her closet.”

“Are you a doctor or a parrot? Get to Lindy’s house. Stat, or whatever you doctors say.”

Mav hovered beside me, watching with less concern and more amusement. Theo had been with him and Bridget and they’d all driven over together. Stat.

Bridget was on the arm of the couch since the coffee table was still turned over the main part of it, wiping her eyes because she’d been laughing so hard.

“I’m fine, Dex,” Lindy said, reaching out and taking my hand in a motherly squeeze.

“You can see the fucker’s little nail marks,” I said, pointing to her forearm and biceps. Four little red lines cut along her skin.

“They’re called scratches,” Theo clarified in his usual deadpan voice. “You watched me clean them with soap and water and this antibiotic ointment will help.”

“Help? Why would it need to help?”

Theo glanced at Lindy. “You sure you want this one? I think he got hit by a slapshot or two in Finland.”

Lindy squeezed my hand again. Sighed. “Now that the exterior’s closed up, I was going to stay here. But I know what I don’t want as a roommate. A squirrel.”

What the fuck? She was going to move out of my little rental? Why? When did she decide this? Why didn’t we talk about it?

“You’re staying with me until it’s found,” I said, putting my proverbial foot down. I didn’t give a shit about a fucking squirrel, but he was my new best friend for giving her a reason not to come back to her house. I’d make him a little nest. Track down some acorns and shit. He could move his furry ass right on in if that kept Lindy out.

And scratch free.

“The front and back doors are open,” Mav said, pointing to the front door. “The little guy will run out on his own.”

“She can’t keep the doors open all night! A bear could walk in. Mountain lion. Raccoon.”

“It’s good you know your Montana wildlife,” Bridget said, amusement lacing her words.

“I’ll stay here,” Theo offered, probably so I didn’t stroke out on him. He screwed the top on the little tube of ointment and glanced at Mav, then Bridget. “I’ll chance a squirrel attack over listening to you two for another night.”

Bridget laughed some more. Mav puffed his chest out but said nothing.

“Good. It’s settled,” I said with a slash of my hand through the air.

Was I being irrational? Yes.

Did I care? No.

“Theo will stay here, ensure the squirrel is gone and no others move in. You’re with me.” I took Lindy’s hand, tugged her to her feet and out the open door, laughter following us.

Five minutes later—I broke just as many traffic laws as I did earlier—I had Lindy in my house, the door closed and her bent over the kitchen table.

“Dex!” she cried as I worked her pants and panties down.

I got my jeans open and dick out, pumped it once, eyeing her perfect, upturned ass.

“I need in you, sugar. I aged ten years when you called.” I kicked her legs apart, then slapped my hand on the table beside her head. This was the position she was in when I spanked her the week before.

“It was a squirrel!” she cried.

I spanked her. “You were bad.”

“Dex, I’m oka—”

I slammed into her. Growled. Fuck, she felt so fucking good. “Mine. You were going to move out.”

“Dex,” she hissed.

I pulled back, rolled my hips and fucked her deep.

I spanked her again. She moaned and squirmed as much as she could pinned to the dining table.

“You weren’t going to tell me.”

“My house is fixed,” she cried.

“It’s infested.”

“One squirrel.”

“You wouldn’t get this though.” I rolled my hips, shifted so the angle took me even deeper.

We were arguing and fucking. I’d never done them at the same time before, but I knew I was going to win. Because when my dick was deep inside Lindy, she was compliant. If that made me a caveman, I didn’t care.

In. Out. I wasn't gentle. But she didn't want gentle, and I couldn't give it to her right now. I was fucking frantic that she would just up and go.

"Dex." This time when she said my name, it was on a breathy whimper because I reached around, found her clit and pinched it.

"Bad girls get fucked hard and fast. They come that way too."

She was so wet it coated my fingers as I worked her clit. That one pinch was followed by a little tug and just as I expected, she came.

Screamed.

She was milking my dick so hard, as if her pussy wanted me to stay as deep as possible.

Which reminded me I forgot a condom. Again. I pulled out, stroked myself, which was slick from her arousal, and made myself come. It spurted all over her upturned ass. Marked her.

"Stay with me."

Lindy didn't move from her bent over position but turned her head to meet my gaze with her own blurry one.

"Okay."

I wasn't sure if she really was afraid of a rodent or if she wanted to be here with me.

Leaning down, I kissed her. Sweet and gentle, completely opposite of how I just took her.

I didn't care what the reason was. It didn't matter. I was too far gone with this woman for it to make a difference. I just

yanked her out of her own house to get her alone to fuck her bent over a table. I just knew—from being in fucking Finland—that I was going to be leaving in a few weeks. Hell, in two days for Vegas.

Not even a squirrel attack—or love—could keep me.



LINDY

AFTER HAVING sex on Dex's dinette, I spent the rest of the night working on my story. My little claw shaped scratches didn't hurt, but whenever Dex saw them, he glared. I pitied any squirrel that got near him in the future.

This time when Dex read the same paperback sprawled on the couch, I wasn't panicked.

He knew the truth and didn't really seem to care. All he did was ask how it was going every once in a while and set a can of seltzer on the table beside me. He didn't try to look at the screen, only pretended to once with a wink. He wasn't prying or teasing or anything.

He made it out to be... normal.

That was why it took me a little bit to get into the words, but I did. And eventually, I stopped.

"I'm done."

Dex looked up from his book. "Good. I can't wait to see what nightie you wear tonight."

I gave him a goofy smile. “You know I don’t wear a different one every single night. I do run out and repeat.”

“What’s a big hockey contract good for if it can’t buy you an endless supply of nighties?”

“Dex,” I said on a sigh. My cheeks flushed because he was praising me. And my sleepwear.

But the word *endless* meant this wasn’t going to stop. And it was.

I pushed that thought to the side because I was living in the here and now.

“No, I mean, the book’s done. I finished.”

“Fuck, yes,” he said, hopping to his feet and giving me a huge smile. “Way to go, sugar.”

I grinned. It felt good. Really good.

He clapped his hands together. “Let’s celebrate.”

Now I *really* grinned. “What did you have in mind?”

“Vegas.”

I blinked. “Vegas?”

“Hell, yes. I’m going this weekend for a charity golf tournament, and you should come with me.”

I laughed. “I thought you wanted to do something fun and different in bed. I wasn’t expecting Vegas.”

His eyes narrowed and he tipped my chin up. Kissed me. “We’re totally going to do something fun and different in bed. But we’re also going to Vegas.”

“When were you going to tell me about this trip?”

“I only found out about it this morning. My agent signed me up. There was an opening.”

“You have to go?”

“It’s to raise money for a bunch of charities. Each participant has one they play for. If I go, my own charity gets a bunch of it.”

“Your own charity?” He had a charity? I had a set of glasses from Dairy Queen.

He nodded and told me about the programs for kids, connecting them with safe places that were enriching, through educational support and sports offerings.

He shared the amount he’d get for showing up—not even if he won the event—and I was a little stunned. Not because he was so philanthropic, which he seemed to be, but the amount of money a simple golf tournament would shell out. “That’s a lot of sports gear for kids.”

“Exactly. I have to go.”

I nodded. “Yeah, you do.”

“So come with me.”

Instantly, I shook my head. “I can’t go with you to Vegas. I have work. Grocery shopping. The house. *A squirrel.*”

He pulled out a chair, dropped in it, then pulled me from mine and onto his lap.

“Listen to yourself, sugar. You don’t work on the weekend. I’m sure Claudia will let you take a day off if you ask. She’ll definitely let you take a day off if *I* ask.”

Sadly, that was probably true.

“Next one. Groceries? Please. Lame excuse. The house? Theo’s there. So is the squirrel. They’ll keep watch together.”

“But—”

He was being ridiculous, but probably so was I.

He stroked my hair back, tipped my chin up again. “What’s the real reason you’re saying no?”

I blinked, thought about it.

“Expensive plane ticket.”

He gave me a look that screamed, *Try harder*. “I’m not trying to boast, but do you know how much money I make? A ticket to Vegas isn’t an issue. Besides, I’m taking the jet.”

The James Corp jet I went on to Denver with Bridget and Mallory. It was so much better than any commercial flight.

“Of course you are.”

“I was going to take it so I could get back to you faster, but now? Mile High Club, sugar.”

He waggled his eyebrows, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

When I didn’t give him an answer, he pushed on. “It’s not that funny of an idea. We don’t have to fuck on the jet. Making out would be good. Heavy petting.”

Why was I arguing about going away for the weekend? It was Vegas, not Finland. I was having a fling with Dex and going to Vegas screamed fling.

I didn’t have to work on my story; it would be with the editor.

“Um... I...”

“We’re celebrating you finishing your book in Vegas. Leaving Friday morning.”

He was no longer asking. He was telling. I was a little stunned. Overwhelmed. But... happy. “Okay.”

He stared at me in surprise, as if he never expected me to give in. “Okay?”

I nodded. Oh my God. I was going to Las Vegas. With Dex!

He stood, carried me into the bedroom. “Now, about those fun and different things in bed. What are your thoughts on toys and my dick?”



DEX

“–AND he did it without any pants!”

The entire table broke out in laughter. At my expense. I was used to the ribbing. Teammates always screwed around and took potshots at each other. We might be adults, but we behaved like children more often than not. Whatever. It was the way of being on a team, which was like being part of a huge, hockey stick-wielding family. Totally dysfunctional and had each others’ backs.

“You know what they say,” I began, and everyone looked to me. “You gotta let things air out.”

More laughter and a blush to Lindy’s pretty cheeks. I leaned toward her, cupped her nape and gave her long hair a gentle tug. Then a kiss.

The tournament finished three hours ago. The only thing hotter than playing golf in Vegas in July was Lindy in her pretty sundress. The organizers had ensured the players were well hydrated–water *and* alcohol–and after, a few of us ended up at a restaurant on the Strip, totally buzzed.

The place was well known and popular, tables hard to come by. Not for us. A perk behind being a celebrity sports figure was this kind of access. Steak was the specialty and they'd delivered perfectly grilled cuts of meat, but it was the drinks they ensured remained full.

Around the long rectangular table was me and Lindy. Max Johansson, a former Silvermine who now played for Nashville, and his wife. Torrey Amano, a Silvermine defenseman. Ethan Grimm, the only other hockey player at the tournament. He played for Miami. Somehow, Lamar Krepke, a football left tackle the size of a VW Bug got pulled into our group.

We were working our way through a third, or fourth, round of drinks. Maybe fifth. I wasn't keeping track. No one was. I'd never seen Lindy drink anything but iced tea or water. Seltzer was fancy for her. But tonight, she was keeping up with the rest of us and it was fun to watch.

We'd arrived in Vegas the day before, but I was immediately pulled into another press gauntlet. Lindy had steered well clear of that and after, we'd decided to do room service and fuck instead of gambling. We stayed in the suite until a car was waiting for me to go to the tournament this morning. Golf was a hard sport to spectate—it wasn't like there was an assigned seat in an arena—so I pampered her with a spa day while I played as a reward for finishing her book.

I wanted to read it, but I wasn't going to push her. She'd share it. Eventually. It didn't matter that she didn't trust me with it. Okay, it did a little, but while I was balls to the wall for her, we'd only known each other two weeks.

Only a rogue squirrel kept her from leaving my bed. I had to be patient. She was here in Vegas with me and having fun.

For now, that was enough.

“Air out? I can’t believe you said that!” Lindy whispered to me, although it wasn’t a whisper at all, then tipped back her vodka cranberry, the ice rattling around in the glass.

“Not sure why your balls need to air out,” Lamar added, as if the topic wasn’t a little intimate for a table in the middle of a busy restaurant. “But a lady’s got delicate parts and my four sisters all told me they need some air at night.”

Ethan piped up. “Why do you know so much about your sisters’ pussies?”

Lindy bit her lip to keep from smiling.

Lamar gave Ethan a scary look, but Ethan was his team’s enforcer and not intimidated, or he was too drunk to notice. “Growing up with four older sisters and I’m a pussy genius. I know all the things.”

“Yet you’re single,” Torrey pointed out. His name was short for Salvatore, so the guy was pure Italian. He had the tall, dark, ripped and handsome thing down. He was single too, but I knew he loved all women and wasn’t ready to settle down with just one.

“And you’re not?” Lamar countered.

Torrey winked. “They all love me. I can’t make any of them sad by picking just one. The strip clubs here are famous for the pretty ladies. Let’s go there next.”

Max Johansson and his wife glanced at each other. “The kids are staying with my parents this weekend. The only tits I’m looking at are my wife’s.” Max looked at Mia as if he wanted to bend her over the table or push her to her knees beneath it. Mia fiddled with the top button on her dress, totally teasing him, and Max popped to his feet. His chair slid across

the floor in his haste. He grabbed his wallet, tossed a bunch of bills on the table. “We’re out.”

Mia stood as well, barely gave us a wave before Max tugged her out of the building.

“I’m game for a strip club,” Ethan said, finishing the last of his drink. “You two in? Ladies get in for free.”

I didn’t need photos of myself outside a strip club. OutdoorNow wouldn’t be too thrilled if there was some kind of repeat of the bar brawl, or me anywhere near bare tits in public, and they weren’t sending the contract for me to review until Monday. Another incident and they could change their minds. Lindy would be with me at the club, but was that any better?

“They have back entrances for celebrities,” Torrey added. Obviously, he’d been before, which meant the place was used to men wanting some privacy and they kept the photographers away.

Looking to Lindy, I figured she’d say no, which made it easy. No way in hell would she want to—

“Sure!”



LINDY

I STARED at the ring on my finger and tried so fucking hard to remember how it got there.

“Like the ring, Mrs. James?” Dex called from the other room.

Mrs. James?

I flung open the bathroom door of the impressive hotel suite. If I wasn't so freaked or confused, I'd have taken a spin in the huge jacuzzi tub, big enough to fit the Silvermines bench.

“Mrs. James?” I practically yelled, waving my left hand around and storming to the side of the bed.

Dex raised his hand, and I couldn't miss the simple platinum band that glinted in the Vegas sunlight.

“Come back to bed, sugar. Since it seems we got married last night, let's have our honeymoon.”

He pushed the sheet down, gripped the base of his insanely big, insanely perfect dick and gave it a hard pump. “This is all

for you. *Wife.*”

Dex had zero modesty and I couldn't say I wasn't affected. I just came all over his face not five minutes ago. But I'd been too sleepy to notice the rock that weighed down my hand.

“Put that thing away!” I shouted, waving the heavy hand about.

He didn't stop working his dick. “Not a chance. You don't remember the strip club. Or the wedding chapel.”

“No!”

“I've got a few pictures on my phone. Climb on, sugar, and I'll tell you all about it.”

I ignored him and the ride he offered and snagged his phone off the bedside table, yanking the power cord from the bottom.

“Pin number,” I said when it didn't like my fingerprint.

“Two-four-four-nine.”

He abandoned his masturbation session and shifted so he sat on the side of the bed, feet on the floor. His fingers grabbed the hem of my nightie and pulled me between his parted knees. I didn't pay him any attention, just searched through the icons for his photos.

“Here, sugar.”

I fought him for the phone.

“I'm not keeping them from you. I'll show you the folder.”

I sighed and relented. “You kept being married from me.”

He swiped a few times, then handed it back.

His hands circled around and cupped the backs of my bare thighs.

“You were right there with me, sugar.”

“I was drunk.”

The first photo was of the two of us, heads close together, smiling at the camera. A selfie somewhere that had black leather booths.

“So was I.”

I swiped. The next photo was of me sitting on Dex’s lap, arm slung around his neck. He was kissing my neck. It wasn’t inappropriate, more like extremely affectionate.

“We shouldn’t have done it.”

A photo of the two of us in the back of a limo. Our heads were together holding our hands up to the camera to show off our rings. To the right of Dex’s head was a man sticking his head out what looked like a fast-food drive thru window. He held up a small placard that said *Just Married* with Best Little Wedding Chapel in fancy script beneath it.

“Holy shit. We got married at a McDonald’s drive thru?”

He set his forehead against my stomach and laughed. “We got that after. This place offers interior weddings or drive up.”

I grabbed the sides of his head and pushed it back, probably jamming the phone into an ear.

“Are you serious?”

“It was pretty crowded since it was a Saturday night. Didn’t want anyone to recognize me and ruin how special it was.”

“Special? This guy looks like Elvis!” I pull the phone back, hold it up and point to the officiant.

He had the audacity to grin. “It’s fun.” Lowering my arm, he turned my wrist over so my ring sparkled between us. “Seeing my ring on your finger gets me hard.”

I looked down and yup, he was hard. *Really* hard.

“Dex, why?”

His eyes meet mine. That playfulness from a moment ago was replaced by a searing intensity. “Because I want you.”

“I can see that,” I replied, eyeing how much he really wanted me between his legs. God, I was suddenly nervous. This... thing between us shifted us into completely different territory. He was a fling. A FLING.

Not a husband I didn’t remember marrying.

“I told you that from the start. That you were my woman. This just... proves it.”

The cell rang in my hand. Dex took it, accepted the call and put the phone to his ear.

“What Scott? I’m kind of busy right now.” He whispered to me, “My agent.”

“I bet,” he said. “I don’t want to interrupt you on your honeymoon and all, but I wanted to say congrats.”

“The contract come in early?” Dex asked, although he was studying me in a way that made it seem like he was giving the guy only half his attention. His hand slid up and down the back of my thigh.

“No. I meant getting married. The photo you posted on your social media has gone viral. A stroke of genius.”



DEX

“WHAT?” she gasped. Lindy tried to step back, but my hand shifted to her bare butt and held her in place.

Shit. Shit!

The angry and freaked out look on Lindy’s face proved this wasn’t going as expected and that she could hear every word. I figured she’d see the ring, she’d love it, we’d have married sex until it was time to fly back to Hunter Valley, then live happily ever after.

“Thanks,” I muttered. While I wasn’t officially hungover—thank God for late night water and pain pills—but a headache threatened. “Look, it’s really not a good time.”

“I just wanted to say that OutdoorNow saw the photo and sends their best wishes along with the contract. Pure genius. It’s one thing me telling them about a new girlfriend, but nothing’s better for clearing up a bad boy image than a quickie wedding.”

“That’s not—”

Lindy snagged the phone from my hand, disconnected the call and flung it across the room. Since the suite had thick carpeting, it barely made a sound.

“You want me. You mean you want me to get that contract,” she spat.

I shook my head. “No. *Fuck* no.”

She pulled back and I let her go.

“That’s not what happened at all.”

“You got your contract.”

“It’s coming on Monday. But I don’t give a shit about the contract.”

She spun around. “No? You told me it was something you’d hoped for for a long time. You went to Chicago to meet with them. It would grow your charity.”

“Yes, but—”

“Tell me, was this your plan all along?”

My mouth dropped open and I stared at her as she paced in front of the huge window. “What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your bad boy image needs to be cleaned up. One punch at a bar and you almost lose your chances for sponsorship. You find me in Hunter Valley on vacation. Boring Lindy Beckett, a woman who can easily make you look good. My social media involves photos of my garden and slow cooker recipes. A dull accountant who can’t even find a man through online dating.”

My eyes narrowed and I was getting pissed. The shit she was saying... “You’re itching for another spanking, sugar.”

She spun about, glared. “I’m just telling the truth. You saw it, what I’m like that day in Denver. Used it to your gain.”

I stood, strode to her, not giving a shit I was bare assed naked. “Getting married? Yes, it’s my gain because I get you!”

A hand shot up to keep me away. I stopped in the middle of the huge bedroom.

“This was a fling. A fling! Just sex. Fun. Not a marriage. I won’t marry a man who won’t stick.”

I stilled. Winced. My father hadn’t stuck. He’d been a husband on paper only. But I *wanted* to be there for Lindy. I was all in. Except for the Silvermines. My job. My career. My life.

“I *want* to stick, sugar. I *can’t*.”

Tears overflowed now. Fuck!

“So you get what you want. The sponsorship. But you don’t get me.”

“Lind—”

She tugged on the ring I picked out in Denver. On the one Mallory said she’d love. Which looked perfect on her finger. Although, I’d be fine with a piece of tied string as an outward sign that she was mine. “You never had me. On paper, maybe. I got a bunch of orgasms, you got your deal. It’s over, Dex.”

With a quick shove, she pushed the ring at me, and I took it. It was that, or let it fall to the floor. I shook my head. “No.”

She ran to her open suitcase, grabbed a pair of jeans and tugged them on, skipping underwear.

“Yes. I want a divorce.”

“What?”

“I want a family. Kids! A man who can be a partner in life. You knew what I wanted all along. I’m married to the one person who can’t give me what I’ve always wanted. Now I’m stuck because I can’t marry anyone else.”

Fuck. Fuck! I ran a hand through my hair, tugged on the strands. “Wait. Where are you going?”

“Home.”

Instead of taking off her nightie, she tucked it into her jeans, then grabbed a t-shirt, threw it over her head. Dollar store flip flops went on her feet. Snagging her purse, she headed for the door, ditching her suitcase. Her hair was a mess. The t-shirt was wrinkled and thin enough that it was obvious she wasn’t wearing a bra. The only makeup on her face was smeared remains from the night before. I’d never seen her like this, and I knew her intimately, and she was leaving. Going out in public.

I was so, so fucked.

“Lindy, please. Let’s talk. I’m sorry I—”

She opened the door, glanced at me over her shoulder. “For what, exactly?”

I wasn’t sorry I married her. I *wanted* her to be mine. Seeing that ring on her finger was the best moment of my life. Having her smile and laugh and kiss in the back of the hired car after we said our vows... amazing.

I wasn’t sorry about the sponsorship either. I worked hard to get it and the partnership would help so many kids.

But I’d hurt her without even trying. Except I hadn’t done anything wrong. She’d been all in for getting married. She’d been the one who’d wanted to go to the strip club, where we’d had even more drinks. In the VIP section, they’d been heavy

handed with the liquor and it showed since... yeah, we fucking got married.

In the middle of the night, I posted the wedding photo because Lamar had shared some images of all of us at a strip club. There hadn't been any naked chicks or tits in the images, but it was clear we were out on the town. Wild. Either his football team didn't give a shit what he did off season, or who the hell knew what, but I had to counter that image with something wholesome and good.

So I posted the wedding selfie. I was fiercely proud of that image, and I wanted to share it with everyone. Maybe I was a little drunk and hadn't thought it through, but neither was Lindy. Until now.

I wasn't sorry for showing off my new bride and the best night of my life.

“For... everything.”

She closed her eyes, a tear dripping off her chin. “Not good enough.”

Then she was gone. The door clicking shut behind her.



LINDY

I FLEW home on the first flight I could get out of Las Vegas that was headed toward Hunter Valley. I didn't care that it flew through Salt Lake or Denver or even Seattle. I just wanted away from Dex. Away from how I felt.

Because Dex had made me feel. Way too much.

I couldn't go back to the house. I had no idea if Theo was staying there still or the squirrel. But it would be the first place Dex would look for me.

I didn't want to see him.

I couldn't.

I couldn't stay at Dex's rental, obviously. I also didn't want to stay at Mav's place with Bridget because the sight of the two of them together was nauseating, and heartbreaking. Dex would go there, too. So I went to the one person who had no choice but to hide me.

Mallory.

She owed me for years of shit she put me through growing up. She couldn't say no. And if she did, I wasn't above blackmail. I knew she stole her parents' car and lost her virginity in the back seat to a kid named Zak who now played jazz flute in LA. I knew lots of things.



DEX

“WHERE IS SHE?” I asked, storming into Mav’s huge house and out the open back patio doors. Scout barked and circled my legs. Absently, I gave him a pet and glared at my brothers, the two that I didn’t expect. “What are you doing here?”

Theo and Silas.

Theo was still around, obviously, but Silas had shown up, too. Great.

They were on the outdoor couches, drinks in hand. Dirty dishes were strewn across the glass coffee table in the center. The scent of grilled meat lingered on the air. This place had an amazing view of the entire valley, and they were enjoying it.

“What are *you* doing here?” Silas countered. “I thought you were in Vegas.”

“With my sister,” Bridget added, sitting up out of Mav’s hold.

I looked around. No Lindy. Unless she was in the house...

“Is she here?” I ran a hand through my hair and turned toward the door.

“No. What happened?” Mav asked, and I spun back around.

“Is she okay?” Bridget added, looking worried.

“Why are you wearing a wedding ring?” Silas put in.

“Lindy and I got married.”

“What?” Bridget practically screeched. Birds startled and flew off.

Theo laughed, which I didn’t even know was possible these days.

“Then where’s your wife?” Mav wondered, his voice low.

“I don’t know! We had a fight and she ran off.” I began to pace.

“You left her in Vegas?” Silas asked, eyes wide.

I set my hands on my hips. “Of course not, you fucker. She stormed out of our suite. All she took was her purse and I texted her like a stalker. After a few hours, she never answered. I called Bradley because well, he takes care of fucking everything. Eventually, he confirmed she got a commercial flight back to Missoula and was already halfway to Salt Lake.” I had no idea how he had access to flight records, but I got the info I wanted and didn’t really give a shit. “I finally took the jet back.”

Bridget was on her phone, hopefully texting Lindy to find out where the fuck she was.

“You already got in a fight? Nice going, dumbass,” Silas added.

“Why the fuck are you here?” I countered.

“Because Theo told me the shit that was going down and I had to see it for myself.” He turned to Theo who was sitting next to him. They fist bumped. “You’re right, this place is better than any of those reality shows.”

“Why are you *married*?” Mav asked.

“Um... because I love her.”

“And she loves you back?” Bridget winced. “Sorry. I... I’m just surprised.” She popped to her feet and came over and hugged me. “I’m happy for you.”

I didn’t hug her back because there was nothing to celebrate.

“Don’t be. It was a drunk mistake.”

“You love her, and you think it’s a mistake?” Mav asked.

I shook my head. “No, not me. Lindy. I’m a fling. I’m not Mr. Right.”

Bridget stepped back and studied me. “You’re Mr. Right Now.”

I blinked at her. “What?”

“You’re only here temporarily, Dex.”

“Why does everyone keep telling me that?” I shouted.

Mav took Bridget’s hand and tugged her back and onto his lap.

I began to pace some more.

“Yes, I’m not living in Hunter Valley. I have a job, a career that keeps me from that. I travel. A lot.”

“The Silvermines is pretty much your wife, Dex,” Theo said. “You know this.”

“I want Lindy as my wife!” I tugged on my hair.

“You can’t have both,” he added.

I spun about, glared. “Why the hell not? At least half the players on the team are married. A bunch more have girlfriends. They make it work. Why not me?”

“Because you can’t give the woman you actually want everything she needs,” Silas added. All earlier kidding was gone. He was dead serious.

“I’ll give her anything,” I said, dropping into a chair, propping my elbows on my knees and holding my head.

Everyone was quiet for a minute. “You can’t. You literally, and legally, can’t. Not with the Silvermines. Maybe in a few years after you retire. Maybe. The only thing you can give her now, Dex,” Bridget said, her voice soft and cautious, “is a divorce so she can find Mr. Right.”

I had enough money to give Lindy anything she wanted. Anything. A plane. A small island. Except the man she deserved.



LINDY

A WEEK WENT by and I didn't leave Mallory's couch. She made me food, set it on the coffee table, but didn't say anything other than offered me a shoulder to cry on. I don't remember showering. Bridget stopped by every day, then left. So did Aspen. Neither mentioned Dex or any of the James brothers.

I didn't care what happened with the house or that I wasn't getting updates. I didn't go to work, calling in sick. I didn't check my email for the book back from the editor. I didn't touch my phone or watch TV as I had no interest in anything beyond this living room. I sat and stared at movie after movie on Netflix and the other streaming services Mallory had.

I didn't even have a list.

In her usual flurry of energy, Mallory came through her front door, Bridget, and Aspen right behind.

"Okay, time's up," Mallory said, dropping beside me on the couch.

Aspen went to the front window and opened the blinds, letting the sunlight stream in.

Bridget settled into the chair beside the couch.

Scout, who I hadn't seen, hopped up beside me and licked my face.

I laughed and gave him a pet.

"Time's up for what?" I asked.

"Moping."

"We gave you room to wallow in your own filth. God, you smell. It's time to spill," Bridget said. "You have to admit, Mallory's been really good at holding off the interrogation this long."

The corner of my mouth tipped up. It was impressive.

"Fine."

Mallory turned, brought her leg up and bent her knee to face me.

"What happened?"

"You don't know?"

"We heard Dex's side of it, but not yours," Bridget said.

She saw Dex. I thought my tears had dried up, but they welled once again.

"Tell us, Lind. What happened?"

"Like a lot of other people in Vegas, we got drunk and got married. I'm sure you've seen the pictures by now."

"He didn't make you?" Bridget asked.

"Get married? Too much alcohol did that. I don't even remember."

“This is so not like you,” Mallory said. “I love it.”

“Mal,” Aspen scolded.

“You obviously don’t want to be married to him. What did he do wrong?” Bridget prodded.

“OutdoorNow wants him as sponsor, but they were hesitant because of the bad boy image from that bar fight that went viral.”

Mallory huffed. She knew what I was talking about.

“I guess they saw the photos of us at the rink last week and of Dex volunteer coaching. Both are a better image for them. They ultimately decided to send the contract *after* his agent showed the wedding photo. A happily ever after–Vegas style–for their new face.”

“You mean he married you as a publicity stunt?” Aspen asked, her eyes wide, as if she couldn’t believe it.

I shrugged.

“Why else would he marry me?” I asked, petting Scout.

“Because he loves you,” Mallory said.

I swallowed hard, shook my head.

“He’s never once said that. Besides, he was a fling and... and now I’m married to a man who used me. I can’t even marry anyone else!”

“If this was just a fling, Lind, then why are you so upset?”

“Because my heart got involved!” I shouted. “Why do you think I fought it, argued with you two about sleeping with him, because I knew it couldn’t just be sex. Not for me. I knew it would be hard to see him leave to go back to pre-season training.”

“But he married you, a guy you care about, for the wrong reasons,” Aspen clarified for me. Thank God because it hurt saying it.

“Do you really think Dex is that... shady?” Mallory asked, her voice soft. “I mean—”

Her doorbell rang. Mallory stood to answer it. “I’m looking for Belinda Beckett. Is she here?”

I didn’t recognize the voice.

I stood, went to the door. “That’s me.”

“You’ve been served.” The guy handed me a large envelope, then disappeared.

I turned around and the girls huddled me into a circle. On the front the return address was a lawyer’s office in Denver.

Opening it, I pulled out a few pieces of paper. At the top, in big, bold letters: COLORADO PETITION FOR DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE.

Mallory gasped as she leaned in. “This makes no sense.”

Bridget wrapped an arm around my waist, set her head on my shoulder. “He’s giving her what she wants. The chance for someone else.”



DEX

“I’M NOT sure if I can keep up with your workouts,” Silas said, breathing hard and wiping his face with the hem of his t-shirt as we finished our run around Washington Park, just south of Downtown Denver.

I walked beside him for our cool down. “Then I guess you’ll never be drafted. Although you can’t even skate. Maybe mom still has that skate trainer from when we were little.”

He punched my shoulder because he knew what I was talking about—the pipe framing, which looked quite a bit like a walker, was used by little kids to hold onto as they skated. I’d ditched it when I was maybe four. Silas used one until he was ten and then gave up.

“Whatever. At least I’m not dealing with a broken heart by running my brother into cardiac arrest.”

“Fucker.”

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“Like shit,” I replied. “It’s been two weeks. Nothing.”

I lingered in Hunter Valley for three days and didn't hear from Lindy or knew where she was. Bridget had confirmed she'd heard from her and that she was okay. Well, safe.

I wanted to shake Bridget until she told me where her sister was, but Mav would have beaten the shit out of me, and it wouldn't have made a difference. Lindy didn't want me.

After that, I gave up and returned to Colorado. It was over.

I'd fucked up. That night in Vegas, she's said we should round out our wild Vegas night of drinks and strip clubs by getting married. Doing *all* the infamous activities. I'd immediately agreed because I wanted Lindy as my wife. It had been what I wanted from the very first time I saw her.

I had the fucking ring the entire time. Even carried it with me just in case. Well, just in case happened.

She didn't even remember being the one to suggest it. Maybe I'd been stupid to go along with a shallow, empty wedding, but it *was* a wedding. We were legally married. I didn't care if we got married at a drive thru or a million-dollar affair at the James Hotel.

All I wanted was Lindy to be Mrs. Dexter James.

"Did it ever occur to you that she's hurt because you two married for the wrong reasons?"

"I married her because I love her. That's the only reason to do so."

News spread of the nuptials like it always did when Dex James was involved. Like wildfire. Scott had fielded calls and interviews and besides a few crazy women, the comments were all positive. Dex James was off the market.

“Did you tell her that?” he asked, walking beside me as we did another loop. He never joined me in any of my off-season workouts, but now he was blatantly checking on me. Theo was back to work at the hospital and hadn’t seen him since Hunter Valley. Something was up his ass besides Maude cheating on him. He was usually quiet and surly and up to his elbows in guts and brains, so he’d get around to telling us eventually.

We shifted to the side to let a woman with a double wide stroller walk pass us.

“No.”

“All she knows is that OutdoorNow gave you the sponsorship deal because of your relationship.”

“She overheard what my agents said. I fired him, the fucker. He spun this all around.”

“Did you tell that to OutdoorNow?”

I stopped, turned to face him. “I told them point blank at the meeting in Chicago.”

“So you let perception and assumption win.”

I ran a hand over the back of my sweaty neck. “What the fuck does that mean?”

A guy on a bike whizzed by and a dog barked in the distance. It was a busy day at the park.

“It means OutdoorNow doubted you for the role because of that bar fight. The media spun the shit out of that to make money.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” I kicked a pebble on the path and sent it flying.

“Then OutdoorNow made assumptions about you and Lindy that swayed them the other way.”

“Right. But I set them straight that Lindy wasn’t part of the deal.”

“Did you set them straight about the wedding?”

“No, because it’s none of their fucking business.”

“You could have turned down the deal. If they only make assumptions about you, then why would you want it?”

“One, because if I keep correcting people on how they perceive me, then I’ll never do anything else. Two, because it’s tens of millions of dollars. I’ve already told them to donate it all to my charity. I don’t want the fucking money. If I didn’t sign, they’d get someone else and then the charity wouldn’t get a dime.”

“Lindy’s made assumptions about you. Why would you want her?”

“Because I love her!” I shouted. A breeze kicked up and helped dry the sweat clinging to my skin.

“And all she wanted was a marriage based on love, which is actually what’s going on.”

I ran a hand through my sweaty hair, getting more frustrated the longer he talked. “Christ, you’re not fucking helping. You don’t think I don’t know this? That I’m not losing my shit every moment of every day? I love her and am married to the woman I want, but I can’t give her what she needs. Me, being around. I can’t commute from Hunter Valley to the practice rink every morning. I can’t wake up with her day in and day out. Solve shit like a tree in her house. I can’t do anything about it for a couple of years, unless I get injured.”

“Don’t even mention that.”

“I’m just saying,” I replied, letting him know I wasn’t going to get myself injured to get out of my Silvermines contract. “But telling my lawyer to send her divorce papers to make her happy didn’t fucking kill me? Si, I had the fucking ring all along.”

“What?” he asked, wide eyed.

“Right after Farrah’s wedding. Remember I brought Bridget from Hunter Valley to confront him at the hotel?”

He nodded. “Lindy and Mallory were with me. Lindy had to work.” On her romance book. “I told Mallory then and there I was going to marry Lindy.”

“You’re shitting me.”

I shook my head. “She went with me to help pick out a ring. I always knew.”

He shook his head, started walking.

“Tell her. Tell Lindy this.”

“Why? I’m just a fling. She made that clear all along and I still can’t be permanent.”

“Then why was she so upset?” he asked. “If all you were was a quick fuck or two, then why did she freak? Why did she stay at Mallory’s and cry the entire week?”

I winced. “She did?” I didn’t know anything about that. No one told me shit once I got back to Denver. Or before.

He nodded. “She has feelings for you, too. I’d say she even loves you.”

I shook my head, even though his words gave me hope. Hope that hurt like fucking hell.

“No. She was mad because I was only Mr. Right Now, and being married to her keeps her from nabbing Mr. Right. I’m legally keeping her from the one thing she wants. No guy’s going to date a married woman, even if it was because we were drunk.”

He stopped again, set his hand on my shoulder.

“You are Mr. Right, you dumbass. You’ve been Mr. Right all along. Show her that.”



LINDY

I STARED at the book revisions my editor sent me. The markups were like the last two books she'd done, finding typos and grammar issues that were always there no matter how much I searched. But there was a note at the end that I couldn't get past.

THIS IS the steamiest book yet! The plot is good. The characters are good, but there's something missing. It's... hot, but lacks feeling. Something's off and I can't put my finger on it.

I KNEW EXACTLY what she meant. Those sex scenes I wrote and Lucy loved made my panties wet. But they were only sexy. Word porn to tantalize the readers. But the hero and heroine didn't gel. It lacked feeling as she said. I couldn't even blame it on my mood because I sent her the file before I went to Las Vegas.

“Fuck!” I said, resting my elbows on the table and setting my head in my hands.

“Why are you swearing at your computer?” Bridget called. “I can’t believe bookkeeping is that frustrating.”

She was in the laundry room folding towels.

While she still stayed at Mav’s she popped in every day to check on me. She didn’t say it, but I knew. She never folded towels voluntarily.

The fixes from the tree were done. Drywall was replaced. Paint completed. Even the new stove was in. There was no outward—or inward—sign that a tree ever fell on the house.

I realized she was used to me working after hours. Thought Claudia was a slave driver. Just like Dex had. I took a breath, let it out.

Just thinking about him still hurt, but I’d survived so far.

“Bridge, come here.”

She stuck her head out of the laundry room. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing, just... come here.”

She set the folded towel on the table and settled into a chair across from me.

“I have something to tell you.”

The look of panic stole over her face.

“Sorry, nothing bad. But... well, I’ve been keeping a big secret.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, pushing her glasses up.

“I know I said I’ve been working at night here on my laptop,” I tilted my head to the screen. “But it’s not work. Not accounting work.”

“Okay,” she said again.

“I... I’m writing romance books.”

There. I said it.

My heart was in my throat with panic at what she was going to say.

A slow smile crept across her face. “Really?”

I nodded.

“That’s so cool! Can I read it? Are you published? What’s your pen name? Do you have those hot man covers that are so sexy? Is it pirates? I love pirate romance.”

I stared at her and blinked a few times. “You like pirate romance?”

She nodded avidly. “I mean, is there a better example of ravishment than a woman captured by a high seas pirate with the body of a calendar model?”

I burst out laughing. I laughed and laughed until I cried.

“Oh, Lind, I’m sorry. Whatever I said I’m sorry.”

She came around and hugged me.

“I never knew you read romance,” I said, wiping my eyes and sniffing.

“Who doesn’t? Wait. How long have you been doing it?”

“Two years.”

“Two years?” she said, her voice rising. “Belinda Joan Beckett, I’m mad at you. How dare you get on your Huffy

bike about me not telling you about MIT and you kept *this* a secret?”

“Your professor seduced you, Bridget, and stole your notes. There is no comparison.”

“This is huge. Why would you not tell me?”

“I don’t want anyone to think I’m a perv, pretty much. I haven’t told anyone. Except Dex.”

“He knows?” Her eyes widened in surprise about that one.

I nodded.

“That must’ve been hot.”

“I told him about it and then he asked if he could read the story I was working on and I told him no. He didn’t ask again.”

“Speaking of Dex...” she said, using this as a segue to him. “Did you sign the papers?”

It had been a week and I hadn’t touched the documents from his lawyer. Stared, yes. Signed, no. I shook my head.

“Why not?”

“Because... well, because.”

“Because you love him.”

I sighed. “Yeah. And if I sign, then it’s over.”

I looked down, felt miserable all over again.

“He can’t stop playing hockey,” she said.

“I know. That’s why this won’t work.”

She shook her head. “Do you love him?”

“Yes!” I repeated.

“Then be with him.”

“Where? In Denver? Finland? Vegas?”

“Denver, yes. Vegas, yes. Finland, maybe.”

“My job is here.”

“Your accounting job, which you don’t even like. You just admitted you’re writing romance. You went to school for creative writing. This is what you’ve always wanted to do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then do it! Go to Denver. Be with Dex and write romance.”

“I have this house.” I glanced up at the ceiling, waved an arm in the air.

“So? It’s not going anywhere. Or sell it.”

“Sell mom and dad’s house?” The idea seemed insane. And scary.

She softened, hugged me again. “Mom and Dad never expected you to stay in this house. It was *their* house. They wanted you to go have a life of your own.”

“I have a life,” I countered quickly.

“You do, but you love someone not from Hunter Valley. You can move away from home, Lindy!”

“But—”

“Dex can’t leave Denver. You know it. But he’s not going to skate forever. I mean, he’s got maybe... five years left.”

I never thought about that. Never really considered that his career had a time limit. He was big and strong and the way he

played in that exhibition game, I couldn't imagine him having to retire. Besides, he was young.

“It's not him here in Hunter Valley or nothing. He's Mr. Right. You know it. Aspen and I only said make him Mr. Right Now to get you to give him a chance. But he can be both, Mr. Right and Mr. Right Now. He's *everything*.”

Her words made me feel something besides heartache. They stirred excitement. Hope. Scariness.

“I don't—”

She stood, went to the counter, picked up the toaster and tipped it so we could both see the list I taped there when I was fourteen. “He's everything on this list. And more.”

Then she turned, pulled on the plug, then brought the toaster over.

“Mr. Right is portable, Lind. Nowhere on it does it say he has to be all those things *plus* being from here.” She shoved the appliance at me and I grabbed it, full of surprise. “Take your emotional support toaster, the list of everything that's right about Dex and move away from home.”



LINDY

IT WAS the middle of the night and I stared at the ceiling in my bedroom. The moon was bright and the glow came through the brand new window. The hole was gone and Bixby's team did such a good job with the repairs, I couldn't even tell a tree was ever in here.

A month ago, Dex had never been in my life. He barreled into it like the tree through the house. And then, just as quickly, he was gone. Unlike the house, I was still damaged.

On the outside, I was back to work. Back to yoga. Groceries on Saturday. Mowing the lawn Monday night. My lists were back in place.

Nothing changed, except me.

I wanted to be a romance author, and I was just starting to accomplish it. Two books. But I was doing it in secret. Hiding my dream from everyone because of what they'd think.

I kicked the covers down, sat up.

"Ahhhh!" I shouted.

Dex was ridiculously famous and always in the spotlight. No matter how diligent and behaved like a Boy Scout, his life was shared like it was an open book for the world. Yet he didn't care what people thought.

No, he did, but only when it hurt others.

He didn't like that woman he protected at the bar to be cast in a bad light. He wanted the sponsorship with OutdoorNow to grow his charity, not because he wanted the spotlight. He shared our wedding photo—albeit a selfie in the back of a hired car—because he wanted the world to know in his goofy way, that I was his wife.

He was *out there*. One of the best hockey players today. Or, if the sports sites were correct, of this generation. He was proud of it. Lived it.

Then there was me. I'd taken on raising Bridget when our parents died. I kept a safe, consistent life for her in this house. Found a job that allowed that to happen. When had I gone astray? Was it when Brandon dumped me because he didn't want an adult life raising a ten-year-old?

Overnight, I went from a dreaming twenty-three-year-old to acting like a middle-aged woman with a kid and a boring job. Now, I really was a middle-aged woman with a boring job. The kid had moved on, like she was supposed to.

I never did.

What was I waiting for? Why was I hiding my dreams? Why was I worried what others thought? If I was holding off until I got the go ahead from the world, I'd be right here with my list and my emotional support toaster—God, I hated Bridget's words—for the rest of my life.

This was my parents' house and...

And...

It was time to go.

Time to live my dream.

I climbed from bed, went downstairs and into the kitchen. I flipped on the light and lifted the lid on my laptop. It flickered to life on my story and the editor's final comment.

Something was missing all right.

Me. All of me.

I could write in all kinds of sexy scenes, but like my relationship with Dex, if I didn't give over my heart completely, the romance would fall flat.

Which it had.

I loved Dex and he'd tried so fucking hard for me to see he was the one for me. My heart got involved, but I never gave it to him.

Just like my characters.

I was holding back. Dex put it all out there and the only thing that kept him from being perfect was that he didn't live in Hunter Valley and traveled for most of the hockey season.

That was a pillow berm I put in place.

I dropped into the chair, bent one knee and set my foot on the seat. I grabbed the envelope with the divorce papers in them. Tossed it aside.

Grabbing my cell, I texted Bridget, even though she wouldn't get it until morning.

ME: I never imagined saying this, but think Mav will let me borrow his jet?

THEN I DROPPED it on the table, pulled my laptop closer.

“It’s time to move away from home,” I said to my kitchen, and all the ghosts that lived in it. Then I went to work.



DEX

“MR. JAMES, there’s someone here to see you.” It was the concierge from the lobby on the house phone. I rarely had guests besides my brothers, and they were on a list to be allowed up without a call.

I didn’t imagine myself to be fancy enough to need someone to clear visitors, but after a crazy woman broke in and got into my bed at my old place, I changed my mind.

“Who?” I asked. I finished my afternoon workout an hour ago, showered and was debating what to make for dinner. I wasn’t in a mood to see anyone. When was I these days?

“She says she’s your wife.”

Adrenaline pumped through my veins as if it was right before puck drop at a playoff event. Lindy was here. I didn’t even know she knew where *here* was. That meant someone had to have told her. Mav. Silas. Theo.

I could imagine why the guy sounded wary. Most married people lived together.

“Please send her up,” I said finally.

I stood in the hallway and waited for the elevator doors to open.

They did. Fuck, it was like at her house when she'd answered my knock the first time I saw her.

Breathtaking. Beautiful. She was perfectly styled, but simply dressed. Her hair was up in a loose ponytail, soft wisps falling around her face. Her makeup was subtle and her lips glossy and fucking kissable. Dammit.

She was in a Steaming Hotties t-shirt and a pair of jeans. With sneakers on her feet, she looked more casual than I'd ever seen her, besides in her nighties or when she fled the hotel room in Vegas. Today, she was definitely wearing a bra. A big purse was slung over her arm and tucked beneath it was a... toaster.

Her eyes met mine and she swallowed hard. A smile tugged at her lips, but she squashed it. Her nerves were obvious.

I was fucking coming out of my skin. Why was she here? What did she want? Could I press her into the wall and kiss the hell out of her? What was up with the toaster?

"If you stay in there much longer, you'll be on your way back to the lobby," I said.

That got her out of the elevator.

"Hey, sugar."

"Hi," she said on a whisper.

I raised my arm indicating she was welcome in my apartment. I'd imagined her in my apartment many times, but now I was wary. Was this a final goodbye? I realized how much hope I clung to these past few weeks and now... now...

Fuck.

I closed the door behind her.

“Wow, um. Great place.”

“Thanks. Drink or bread to make toast?”

She blinked. “Oh, um. No. I...” She closed her eyes. Took a breath, probably imagining she was in her yoga class or something. Then she lifted her chin, looked me in the eye and said, “I have something for you. You’ve been wanting it for a while.”

Fuuuuuuck. I looked at the floor, held out my hand. “Right, the divorce papers. You could’ve done us both a favor and stuck them in the mail. Nice knowing you, Lindy.”



LINDY

“WHAT?” I gasped. Saw the way he wouldn’t look at me, processed the harsh tone he’d given to those words. I was just inside his doorway, and I’d already fucked up. Again. “No. Dex, not the divorce papers.”

He finally looked up, eyes wide and full of surprise. He’d been expecting the worst.

“Here.” I shoved the toaster at him so I could pull my laptop from my bag.

“A toaster?” he asked, holding it out in front of him as if it was a bomb.

I huffed out a laugh because I was so nervous. I hadn’t seen him in so long and he looked so good. Smelled good. His hair was a little longer, but he looked... weary. As weary as I felt, probably.

“No.” I grabbed the laptop and held it up. “This. Can I put it down somewhere?”

He nodded and I followed him through the beautiful penthouse apartment and to the kitchen. The huge, modern and

sleek kitchen. Completely different from mine. There wasn't a takeout menu or a magnet in sight. No appliances besides a coffee maker. Did he even eat here?

I set it on the center island, opened the lid and pointed at it. "Here."

He frowned. "What?"

"My story. You said you—"

"You want me to read it?"

I nodded, bit my lip.

He was the first person I knew, besides Lucy and my editor, to read anything I wrote. I had some sales so readers had bought the first two books, but they were under a pen name. They had no idea who I really was.

"Lind, I know where I stand. Me letting you in is because I'm a gentleman, but I'm not a masochist. I can't read your book and send you on your way. I can't... I can't do this."

My eyes widened, then I wilted. Hurt shot through me because I had done this to him.

"Please," I begged.

"Now?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. You might have plans and I barged in and—"

"I don't have plans. But I... fuck. Fine."

He set the toaster on the marble, pulled out the stool and sat down.

And started to read.



DEX

THE ONLY OTHER time I read a romance was on the flight back from Finland. Then, I had hours to kill and nowhere to go. Now, I had Lindy in my apartment, and she wanted me to read her book.

I asked her more than once and every time, she'd said no faster than a mom scolding a two-year-old. She'd come to Denver and wanted me to read it.

So I did. I was definitely an idiot for doing it. A dumbass. A sucker for anything Lindy wanted.

The first chapter was catchy or whatever and pulled me right in. At first, she'd loomed in the kitchen, then I settled into the story and pretty much ignored her. It took me two hours—I saw the time on the microwave when I closed the lid—and stood. Stretched. Fuck, I just gave her two more hours of my life. Now she was going to leave, and I'd be fucked all over again.

I went in search of Lindy to get this over with.

I found her on my couch. Asleep. I exhaled, died a little inside. Fuck, she was so pretty. Sleeping, she wasn't sassy or contrary or sweet or anything. She was perfect, at least to me.

And she was here. Why? Why did she want me to read it after all this time? I hadn't heard a thing from her and now she was in Colorado.

I sat at her hip, ran a hand over her arm. She stirred. Blinked.

"Sorry I fell asleep."

"It's fine," I said, giving her a soft smile. I couldn't help it.

Pushing up to sitting, she rubbed an eye. "What did you think?"

"I love it." I gave her a sly smile. "I really like the part where she's bent over the bed, and she's being called a bad girl." I remembered those events very well.

She blushed just how I loved. "You were my muse."

My eyes widened. "Did you fuck me for research, sugar?"

Her eyes widened and—

I couldn't help but laugh. "You did!"

"My writing friend said you were my muse and well, yes." She tipped her chin up, owning her words.

"I love it," I replied. *I love you*. "It's not done though. I thought you said you finished it."

With a nod, she said, "I did. Or I thought I did. It needed to be reworked."

"What happens? Do they get their happily ever after?"

She licked her lips and glanced at her hands, which she was wringing in her lap, then at me. “That depends.”

“On what?”

Our voices had gone soft, as if we didn’t want anyone to overhear us, which was crazy since there wasn’t anyone else on this entire floor of the building.

“On you.” Her blue eyes slowly lifted to mine. “And me.” She stood and went around the coffee table. “I’ll be right back.”

I nodded and watched as she went to the kitchen and returned carrying the toaster.

“When I was fourteen, I got asked out on a date. To the bowling alley and the boy’s parents were driving us.”

I imagined pretty Lindy at that age. How shy she must have been. Nervous.

“Bridget was four, if that gives you any perspective. My mom and I talked about boys and what I wanted from them.”

My eyebrows rose thinking that had to have been an interesting talk.

“Not sex because I was a late bloomer and didn’t really think much of it then. It wasn’t like she tucked condoms in my little purse along with my strawberry lip gloss. More like since boys were now interested in me, I should decide what I expected from them. She told me I shouldn’t sacrifice on anything I was looking for in a boy, that he should be all the things I wanted from him instead of being all the things I thought a boy wanted from me. Like they needed to be nice.”

“Okay,” I said, not because I understood, but I wanted to keep her going. And why the hell was the toaster was so

important. And why I spent two hours reading her book.

“We made a list. Things I thought, at fourteen, that a boy should be.”

She handed me the toaster and I frowned. Completely confused.

“Flip it over.”

There was a piece of paper taped to the bottom. It was old with wrinkled edges. Lavender in color and had a handwritten list.

I glanced at Lindy. “This is the list? Why is it on a toaster?”

“My mom wanted it on the fridge so I could always see it and be reminded. Like any other fourteen-year-old girl, that idea was mortifying, especially since my dad would see it. Or anyone else who ever came to the house. Like boys or my friends. Anyone.”

That made sense.

“In a teenage girl snit, I taped it to the bottom of the toaster, which was right next to the fridge. I could look at it whenever I wanted, but who else would pick up a toaster and snoop?”

I smiled, imagining the whole thing.

“It’s been there ever since. Through the first bowling date to the others that followed. Through my parents’ deaths and as an adult. All this time.”

I look down at the list.

KIND.

Smart.

Doesn't smell bad.

Chews with his mouth closed.

Doesn't go to other girls if he's talking to me.

Isn't ashamed of me.

Will stand by me.

Protective.

Likes ketchup and mayonnaise on fries.

“KETCHUP AND MAYONNAISE ON FRIES?” I asked.

She smiled and rolled her eyes. “I was fourteen. Then I added more when I was seventeen. Then in college. And... after.”

The handwriting changed a little, along with the color of the ink.

DOESN'T KISS OTHER GIRLS.

Asks permission.

I DIDN'T WANT to even wonder why she put that down.

SUPPORTS MY IDEAS.

Handles the bad stuff with me.

Loves me no matter what.

Handsome.

Witty.

THEN THE PEN color changed once more.

HAS A JOB.

Doesn't live with his mother.

Isn't an asshole.

Likes kids. Wants kids of his own.

Committed.

Needs me.

“I WAS ALWAYS LOOKING for a man to meet this list.”

“Your man list,” I stated.

She nodded.

“That dentist? The date I went on? Remember.”

I frowned and even growled a little. “Oh yeah. You came back all bent out of shape about wheat.”

“He met everything on this list.”

That was definitely not what I wanted to hear. “Oh.”

She wrung her hands. “But I didn’t want him. I didn’t even really like him.”

I felt better hearing that.

“You meet everything on this list, Dex. And a few things I didn’t even put.”

I smiled, pleased with myself, but it didn’t matter. Nothing had changed in the time she’d been in my apartment except I longed for her even more and it would hurt like a skate to the jugular when she walked right back out.

“Except it turns out I wasn’t, for you, all the things listed in return.”

“Oh?” I was still fucking confused.

“In a way, I still live with my mother. And father. And... well, I never really grew up.”

I set the toaster on the coffee table and held out my hand. I wasn’t sure if she was going to take it, but I needed to have her close. If this was the last time I could touch her, so be it.

She was sharing a lot, so much more than she’d ever really given me before. But why?

When she set her fingers in mine, I felt the heat of them and something soothed. I settled back into the couch and pulled her into my lap. She straddled me and I set my hands on her hips. Her eyes met mine. She didn’t complain or pull away.

“You grew up,” I disagreed. “All at once.”

She shook her head. “I stayed. At home. I didn’t realize how afraid I was to change anything after they died. I mean, I have a toaster with a list!”

I gave her a small smile. “I love your list. And the toaster. What are you trying to tell me?”

I was afraid of her answer. So fucking afraid.

“I don’t think I can be a good romance writer until I have one of my own.”

“A new toaster?”

“A romance,” she clarified. “Our story, God, it’s the perfect romance, but it’s not finished.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked, barely breathing. *It’s not finished. It’s. Not. Finished.*

“I want... I want a happily ever after, Dex. With you.”

God, the words I wanted to hear. Fuck, my heart was beating frantically, desperately, for her.

“Nothing’s changed,” I reminded. “I’ve got pre-season training in a few weeks. I’ll be traveling. A lot. Just as you’ve said all along, I can’t be in Hunter Valley. Probably not for any length of time until June.”

“I quit my job,” she said, ignoring my words.

My eyebrows went up. “What?”

She licked her lips, met my gaze. “And... I’m moving away from home.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “Denver. With, hopefully, my husband.”



LINDY

HIS EYES WIDENED at my words. “You mean it?”

God, the hope I saw there was just like I felt.

I nodded. “If you’ll have me. I don’t want a divorce.”

His hand cupped my nape and he pulled me in for a kiss. A kiss that wasn’t passionate, but fierce, as if he never expected to have his mouth on mine again.

He rested his forehead against mine.

“I’m so sorry, sugar. For everything.” Now he called me sugar again. God, I loved it when he called me that.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I told him. It was the truth. He’d done every single thing right and I’d been stubborn, even when I didn’t know it.

“I told you you were my woman. That I wanted you. I even married you. But I never told you I loved you. It’s on your list and I didn’t say it even though I knew it from when you opened your front door that day. I love you, Lindy Beckett.”

I sucked in a breath and pulled back, just a little so I could see his eyes. Tears welled in mine, and he became blurry.

“I love you, too.” All I’d told him was fling, fling, fling. I needed him to know how I really felt.

He kissed me again. And again. When we stopped, I was on my back on the couch and he loomed over me.

“Your ring? Mallory helped me pick it out in Denver that day,” he said.

I blinked up at him. “What?”

“I told my brothers I was going to marry you. Ask them. Ask Mallory.”

“I... I believe you.” I did, especially looking back at everything he did. He’d asked me out, been sexy and silly, protected me and stood by me with the tree mess. Helped me, made my problems his. The list went on and on. He hadn’t been on vacation in Montana. He’d been there for me.

“I wanted you before the OutdoorNow deal. Before the photos of us at the rink spread. Or the wedding one I posted. I was so fucking proud that you were mine that I wanted to share you and show you off. That I got to put up the truth for once before anyone else had the chance to fuck it all up. You’re not a publicity stunt or a way to close a deal.”

“You carried the ring around?”

“Just in case.”

Just in case. God, he was more romantic than me.

Tears slid down my temples. “I know. Not about the ring. Mallory didn’t say a word, which is ridiculous because sometimes you can’t get her to shut up.”

He grinned.

“She was on Team Dex all along,” he told me.

“Team Dex?”

He nodded. “Instead of the dentist.”

I had to laugh. “I sat there and listened to him talk about gum bacteria and all I could think of was our first kiss.”

“Even if you move in with me, I still have to travel,” I warned. “I’ll be gone. A lot. That hasn’t changed.”

I nodded. “I know. But I hear you have lots of money. I figure you can buy me a plane ticket to join you sometimes. Besides, you might not be old now, but you’ll get there.”

“And work? You just quit?”

I called Claudia and told her. She laughed and said she expected it, especially after she saw the wedding photo online. And, she said if I didn’t quit, she’d have fired me. “I can’t put my dream on the side any longer. I’ll sell the house and—”

“No,” he said firmly.

“No?”

“No, you’re not selling that house. That’s where we’re going to settle. Off season. Holidays. After I retire. I want our kids to grow up there just like you and Bridget did.”

I couldn’t help but blink. “Really? Kids? Isn’t that moving really fast?”

“We’re already married, sugar. We do this together. Your dream and mine.”

I swallowed hard and couldn’t help but smile.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful.” His hand slid through my hair. I should have added *reverent* to the toaster list.

“How does your story end?” he wondered.

“They tell each other how in love they are.”

“Done.”

“Sex. Always sex.”

“I can make that happen. And our story?”

“I guess we’ll have to wait fifty years to find out.”

“You’re definitely a romance writer. I’m just the muse, so—”

He didn’t say more, just stood, yanked me up and tossed me over his shoulder, carried me through the apartment and dropped me on a big bed.



DEX

“WAIT.” I was about to get naked and show her what a cowboy can do with an eight inch dick—if I was her muse for her book’s western, rope-tossing hero, then I could think like one—when I remembered the most important thing.

I left Lindy on the bed and went to the side table, picked up her ring. The one I bought with Mallory. The one she’d married me with.

“Here, sugar.”

She sat up, held out her hand.

“We’re sober now so you know what I’m going to say is real,” I said, taking her fingers in mine. “I love you, Lindy Beckett. Will you be my wife? Will you let me be your book muse while I let you be my stick handler?”

“I will. But I’m not sure if stick handler is a euphemism or not.”

I laughed.

“Hockey stick, dick, you can handle any stick of mine you want.”

Her fingers brushed over the platinum band I never took off. “I love you, Dex James. I want to be your wife. I do. I want to fuck you for story ideas—and sometime soon a baby—and be your number one puck bunny.”

I slid the ring on her finger, then pushed her back on the bed.

“I’ve never fucked a wife before,” I said, pushing my pants down, my boxers with them. He paused. “That came out weird. I’ve never fucked *you* as my wife before.”

Her eyes dropped to my... stick.

“And wife, you’re wearing too many clothes. All you should have on is my ring.”

She crawled off the bed and I helped her strip bare. Except for her wedding ring.

“Fuck, woman. I’ll never get enough.”

I couldn’t believe it. Couldn’t even understand the happiness I felt in this moment. It was me and Lindy. Bare except for our rings.

We were starting from scratch. From a list on the back of a toaster.

We completed each other and I was going to spend the rest of my life proving it to her.

EPILOGUE



THEO

I PULLED the collar on my jacket up higher around my neck against the fierce wind. This cold weather fucking sucked. If Mav didn't come to the door in the next thirty seconds, I was breaking a window.

Fortunately, he only took ten.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, eyeing me with surprise. I didn't show up anywhere unexpected, let alone my brother's place during a rogue snowstorm.

Scout, his trusty mutt sidekick, circled around my legs with too much exuberance for a dog who loved to sleep twenty hours a day.

I pushed past Mav into the warm house, Scout following. “Fucking weather.”

The frigid wind was thankfully cut off as he shut the door.

I rubbed my hands together. “It was barely snowing when the plane landed. There's got to be four inches now.”

“This is Montana,” he replied as I toed off my shoes.

“It’s October,” I countered. Denver, where I lived, had snow as early as September, but none had fallen yet. Not that I would have known because I barely left the hospital. I had an apartment that I hardly slept in.

“This is Montana,” he repeated.

I wiped a hand over my hair, brushing soggy snow to the wood floor.

“Theo!” Bridget said, surprise in her voice as she came around the corner from the kitchen. “I thought you were the pizza guy.”

I shrugged. “Sorry.”

“I didn’t know you were coming,” she added.

Mav crossed his arms over his massive chest and raised a dark brow because he was wondering the same thing.

“Last minute decision.”

“Want a beer or a—”

“Beer,” I said.

Bridget turned on her thick, fleece socks and I followed her into the kitchen.

She already had a beer from the fridge and held out before I caught up.

“Thanks.” I twisted off the top and took a deep swig. Fuck, that was good.

“I like the beard.” She reached out and tapped my chin. “New look for you.”

I sighed. Like the snow, the day melted away as I stood here.

Mav came in, leaned a hip against the counter.

“I thought you were at some medical conference in Phoenix,” he said, after taking his usual time studying me. As if he could tell what all my problems were from my black dress pants, button up shirt and cashmere overcoat.

“I was. The weather was a hell of a lot better,” I grumbled. I set the bottle down and shrugged out of my coat.

“Then why didn’t you stay there? If you want a break, the desert must be amazing,” Bridget said, her voice laced with the wistfulness of someone who lived in the fucking Tundra.

Mav cocked his head and eyed her. “You want to go to Arizona, baby?”

I wanted to roll my eyes at him, but held back. I was in his house and I had no interest in being shoved back out in the cold. Over the summer, he’d handed his man card to Bridget when he fell for her in a week. A week! Dex soon followed with Bridget’s sister, Lindy, although they took a little longer.

Thankfully, there weren’t any more Beckett women so my balls were safe.

Except whenever I thought of a slightly crazy, extremely over the top woman, it wasn’t Bridget or Lindy. It was Mallory, Bridget’s best friend. The little spitfire who must drink pixie dust and sarcasm in her morning coffee. Who had the prettiest skin, the perfect curves and the sweetest ass in the time zone.

“Theo?”

I blinked at Bridget, breaking my thoughts away from the sexy, petite woman who made my dick hard just thinking about her.

“Sorry. Long day.” I shifted, blocking my latest Mallory-induced erection with the counter.

“Right.” She dragged out the word, looking at me with concerned eyes.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Bridget said.

Mav only shook his head and went for the door.

She was the one with the eyeroll and the sigh. “He doesn’t like me answering the door to strangers.”

I frowned. She wasn’t six and this was Hunter Valley.

“Protective, much?” I asked.

She laughed. “Very.”

“Why don’t you tell him to fuck off?”

“Because he’s not being a dick. He’s watching out for me and... well, I love it.”

She ducked her chin and flushed. Ah, love.

Mav returned with two pizza boxes—Scout on his heels with his nose in the air—and slid them onto the center island. The top one was dusted with snowflakes that quickly melted.

Bridget turned to get plates.

“You’re not at a conference and not at the hospital. What’s up?” Mav asked, flipping the top lid up. Steam rose and I took in the veggies and melted cheese. He pushed the box to the side and opened the other. From what I could tell, this pizza had everything on it.

Perfect. My stomach growled. While the James Corp jet usually had whatever food we wanted, I hadn’t given them

much notice for my flight. Hell, I hadn't even known I was going to bail on the conference until lunchtime.

The crew had enough time to log a flight plan—Phoenix to Hunter Valley—and we were off. Without more than canned nuts.

Bridget handed me a plate and I held it out for Mav to give me a big slice.

I dropped my coat, went to a stool and parked on it, wolfing down the pizza as I watched my brother and his women move around the kitchen, getting drinks for themselves and napkins, then settle down to eat as well.

I reached for a second slice, put it away as quickly as the first, then finished off my beer.

“The one thing I like about you is that you don't talk just to fill the air,” Mav said. He'd made his way through one slice and was reaching for another. He glanced at Bridget's plate and she shook her head. “But when your grumpy ass shows up on our doorstep in a snowstorm without warning, you need to share.”

Before I could open my mouth, he added, “Please say you aren't marrying that crazy foot doctor.”

I winced. “Fuck no. I don't like cheaters. Or women with the personality of a cadaver.”

“Then why the hell did you stick your dick in her in the first place?”

I glared at him and didn't respond. I'd walked away from Maude—easily and without a backward glance—when I found her foot fucking another doctor in the break room.

Yeah, that happened.

Bridget flickered her gaze at Mav, then my way. “Are you okay?”

“I quit.”

They stared at me blankly.

“Smoking?” Mav finally asked.

I winced. “Fuck that shit. No. The hospital.”

Now they blinked in unison.

“You quit the hospital,” Bridget said. “Um... congratulations.” She gave her support but the end was more of a question than exuberance.

Mav didn’t look happy. He looked... perplexed.

“You can just quit? Don’t you have a fellowship or residency or something?”

“Finished residency *and* the fellowship, fucker. You’re not the only one who’s old.” I was only a year younger than Mav.

“So you’re an unemployed, overeducated trauma surgeon who no longer fucks cadaver women,” Mav said, getting his head around it.

I shut my eyes, ran a hand over my face. Bridget laughed.

“Jesus. Don’t say shit like that out loud. I’ll be arrested or lose my license or something.”

“One look at Maude and you’d be cleared,” Mav grumbled and took a pull of his beer. He’d met her at some charity function last spring and didn’t like her from the get go. Neither had Silas or Dex.

“So...unemployed. Good thing you’re a billionaire,” he added dryly.

Bridget laughed. “You can come work with me at the high school. They’re always looking for substitute teachers.”

She’d been working as a long-term sub herself as a Physics teacher at Hunter Valley high school. From what Mav had told me, she loved it.

I had no idea what the salary of a substitute teacher was, but it wasn’t billions. It seemed Bridget didn’t care about Mav’s money, or she was too smart to sit around and do nothing. Or both. We were alike in that way. I couldn’t sit on my ass. I’d lose my shit if I was bored enough for my brain to start telling me things. Things I *really* didn’t want to hear.

Like quitting and taking a small town doctor job. I wasn’t sure if this was the dumbest or smartest thing I ever did.

Time would tell.

But high schoolers? Fuck no.

I gave her a look and pointed at my face. “Do I look like the kind of person who likes kids?”

She pursed her lips, pushed her glasses up. “No.”

I didn’t like them. Didn’t know how to talk to them. Deal with them. No way could I be trusted with making them smart citizens or whatever was required for them to graduate.

“So what *are* you going to do?” she asked. “You’re not giving up medicine, right?”

I’d gone to school for pretty much fifteen years. Worked eighty or more hours a week. I had a closet full of clothes but spent all my time in scrubs. No way in hell was I giving up medicine. Besides, in that same amount of time, I’d had zero life.

Zero. Proof—or maybe the last straw—was that I’d dated Dr. Maude Fleisher. Podiatrist. Foot fetishist. Per Mav, a woman as cold as a cadaver.

Fuck my life. That’s what I said to myself in Phoenix, having a midlife epiphany. Bradley, Mav’s overly skilled PA, had called with a job he’d thought I might be interested in. I wasn’t sure why he thought I would be. Maybe he was also a fortune teller. Read tarot. Licensed psychologist on the side. Whatever. For some reason, he’d found me a fucking job. And, standing in the middle of a high-end hotel’s lunch buffet without thinking twice, I accepted.

“A doctor here in Hunter Valley is retiring and looking for a replacement for her small practice. I start next week.”

Get Theo’s story, Man Cave!

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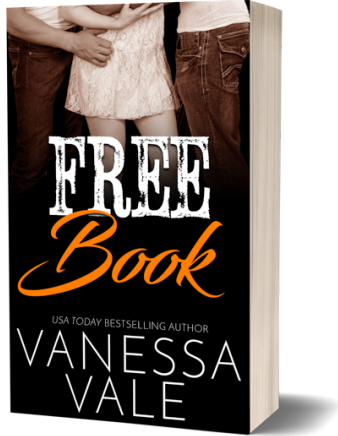
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Mail Order Bride of Slate Springs

A Wanton Woman

A Wild Woman

A Wicked Woman

Bridgewater Ménage

Their Runaway Bride

Their Kidnapped Bride

Their Wayward Bride

Their Captivated Bride

Their Treasured Bride

Their Christmas Bride

Their Reluctant Bride

Their Stolen Bride
Their Brazen Bride
Their Rebellious Bride
Their Reckless Bride

Bridgewater Brides World

Lenox Ranch Cowboys

Cowboys & Kisses
Spurs & Satin
Reins & Ribbons
Brands & Bows
Lassos & Lace

Montana Men

The Lawman
The Cowboy
The Outlaw

Standalones

Relentless
All Mine & Mine To Take
Bride Pact
Rough Love
Twice As Delicious
Flirting With The Law
Mistletoe Marriage
Man Candy - A Coloring Book

ABOUT VANESSA VALE

A USA Today bestseller, Vanessa Vale writes tempting romance with unapologetic bad boys who don't just fall in love, they fall hard. Her books have sold over one million copies. She lives in the American West where she's always finding inspiration for her next story. While she's not as skilled at social media as her kids, she loves to interact with readers.

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