



NEVER HAVE I EVER:

WANTED

my Brother's Rival

BOOK FOUR

WILLOW DIXON

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WANTED MY BROTHER'S
RIVAL**

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AUTHOR NOTE

PLEASE NOTE that this book contains scenes some readers may be sensitive to, including discussions of past bullying, and a brief mention of childhood domestic abuse.

ELI

I TILTED my head and gave the camera a sweet smile. “You guys made me work for it tonight.”

dangerboi5: show ur dick

tops465: cut?

mrbigz: I came twice!

SuZaNnA: I missed the show???

694ever: ass plz

jonesey444: show feet

“It’s pillow talk time, Danger. If you want to see my dick, you gotta tip.” I winked at the camera and put my chin on my folded hands, making sure to pop my ass up so my viewers could see it.

dangerboi5 sent you a tip!

“Thank you, Danger.” I got up on my knees and tugged on my soft dick a few times, moving my hips so I showed my best angles. “And you did miss the show, Suzanna. Hopefully, you can make it next time.”

jocks4jocks: y u let women in your room???

“Because my channel is for everyone.” This happened every show without fail. “If you look at my bio, you’ll see I’m bi. And you’ll also see I don’t put up with gender-bashing.”

jocks4jocks: bi means ur ashamed 2b gay

I flopped back down onto my belly and moved my cursor over Jocks' name. "Nope. I'm not gay or ashamed of anything. I'm bi. We exist." I winked and kicked him out of my room with a few clicks on my touchpad.

One of the site's features was it showed users' tip history by displaying their names in different colors that corresponded to a tip range. Jocks' name was gray, which meant he'd never tipped anyone or even bought tokens. Lurkers didn't get the same kind of chances potential tippers did.

"Are you ready for the unboxing I promised?"

The chat filled with affirmations. Smiling, I sat up and scooped up the box and pair of scissors I'd tucked under my bed. I'd already ripped off the shipping stickers so all they could see was it was from Amazon.

"A few things are missing from my wishlist. I wonder what's in here?"

Like most cam models, I had a wishlist viewers could buy stuff off as a way to support me. Most of the items on the list were things I used to make content, like toys or sexy outfits and costumes. I had a few practical things on there, like hoodies and gift cards. Hardly anyone bought those.

"Let's see what I got today."

Carefully I sliced open the packing tape and set the scissors aside.

"Looks like more than one thing." I peeked inside and pulled out the packing slip to see who the package was from. "No name. Well, thank you to whoever sent this."

SuZaNnA: whats inside?

jayjay: what did you get?

ALPHA22: SHOW ASS

"No need to yell, Alpha."

ALPHA22: ASS

"Last warning." I gave the camera a pointed look. "Rule number six is no sticky keys or caps lock."

Alpha's name was displayed in red, which showed he was in the lower range of tippers. But he tipped, so he got a warning.

ALPHA22: ASS NOW

“Not how my room works.” I booted him out and sighed dramatically. “Now that that’s over, who wants to see what I got?”

Knowing they’d say yes, I pulled out a pair of sheer white boy shorts.

gymbro97: r those gonna fit?

fitguy07: Hot!

sweetsuzy: put them on!

Bballer: show feet!

“They’ll fit.” I tugged on the waistband to show how stretchy they were. “I think these would look hot in a shower shoot. Can you picture it? These all wet as I jerked off through them? I bet the material would feel really good against my dick.”

urdadsabottom: holy fuk

694eva: do it!!!!

Rawdawg20: wanna see it now

9incher: do a shower show tomorrow!

“Maybe soon. Want to see what else is in here?” Not waiting for answers, I pulled out a box with a purple tentacle on the front of the package.

SuZaNnA: is that a dildo?

toppyt1m: Bailey making tentacle porn = new kink unlocked!

mrbigz: why is that so hot?

“I probably should have taken a closer look at the dimensions.” Chuckling, I peeled off the safety sticker and opened the box flap. “This thing is girthy.”

I'd added the toy to my wish list one night as a test. I'd noticed an influx of content where models were using toys that wouldn't be out of place in tentacle porn. I'd chosen this one because the tiny bumps and ridges that made up the suckers would probably feel good, but also because it was insanely expensive.

I'd had a twelve-dollar hoodie on my list for over a year, but someone had bought a two-hundred-dollar tentacle dick less than twenty-four hours after I'd put it on my list.

"I think something this special deserves to be treated as such." I held the dildo up to the camera and showed off the details. "If you want to see me use it, all you have to do is buy a custom video at option five. Links are in my bio."

dicks4life: why we gotta pay?

spank_n_wank: use it now!

daddy4u: go private?

"Sorry, Daddy, I don't do private shows during scheduled times. You can DM me to book one if you'd like."

toppyt1m: id fuck you better than that ever could

dangerboi5: my cock is bigger!

I tucked the toy away and dropped it back into the shipping box. Hopefully, no one bought a video. The base of the toy was thick, about the same size as the bottom of a soda can, and thinned until the tip, which was the same width as my finger. I could probably take half of it, but it would be a struggle, even with the cleverly designed ridges and curves. Option five was my highest tier for custom videos, and not many people were willing to pay twenty bucks a minute for porn, even if it was custom.

"I gotta get going. Next show is tomorrow, and I'm thinking it'll be something different."

I already had the next month of shows planned, but viewers loved feeling like they were part of my decision-making process, so I always pretended my ideas were spur of the moment.

“What do you think I should do?”

A wall of chats filled the screen as people tossed out suggestions.

“My Hush is a possibility,” I said when several people suggested I use my interactive butt plug. “Maybe I’ll pair it with a game.”

The chat lit up again, and most people seemed in favor of the idea.

“Thanks for hanging out with me tonight. I’ll be back online tomorrow at eight Eastern Time. Be sure to check out my Twitter for updates and subscribe here so you can get the alerts.” I blew the camera a kiss. “Hope you have a nice, relaxing night.”

A wall of good-byes appeared in the chat. I waited a few seconds, shut the show down, and checked my tip balance. The show had given me a nice little bump, but the off-line tip from *NotEast5* confused me.

Every week they sent me the same tip, which was equivalent to one hundred dollars. When I was on cam, I kept an eye out for their handle, but they never seemed to be online when I was.

This had been going on for six months. I appreciated the tips, but the mystery surrounding the situation was annoying. Not being able to solve it bothered me. I knew I should let it go and focus on the tips and not on the motivation behind them, but my brain didn’t work like that.

Heaving a big sigh, I moved through my room, putting away my gear as I tried not to think about all the stuff that was always right there in the back of my mind.

When my room was clean, I darted into the tiny bathroom across from my attic bedroom and turned on the shower so I could clean up.

Distracted, I soaped up my torso and scrubbed away the dried cum as I went through my mental to-do list.

The hot water cooled rapidly, and I rinsed off, hoping to beat the clock before it ran out.

That was unusual. The hot water had been temperamental the past few weeks but had never gone cold this fast. I grabbed the faucet as a blast of ice-cold water hit me, the spray like needles as it peppered my skin. Yelping, I wrenched it off.

“What the hell?” I panted as I stared at the showerhead. That shouldn’t have happened. I’d only been in the shower for a few minutes.

The water pressure had been normal, which meant no one else was currently using the shower. What was going on?

Shivering, I wrapped a towel around my waist, then another around my shoulders.

The chilly February air prickled my skin as I hurried into my room. I tugged on the first pair of sweatpants I pulled out of my dresser, then donned a thermal long-sleeved shirt, the warmest hoodie I owned, and shoved my feet into a pair of fuzzy socks.

Living in the attic should have meant my room and bathroom were the warmest part of the house, but whoever had finished the attic hadn’t splurged for quality insulation, and the entire floor was always cold, especially now that it was winter.

I went to the bathroom and checked the water, letting it run for a few moments and periodically sticking my finger in the downpour. Still freezing cold with no hint of warming up.

“Weird,” I muttered.

Might as well go see if anyone else noticed the loss of hot water.

“Eli!”

I paused at the bottom of the stairs that opened into the main living area. Beck and Finn, two of my roommates, stood near the door to the kitchen.

“Hey.” I looked between them.

“Are you going to be around for the next hour or so?” Beck asked.

“Um, yeah.”

“What my tactless boyfriend meant to say was ‘hi, Eli. Did you happen to notice the hot water is out?’” Finn poked Beck in the side, a fond smile on his lips.

“What he said.” Beck grinned.

“I definitely noticed. I was in the shower when it happened.”

“Yikes.” Finn grimaced. “I was washing some dishes, and that was bad enough.”

“Do you know what happened? Is the tank empty?” I asked.

“No clue. But I doubt it’s the tank.” Beck slung his arm over Finn’s shoulders. “I called the emergency line, and they said the property manager would be by in the next hour to check it.”

“And you’re wondering if I’m going to be home to let him in?” I asked.

“Are you? We’re meeting Alex and Kai soon, and I have no idea when Matt is going to be home.”

“Yeah. It’s fine. I’m not going anywhere tonight.”

“Are you sure?” Beck asked. “We can cancel if you have something going on.”

“Nothing going on. Have fun.”

“Can you text us what the manager says?”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Thanks.” He beamed another big smile at me, then pressed a kiss against Finn’s temple.

Finn melted against him and sighed happily. They walked toward the front door, their heads bent together and speaking quietly. A pang of longing stabbed me deep in the gut.

It wasn't my roommates' fault I didn't have any friends to make plans with on a Friday night.



DING DONG.

The chime of the doorbell echoed through the main room. I slipped my bookmark between the pages of my book, put it on the coffee table, and answered the door.

I'd met the property manager in the summer when I'd taken a tour of the house after being assigned to it. Mr. Culligan was short and portly, with a bushy beard and a shiny bald head.

The man on our doorstep was not Mr. Culligan.

I narrowed my eyes, and a rush of adrenaline shot through me.

Six and a half years might have passed, but I'd recognize Weston Daniels anywhere.

Gone was the sixteen-year-old boy I'd known. He was easily six feet now and still built like a swimmer with a trim waist, thick thighs and arms, and wide shoulders. His features looked the same but different. Same golden-brown eyes, same wavy, dark brown hair. Same full lips and perfect bone structure. Did he still have that little dimple in his cheek when he smiled? They were leaner now, more defined, and the scruff of a day-old beard made him look older than twenty-three.

West's mouth fell open in surprise.

"Eli?"

His voice had changed. It was deeper with a rich tone to it that hadn't been there when he was sixteen.

A shimmer of something fluttered in my stomach.

"What do you want?" I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at the man who'd disappeared six years ago and left

a trail of destruction that had irrevocably changed my brother's life.

WEST

“WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

Eli’s angry words knocked me out of my shock.

He’d been thirteen the last time we’d spoken, and the man in front of me was a far cry from the kid I’d known.

Eli had always had a delicate look about him. He’d been small for his age, and with his dark blond hair and big green eyes, he’d reminded me of those paintings of cherubs from back in the day.

The hair and eyes hadn’t changed, but he’d filled out over the years. He was only half a head shorter than me and probably stood at five nine or five ten now. His baggy clothes hung off a slender frame, and his plush lips were twisted up in a scowl.

Thirteen-year-old Eli had been a cute kid who’d looked at me like I was a superhero. Twenty-year-old Eli was a breathtakingly beautiful man who looked at me like I was dog shit he’d stepped in.

“Well?” He glowered at me. “I’m waiting for someone. State your business and go away.”

“I’m here to look at the hot water tank.”

His jaw dropped. “*You?*”

I nodded.

“What happened to Mr. Culligan?”

“He retired.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Your family owns this house.” He uncrossed, then crossed his arms again. “Of course you do.”

“Can I come in and see the water tank?”

He stepped aside and swept out his arm dramatically. “It’s not like I can stop you, since you own it.”

“My father’s company owns it. I don’t own anything.” I came into the house and closed the door behind me.

He snort-laughed. “Sure. Keep telling yourself that.”

“When did you notice the problem?” I asked as we made our way to the laundry room at the back of the house.

“Right before my roommate called you.”

“What time was that? They called the answering service, not me.”

“Too good to give your number to your subjects, Sire?” he muttered behind me.

“I’m only trying to get a timeline so I can figure out what’s going on.”

“It’s been about an hour,” he said grudgingly.

“The message said the hot water isn’t working.” I unlocked the door to the small closet that housed the unit and flipped on the light.

Nothing was outwardly wrong. Not that I could see at least.

“One minute, the water was fine. Then it went ice cold and hasn’t warmed up since.”

“Was it a gradual change?” I crouched next to the tank and checked it was still on. “Or was it an instant one?”

“Gradual, but a quick one. I was in the shower for less than two minutes before it went from hot to freezing.”

A vision of Eli in the shower, water cascading down his smooth skin as he soaped up his chest, flashed in my mind. I

shoved that visual aside and unzipped the bag I'd brought with me. Now was not the time to be picturing Eli naked and soapy.

Hell, he'd probably kick me in the nuts if he knew I'd thought about him that way at all.

"Have you noticed anything off about the hot water in the last few days or weeks?" I pulled out a multimeter and adjusted the settings on it.

"It's been off for weeks. Some days it's fine. Other days it runs out fast." He crouched next to me and peered into my bag. "Are you testing the elements?"

"I am." I smiled despite myself. Curiosity had always won out over anger when he was a kid. It was nice to see some things didn't change.

"Are you going to calibrate your meter?"

"I was just about to. Can you flip off the power supply so I don't get zapped?"

He nodded and stood. I tried not to watch him, but my eyes were drawn to the slight sway in his hips and the soft, floaty way he walked.

I'd noticed it when he was a kid too. Eli moved like he was trying not to make any noise. The swing in his hips was new.

Clearing my throat, I focused on calibrating the meter so I didn't think about his tight, firm ass or his slim legs.

"Done." He crouched next to me again.

"Want to do the test after I get the element exposed?"

"Sure." He picked up the meter. "Are you testing the bottom element first?"

"Yup."

"Because the bottom one usually goes first? The water here isn't especially hard, so it probably isn't sediment causing the issues. Do you think one of the elements has lost continuity?"

“That would be my guess.” I undid the access panel and pulled it off.

He handed me a length of electrical tape. I secured the strip of insulation covering the element to the tank, popped off the protective cover, and detached the power wires.

“All set.” I glanced at him, and my breath caught in my throat.

He’d moved closer so he could see into the small panel. He wasn’t scowling anymore, and his curious expression only highlighted his ridiculous good looks.

I focused on the job at hand and not on the gorgeous guy next to me.

He touched the leads to the terminals on the element.

“Twelve.” He pulled the leads away. “So it’s not that one.”

“That’s a relief. It’s infinitely easier to replace the top one.”

“Infinitely?” A small smile quirked the corner of his lips. “A bit of a dramatic word choice, don’t you think?”

I chuckled and replaced the pieces on the panel. “Maybe a bit dramatic. But it *is* easier to only have to do the top one.”

“But you haven’t established it’s the problem yet.”

“That’s true.” I stood. “But it’s a logical conclusion. There are two elements. The bottom one is fine. That leaves the top one.”

“But how do you know for sure it’s the elements when you’ve only tested one? They’re the most obvious reason why the tank might not be working, but not the only ones.”

“Touché.” I unscrewed the other access panel.

“I’ve always thought it’s funny we use a French term from fencing to say someone has a good point,” he mused.

“You could say a discussion is like verbal fencing. You’re both making points to sway the other.”

“Yes, but I usually don’t try to stab my discussion partners with a sword while I discuss things.” His eyes glittered.

“That’s why I said *verbal* equivalent.” His smile and the lightness in his features and eyes made something deep inside me ache.

“Touché.” He shot me a playful grin.

“Language is interesting.” I focused my attention on the water tank. “I wonder how long it’s been part of our vernacular.”

“Since 1902. That’s when it was first recorded.”

I smiled, not surprised he knew that off the top of his head.

“And vernacular? Aren’t you the guy who called a protractor a half moon measuring thingy? Since when do you know big words?”

“A lot can change in six years.”

His eyes went from curious to cold, and his features tightened again. “Maybe. But some things never do.”

Shit. That had been the wrong thing to say.

We tested the other element in silence. Eli didn’t bother telling me the reading and stuck the meter under my nose. It was at zero.

“I’ll get a replacement element and get in touch with our plumber.” I replaced the pieces of the panel.

“Fine. When can we expect it to be fixed?”

“I’ll have to double-check with Phil, but most likely before dinner tomorrow. I’ll let you know when I have a time frame so someone can be home when we need to get in.”

“Contact one of my roommates. I’m busy tomorrow.” He stood and crossed his arms over his chest as I cleaned up my tools.

“I meant that as a general you, like all of you, but sure. I’ll let your roommates know. Can you turn the power back on?”

He leveled a glare at me but did as I asked. I locked the door, and when I turned around, he was leaning against the washing machine.

“You know the way out,” he said, his eyes on the floor between us.

I wanted to say it was nice to see him again, to ask how he’d been. To explain what had happened six years ago. Something to try and get back the easy conversation we’d fallen into before I’d opened my big mouth and reminded him of our past.

Instead, I left.

I’d parked the company truck on the next block because there hadn’t been any spots near the house. Now I was glad for the walk.

Of all the people I could have seen at one of my dad’s properties, Eli hadn’t even been on my radar.

For one, I’d never expected him to still be here. I’d thought he would have gotten out of this town. He’d been on track to graduate at fifteen. Why hadn’t some Ivy League school snapped him up?

Was he a grad student? That made even less sense. Rutherford was a good school with a solid academic reputation and surprisingly competitive sports teams, but it wasn’t anything special. Why would he stay here?

When I got to the truck, I shifted the bag on my shoulder and dug my keys out of my jacket. This was a small town, and I’d been back for five months. I’d managed to avoid running into anyone I knew by keeping close to the school and driving to the city when I needed anything, but it couldn’t last forever.

Hopefully, I didn’t run into Gray. If I thought things with Eli were complicated, they had nothing on what was between me and his older brother.



TAP. TAP. TAP. TAP.

I dropped the pen I'd been hitting against the side of my desk and closed my hand over the lid of my laptop, but I couldn't bring myself to pull it down.

I shouldn't do this.

"Fuck it." I grabbed my phone and searched for the tweet that had me all in knots.

BaileyB: join me at 8 p.m. Eastern for a fun show and a big announcement!

The tweet had a link to his cam channel and a photo of his ass encased in a pair of sheer green briefs that left nothing to the imagination.

I'd stumbled on his channel just over six months ago when I'd logged on to the cam site and seen his familiar face smiling back at me from a thumbnail on the solo male cam page.

I'd stared at his photo for a long-ass time, trying to wrap my brain around the fact that Eli, sweet and cherubic Eli, was a cam model.

My first reaction had been shock. Not because he'd chosen to cam, but because in my mind, he was still that kid I'd known all those years ago.

Seeing him now as an adult had been disorienting, and a million questions had rolled through my head as I'd stared at my screen.

Once the shock had worn off, the fascination had set in. The kid I'd known hadn't had any interest in sports or fitness, preferring to read and learn everything he could about whatever happened to catch his attention.

That had obviously changed. He'd always been slender, but now he was cut. Not ripped or anything, but his muscles were lean and defined.

Why the fuck was his tweet bugging me? He wasn't active on Twitter like a lot of models were, only using it to promote his shows or when he had new content for sale. Nothing about the tweet was unusual.

Was it the announcement?

“Ugh.” I scrubbed my hand over my face. I should go for a drive or something.

I’d never watched one of his shows or bought any of his content. Not because I didn’t want to, but because it felt like a violation.

I wasn’t ashamed that I enjoyed watching cam models, and I didn’t think less of Eli for being one. It was more that I didn’t feel like I had the right to watch him.

Especially after yesterday. I’d hoped his anger toward me might have cooled to a strong dislike, but the fire in his eyes as he glared at me had proven that wasn’t the case.

Did I have this insane urge to watch his show because I’d seen him yesterday? Was my subconscious trying to find reasons to justify my attraction to him?

From his bio on the cam site, I knew Eli was bisexual, and I hated the flicker of hope that sparked deep in my chest.

This was so fucked up. For six months, he’d been an image on a screen. A reminder that the kid I’d known was all grown up. I’d been able to tell myself my interest in him was natural. That it had nothing to do with my attraction to him and everything to do with being curious about someone I used to know.

Yesterday had changed things. Now he wasn’t just a pretty face on my screen. He was a real person filled with snark and fire and that innate curiosity that made him who he was. He might have changed physically, but his energy hadn’t.

He *felt* the same, which was asinine to even think. I might have known him six years ago, but I had no idea who he was now.

I glanced at the time. His show had started.

Now was the perfect time to shut my laptop down and go for a drive. But instead of getting my ass up and walking away from my desk, I clicked my bookmarks and opened the link to his cam room.

One time wouldn't hurt, right?

ELI

“HI, SUZANNA, HI STRIPES. HI, JAYJAY.” I smiled at the camera as some of my regulars greeted me in the chat.

jayjay4: what's the big announcement?

SuZaNnA sent you a tip!

SuZaNna: what's your announcement?

“Thank you, Suzanna. You'll find out soon enough. But it's a fun one, I promise.”

The chat lit up with greetings and people asking about my announcement. The odd comment demanding to see my dick, ass, or feet also popped up, but I ignored them. I'd learned long ago that feeding the trolls only made them louder.

I'd turned on the feature that allowed me to see the handle of every person who came into my room. It made the chat fly by as the names flashed between messages, but I didn't have any trouble following both.

NotEast5 has joined your room!

My greeting died on my lips. My mystery tipper was going to watch my show?

A line of messages shook me out of my stupor, and I focused on making small talk and not on the weird flutters in my chest.

stripes: tell us a story while we wait for the good stuff

“A story?” I smiled and tapped my chin like I was thinking. “Okay. Once upon a time, in a land far, far away.”

My chat went crazy with protests.

stripes sent you a tip!

stripes: not that kind of story;)

“Okay then, what kind of story do you want, Stripes?”

stripes: tell us more about your roommates

“My roommates, huh?”

stripes: something hot

“Something hot about my roommates. Okay.” I looked around like I was making sure no one was in the room with me and we were exchanging secrets. “The one who lives in the room beneath mine still hasn’t closed the vent I told him about months ago. I get a front-row seat to their dirty talk every time he and our other roommate get it on.”

SuZaNnA: do you think he did it on purpose?

coldbreww: thats so hot

assssman6969: are they hot?

“I’m not sure if it’s on purpose. He might have forgotten.” I leaned back on my hands. “But I’ve heard them talking about all the times they’ve fucked in the library, so maybe they like knowing I can hear them. I’m certainly not complaining.” I ran my hand over my chest. “And yes, they’re hot.”

I chatted about my roommates for a few minutes, making sure not to say anything that could even remotely identify them. When I hit my viewer goal, I got to business.

“Time to start.” I picked up the notebook and pen I’d set out earlier. “I was thinking it would be a fun night to play a game. I don’t know about you, but it’s been a *long, hard* week, and I could use a little fun. How about we play a few rounds of Never Have I Ever?”

I’d gotten the idea at the beginning of the year when my roommates had played before going out one night. I’d heard

them in the living room, and after listening to a few rounds, I'd been convinced everyone in the house other than Finn were empty-headed party kids and I needed to stay away from them.

What I hadn't known was the game was supposed to be outlandish and crazy and shock the people you were playing with. That the things they'd revealed were the exception, not the rule when it came to their experiences.

"Since I can't drink, I thought I'd add my own twist to things. Strip Never Have I Ever."

The chat lit up. They liked the idea.

"Rules are simple. If you have a 'never have I' question you want me to answer, put it in a tip. I'll write down the ones that come in, then randomly choose one to answer. If I have done it, you get nothing. If I haven't, then I take off an article of clothing."

SuZaNnA: isn't it supposed to be the opposite? You drink if you have, so wouldn't you strip if you have?

I smiled sweetly at the camera. "We could do it that way, but we'd be here forever. I mean, I'm not exactly the most experienced guy."

That made the chat go crazy, and tips poured in. People loved innocence.

By the time the tips stopped, I'd written down an entire page of statements. Most of them were innocent enough, but a few made my skin crawl. I wouldn't be reading those, tips or no tips.

"Now for the fun part. You're welcome to strip along with me. Being naked with friends is always more fun than being naked alone." I winked. "Don't you agree?"

"Once I'm down to nothing, the real show will start." I set a show goal on my computer. "Hit that, and the Hush comes out. The tip menu is active, and for the new people, I don't put up with abusive language or bullying of any kind. My room rules are in my bio, and I have no problem kicking people out if they break them."

I made a show of waving my pen around and dropping it on the page like I was randomly choosing a question. I'd already decided which ones I was going to answer, but people loved theatrics. Might as well give them a good show.

"Never have I ever hooked up with an older woman." I ran my hand down the front of my hoodie. "The first girl I kissed was a year older than me. Does that count?"

I paused to give people a chance to answer, then yanked the hoodie off and tossed it aside. "I guess not. Next one. Never have I ever taken eight inches." I pretended to look thoughtful. "I supposed this one would depend on what you mean by eight inches. Eight inches of what?"

Dozens of messages with varying words and phrases for "dick" scrolled through my chat.

"You think they meant have I taken an eight-inch dick? If that's the case, then I'd best lose this."

I pulled off my T-shirt, subtly shifting so the light showed off my abs. "Ready for the next one?"

I spent the next ten minutes answering various statements and taking my time teasing my viewers as I slowly stripped and played up my innocence. I made it a point not to lie on cam, but I did sometimes stretch the truth. For this game, I didn't have to. My total lack of experience worked in my favor.

"Uh-oh." I grinned and tossed my briefs onto the floor. "Looks like I'm naked. Whatever will I do with myself now?"

Tips and suggestions rolled through the chat. This was the easy part of the show. I didn't have to be charming or cute. All I had to do was focus on the tips and deliver what people paid for.

queenie sent you a tip!

My screen flashed, the sign my goal was surpassed.

"Thanks, Queenie." I got up on my knees to show off my semi. "Looks like the Hush is coming out to play tonight."

Ignoring my computer for a moment, I pulled the vibrating butt plug and my lube out from under my pillow. I kept my phone off-screen, connected the toy, then used the app to connect both to my laptop.

The toy was a crowd-pleaser and a good money-maker. The more they tipped, the harder and longer it vibrated. I'd prepped in anticipation of hitting my goal but still made production of spreading my legs and working the toy in. I thanked the people who tipped, and kept an eye on the chat for anyone breaking my rules or being an asshole.

Most cammers had moderators to help them, but I did it on my own, same as everything else in my life.

When the toy was in, I leaned back and slowly stroked myself. Keeping one eye on the chat and being cognizant of my poses and how I looked on cam helped distract me from the pleasure spreading out from my ass as the toy buzzed and vibrated. I did my best to interact with my viewers and keep from getting too close as I edged myself, the toy amplifying every stroke.

After nearly half an hour, the buzzing in my ass shifted to pain. My prostate was oversensitive, and my dick ached from the friction of stroking for so long.

"I don't know how much longer I can hold out," I said, my voice low and broken. "I'm so close. I need to come."

The chat lit up, and the tips came pouring in. The toy switched to the highest setting, and a shock of pleasure tore through me.

buckeye: come on your face!

I chuckled, struggling to focus on the chat and not on my impending orgasm. I rocked my hips to move the toy off my prostate so I didn't come before I hit my goal. "On my own face? Not sure how that would work."

buckeye: I saw a guy lie back and put his ass up on the wall. Then he came all over his face. Soooooo hot

The toy hit just right, and I moaned. "Maybe next time. Not sure I'm coordinated enough for that."

NotEast5 sent you a tip!

The toy went haywire inside me. My mystery tipper had tipped the highest amount the toy could recognize. It pulsed and buzzed, switching from high to low in a random pattern that rocked me all the way to my core.

“Holy shit,” I panted. “Holy shit.”

I’d had people tip this much before, and it never failed to send me flying over the edge. Pleasure coiled deep inside me, my mind going blank as tendrils of need snaked through me.

“Oh god!” I threw my head back as the pressure snapped, like an elastic pulled beyond its tensile strength.

Waves of pleasure rocked me, and I came hard, writhing and squirming on the bed, the toy lighting me up from the inside.

Groaning, I grabbed my phone so I could turn the toy off when the haze of my orgasm faded. The app had a line of tips still in cue and would continue to go off if I didn’t, and I couldn’t handle any more tonight.

Getting up on my knees, I gave the camera a crooked smile. “Be right back. Then it’s pillow talk time.”

Shakily I climbed off my bed, moved out of frame, and gently tugged out the toy. Using my T-shirt, I wiped off my chest, then got back on my bed and lay in front of my laptop.

stripes: that looked like a good one

SuZaNnA: what were you thinking about?

babygirl702: show feet

toolguy: cum again!

I chuckled at the screen. “It was a good one. And I was thinking about my announcement and how much fun it’s going to be.”

The chat went wild.

muscles21: pillow talk time!

“It is.” I rested my chin on my folded hands.

I called the postorgasm portion of my shows “pillow talk time.” I tended to lose about half my viewers once I came, but most of those were lurkers or nontippers. My regulars loved it, and truthfully, I did too.

Being able to chat without having to worry about trying to make money was a nice way to come down after a show. Sometimes I had to log off right away, and I hated the emptiness that filled me after going from interacting with people to being alone with my thoughts.

jayjay: whats your announcement????

I smiled and pulled in a deep breath. My body tingled from my orgasm.

sitonmyface222: what's on your arm?

I was used to this question. “It’s a glucose sensor.”

bendmeover99: why?

sweetiepie444: what does it do?

“It’s part of my CGM, or continuous glucose monitoring, system. I use it to check my blood sugar.”

sitonmyface98: you have diabetes???

“I do. Type 1.”

I didn’t particularly like sharing my medical information with hundreds of strangers on cam, but the white disc attached to the back of my triceps wasn’t something I could hide. I’d learned it was better to just put the truth out and not make a big deal out of it.

“Do you want to hear my announcement?” I changed the subject, then waited as the chat went crazy. “Well, I’ve decided I’m tired of being a twenty-year-old virgin.”

The chat went nuts again. My regulars knew I was a virgin, and I’d said as much during Never Have I Ever, but not everyone in the chat believed me. I ignored the rude remarks and ones accusing me of lying.

“And since I’m tired of waiting for my Prince or Princess Charming to come along, I’ve decided it’s time to do

something about it.”

kwiky579: partner show!

daddy4u: I'll pop your cherry

hiball7: fuck me

farmerbobby: I volunteer as tribute!!!!

papabear352: I'll rail you so hard you wont be able to walk for a week

I chuckled as the messages scrolled by. “I’m glad you’re all so enthusiastic about this. I thought about making some content with another model but figured I might as well fuck one of you instead of a stranger.”

The chat went so quiet I checked to see if I’d lost my internet connection. Then, it went insane as messages flew past. I didn’t bother reading them and scanned them to make sure people were reacting positively.

“You like that idea?” I grinned and popped my ass. “You want to be the first to fuck me?”

I waited for the chat to quiet down a bit. “I’m going to hold a live auction. It’ll be a private show, so if you want to bid, you’ll have to buy a ticket. If you only want to watch, that’s fine too. Once the show starts, I’ll keep tabs on the tips that come in, and whoever tips the most by the end wins.”

A flurry of messages flew past. A few questions caught my eye, and I did my best to answer them.

“I’ll release the rules of the auction before the show, but winning is only the first step. My safety comes first, so there’s a list of conditions the winner will have to meet before anything happens. If you can’t fulfill the terms, then you don’t get my ass or a refund.”

SuZaNnA: what about women? Is the auction open to us too?

“Of course. I’m equal opportunity.”

daddysbabygirl18: have you fucked a girl before?

“Nope. I’m a true virgin. Only kissed one guy and one girl. Never done anything else.” I winked at the cam. “The winner will get the same options regardless of gender identity. You can fuck me, or I can fuck you.”

Chat messages flew by, but I ignored them. “I’ve got to sign off. Lots to do. The auction is happening tomorrow at eight p.m. Eastern. Anyone who’s interested will get a chance to go over the rules before the show starts. Entering the private show will be considered an acknowledgment of the terms.”

I went through my closing spiel and logged out of my room. I’d made more in tips than I’d anticipated, and that big tip right at the end was the reason why.

My thoughts strayed to *NotEast5*. Had it turned them on to know their tip was the reason I’d come?

The hell? Why was I wondering about them at all?

Moving on autopilot, I shut down my laptop and put away my ring lights. At least the hot water was fixed. Taking a cold shower in February wasn’t my idea of a good time.

West had kept his word and contacted Beck about coming by to replace the element. Unfortunately, none of my roommates had planned to be home during the window he’d given, and I’d had to let him in again.

This time I’d stayed in the living room while he and someone I assumed was a plumber changed the element. Then they’d left, and I’d been trying to think about anything other than him since.

Seeing him again had brought back everything from the past six years—hurt, betrayal, anger, and sadness.

The worst part was he still felt like the guy I’d known all those years ago. His quick smile, the way we fell into easy conversation, and how he made me forget to overthink everything that came out of my mouth.

He even walked the same: tall and confident like he owned the world. Which he kind of did.

“Stop thinking about him,” I chastised myself and grabbed a towel. “He’s nothing to you. Just a guy you used to know and your current landlord.”

WEST

I STARED at my laptop screen long after it had gone dark.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

Eli was going to auction off his virginity to a stranger on the Internet?

“Jesus fucking Christ.” I rubbed my hand through my hair.

What was he thinking?

Dozens of worst-case scenarios flashed in my mind. Eli being beaten, raped, murdered. The grisly images kept coming, getting progressively more graphic. My stomach rolled over, and panic tightened my chest.

“Fuck.” I shoved my chair back and paced the small room I used as my office. “Fuck fuck fuck *fuck!*”

Had he thought this through? Actually *thought* about it?

My stomach soured as I pictured some faceless asshole touching him. Being his first. Even if they were considerate and didn't hurt him, the very idea made me ill.

I didn't subscribe to the notion that virginity was anything special. That it should be saved or “given” to someone. Everyone had a right to bodily autonomy, and that included having sex with whomever they wanted as long as they were of age and could consent.

But Eli was different. I had no idea if it was because of the protective instincts I still felt toward him, but I knew deep

down in my soul that fucking a stranger for money would affect him in ways he hadn't even considered.

Should I talk to him? Tell him I knew what he was planning? Maybe if I laid it out logically, and got him to think about everything that could go wrong, he'd realize it was a mistake.

I stopped pacing, my shoulders tight and my jaw aching from clenching it so hard. He'd never listen to me. Hell, knowing him, he'd do it in spite of me. Eli had a stubborn streak, and nothing motivated him more than being told he couldn't do something.

Had he talked this over with anyone? Why hadn't they knocked some sense into him? Did he have anyone he *could* talk to about this kind of stuff?

An image of him smiling sweetly at the camera, his eyes soft and his features relaxed, flashed in my mind.

No. No way in hell could I let this happen. He'd probably hate me until the end of time for interfering, but fuck it. I'd rather have him alive and pissed than dead or broken because he'd trusted the wrong person.

I marched back over to my desk and shut down my laptop. If he was going to do this, then I was going to make sure I won.



THE AUCTION WASN'T WHAT I'D EXPECTED IT TO BE. I'D READ the terms, and they were comprehensive and logical, but there were still dozens of ways things could go south and he'd end up another statistic.

The show itself had a decent number of viewers, but after the first twenty minutes, most of the tips coming in corresponded to something off his tip menu.

Thankfully, he'd kept announcing the winner and their token balance. I'd tried to keep a running total, but after almost an hour, I was completely lost.

Did anyone else notice how he was keeping track in his head? It was impressive as fuck, but I doubted they were focused on his brain when he had his dick out.

“It looks like Suzanna is in the lead.” Eli stroked his cock and ran one hand down his chest. The pose was sexy as hell, but it was his flushed cheeks and the little smile on his lips I couldn’t look away from.

Cha-ching!

The cartoon-like effect only activated when someone tipped over one thousand tokens, which was the equivalent of two hundred and fifty dollars.

Whoever alpha4u was, they’d tipped him two thousand dollars.

Eli widened his eyes. “Thank you, Alpha. You’re officially leading by three hundred tokens.”

He sat back on his heels, still stroking his dick. “You guys are so generous tonight. Eight thousand tokens is the price to beat if you want a chance to be my first.”

The chat filled with a wall of tips and comments.

Shit. I tried to keep up with the names and amounts as his viewers battled it out, sending small tips. Eli had his eyes glued to the screen and distractedly stroked himself.

Fuck. What was the top bid now?

“Thank you so much,” he said when the chat finally went silent. “Alpha is in the lead with ten thousand.”

Ten thousand? Shit. I grabbed my phone to buy more tokens. I’d seriously underestimated what people would be willing to spend to fuck him.

“Anyone else?” He turned around to give the camera a view of his ass. “This is what’s on the line.”

Dangerboi5: too rich for my blood

angelbaby: I’m out

baller7: fuuuuuuuuuck

SuZaNnA: I can't

“Come on,” I muttered as the purchase confirmation screen loaded on my phone. It could take up to five minutes for my payment to go through and the tokens to appear in my balance. “Hurry up!”

alpha4u: I want to see you cum

Eli's hand paused midstroke.

alpha4u: 1k tokens is a cumshot on ur menu

Eli smiled woodenly. “It is, but this is a bit of a different situation.”

alpha4u: u said ud honor ur menu

The auction ended when he came. Was he going to do it?

“You guys ready to see me finish?” Eli asked in a hollow voice.

Shitshitshitshit.

“Come on, come on, come *on*.” Adrenaline flowed through me as I stared at my tip balance. I couldn't refresh the screen to hurry things along because I'd be kicked out of the show and wouldn't be able to get back in.

Eli stroked himself, his eyes shifting from blank to faraway. Was he fantasizing or freaking out?

alpha4u: hurry up

alpha4u: I want to see it now

Eli set his mouth into a tight line and nodded at the camera.

The corner of my screen blinked, and my balance updated.

“*Fucking* finally!” I clicked the tip button, nearly smashing my mouse through the top of my desk.

I typed out the full balance, then confirmed the amount.

Once a tip was sent, it couldn't be recalled. The confirmation safeguard protected people from typos and losing tokens, but it was a bitch when I was in a hurry.

I clicked the Send button, only then realizing that my chest was burning.

I blew out my breath. Stars danced in my vision. Shit, I'd been so focused on what was happening I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath.

Cha-ching!

Eli closed his eyes, his face screwed up in concentration, then came.

Considering he'd been edging himself for an hour, the orgasm didn't look all that satisfying. He played it up by moaning and rubbing his free hand over his body, but his actual cumshot was weak, like he'd forced it out.

He'd also gotten up on his knees so his face wasn't on cam. Was that something he normally did?

"Wow." He sank back down on his knees and smiled weakly. "That was a good one. Thank you so much, NotEast."

I didn't like hearing him use my handle, but the relief that it was over and I'd won overruled my discomfort.

The chat lit up with agreements and lewd messages. Really? Had no one seen what I had?

"Thanks so much for being here. For buying a ticket and for bidding. I'm blown away by your response. Anyone who bid over seven hundred and fifty tokens will get a credit for a photo collection and video of your choice. If you bid over one thousand, you'll also get a one year subscription to my OnlyFans. And bids over two thousands will get all that, plus a custom video. For those who bid over five thousand, I'll add in a one-hour private show. I'll contact everyone about your prizes through your DMs with the links you need."

alpha4u: what about me? u think some vids and a private is worth what I paid?????

"I'll contact you and give you more options." He smiled tightly.

alpha4u: fucking bullshit

alpha4u: ur a tease

alpha4u: I bet ur not even a virgin

Eli ignored the comments and gave the camera a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Thanks again for being here. Keep an eye on your inboxes if you bid. And thanks, NotEast5.” He went off-line.

I sagged in my desk chair. The adrenaline from the show left me in a rush.

I'd just spent three thousand dollars buying my former rival's little brother's virginity online.

Jesus fuck. How had this become my life? This shit didn't happen in reality. This was the kind of stuff you read about in books or saw in movies.

I snorted, nearly delirious with relief. This was so outlandish I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

Did I care about the money? Not one bit.

My relief faded. Right before he'd logged off, Eli's eyes had gone blank and his face pale. Something had spooked him, but what?

A notification popped up on my screen.

You have a message!

I opened my DMs.

BaileyB: thanks so much for bidding! Congratulations on winning. I'll send you all the info in 24 hours

Now was the hard part. How was I supposed to let him know *I* was the winner without setting off his stubborn streak and having this backfire?

I couldn't blindside him with it. No way could I go through with setting everything up and not tell him.

Should I wait until he sent the info tomorrow? I wanted to march over there and give him a piece of my mind, but confronting him after whatever had happened during the last

few moments of the show would be cruel and probably overwhelm him.

But waiting would undoubtedly piss him off even more.

“Goddammit.” I closed the lid to my laptop and stood, needing to move and expel some of the energy flowing through me.

I was between a rock and a hard place. I lifted one hand and stared at it. How long had it been shaking?

Fuck. The auction had affected me more than I’d thought it would. I needed to calm down before I made any decisions about how to proceed.

With a sigh, I grabbed my keys, phone, and coat. A long drive should help clear the cobwebs and distract me for a while.

As I left my office, an image of Eli smiling at me as we’d checked the elements of the water heater flashed in my mind.

Any chance of him forgiving me had disappeared when I’d sent that tip. I’d done the right thing, I was sure of it, but that didn’t stop the disappointment from washing over me.

Six and a half years ago, I’d made a mistake that had nearly cost me everything. I’d fucked up, but it hadn’t only been me who’d suffered.

When the truth came out, Eli was going to hate me even more than he already did. Hopefully, this entire experience was the wake-up call he needed to not do anything like it again.

ELI

“WHAT’S GOING ON WITH YOU?”

“Huh?” I snapped my gaze up from the book I’d been staring at, my vision hazy and blurred. “Sorry, what?” I blinked to clear my eyes.

“Are you okay?” Finn sat on the couch next to me, concern on his face.

“Yeah. Fine.” I smiled, or at least tried to.

He gave me a look that said he didn’t believe me.

“Just distracted by something.” I closed my book. “Did you need something?”

“Ready?” Beck came thundering down the stairs.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Finn stood.

“I’m fine.” The lie slipped out so easily, and I tried not to dwell on how Finn was the only person who’d noticed I wasn’t fine.

But even though he’d reached out and asked, I couldn’t talk to him about this. How did one tell their roommates they not only cammed but had also auctioned off their virginity online?

Matt and his boyfriend knew about my job, but they were the only ones outside of my family and my oldest, and only, friend.

No way could I tell any of them about the auction.

“Are you going out?” I asked.

Beck stood behind Finn and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend’s waist.

“Anna has a show this week, so we’re going to help her set up.” Finn leaned back against Beck.

“Have fun.” I gave them what I hoped was a genuine smile.

They said their good-byes, and I turned back to my book. I’d read this series a dozen times already. It was one of my comfort reads, but I couldn’t get into it.

With a heavy sigh, I tossed the book onto the coffee table and stared at the wall. Almost a week had passed since the auction, and NotEast5 hadn’t answered my message. Everyone else who’d bid enough to get a prize had claimed theirs already, but they’d left me on read. I wanted to get it over with, but I didn’t know what to do with their silence. And I couldn’t stop obsessing over why they’d dropped so much money to win, only to ignore me.

Knock. Knock.

Startled out of my musings, I padded over to the front door. I was the only one home now that Beck and Finn had left.

West stood on our doorstep, looking... off. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something was wrong. His hair was disheveled, like he’d been running his fingers through it, his shoulders were stooped, and his eyes were troubled.

Was he okay?

“What do you want?” I crossed my arms, angry at myself for caring about him at all.

“We need to talk.”

“Why?”

“Can I come in?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

The corners of his mouth tilted up. “Weren’t you the one who gave me a ten-minute lecture on grammar when I pulled that on you in seventh grade?”

I couldn’t stop the chuckle that bubbled up in my chest. “Maybe.”

“Can I come in? Please?”

I wanted to tell him to go away but stepped back. He was the property manager. It wasn’t like I could keep him out.

“Thanks.”

“What do you want?” I asked again.

He closed the door behind him and looked past me. “Can we talk in private?”

“Why? Anything you need to tell me about the house isn’t private.”

“This isn’t about the house.”

“Then I don’t want to hear it.” I pointed at the door. “Out.”

“Eli—”

“Out.”

“I’m NotEast5.”

My brain went utterly blank, and my vision went white.

What? No. No freaking way.

“Eli?” Strong hands gripped my arms.

Why was my chest burning? Static exploded in both my vision and my ears as the reality of the situation hit.

West was NotEast5. West had won the auction. He’d bought my virginity.

“Eli!”

His sharp voice knocked me out of my shock, and I dragged in a gulping breath.

He let go of my arms, concern etched into his handsome face.

Wait. What? Handsome? Why was I thinking about his looks now?

West was my mystery tipper.

The realization hit just as hard as learning he'd won the auction. How? The odds of someone I knew finding my channel were statistically impossible. I'd done the math.

Why had he sent me money every week?

Hurt flared in my chest, and heat prickled my cheeks.

"I know you're pissed—"

"Damn right, I'm pissed." I blinked back the tears gathering in my eyes. "Why? Why did you bid? To humiliate me? To blackmail me?"

"No—"

"Then why? You're not gay? How did you even find my channel?"

"I found it by accident. It was on my suggestions page."

"But why would I be on your suggestions?" I shoved down the hurt and focused on the anger simmering underneath it. The algorithms based your recommendations on your watch history.

"Because I watch male cammers," he said slowly.

"Why?"

He arched his eyebrow. "You really can't figure that one out on your own."

"You're bi?"

He nodded.

My brain stuttered again. I hadn't seen that coming.

West had this magnetic aura about him that drew people in. He'd always had a lineup of girls at school vying for his attention. His connections and bank balance had certainly helped boost his popularity, but he'd seemed like a genuinely good person and never wanted for company or admiration.

My thoughts clouded. Yeah, I'd horribly misjudged him back then. I wasn't about to make that mistake again.

"I know this is a huge shock." He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets.

I snorted. That was the understatement of the century.

My older brother's former rival, and one of the few people I'd called a friend, not only knew about what I did for a living but had also dropped three thousand dollars to win my auction and buy my virginity.

"Can we talk in private, please?"

"No one else is home." I crossed my arms over my chest and lowered my gaze to my threadbare sweatpants and ragged hoodie. Both were several sizes too big, the colors faded and washed out.

I almost laughed at the picture we must make. There stood West in his expensive work boots, designer jeans, and brand-new jacket. The gold watch on his wrist looked like an antique, and his haircut probably cost more than I spent a week on groceries.

Then there was me. Mousy, average Eli in his frumpy clothes. The weird kid from the wrong side of town.

Humiliation burned in my chest. My fingers ached from clenching them.

"Can we go into the living room or something?"

"No point." I unfurled my fingers and pulled in a steady breath.

"Eli—"

"Why? Why the tips? Why did you bid? Why would you spend all that money on a prank?"

"It wasn't a prank—"

"Don't lie to me. I know it was." Angrily I swiped at my eyes with the back of my hand.

"Eli—" he said, his voice gentle.

“Don’t,” I choked out. “This isn’t because of you.” I waved my hand at my face. “It’s a stress response. Nothing more.”

He kept silent, his eyes filled with concern.

“Why did you send me those tips?”

“I honestly don’t know.” He ran his fingers over the clock face of his watch. “I guess I wanted to help.”

The flash of anger came out of nowhere and hit so hard it stole my breath. I gasped as my chest tightened and my vision went hazy around the edges.

My reactions to his words freaked me out almost as much as what he’d said. I didn’t get angry like this. Hell, I didn’t get embarrassed or sad or scared either. Sure, I felt all those emotions on the surface, but not on such a deep, visceral level.

What the hell was happening?

“Help?” Instead of fighting my anger, I sank into it and let it take over. “Help like you did six years ago?”

He hung his head. “I made a mistake—”

“Yeah. You did. But you didn’t give a shit then, so why now? To assuage your guilt? To make you feel like a big man?”

“No.” His voice was quiet, defeated. “I just... I know how expensive insurance is, and when I found out you...”

“I don’t need your charity.” Something akin to sorrow flowed through me, battling with the anger still consuming me.

A part of me had foolishly hoped West had sent the tips because he was attracted to me. That he’d see me as an adult and maybe even an equal.

God, I was so stupid. Even if he were attracted to guys, he’d never be attracted to me. He had everything, and I was nothing.

“It wasn’t charity.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I focused on a spot on the floor. The fight had left me. “What’s your Venmo? I’ll refund you for the auction and all the tips.”

“No.”

The sorrow evaporated and was replaced by shock. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t want any of it back.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want it.”

“Then give it to charity. I’m not taking it back.” His eyes softened.

Was the fucker laughing at me?

“Fine,” I snapped. “Then let’s do this.”

“What?” His face went slack with shock.

“You won the auction. There’s no point making a big deal out of this now.” I waved for him to come into the house, my movements jerky and overly dramatic. “Come claim your prize.”

“No.”

“No?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “What? The accommodations not up to your standards? Sorry, your highness, but this is how the other half lives. You want my ass? Then you’ve got to deal with the poor people cooties floating around.”

“Don’t be childish.”

“Childish?” I shrieked, sounding as hysterical as I felt. “I’m just telling it how it is.”

His jaw worked as he gritted his teeth. Why the fuck was he mad? He didn’t get to be mad. I was the one who’d been played. Me, not him.

“What? You spent three grand, and you don’t want me?”

“No.”

Hurt and humiliation slammed into my chest. Of course he didn’t want me. He’d never want me. I was nothing more than

a charity case to him. Someone to throw money at so he could pat himself on the back for being so magnanimous. Like a damn shelter animal he'd sponsored.

"Then why?" My voice trembled. "Why did you bid if you don't want me?"

"To make sure you didn't do something stupid!" he burst out.

Anger once again flared in me. "Stupid?"

"Yes, stupid." He raked one hand through his hair. "You keep asking me why, but what about you? Why the fuck would you auction your virginity off to a *stranger* on the goddamn Internet?"

"Why not?" I shot back.

"Because it's dangerous." He stared at me like I'd told him that monkeys ran the government and dinosaurs were alive and well and living underground.

"Cammers and porn models do this kind of stuff all the time. Besides, I planned for every possible scenario or outcome. I had contingencies in place for my contingencies—"

"You can't plan for human emotion. I read your plan. It was thorough. I'll give you that. But it was flawed."

"Flawed?" I tamped down the flash of indignation. "I don't make flawed plans. You just couldn't see I had everything covered."

"What if they hurt you? What if you were in some fucking hotel room alone, and they wanted more than you were willing to give? What if they beat you? Raped you? Killed you? What plan could possibly take *that* back?"

"They wouldn't..."

"Why not?"

"Because they'd have agreed to my terms..."

"You really think a checklist is going to save you if someone decides they want to hurt you?"

“I’d have their name, their personal information. I would have had the upper hand.”

“Logically, yes. But humans aren’t logical. They don’t always act or react the way they should, especially when sex is involved. Ever heard of a crime of passion?”

“It wouldn’t be like that.”

“How do you know?” His eyes blazed with what looked like fury. “How do you know it wouldn’t?”

“Because...”

Cold prickled at my skin, and my anger faded. Was West right?

No. He wasn’t. I’d planned for everything. This was him overreacting and indulging in his savior kink.

“What are the statistics when it comes to sex workers being the victims of violent crimes?” He’d gentled his tone, but the tension from before still simmered under the surface.

“Those are irrelevant. This is a completely different situation.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“There are easier ways to make money—”

“I didn’t do it for the money.”

“Then why?”

“Weren’t you listening? Because I’m tired of being a virgin.”

“Why would you want a stranger who bought you to be your first?”

“Why not? What’s so different from going to a club or going on Grindr and picking up some random? The danger would be there no matter what. At least this way I get something out of it.”

“It’s not the same, and you know it.”

“Why do you even care? You saved me from all the terrible, implausible things your brain decided were going to happen if I went through with the auction. Congratulations. Mission accomplished. Eli, the idiot, has been put in his place.”

“You’re the furthest thing from an idiot.”

“You called me stupid. That’s kind of synonymous with being an idiot.”

“I didn’t call you stupid. I said your idea was stupid.”

“Well, my *stupid* idea isn’t happening now. You can go back to your ivory tower and congratulate yourself on your altruism and benevolence. Did you even stop to think that maybe this wasn’t your decision to make? That I’m an adult with free agency over my body, and I should be the one to decide what I do with it?”

“I didn’t want you to make a mistake you’d regret for the rest of your life,” he said softly.

“But it was *my* mistake to make. And getting railed by a stranger isn’t even going to make the top one thousand of things I regret.”

“It might. You don’t know how things will affect you until it’s done and you can’t take it back.”

“Why would I want to take it back? It’s not like I was expecting it to be good. It was a business transaction. Nothing more.”

“You don’t think you deserve to enjoy your first time? To be with someone who’ll treat you properly?”

“What’s your obsession with first times? Virginity only matters because society has decided it has value. I have a commodity people are willing to pay for. Why wouldn’t I use that to my advantage?”

“Because you’re more than a commodity.”

“Am I?” A bubble of laughter escaped my throat.

“Yes, you are. The kid I knew—”

“That kid grew up a long fucking time ago,” I snapped. “He learned the world is a cruel place filled with horrible people and his only worth is in what he can do for others. So tell me again how I’m not a commodity? How I’m anything more than a broken mistake who isn’t worth anything to anyone.”

West gaped at me.

Fuck. I hadn’t meant to say that. The emotional whiplash from the conversation was getting to me and lowering my defenses.

“You think I’m some naïve kid who doesn’t understand how the world works. That you needed to swoop in and save me from myself because of some idealized version of me you have in your head. You’ve fed your savior kink.” My lips folded into a smile. A rush of adrenaline shot through me. “Now it’s time to follow through.”

“Follow through?”

“Yeah.” I stood up straight and tilted my head to the side.

West’s eyes darkened as a lock of hair fell over one eye.

“You’re the one who’s convinced my first time needs to be this magical experience. Now you get to not only play savior but also be one. Come on, West. Come save me with the power of your cock.”

He swallowed, his eyes flaring with something. Was it irritation? Or maybe heat?

“That’s not why I—”

“I know. You dropped three thousand dollars to save me, not because you want to fuck me. Because the idea of sticking your dick in me is just so repulsive you can’t do it. But we made a deal.”

“Eli...” A hint of warning.

“What? Can’t handle the terms you agreed to?” I asked sweetly.

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’m not doing anything. You willingly entered into a binding contract with me, and now you’re changing the rules because they don’t suit you.” I ran my tongue over my bottom lip and peered up at him through my lashes.

He dragged in a ragged breath and shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’m not changing the rules.”

“Aren’t you?” I gave him my best innocent smolder, the one I’d perfected over years of camming.

His nostrils flared, and he cut his gaze to the side and stared at the wall.

Seeing him all flustered and off-kilter was strangely exhilarating.

“Whatever you’re trying to do, it’s not going to work.”

“I’m not trying to *do* anything.” I pouted. “Just pointing out how you’re not fulfilling your end of our deal.”

“Stop that.”

“Stop what?” I injected as much innocence into my voice as I could.

“You’re being a brat.”

“A brat?” A rush of the emotional equivalent of yelling “fuck, yeah” shot through me. He was pissed, and I loved it.

“Yes, a brat.”

“Then what are you being?”

“An adult.”

“Well then, Mr. Adult. Time to fulfill your end of our deal. Either you fuck me, or you forfeit your right to my ass, and I go and find some random to do it for you.”

His eyes darkened as he looked me up and down.

“Fine.”

WEST

A TREMOR of victory shot through me as Eli's expression melted into one of shock.

I'd seen through his act the moment he'd switched gears and flipped from angry to flirty. He was trying to piss me off, to make me break the terms by outright refusing.

I'd read the contract carefully and gone over every line with a fine-toothed comb. The winner had first rights to his virginity, but nowhere in the contract did it say how long I had to claim my prize.

He'd written the rules based on the assumption that the winner would be a stranger and they'd only be in contact for a single night.

I wasn't a stranger, and I sure as fuck wasn't setting up some deflowering road trip like the terms laid out.

Did I want to fuck him? Hell yeah, I did. Thinking about him bent over and ready for me made my dick throb. Picturing how he'd look with my dick in his mouth, imagining the sounds he'd make when I put my mouth on him, was enough to make my already hard cock ache with need.

"Fine." He schooled his face into a neutral, almost bored look. "Then let's do it."

"No."

"But you just said—"

"I'll fuck you, but not like this."

He rolled his eyes. “Like what?”

“Like this.” I waved a hand at him, knowing my vague answers would piss him off.

Getting a rise out of him was fun. I wasn’t ready to unpack *why* I thought so, but both my dick and I were fans.

“Sorry I didn’t get all pretty for you.” He smiled. At least I think it was supposed to be a smile, but it looked more like he was baring his teeth. “Guess you’ll have to close your eyes and pretend I’m someone you’re actually attracted to.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.” I took a step closer to him.

“Then what?” He swallowed and looked up at me with wide eyes.

“You think I don’t want to fuck you because I don’t want you?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Newsflash, brat. Having sex with someone who hates me isn’t exactly a turn-on. If you want this to happen, then you not only have to want it, but you also have to want *me*.”

“That’s... that’s not how it’s supposed to work. The contract—”

I stepped right into his space so our chests were almost touching.

His big green eyes were filled with so many emotions I couldn’t pinpoint them. Confusion, anger, defeat, and something that looked a lot like anticipation flashed like lightning.

“The contract didn’t say anything about a timeline. It didn’t even say I *had* to claim my prize.”

“That’s... but...”

I lowered my lips so they hovered next to his ear. A spicy, citrusy scent enveloped me. The skin of his neck was so smooth and creamy.

Fuck, I wanted to mark him. To suck and bite the sensitive skin until it was red with my brand.

Jesus. What was wrong with me? I wasn't into biting and marking. Was I?

It had to be the fighting. My adrenaline was jacked up, and my body was confused about what it liked. I needed to get the fuck out of there before I did something stupid.

“Your ass is mine, Eli,” I rasped. “Make no mistake about that. But *I* decide if and when I take it.”

His neck flushed, staining his skin pink.

“You keep talking like fucking me is going to be a chore. Like it's something that needs to be done quickly so it can be over.”

He let out a little moan and tilted his head to the side.

Giving in to the overwhelming lust inside me, I trailed the tip of my nose along the column of his throat, stopping when my lips were next to his ear.

“But it won't be a chore,” I whispered. “Not even close. We're *both* going to enjoy every second of it.”

“West...”

The breathy way he said my name made my already aching balls twinge with arousal.

Fuck. I hadn't meant to say any of this. I'd told him the truth when I'd said hate sex did nothing for me. The thought of being with someone who was only going through the motions while their mind was somewhere else had the same effect as a cold shower.

The thought of Eli under me, unresponsive and merely tolerating my touch, was an instant boner killer.

I'd already come to terms with the fact that I wanted him. I was attracted to him, and this conversation was confusing the fuck out of my dick. His attitude shouldn't be turning me on. His anger and the way he kept trying to play me should have

pissed me off. It *should* have made me roll my eyes and tell him to grow the fuck up.

It didn't. Instead, it amused me.

The Eli I'd known had always kept his emotions tight to his chest, like he thought showing people what he was feeling was a weakness. This Eli was all flashing eyes and flushed cheeks. Something about seeing him letting go and unleashing all that anger and hatred at me was hot as fuck, and I had no idea why.

I didn't like confrontation. I didn't enjoy verbally sparring with people or having sassy back-and-forths with partners. I didn't get into fights and couldn't remember the last time I'd yelled at someone.

I'd long since perfected the art of pretending to listen while being dressed down by my father or teachers or whoever else felt the need to put me in my place. I was a champ at turning the other cheek and walking away whenever drama presented itself.

This situation with Eli had drama written all over it. Our history was bad enough, but this whole auction debacle was making things complicated with a capital C.

I should walk away. I *needed* to walk away.

“Give me your phone.”

Breathing fast, he pulled it out of his hoodie pocket.

“Unlock it.”

Jesus fuck. What was I doing?

He did, his eyes glassy and dazed.

I took the phone and put in my number, then saved myself in his contacts. I tucked the phone back into his pocket.

“The proverbial ball is in your court,” I said softly, leaning the slightest bit closer to him than was necessary. “I promise I won't look your number up. If you want to see me again, you need to be the one to reach out. You have the power here, Eli.”

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing enticingly.

“I meant what I said. I won’t fuck you unless you want it. Until I’m sure you want me.”

“But you want me?” he whispered.

Moving slowly, I gently pressed my erection against his stomach.

His eyes filled with confusion and what looked like desire.

I took a step back.

He let out a little breath and crossed his arms over his chest in a defensive pose.

“I understand things between us are complicated, but I want you to know I’m sorry. I’m sorry for everything. An apology can’t make up for the hurt or damage my stupid mistake caused, but I am.”

He blinked, a calculating look in his eyes.

“Call or text if you need anything. Any time. I mean it. I want to try and fix things between us. And not so I can get my dick in you.”

He rolled his lips inward and pressed them into a tight line.

“I’d like it if we could eventually be friends again.”

He cut his gaze to the wall.

“Have a good rest of your evening.”

He didn’t move, and I turned and left the house.

The chill of the air seeped into my overheated skin, and I shoved my hands into my pockets as I headed down the street and toward where I’d parked my truck.

My rock-hard dick rubbed painfully against my jeans, and I discreetly angled it up to take some of the pressure off it.

I still couldn’t believe what had happened, what our conversation had devolved into.

I’d known he’d be angry, but I hadn’t anticipated his hurt and confusion when I’d told him I had no plans to claim my prize.

I'd thought he'd be relieved. Well, relieved I was giving him an out. I'd known forcing his hand and making this decision for him would piss him the fuck off. I'd assumed he'd latch onto the loophole and that would be the end of any and all talks of sex or virginites.

But the vulnerability in his eyes and the way his whole body had curled in on itself as he'd asked me why I'd bid if I didn't want him had shaken me almost as much as what he'd said when I'd reminded him we had a past.

That kid grew up a long fucking time ago. He learned the world is a cruel place filled with horrible people and his only worth is in what he can do for others. So tell me again how I'm not a commodity? How I'm anything more than a broken mistake who isn't worth anything to anyone.

Jesus, what had happened to him after I'd left town?

Eli had been ten the first time I'd met him. I remembered walking into homeroom on the first day of seventh grade and seeing a literal child sitting in the back corner, his head buried in a book.

At only four and a half feet tall and barely seventy-five pounds soaking wet, he'd been small for his age. Add in his disheveled blond hair, big green eyes, and cherubic face, and he'd looked horribly out of place among his older classmates.

Something about him had tugged on my heartstrings, and the urge to protect and befriend him had hit hard. It hadn't taken long to learn he was Gray Hawthorne's younger brother.

Gray, who'd become my biggest rival and competition before I'd fucked everything up.

ELI

“ARE you sure you’re going to be okay?”

I jammed the phone between my shoulder and ear and pulled open the door to the fridge.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I still can’t believe I messed up the dates.” Mom sighed. “Work has been so crazy, then Glen’s vacation time was rescheduled, and if he didn’t take it, he’d lose it—”

“It’s fine, Mom.” I scanned my shelf and pursed my lips. I needed to go shopping tomorrow. “I’m an adult. I can spend spring break by myself.”

“I know.” She sighed again. “I wish you could have come with us, but...”

“It’s fine,” I repeated, then closed the fridge.

My parents had taken my younger siblings to see their grandparents for the weekend. My stepfather had always treated Gray and me like his own kids, but his parents were less than receptive to our existence, and we’d never been included in their family gatherings.

“I don’t like the idea of you being by yourself.”

No way would I tell my mother I was happy she’d made a mistake and I didn’t have to spend my break watching my younger siblings while my parents worked. I didn’t mind helping out, and I loved my siblings, but I resented how heavily my parents relied on me.

I liked my alone time, and I was looking forward to having the house to myself for the first time since school started.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I know, but it’s my job to worry. Do you have any plans?” The hope in her voice was clear as a bell.

“Study, work. Not much going on with most people leaving town.”

“What about your friends from high school? You should see if anyone wants to hang out now that you have some time off.”

I gritted my teeth so I didn’t snap that I didn’t have any friends from high school, and if I never saw those assholes again, it would be too soon.

“I don’t think so.”

“What about Taryn? You two were so close. I heard she and her boyfriend broke up.”

“I haven’t talked to her in years.”

“Maybe now is the perfect time to get back in touch. You’re both single, and you had such a big crush on her.”

I barely managed to hold back my snort of laughter.

Taryn and I had been friendly, and she’d been my first kiss, but I’d never had strong feelings for her.

I’d never had strong feelings for anyone.

Not unless I counted West and the all-consuming hatred he stirred in me.

“I don’t think things would work out, even if I were in a place where I was looking for a relationship.” I made my way through the empty first floor and toward the stairs.

“I still don’t understand why you’re so against them.”

“I’m not against relationships. I’m just not interested in one.”

“But don’t you want to get married and have a family?”

She asked me this at least once a month since I'd turned eighteen.

Marriage and family were important to her. She loved being a wife and mother. I was happy she'd finally found a good partner and had the life she'd always wanted. The problem was she didn't seem to understand that wasn't my dream.

"I'm going to grad school next year. Why would I start something when I'm leaving for California in six months?"

I didn't bother telling her my reasons had nothing to do with my future home address and everything to do with how I was. Not only was I not interested in anyone, but no one would ever be interested in me.

A vision of West floated in the forefront of my mind as I climbed the stairs. The intense look on his face as he'd told me he wanted me.

But that was different. He wanted the version of me he'd built in his head. He wanted the guy he saw on cam. He didn't want me. No one did.

"Just think about it."

"I will," I lied.

"I have to go. Love you."

"Love you too. Hug the kids for me."

"Will do. Bye, hun."

"Bye."

I pushed the door to my room open and ended the call. Two weeks had passed since the auction, and West had kept his word. He hadn't left any off-line tips, hadn't answered my DM about the stupid terms of his winnings, and he hadn't tuned into any of my shows.

I was glad.

Sort of.

“Ugh.” I went to the tiny wardrobe that functioned as my closet and yanked open the door to get out my ring lights. I still had an hour before my show was scheduled to start, but I might as well set up now.

West was nothing to me, and I was still upset at myself for losing my cool with him. No one had ever elicited that kind of response from me, and I hated how he wasn’t playing fair.

He’d ruined my brother’s life, and he’d shown me I was nothing more than a means to an end.

I’d like it if we could eventually be friends again.

Why did he have to be so damned nice? Why couldn’t he be an asshole? I wanted to hate him. To shove his very existence into the back of my subconscious and forget every conversation and smile and time he’d stood up for me.

Stop thinking about him, Eli. He’s nothing to you. I swiped my towel off my bed and stomped into the tiny bathroom to take a quick shower. Hopefully, the warm water would calm my brain down.



“THANK YOU, SUZANNA.” I GROANED AND SWITCHED HANDS, using my left to slowly stroke my shaft.

Carsforever6969 sent a tip!

jayjay sent a tip!

dangerboi5 sent a tip!

“Thank you, Carsforever, Jayjay, and Danger.” I smiled at the camera, hiding my frustration with a bashful look. “Almost there. Fifty more tokens and you’ll get the good stuff.”

I’d been edging myself for over an hour and was about ready to scream.

I hadn’t gotten a tip higher than five tokens in the last twenty minutes. It was like my viewers had all gotten together and decided to draw things out as long as possible.

My dick ached, and my skin was raw and a bit chafed, even though I was using lube. My balls were high and tight and rock hard, and my body hurt from tensing and keeping control for so long. It felt like I'd been kicked in the junk, and it was a struggle to keep pretending I was enjoying it.

The thing about edging was it only felt good for so long. I liked it up to a certain point, but once I crossed that threshold, it went from being a physical act to a mental battle. My ability to think about multiple things at once was a huge help, but even I had my limits.

I needed to come, but my viewers were making me work for it.

“Just a few more tips.” I let go of my dick to give it a break and turned my ass to the camera, looking over my shoulder so I could keep track of the tips and chat. “How many of you have already come while thinking about this?”

The chat lit up, but no one tipped.

I shifted again. The lights flickered, then went out.

My laptop had a full battery, and the screen glowed in the dark room as the picture froze.

Carefully I climbed off my bed and walked to the window. Was it only the house or the street? A few weak lights dotted the inky darkness, most likely flashlights or device screens.

Crack!

The entire house shook with the force of the thunder, and a few seconds later, the sky flashed with lightning.

It had been raining for the last half hour, but the winds had picked up, and by the sound of things, the worst of the storm was hitting.

Of course we'd lose power. Years ago, this neighborhood had been considered middle class and had been full of well-cared-for homes and properties. Then greedy investors had bought up properties and forced most of the locals out so they could convert the area into student housing.

The rents were ridiculously inflated, but since the town was so small, students who couldn't get into the dorms had no other option but to use student housing.

Losing power during storms wasn't anything new, but the power companies had a hierarchy when it came to restoring the grid when it did go out. The wealthy area around the campus was always first, then the school, downtown, student housing, and finally, the east side.

Thank god my parents were long gone. It could be days before they got their power back.

Crack.

I jumped away from the window, hurried over to my bed, and picked up my phone. I needed to tweet that I'd lost power. It took forever to get a signal, but I managed to get the tweet out before I lost it again. I didn't want my viewers to think I'd rage-quit because I hadn't hit my goal or anything.

A chill seeped into my skin. I pulled on a pair of sweats, an oversized hoodie, and a pair of fuzzy socks. I wanted to take a hot shower to soothe my body and warm up, but that wasn't an option.

My dick was still rock hard, but jerking off was the last thing on my mind. Sighing, I unplugged my lights and moved them out of the way, then shut down my computer to save the battery, grabbed my phone, and turned on the flashlight.

The attic was going to get colder the longer the power was out. I went to my dresser, pulled open the top drawer, and dug around for the small flashlight I kept in there.

My hand closed over the cold plastic, and I clicked it on.

The beam flickered and glowed warm yellow rather than the bright white it should be giving off. "Of course," I muttered. The light slowly dimmed, then went out completely. "Just perfect."

I shook the stupid flashlight and clicked it on and off a few times, but it was dead. Grumbling, I tossed the flashlight back into the drawer, pulled out a packet of glow sticks, and

cracked one, then shook the stick to fully activate it. Soft green light filled the room.

It wasn't as bright or convenient as a flashlight, but glow sticks were safer than candles, so I always kept a supply of them handy in case of power failures. Having grown up in town, I was intimately acquainted with how shitty our power grid was and how often we lost power for seemingly no reason.

The dark didn't bother me, but the silence was eerie. The rain pinged off the roof and windows, and the wind was strong enough that it gently shook the walls every time a gust hit the house. The absence of any other sounds was disconcerting.

The battery on my phone indicated I had a little over 50 percent left, and I turned off the flashlight. I should have charged it when they announced we were having a storm. But the weather advisory hadn't said anything about wind, so I hadn't bothered to prep for a power failure.

Was only student housing affected, or was the whole town out?

The room was already uncomfortably cold and would only get worse the longer the heat was off. Looked like I was in for a night of sleeping on the couch.

I stripped the comforter off my bed and grabbed my book. Walking down three flights of stairs in the dark with my hands full wasn't easy, even with the soft light from the glow stick, and I took my time. The last thing I needed was to fall and break my ankle.

I'd just dropped my stuff onto one of the couches when a soft sound caught my attention.

I blocked out the noise of the storm and concentrated. Was that running water coming from the back of the house?

Fear lanced through me, and I rushed past the kitchen but stopped when the area in front of the laundry room door shimmered in the soft light of my glow stick.

“Oh shit.”

Fumbling, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and turned on the flashlight.

“Shit!”

I shoved the laundry room door open and shined my light inside. The floor was covered with water. Panic clawed at my chest as I pulled up West’s phone number and pressed Call.

“Hello?”

“West?”

“Eli? What’s wrong?” His voice was filled with alarm. “Are you okay?”

“The laundry room is flooded.”

“Shit. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Rustling material and soft bumps came over the line.

Ignoring the cold water soaking into my socks, I hurried over to the washer and opened the electrical panel over it.

“Did you lose power too?” I flipped the switches to the washer, dryer, and water heater off.

“Yeah. The whole town is out.” A thud, followed by a loud bang. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. I grew up here, remember? Power failures aren’t exactly new for me.”

“Do you have any idea where the water is coming from?”

I splashed over to the water heater closet. The sound from before was loud now.

“The water heater room.”

“Fuck. Okay. Stay back until I get there—motherfucker!”

“What happened?”

“One of my asshole neighbors didn’t secure their trampoline, and it’s in the middle of the fucking road and blocking my driveway. Hang on while I get it out of the way.”

Muffled sounds filled my ear as he presumably put his phone in his pocket.

Crash!

Another clap of thunder rocked the entire house. I jumped in surprise.

Something on the phone slammed. Then a voice cried out.

“West?”

The connection crackled, coming in and out.

“West? Are you okay? What happened?”

“E...i? ... you... ere?” A choppy, barely audible voice came over the phone speaker.

“West?”

“I... you... care... shit!”

“West?”

The line went dead. I checked my phone screen. No signal.

Panic filled my chest. Was West okay? What had he been trying to tell me before the call was dropped? Was he hurt? Had something happened to him?

“Shit!”

Pushing down the terror bubbling up in my chest, I rushed out of the laundry room and stared at the puddle in front of the door, trying to gauge how fast it was growing.

What had happened? How long had this been going on?

Calm down. It's just some flooding and a power failure. I drew in a deep breath. “You’ve dealt with worse than this. You’re fine. It’s not a big deal.”

Why was my heart racing? I’d barely felt anything when my little brother had lit a garbage can on fire when he was four.

Fire was far more deadly than a simple flood and a power failure. And I’d been alone with three kids, including a newborn.

This wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t.

So why did I want to bury my face in a big, warm chest and feel strong arms around me? Why was my first instinct to run into someone's arms rather than be an adult and deal with the situation?

Why did I want West to fix it and tell me it would all be okay? Why him? Why *West*?

My chest squeezed. Was he hurt? Had something happened right before the call was dropped? Or was he on his way over?

Thud!

I spun around. A strange sound penetrated my growing panic. What was that?

Fighting down the fear, I hurried to the front of the house. The living room was dark, but all around the window was glowing red.

What the fuck? I ran to the window and yanked the curtain back.

Brake lights were pointed straight at the window. Was that a truck? Had it crashed into the tree across the street?

Panic filled my chest. "West?"

I raced out the front door. My socked feet slid on the wet wood of the porch. Icy rain pelted my skin, soaking into my sweater, and the wind slammed into my side.

My heart pounding in my throat, I rushed toward the car as fast as I could, but between the darkness and the wet ground, I had to slow my pace to a quick walk.

As I reached the driver's side, the door opened, and a big figure stepped out.

"Thank fuck," I muttered.

It wasn't West. They were about the same size and age as him, but it wasn't him. The guy rubbed one hand against his forehead and swayed on his feet.

"Are you okay?" I shouted over the rain.

"Dude!"

I whirled around. Three huge guys walked toward us, and a strange sound filtered through the storm.

Laughter.

The guy who'd stumbled out of the car was sitting on the ground, laughing his ass off.

"The hell?"

The guys stopped in front of him.

"What the fuck did you do?" One of them reached down and hauled the guy up.

"Hey, look, it's Christy's little sister! Hi, Becky!" Another of the guys waved at me.

"Huh?"

"Come on. Christy's gonna kill me for letting you get all wet." He strode forward and grabbed my arm.

"Hey!" I tried to pull free. "Let go!"

I tripped over my feet as he yanked me toward him. He bent down, his face only inches from mine. "Becky?"

The unmistakable scent of hard liquor wafted over my face.

He was drunk. Was his friend drunk too? Had he driven drunk in the middle of a storm?

"You're not Becky." He grinned as his companions guffawed.

"Let. Go!" I tried to wrench my arm free, but he was too strong.

Headlights illuminated us, and a car came to a stop in front of my driveway. The door opened, and a large figure jumped out.

"Hey!"

I blinked against the stars dancing in my vision from the sudden light.

The figure raced toward us.

“Let him go!”

Strong hands grabbed my shoulders, the grip surprisingly gentle.

The guy let go of my arm and raised both of his hands in surrender.

The hands whirled me around, and my knees buckled. West. Thank god.

He wrapped me in a hug. I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek into the slick material of his jacket.

“Get the fuck out of here,” West snarled, presumably at the drunk morons.

“Eli?” He smoothed my wet hair back from my face and put his lips next to my ear. “Did they hurt you?”

I shook my head.

He let out a breath and squeezed me tight. “Are you okay? Can you walk?”

I nodded against him.

“Get into the house while I park the car, okay? Can you do that?” he asked, his lips next to my ear.

I nodded again, my face still buried in his jacket.

He let go of me, but the shock of cold that hit me was disorienting. I blinked a few times to get my bearings.

A shout from across the street startled me back to reality. I turned and ran up the walkway and right into the house. I needed to get as far away from those guys and whatever the fuck had just happened.

Once I was inside, my head cleared enough that I could think straight. West was here. He was fine.

Those guys were drunk. I was fine. Nothing had happened. I needed to stop being so dramatic and focus on why I’d called West in the first place.

The front door closed. Then West was in front of me. The beam of his flashlight illuminated the area around us, concern

was etched on his face.

“Eli?” He reached for me, but I stepped back, feeling raw and vulnerable and so confused.

Why was I this shaken? That guy had only grabbed my arm, for fuck’s sake. It wasn’t a big deal.

“I’m fine.” I pushed my hair back from my face, and a shiver ran through me.

I was completely soaked, and the cold was starting to set in now that the adrenaline was wearing off.

He put the flashlight on the floor, stripped off his jacket, and wrapped it around my shoulders.

“I’m fine.”

“Your lips are blue.”

Another shiver ran through me. I shoved my arms into the sleeves, and West zipped it.

The jacket was huge on me, but the lingering heat from his body wrapped around me like a hug.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.”

WEST

“I’M FINE.”

His emotionless tone and the way he stared at my chest told me he wasn’t fine, but I had no idea what to do or how to help him.

The lingering rage from driving up and seeing that guy holding his arm simmered under the surface of my skin. What the fuck had happened?

My palms itched with the urge to go hunt him down and beat his sorry ass for even daring to touch him. I needed answers, damn it, but Eli wasn’t in any shape to give them. Not now.

“Stay here while I go check the laundry.”

Eli snapped his eyes up, and a flare of life came back to them. “I’m fine.”

“Okay. Let’s go see what the fuck is going on.”

As I led him to the back of the house, he fell into step behind me.

“Oh shit.” In front of the laundry room door was a giant puddle of water. “Stay back. I need to turn off the power supply.”

“Already did it.” He gripped the back of my shirt.

I swept the flashlight through the room, making sure there weren’t any hidden surprises, and pulled my keys out of my pocket.

It took a moment to get the door to the water heater closet unlocked, and I pushed it open.

A blast of cold water hit me in the face. “Fuck!”

I stepped in front of Eli to shield him. The cold water pipe connected to the top of the water heater had burst and was spraying the tiny space with water.

It was spectacular as far as leaks went. The pressure from the burst pipe was forcing the water to spray around like when you put your thumb over the end of a garden hose.

Lifting my arm in front of my face to shield my eyes from the worst of the water, I went up to the appliance and found the shut-off valve. I wrenched it closed, but since it was the pipe and not the actual water heater leaking, it didn't do anything to stop the spray.

I needed to shut down the main water supply. Shit. Where was it?

I racked my brain as I tried to recall the floor plan of the house. Every house I looked after was different, and I hadn't thought to check in my haste to get over.

“What?” Eli asked.

“We need to shut off the main water supply.”

Please don't let it be in the crawlspace under the house. The last thing I wanted to do was crawl around under the house in the dark during a storm.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the closet. “It's under the sink.”

“Thank fuck.”

We rushed into the kitchen, and I fell to my knees in front of the sink. I yanked the door to the cupboard open and shined the light inside. The valve was to the left of the drain pipes, and as soon as I'd closed it tight, the sound of rushing water died.

Blowing out a breath, I stood and turned back to Eli.

Shit. He was shivering. His lips were tinged with blue, and his skin was chalky white.

“Don’t you need to check it?” he asked, his voice high and breathy.

I extended my hand, which he took. Oh shit. He was ice cold.

“Later. We need to get you out of those wet clothes.”

“I’m fine.”

Ignoring him, I gripped his hand and gently led him out of the kitchen.

When we were in the living room, I used the flashlight to see if there was anything I could use to get him warm. On the couch lay a comforter, forming a makeshift bed. Had he planned on sleeping down here?

“Take my jacket off.”

He was shaking so badly he couldn’t grip the zipper.

I put the flashlight on the coffee table and pointed it at the ceiling to give us some ambient light.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re freezing.” I pushed his hands away from the zipper and carefully pulled the slider down.

“I’m not,” he said through chattering teeth.

“You’re soaking wet, and you have like, three percent body fat. You’re hypothermic.”

“Just a little cold.” He held still as I pulled my jacket off him.

“Sure. We’ll pretend that’s all it is. Arms up.”

“Why?” He lifted his arms despite his weak protest.

I tugged his hoodie up over his head and tossed it onto the floor. “Because we need to get your wet sweater off you. Where’s your room?”

“Upstairs.”

“I assumed as much, smartass. Which floor?”

“Top.”

“In the attic?” I wrapped the comforter around his shoulders and closed it around him.

“Not all of us can live in a penthouse,” he muttered.

I rubbed my hands up and down his arms, trying to warm him up faster. “The attic could be considered a penthouse,” I mused. “The room makes up the entire floor, and it’s the top one in the building.”

He snickered. “Is that why I pay premium rates for an eight-by-ten room and a bathroom I can barely turn around in?”

“What do you mean?”

“My rent is only fifty bucks less than the other guys in the house, even though their rooms are more than twice the size of mine.”

“Seriously?”

“Like you didn’t know.”

“I have nothing to do with rent. I only deal with maintenance and any day-to-day issues that might come up. Come on. We need to get you out of these wet clothes.”

He pursed his lips like he was going to protest but nodded.

Grabbing the flashlight, I fell into step behind him, illuminating his way as he led me up to the top floor.

As soon as we stepped into the tiny hall separating his room and bathroom, the temperature change was stark. Chilled air seeped into my wet clothes and skin. A shiver ran through me.

“Shit, it’s, like, ten degrees colder up here.”

“My guess is the assholes who turned the place into student housing didn’t bother using the good insulation.” He shot me a pointed look and pushed the door to his room open.

“This isn’t the difference between basic and good quality insulation.” I followed him into the tiny room and handed him the flashlight. “I’m wondering if it’s even up to code.”

“Considering who owns the place, my guess would be no.”

He went to his dresser and dug through the drawers.

“Do you mind?” He winced.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. At least turn your back while I change.”

I faced toward the wall. “Pack a bag when you’re done.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“There’s no water.”

“So? I don’t need water.”

“What percentage of the human body is water again?”

“Shut up,” he grumbled petulantly. “I liked you better when you were a dumbass.”

I smiled at his tone.

“It’s a health and safety issue. I can’t get someone in here to start cleaning up until the power comes back on. And it’s the weekend. It could be days before we can turn the water back on.”

“I’ll make do.”

“Eli.”

“Don’t use that tone with me.”

“What tone?”

“The ‘oh Eli, you’re such a silly kid’ voice.”

“That’s not the voice I was using.”

“It was!”

“It wasn’t.”

“Then what voice was it?”

“That was my ‘this has been a shit-tastic day, and now I have to deal with a flood in one of my houses’ voice.”

“Oh.”

“Can I turn around? This wall is interesting, but I’m kinda over staring at it.”

“Fine.”

He was sitting on the edge of his bed, the comforter around his shoulders and his face twisted up in pain as he rubbed his foot.

“What happened?” I crossed the room in five long strides and knelt in front of him. “Did you step on something?”

“It’s nothing. Just cold.”

“Let me see.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“Let. Me. See.”

His breathing hitched, and he widened his eyes.

“Please,” I said, my voice softer. “Give me your pillow.”

“Why?”

“Are you going to argue with everything I say?”

“Probably.”

I chuckled. “Fair enough. I’m going to put it on my legs so I don’t get your socks all wet.”

“But then I’ll get feet all over my pillow.”

“You have a pillowcase on it, right?”

“You’re so annoying.”

A pillow landed on my lap. I tucked it against my legs and pulled his foot so it was resting on the soft surface. He drew in a hissing breath. I looked up at him.

“Did that hurt?”

He nodded curtly.

Gently I wrapped my hand around his toes. Holy shit. They were ice cold under the soft material of his sock.

“I need to take your socks off and check your feet.”

He opened his mouth like he was going to protest but closed it and nodded again.

Carefully and as gently as I could, I peeled his sock down his foot. His skin was so pale it looked bloodless.

“Give me your other foot. We need to warm them up.”

Wordlessly he did as I said. When his sock was off, I tugged my shirt up over my head.

“What are you doing?”

“Warming you up.” I pulled the pillow from under his feet and tugged off the case.

Scooting closer, I replaced the pillow and carefully wrapped my hands around his slim ankles.

I put the soles of his feet against my stomach, wincing as his freezing skin settled on mine. I covered them with the pillowcase to trap in whatever body heat I managed to share with him.

“This okay?”

“Yeah,” he said softly.

I gently rubbed my hands over them to get the blood circulating faster and tried to gauge how much they’d warmed up. A soft beep echoed in the room. He was staring at his phone screen, a frown on his face.

“What?”

“My blood sugar is a bit high.” He sighed and put the phone on the bed. “Not surprising considering everything.”

“What do you need to do for that?”

He leaned down and picked up a water bottle that was tucked up next to his bed. “Rehydrate. All that running around should help too.”

“How are your hands? Are they too cold too?”

“They’re fine.” He gave me a tight smile. “Honestly.”

He looked so young and vulnerable and tired. But I wasn’t sure if it was physical or mental tiredness.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “You’re just chilling down there half-naked while I’m wrapped up in a blanket and stealing your body heat.”

I chuckled. “I’m fine. I’m sure I’ll feel it more when the adrenaline wears off.”

We sat in silence. Dozens of questions floated in my mind, but I held them back as he sipped his water. He didn’t need an interrogation right now.

“Is there somewhere I can drop you off?” I shifted his feet to my chest. Hopefully, some fresh, warm skin would help things along.

“This isn’t exactly the most comfortable position,” he grumbled and leaned back to keep his legs up.

“I could always lie down, and you could use me as a footrest,” I suggested dryly.

He snickered. “I mean, if you’re offering.”

I shimmied so I was sitting cross-legged and he didn’t have to hold his legs up so high. “Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“How do they feel?”

“Better. Still cold, but they’re warming up.”

“No pain or anything?”

“Pins and needles. But it’s not bad.”

“You know you can’t stay here, right?”

He heaved a big sigh. “I know.”

“Is there somewhere I can drop you off?”

He shook his head and looked at the floor.

“What about your family?”

“My parents are out of town, and Gray...” He sipped his water. “He doesn’t exactly have the best living situation right now. I’m not sure he could help even if he wasn’t working.”

His evasiveness made me pause. Had Gray not gotten out of here either?

“What about a friend’s place?” I asked, not wanting to pry into his brother’s business.

He shrugged and stared at the top of his water bottle.

“Do you want to come home with me?”

“What?” He gave me a sharp look.

“I have lots of room. You’d have your own space. Think of it like a hotel until you can find an alternative.”

“And if I can’t?” he whispered. “Find an alternative?”

“Then you can stay as long as you need to.”

He studied me, his eyes dark and calculating.

I sat still and held his gaze.

“Fine.” A pause. “Thank you.”

“How do your feet feel now?”

“Almost back to normal.” He sighed. “I’m about ready for today to be over.”

“You and me both.” I pulled the pillowcase off his feet and ran my hands over them. His skin was chilled, but the color was back to normal. Gently I pressed my palm to his toes. They were still alarmingly cold.

“I apologize in advance for how weird this is going to be, but we need to get your toes warmed up a bit faster.”

“What do you—”

I lifted his feet and tucked his toes into my armpits.

“This is the strangest thing that’s ever happened to me. Like so weird I can’t even articulate how weird.”

“Same.” I chuckled and held his ankles to help keep him in place. “I’m not sure how to ask this without being blunt, but is there anything you need me to have at home if you’re going to stay with me?”

He cut his eyes to the side and stared at a point in the distance. “A cooler would be good. I need to keep my insulin cold and with the power off... Otherwise, just healthy stuff I can eat.”

“I have a cooler and went shopping this morning. Do I need to do anything? Watch for anything?”

“Do you know what hypoglycemia is?” he asked softly.

“That’s when your sugar is low, right?”

“Right. Do you know the signs of it?”

“Yeah.” I’d done a ton of research on diabetes when I’d found out Eli had it. I still didn’t know why. I’d never planned on seeing him again. But I was glad I had. It was obviously hard for him to talk about this.

“Do you know about hyperglycemia?”

I nodded.

“Tell me if you see I’m showing signs of either and don’t seem aware of it. I have glucose tablets in my kit I take when I need to get my sugar up fast, and I have fast-acting insulin for when my sugars are too high. I monitor my levels so I can usually stay ahead of issues. I’ve got a routine that’s working, but sometimes it doesn’t matter what I do, and things go out of whack for a bit.”

“How do your toes feel?”

“Like they’re shoved in someone’s armpits.” A small smile tilted his lips.

I snickered. “Imagine that.”

“They’re better,” he said softly.

“Back to normal?”

He nodded.

Gently I pulled his foot out from under my arm and ran my fingertips over his toes. They were warm.

“Can you move them okay?”

An impish grin slid over his lips, and he wiggled all his toes, including the ones still in my other armpit. It tickled, and I yelped.

He laughed.

My protests died on my lips as I stared at him. Eli was beautiful no matter what, but he was absolutely breathtaking when he laughed.

“Brat.” I cleared my throat and placed his feet on the floor.

“I mean, you asked. I was just testing.” He blinked at me innocently.

“Sure you were.” I got up onto my knees, then stood. “How about you pack a bag and we’ll get out of here.”

He pulled the comforter off his shoulders. “Use this. I’m good now. I have a sweater that should fit you.”

I took the comforter and wrapped it around myself. The heat from his body soaked into me, chasing away the shivers that had been lurking under my skin. I’d been so focused on helping him I hadn’t realized how cold I was until I’d stood.

He tugged on a pair of thick socks, shoved his feet into his shoes, and pulled a worn gray hoodie out of a drawer.

“Here.”

“Thanks.” I took it and put it on. It must have been huge on him because it fit me perfectly.

“Do you want to bring your laptop and work stuff?” I asked when he’d finished packing his clothes, toiletries, and medication.

“What do you mean?”

“You can work while you’re at my place if you want. You’ll have your own room, so it’ll be private.”

He bit his lip. “You don’t mind me doing that in your house?”

“Why not? I do paperwork in my office. Work is work.”

“I probably should. I only work on the weekends, and consistency helps with the site’s algorithms.”

“And a coat. Can’t have you getting all wet again when we go to the car.”

He shot me an unamused look. “So bossy.”

“You know it.” I grinned.

He rolled his eyes and spun on his heel dramatically.

I liked how he was relaxed enough to tease and be silly and dramatic, to be more like the Eli I used to know. Maybe we could be friends again.

The next couple of days were going to be interesting; that was for damn sure.

ELI

“DO YOU HAVE ROOMMATES?”

West carefully pulled into the driveway of a huge Queen Anne-style house. We were deep into the west side of town, right on the outskirts of the super rich area.

Even in the dark, the house was impressive with its three stories, a round tower with a conical roof on one side, and an ornate, wraparound porch.

“Nope.” He parked the car and turned it off.

I wanted to ask why he'd live in such a big house alone but stopped myself. West had grown up in a sprawling mansion on a hill. The house was famous in the area and had been empty since his family had moved away after West and his sister had left school. He'd told me it had nine bedrooms and twelve bathrooms, like it was perfectly normal for a family of four to live in a house the size of my apartment building.

A house like this would be a massive downgrade for him.

Bitterness rose in my chest. It wasn't West's fault his family had money, but the stark reminder that we came from different worlds didn't help my mood.

It wasn't like I could forget how different we were.

The drive over had taken twice as long as it should have. Thankfully not a lot of cars were on the road, but with no streetlights and the heavy rain, visibility had been shit, and West had been forced to drive slowly.

How had he gotten to the house so quickly after I'd called him? The storm had been worse then.

"Ready?" West grabbed my bag from the back seat.

I clutched my laptop bag against my chest and nodded.

We threw open the doors and raced to the house. West unlocked the door and led me into what looked like a foyer. With only the beam of his flashlight illuminating the room, I couldn't see many details, but a large, ornate staircase lay ahead of us, and two small hallways led farther into the house on either side of the stairs.

"This way."

I followed West into the room directly to our left. It was a living room of sorts. I could make out the shadowy shapes of furniture. Was that a fireplace?

West went to the wall and knelt. "Can you hold the light for me?"

"Yeah, sure." I slung the strap of my laptop bag over my shoulder and crossed the room to him. "Didn't take you for the Boy Scout type."

He snort-laughed. "I wasn't."

"Then how did you learn to make a fire?"

He balled up sheets of newspaper, his hands were so big and strong. His palms were wide, and his fingers were long and thick. They looked capable and like they could swallow up my own small, slender hands if we put them together.

When he'd touched me, his skin had felt warm and a little rough. Like he had calluses. It was strange to think of West working with his hands, but he obviously did.

"Trial and error." He laid the newspaper down on the grate. "I didn't know I had to open the damper and almost had to call the fire department when the place filled with smoke the first time I tried to light one."

I smiled at his light tone. "Bet you only made that mistake once."

“So far. But it’s too early to know if it stuck.” He picked up a packet of matches and shook one out. He lit it and held the flame under the opening to the chimney. The flame flickered and stretched out.

“Are you checking the draft?” I asked.

“Yup.” He blew the match out and tossed it onto the newspaper. “Another thing I didn’t know the first few times I tried to use the fireplace. A week after nearly smoking myself out of the place, I spent a good twenty minutes sitting here and trying to start the tinder. And for the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why the flames kept going out.” He stacked kindling on the newspaper in a tight grid.

“The cold air hitting your hand or the fact that the flames were being blown out by something didn’t tip you off that maybe it wasn’t a fire issue but a draft one?”

“You’d think, but my stubborn ass was convinced it was the lighter. Like the fire wasn’t hot enough.”

I snickered. “Did you get it lit?”

“Nope. I gave up and lit some candles and pretended the fireplace didn’t exist.”

I laughed. “What happened the next time you wanted a fire?”

“I watched a bunch of YouTube videos and figured it out.” He leaned two big logs against each other, creating a peak over the tinder and kindling. “I’m just glad I practiced down here and not up in my room.”

“You have a fireplace in your bedroom?” I asked. Wow, having a fireplace at all was a huge luxury in my book, but to have one in your bedroom was peak opulence.

He nodded and struck another match. “It’s right above us.”

He lit the newspaper in several places, then tossed the match onto the pile. The flames flickered low, then slowly spread and grew, crackling and popping as the kindling caught.

The scent of burning wood tickled my nose, and I breathed deeply.

“You like fireplaces?” he asked.

“Love them. The sound, the smell, the flickering light. I find them soothing.”

“Me too.”

I tore my gaze from the spreading fire and glanced at West. I’d assumed he was watching the fire too, but he was staring at me. The soft glow of firelight danced over his face and reflected in his eyes. He looked like a sculpture. Too perfect, too handsome.

He cleared his throat and looked away, breaking whatever spell we’d fallen under.

“I’ll go get that cooler for you.” He stood and held out his hand for the flashlight.

I gave it to him and turned back to the fireplace as he walked toward the back of the house.

This was so messed up.

Why did he have to be so nice? Why had he taken care of me back at the house? It was my fault for getting wet and not putting shoes on. But he hadn’t berated me or made any snide remarks about how stupid I was.

A vision of him sitting in front of me, holding my feet against his stomach as he’d used his body to warm them up flashed in my mind, and I flushed hot.

His body was... perfect. Big and strong but not overly bulky. He was in great shape, but he didn’t have that cut look a lot of guys strived for. His muscles looked like they were the result of hard work and not the gym. Like he didn’t mind getting physical and rolling up his sleeves to do the dirty work.

I swallowed the bubble of... something that crept up my throat. It wasn’t dread or fear but more fluttery. Like a sudden adrenaline drop concentrated in my chest.

His body had distracted me, but it was how he’d treated me that I couldn’t shake from my thoughts. The care he’d shown. How he’d insisted on helping me, even when I’d tried to push him away.

I'd known I was in trouble, and I also knew how dangerous hypothermia and frostbite could be. But my old defenses had popped up, and everything in my being had told me to shut West out and deal with it on my own. That I'd put myself in the situation, and it was my responsibility to deal with the consequences.

But he hadn't let me. He'd taken charge, and he'd sat there, shivering and half-naked, while he'd helped me. He'd put me first, my comfort and my well-being, ahead of his.

What the hell did any of this mean?

“Did you need anything else?”

I jumped. “Sorry, what?”

“Did you need anything?” He held a small cooler out to me.

“Some water, maybe?”

“Anything else? Something to eat?”

“I'm not sure.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and quickly checked my sugar. “Just some water is good for now.”

“Is it okay?”

“A little high still, but it's going down.”

“Pick a place to sit if you'd like.” He waved to the worn couch across from the fireplace and a round, squashy-looking chair tucked into the corner.

This time, when he left, I stood and looked around the room. It was gorgeous, with dark wood accents and intricate craftsmanship. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, and the built-in shelving systems were beautifully crafted but empty.

The entire room was bare other than the couch, chair, and a tall lamp that hung over the chair. The room screamed opulence and riches, but the furniture was worn and mismatched.

Shaking off the questions in my head, I put my medication in the cooler and curled up on the chair.

Loud footsteps echoed in the room. West was striding toward me.

“I brought this in case you’re still cold. It’ll take a few minutes for the room to heat up.” He handed me a folded blanket.

I took it, the softness of the material tickling my skin. What was it made of? I’d never felt anything so soft and silky before.

Eagerly I spread the blanket over my lap and nearly purred in contentment as I ran my hand over the top.

“Here.” He passed me a bottle of water. “I’m going to go change out of these wet clothes. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Okay.”

I turned back to the fire, getting lost in the flickering flames, and let my mind wander. Dozens of thoughts and questions floated through my head. Flashes of memories and random moments from my life filtered in and out.

Fear. Panic. Hearing that crash and not knowing if West had been in the car. Running into the rain, being grabbed. West holding me. Giving me his coat.

Feeling helpless. Being dragged. A hand on my arm. The smell of liquor. Laughter.

So much laughter.

Being trapped. Panic. Fear. That fucking laughter.

“Eli?”

Soft fingers stroked my wrists. I opened my eyes. When had I covered them with my hands?

“Are you okay?” he asked softly.

I nodded and dropped my hands.

West was kneeling in front of me, his face full of concern.

“I’m fine.” I swallowed and looked down at the blanket.

Stop it. You’re fine. Stop being a baby.

“Drink some water. It’s been a stressful night.” He pressed the bottle into my hand. I must have dropped it at some point.

“I’m fine.”

He didn’t say anything as I opened the bottle and took a few sips.

“I’m okay. Just... stressed,” I finished lamely and screwed the cap back on the bottle.

He nodded and sat on the couch. He uncapped his bottle of water, tipped his head back, and guzzled about a third of it down.

My eyes were glued to his throat. The muscles worked, and his Adam’s apple bobbed. It was a perfectly normal physiological thing. He was swallowing. There wasn’t anything special or different about it. But I couldn’t look away. And another of those little adrenaline bursts exploded in my chest.

Get a grip, Eli. He’s drinking water. Stop staring like a creeper.

I tore my eyes from him. What was wrong with me?

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” I picked at the label on my bottle.

“What happened? When I drove up?”

“Nothing.” I squeezed the bottle, the plastic cracking from the force. “I heard the crash and thought it was you, so I went outside. It wasn’t. His friends showed up. One of them thought I was someone else and was trying to get me out of the rain. Then you came, and it was over. Like I said. Nothing happened.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

“Well, it was. Worse stuff happens to people every day. No use getting all bent out of shape because some meathead thought I was a girl and touched my arm.”

“He thought you were a girl?”

“He called me Becky.” I rolled my eyes. “It was dark, and he was drunk. Not the first time someone made that mistake. My hair and build confuse people sometimes.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”

“I shouldn’t have gone outside. It was my own fault.”

“It wasn’t your fault. No one has the right to touch you when you don’t want it. It doesn’t matter where you are or what you’re doing. And it’s okay to be shaken when—”

“Nothing happened!” I burst out. “And it *is* my fault. I went out into the rain. I didn’t leave when I realized they were drunk. I wasn’t strong enough to get free. So he touched my arm. Boo fucking hoo. Big deal. It’s not okay to be shaken because *nothing happened*.”

The urge to run, to get away from West and his kind eyes and his understanding words hit hard. The next thing I knew, I was scrambling out of the chair and darting across the room.

“Eli!”

Strong arms wrapped around me and hauled me against a big, warm body.

“I have to go.” I struggled in his hold as panic took over.

“No. Not until you’re calm.”

“I can’t. I have to...”

“You can. It’s okay.” He put his lips next to my ear. “Just breathe. You’re safe.”

The fight left me in a rush, my knees gave out, and I collapsed in his arms.

“It’s okay.” He held me tighter, hugging me and keeping me from crumpling to the floor in a pathetic heap. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

“Why?” I sucked in a hiccuping breath. “I don’t understand why. Why are you being so nice? Why are you helping me? What do you want from me?”

“Nothing. I don’t want anything from you.”

“Then *why*?”

“Because I care about you. Because I meant what I said. I want to be friends again.”

“Friends?”

“Yes, friends. I know you hate me, and I get it. But it was a fucked-up situation, and I was a kid and...” He squeezed me tighter. “And I’m so fucking sorry.”

I pressed my face into his soft sweater. When was the last time someone had held me like this? Maybe never? Gray and my mom hugged me all the time, and my siblings loved hugs and cuddles, but this was different.

I felt safe. Like West could protect me from all the things that could hurt me. Like he *wanted* to.

Why was he the only person who made me feel like this? Had I ever truly hated him? I’d tried, but the rightness of being in his arms said otherwise.

An ache formed deep in my chest as tears pricked my eyes. No. I wasn’t going to cry. I was better than that. Tears wouldn’t help anything. Crying in front of West would only prove to him how weak and stupid and pathetic I was.

“I’m not going to run away,” I said softly.

I needed him to stop holding me. It felt too good, too right.

He slowly let me go and tipped my face up. “We need to talk about what just happened... and about before, when I... But I don’t think either of us is in the headspace for that tonight.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. Not right now.”

He dropped his hand. “I think it’s time to go to bed.”

“Yeah. I think so too,” I said, my voice thick with all the emotions still swirling inside me.

“Come on. I’ll show you where you can sleep tonight.” He swiped a lantern off the floor next to the couch. I hadn’t even seen him bring it into the room. He turned it on, handed it to me, and picked up my bags and the cooler.

I followed him out of the living room and up the grand staircase. I was surprised when he brought me to a room on the left.

“I thought you said your room was over the living room.”

“It is.” He pushed the door open and waved me in. “You can sleep in here tonight. It’s warmer.”

“Where are you going to sleep?” I stepped into the room, which was massive.

A king-sized bed was pushed up against the wall across from the fireplace and flanked by ornate tables. A huge chandelier hung over the bed, and another round, squasy chair was tucked into the corner next to an antique-looking lamp and a small bookshelf. The high ceilings and detailed woodwork gave the room an old-fashioned feel, but the lack of personalization and minimal furniture made it seem cavernous and more like an exhibit in a museum than someone’s bedroom.

“The spare room at the top of the stairs. I’ll tend to the fire for a bit and make sure it’s out before I turn in.” He put my stuff on his bed.

“I can’t take your room.”

“Yes, you can.” He pointed to the dark end of the room. “Bathroom is through there, just past the closet.”

“I’ll sleep in the spare room.”

“It’s warmer in here. Please. I’ll feel better knowing you’re in here.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He lifted his hand like he was going to touch me but dropped it.

“Do you need to charge your phone or anything? I have a power bank.”

“I’m okay. I have one too.”

“Okay.” A pause. “Night.”

“Night.”

The door clicked closed behind him, and a pang of loneliness moved through me.

I was used to being alone. I *liked* being alone. It was stupid to be lonely when he was going to be right down the hall.

Sighing, I pulled out my phone and checked my blood sugar. Only slightly elevated.

I drank some more water, dug my power bank out of my bag so I could charge up my phone, and put the lantern on one of the night tables. The bed was so big I could roll over multiple times and not reach the other side.

A wave of exhaustion slammed into me as I kicked off my shoes. I pulled the covers back and slid between the crisp sheets. They smelled nice. Like sunshine and peppermint. I snuggled into the oversized pillow.

I should turn off the lantern so I didn't waste the batteries, but I was so comfortable I didn't want to move. Instead of reaching for the light, I closed my eyes and gave in to the overwhelming urge to sleep.

WEST

THE CREAKING of wood floors startled me out of sleep. I blinked my eyes open and looked around. Why was I in the spare room?

Another creak. A footstep.

The night came rushing back to me. The storm, the power going out. Eli's call. The flood, bringing him here and putting him to bed in my room.

I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. The face was dark. The power wasn't back yet? What time was it? I checked my phone. Just after eight in the morning.

The bright light streaming in from the window through the curtains told me the storm was over. That was good at least.

Another creak, this time on the stairs.

Eli must be up.

My chest tightened at the memories of him trying to run away from me last night. The anguish in his voice as he'd demanded to know why I'd been nice to him was etched into my brain, the same as the way he'd asked what I wanted from him. The dejected, resigned tone had haunted me long after I'd left him in my room.

What the fuck had happened to him?

Another creak, followed by a loud crack and a soft exclamation, drew me out of my thoughts. I threw the covers

off and stood, rubbing a hand through my hair haphazardly, then pushed the door open.

“Oh!” Eli jumped. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

He stood halfway down the stairs, his eyes wide and his hair a ruffled mess. He looked cute. A little chaotic and sleepy.

“It’s fine. I’m usually up earlier than this. I forgot to set my alarm. Do you need to eat breakfast?”

He nodded.

“I was hoping the power would be back by now. It’s going to be a rough day without my morning coffee.” I stomped down the stairs. Stealth wasn’t a possibility in a hundred-and-ten-year-old house. “Do you drink coffee?”

“No. Never could get used to the taste. And caffeine doesn’t really affect me, so there’s no point.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t affect you?” I fell into step beside him.

“I feel all the physiological reactions, but it doesn’t wake me up or make me feel more alert. It just makes me jittery.”

“Maybe because it’s not a habit for you. I didn’t start drinking coffee until about six months ago and was fine. Now I need it to feel human most days.”

“Why six months ago? Seems like a random time to start.”

“I started working for my father.” I brought him into the kitchen and pointed to one of the stools at the big island in the center of it. “You sit, and I’ll find you something to eat.”

“Is that when you moved back?”

“Around then.” I opened my pantry and scanned the contents. “What kinds of things can you eat?”

“Do you have any bread? Hopefully, whole grain or something like that?”

“I have multigrain.” I pulled the bag off the shelf.

“That should be good. What about peanut butter?”

“Is almond butter okay?”

“Yeah, that’s great, actually.”

“What else?”

“A piece of fruit?”

“I have apples, bananas, or grapes.”

“An apple.”

“Do you like cinnamon?”

“I do.” I could hear the confusion in his tone and grabbed the spice container.

“Have you ever had almond butter with cinnamon on top?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“It’s good.” I put the food on the island. “I have water or sugar-free electrolyte drinks.”

“Water is good for now. I finished the bottle you gave me last night. I should have brought it down to refill it.”

“I’ve got more.” I went to the package next to the fridge and pulled two out. I also got an apple from the fruit bowl on my counter and put them in front of him.

He was reading the back of the bread package.

“I already washed it, but I can do it again if you want.”

“That’s fine, thanks.”

“Is the bread okay?”

“Yeah.”

I wanted to ask how he was feeling and if his sugar had leveled off, but it wasn’t my business. He was an adult and didn’t need me nagging or bugging him. He was more than capable of taking care of himself.

“What about you?” he asked as I put a plate, a cutting board, and two knives in front of him. “Aren’t you going to eat?”

“I am. Just didn’t have enough hands.”

I went back to the pantry and grabbed a cereal bar, a bag of dried apricots, and another of high-protein chocolate chips.

I brought my food to the island, but rather than sit beside him, I leaned against it and stood across from him.

“Chocolate chips for breakfast?” He arched his eyebrow as he slathered some almond butter on a slice of bread.

“Not usually, but I gotta get my caffeine fix where I can today.” I opened the bag. “But these are cheater chocolate chips.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re technically chocolate chips, but they swapped out the good stuff with protein powder so they’re not nearly as tasty.”

“So why eat them if you don’t enjoy them?”

“Because... I have no idea.”

He smirked.

“It’s just one of those things adults do and you don’t question it. Like I hate eggplant, but I still eat it because adults like eggplant.”

He snickered and picked up the cinnamon. “I didn’t get the memo that adults like eggplant. I don’t.”

“Maybe that was the wrong example. But aren’t there things you do because you think you’re supposed to? Eating chocolate chips at breakfast isn’t something an adult does, but eating protein-enhanced pseudo-chocolate that kind of tastes like sadness seems like it would be.”

“I suppose.” He sprinkled some cinnamon onto his food. “I always take coupons when I see them at the store, even if I know I won’t use them. And my roommates and I save plastic bags. We have a bag of them under the sink. Never talked about it, but my mom does it, so I do too.”

“Exactly. You get it.” I shoved a small handful of the chocolate chips into my mouth.

“You look like you’re chewing on protein-infused dirt.”

“Then I look how I feel.” I swallowed a few gulps of water to wash down the taste.

“Did you know eggplants aren’t even a vegetable? They’re berries.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “And they have the highest levels of nicotine outside of cultivated tobacco.”

“Eggplant has nicotine in it? Shut the front door.”

He chuckled. “Yup. But only trace amounts. So do tomatoes and potatoes. They’re part of the nightshade family and were grown as ornamental plants because people used to think they were inedible.”

“Who knew eggplants had such a sordid history? And here I thought the most interesting thing about them is how they look like giant dicks.”

He snorted, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. “Do they really, though? Have you ever seen a pitcher plant?”

“No.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “Do they look more like dicks than eggplant?”

“You tell me. If you can find a signal.”

The Internet was slow as fuck, and I howled as I tapped on one of the photos to enlarge it. “No fucking way those are a real thing.”

“They are. They’re on the verge of extinction, unfortunately. But if you want to stick with penis-like food over plants, then look up the peter pepper.”

“Now I know you’re pulling my chain.” I typed it into the search bar. It took a moment for the page to refresh, and I nearly choked at the line of photos showing off bright red peppers that looked like uncircumcised dicks. “No fucking way that’s real. It has to be Photoshop.”

“Nope. One hundred percent real.” He grinned.

“Are they spicy?”

“They have a rating of between ten thousand and twenty-three thousand on the Scoville scale. Spicier than a jalapeño but not nearly as spicy as a lot of peppers.”

“A spicy dick pepper.” I snort-laughed. “How did I not know this was a thing?”

“Because eggplants have cornered the market when it comes to penis-impersonating food.”

“It would seem so.” I popped a few apricot slices into my mouth and checked out the power outage map on my phone.

“What’s that face for? You don’t look like someone looking at penis peppers.”

“Just checking the power map.”

“And?”

“Things are starting to go back online, but the estimated restore times are... concerning. They’re staying late tonight for this area.”

“What are they saying about student housing?”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“And the east side?” he asked quietly.

“Middle of the week.”

“What? When?”

“They’re predicting Wednesday evening.”

“Of course they are.” His eyes darkened. “They’ll get the whole town up and running in a few days but fuck the east side. Let the people who have nothing sit in the dark and cold while the food in their fridges goes bad, and they miss days of work.”

I kept my mouth shut, even though I agreed with him.

“At least my parents are out of town.” He sighed.

“Are they on vacation or something?”

“They’re visiting my stepdad’s family.”

I opened my cereal bar and took a bite. “You didn’t want to go with them?”

“They have a full house with my brother and sisters. And his family kind of hates that Gray and I exist, so they pretend like we don’t.”

“Brother and sisters? I thought Gray was your only sibling...”

“Gray’s my only full-blood sibling. I have three half siblings.”

“Oh, I didn’t know.”

“Why would you?” He shrugged and focused on cutting up his apple.

“How old are they?”

“Henry is seven, Lyla is six, and Harper is four.”

At least one of his siblings had been born when we’d known each other, maybe two. Had I ever asked him about his family? Had he told me about his stepdad or half siblings?

“Is your stepdad nice?”

“He’s great. His family are assholes, but he’s always acted like he’s our dad too.” He kept his eyes on his apple as he slowly and precisely cut out the core.

Beep.

I picked my phone up off the island and checked my notifications. I had a text from Phil, the plumber my father’s company had on retainer.

Last night, when I’d managed to hold a signal for more than a few seconds, I’d texted him and told him about what had happened to the water heater. I liked Phil, and he had over twenty years of experience. It didn’t make sense that he’d missed whatever had happened when he’d replaced the element last month.

Phil: I put all this in my report. The pipe was corroded. Badly. I told your father it was in danger of bursting. He’s lucky the whole thing didn’t blow.

West: Wait. What? The heater was in danger of exploding?

Phil: yeah. Showed all the classic signs. I told your old man to replace it right away. Maybe next time he'll actually listen

West: can you meet me at the house in an hour? We can't do much with the power out, but we need to get the water out of there before it becomes a biohazard

Phil: yeah. But we'll need a generator to work the pumps

West: I've got one

Phil: see you in an hour

I sighed and put my phone back on the island.

"Problem?"

"Not sure. I was texting my plumber."

"Phil?"

I blinked. Had I mentioned his name? Eli had incredible recall, so I must have. "Yeah."

"You looked like someone stuck a lemon wedge in your mouth while you were texting. What's wrong?"

"He said he told my dad to replace the water heater because the pipes were corroded and in danger of bursting. He also said the heater was showing the classic signs of exploding."

He widened his eyes, a slice of apple hovering near his mouth.

"It doesn't make sense. An exploding water heater is... it's lethal. Not only would the unit have blown right through the roof like a missile, but the damage from the explosion would have been catastrophic."

Eli dropped his hand.

"And the pipe burst, exactly like Phil said it would. We had ample time to replace the unit. Why wasn't I told about any of this?"

"You didn't see the report?"

“No. Everything gets sent directly to my father. I asked him what I should do about the water heater, and he said it was fixed and wasn’t a big deal.”

“I’d say the threat of an explosion that could potentially kill five of his student tenants is kind of a big deal.”

“I’m going to talk to him about this. Later. I need to deal with the cleanup first, and I’m not in the mood to be lectured about how this is my fault.”

“How can it be your fault? You didn’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s always my fault.”

“Do you think your dad would purposefully ignore a report like that?”

“Maybe. He’s arrogant as fuck, so I could see him thinking Phil was being overly cautious. But even then, he should have gotten a second opinion and not just ignored it.”

Eli hummed in agreement and shoved a slice of apple into his mouth.

I finished my cereal bar, barely tasting it, and chugged my water, my mind a million miles away.

“Will you be okay for a while?” I came around the island and picked up the dishes piled in front of Eli.

“Yeah. Of course. Do you need to go somewhere?”

“I’m meeting Phil at the house so we can clean up the water. I’ll deal with the rest of the cleanup later, but we need to get the standing water off the floors ASAP. I should check out the rest of the properties too and see if there are any problems or wind damage. The messaging service didn’t get any calls, but with cell service going in and out, it’s possible someone tried to call and couldn’t get through.”

“I checked the news sites, and they’re saying the power failures are the worst that happened. A few fender benders, some minor property damage, but nothing too bad.” He came to stand beside me as I put everything in the sink.

“That’s a relief. Did you hear from anyone?”

He nodded and pulled the sleeve of his sweater over his hand. “My mom texted to check in. Gray did too.”

“Does he still live in town?”

“He’s kind of between places right now,” he said evasively. “I texted my roommates about the flood and how we have no water. All but one of them are out of town. He’s staying with his boyfriend on the east side.” He picked at the material of his sleeve cuff. “They said I can stay with them until it’s fixed.”

“Do you want to go stay with them?”

He shrugged. “I’ve known Kai, his boyfriend, forever. We grew up together.”

My chest clenched. I’d gotten used to the idea of having Eli in my house for a few days.

“I can take you over there if you want. But if he’s on the east side, wouldn’t it be better for you to stay here? I’ll get my power back before him.”

He pursed his lips but didn’t look up at me. “Yeah. I know. I told him I was fine where I am.”

Relief washed over me, and I stepped back before I could do something impulsive like rub his back or give him a side hug.

“Make yourself at home while I’m out and help yourself to anything you want. I should be back after lunch.”

He nodded and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Call or text if you need anything.”

He shifted from foot to foot. “I will.”

Turning and walking away from him was harder than I wanted to admit. Something about the lost, sad look on his face and defeated body language gutted me.

I wanted to say “fuck it” and spend the day hovering and making sure he was okay, but I couldn’t. For one, I had a job to do. And I already knew he wouldn’t appreciate it and it would just piss him off more.

Feeling more conflicted than I ever had, I changed into some work clothes and got into the company truck. The sooner I left, the sooner I could come back.

WEST

“HELLO?” I called quietly and closed the front door behind me.

“I’m in the living room.”

I bent to untie my mud-splattered boots, kicked them off, and trudged into the living room.

I paused in the doorway, taking in the sight in front of me.

“I hope you don’t mind.”

Eli was curled up on my chair with the blanket I’d given him last night spread over his lap and a book in his hand. He’d also lit a fire, and the soft crackles and pops made the room feel cozy.

It was a strange thing to feel about the house. I’d lived here for five months, and I still felt like I was in a museum. The big, empty rooms and antique features were impressive, but they were cold and sterile and made the house dark and dreary.

“Of course not. It’s nice to come home to a warm room.”

“Is it bad out there?” He closed his book.

“Not too bad. Some downed branches and broken windows, but our properties are all fine, other than your place.”

“Did you get the water cleaned up?”

“Yeah. The damage is extensive, but at least it didn’t spread too far outside the laundry area.” I looked down at my

clothes. “I should change.”

“Do you have to go back out later?”

I shook my head and peeled off my jacket. “Not unless I get a call from someone.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Starved. I’ll grab something when I’m in my comfy clothes.”

He gave me a small smile.

I hurried up the stairs and into my room. Well, into the room I was using as mine.

The master bedroom was massive and took up the entire left side of the upstairs. A big walk-in closet connected the room to the master bath, which was the reason I’d chosen this room over one of the smaller ones. That and the fireplace.

I tried not to think too hard about the pile of Eli’s stuff on the corner of the bed and grabbed some sweats, a hoodie, and a clean tee out of my dresser. I tossed my dirty stuff into the hamper hidden in my mostly empty closet and headed back downstairs.

“Eli?” The living room was empty.

“I’m here.” He appeared at the door to the dining room, a plate in one hand and a bottle of Propel in the other.

“I didn’t know what you’d want to eat, but since we can’t cook, I figured this might be okay.” He shoved the plate and bottle at me.

“Thanks.” I took them, and he scurried back into the living room and practically dove onto the chair.

“Almond butter, cinnamon, and banana slices.” He busied himself with spreading the blanket over his lap. “The cinnamon is new, but I remember you used to like those.”

I nodded, my throat tight. “They were my fuel food. I’d always eat one an hour before the start of a meet.”

He smiled softly. “Yeah. You athletes love your superstitions and routines.”

I sat on the couch and took a bite of the sandwich. The familiar taste brought a barrage of emotions and memories to the surface, but I pushed them aside.

“The cinnamon is a good addition.” When I was done, I put the plate on the coffee table. “Gives it some depth.”

“It’s a versatile spice.” He rubbed his hand over the blanket.

“We need to talk about the elephant in the room.”

“Which one?” He snorted.

“The biggest one.”

“Which one is that?”

“I’m not sure. Which one is the biggest for you?”

He drew in a deep breath and looked up at me, his expression blank and guarded. “What happened that night?”

“What do you know about it?”

“Not a lot. Only what Gray told me. I know there’s more to the story. There are too many missing pieces and things that don’t make sense.”

“What did he tell you?”

“There was a party at Mason’s house. You were both there. He said things started to *go sideways*, his words. Then the cops showed up, and he ran. The two of you somehow got caught, and the cops arrested both of you when they found weed in your pocket.”

“That’s the gist of it.”

“Fill in the blanks for me. Tell me your side.”

“You trust my side?”

“There are always three sides to every story. His, yours, and the truth. I know his. Now I need to know yours so I can find the truth.”

I leaned back and stuck my hands into my hoodie pocket. Time to own up to what I'd done.

"I didn't even want to go to the stupid party, but Mason made such a big deal about it, so I went. It was fine for a while. Then someone brought out pills and weed. That wasn't exactly new, but we had a meet in a few days, and I was worried they'd drug test us. I said no, but people kept bugging me. I took the joints to shut Mason and his stupid cronies up. I never planned to smoke them."

"Then what happened?" he asked softly.

"One of the neighbors must have called the cops because they showed up, and everyone panicked and scattered. It was chaos. I ran but ended up getting cornered by a cop in the side yard while I was trying to jump the fence. I didn't even see Gray behind me until the cop was screaming at him to hit the ground too.

"He patted us down, and he found the joints in my pocket. He cuffed us, and more cops showed up. They arrested us, and the next thing I knew I was in an interrogation room."

Eli nodded slowly. "Then what?"

"I honestly don't remember a lot of it. I asked for my lawyer. He came. I answered some questions. Then my dad was there, and they let me go."

"Why did you try and pin things on Gray?" he asked quietly.

"What?" I gaped at him.

"Why did you tell the cops it was Gray's weed and you were holding it for him?"

"I... I didn't. He thinks I did?"

"They told him you did."

"The cops?"

He nodded.

"I never said that. I told them it was mine. I told them Gray was there at the wrong time and we weren't even friends."

“That part of the story has always bothered me. It didn’t make sense they’d let Gray go without charging him if you’d blamed him. I mean, you’re you. If the son of the most prominent businessman in town points the finger at a poor kid from the east side, then why didn’t they jump all over that?”

“Because they didn’t have anything on him. I swear I never even considered trying to pin it on him. My lawyer and my dad told me to, but I said no.”

“I believe you,” he said softly. “But you have no idea what they did to him in there. They eventually let him go, but the damage was done.”

“What do you mean?”

He blinked at me. “What do you mean, what do I mean?”

“What damage?”

“You didn’t hear about what happened after?”

“No. I figured he’d gone home and everyone was pissed at me for getting arrested.”

He let out a burst of bitter laughter.

“What?”

“People were pissed, but not at you. They blamed it all on him.”

“But it wasn’t his fault. He didn’t touch anything. He said no to everything they tried to get him to take.”

“I know. But that didn’t matter to people. You were gone, your father was running around town threatening to put people out of work by shutting down his businesses, and Gray became the scapegoat.”

“What do you mean, the scapegoat?” The last word came out as a croak.

“They kicked him off the swim team and stripped him of his scholarship.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he broke the student-athlete code when he was arrested. It didn’t matter the charges were dropped and you were the one holding. He’d gotten the star swimmer and the son of the richest asshole in town kicked out of school. And not only that, but you left without a word. You really think people wouldn’t have blamed him? The scholarship kid from the east side? The only reason anyone at school treated him like a person and not a pariah was that he won meets and broke a shit-ton of records. As soon as he didn’t have swimming to protect him, they turned on him.”

“I... I had no idea.”

“He lost everything. Swimming for Hopewell Academy was his chance to get out of this place.”

My chest squeezed as a pit formed in my stomach.

“But he lost that chance, and now he works whatever jobs he can while moving from place to place because his asshole landlords keep jacking his rents up.”

“I... Fuck.”

“What happened to you?”

“What do you mean?” I croaked, my head spinning as the reality of the situation hit like an anvil.

“Why did you leave town without saying a word?”

“I... I didn’t have a choice.”

“Why not?”

“When I got home from the police station, Dad was livid. He shipped me off to an all-boys boarding school the next day and told me I wasn’t allowed to contact anyone from school or town ever again.”

“And you obeyed? You never looked up the school’s records and saw he wasn’t on the team?”

“I couldn’t.”

“What do you mean you couldn’t?”

“I didn’t just go to boarding school. It was basically military school. I guess the big difference was it was for rich troubled youth, so they dressed it up with fancy titles and a pretty campus. They controlled everything we did. We didn’t have phones or internet outside of the supervised times they allowed, but even then, it was only on school computers so they could track everything we looked at.”

His mouth dropped open as he stared at me.

“I had no idea any of that happened. I swear. I know it makes me sound horrible, but it never occurred to me that Gray would’ve had to deal with the fallout. I thought it ended when they released him. I truly thought that was it.”

“It wasn’t. Not by a long shot.”

“I’m so sorry,” I choked out.

“I believe you. But sorry doesn’t erase the damage. It can’t give him back his life or restore what he lost.”

“I know. God, I wish I could change so many things. I wish I’d never gone to the party. I wish I’d told Mason to fuck off. I wish I’d run in the opposite direction or hadn’t stopped when the cop told me to.”

“You were sixteen, West. You made a mistake.”

“And that stupid mistake fucked everything up.”

“It doesn’t sound like things were all sunshine and rainbows after you left. Everyone said you and your sister went off to some fancy private school and you were rubbing elbows with kids of celebrities and tycoons and living the high life.”

I snorted. “Lexi was, but not me. I spent the next two and a half years at that school playing the game. I had to follow the rules, but not too well or they’d get suspicious and punish me. But I couldn’t break too many because then I’d have to deal with worse punishments. It was all mind games, a power play. They didn’t want to rehabilitate us. It was about punishing the bad behavior out of us. And you can imagine how well that went over with a bunch of teenage boys who didn’t give a shit about anything or anyone.”

“It sounds like you suffered too, only in a different way,” he said.

“What happened to you?” I asked.

My head was still reeling from what he’d told me, but I knew there had to be more to the story. I’d fucked up his brother’s life, but his anger went deeper than just being mad at me for what had happened to Gray.

“What do you mean?” He turned his attention to the fireplace.

“Something happened to you.”

He swallowed hard, his unblinking eyes on the fire. “Things weren’t easy for me after that night.”

His voice was hollow and devoid of any emotion or inflection. It was eerie, but I kept quiet.

“People mostly left me alone because of who my brother was. They tolerated me because they tolerated him. As long as he kept winning, they were happy to leave us alone. When he got kicked out... I lost that protection. Then you left, and I had no one to protect me.”

“Protect you from what?”

“Everything,” he whispered.

Both Eli and Gray had gotten scholarships to Hopewell Academy, the private school in town where the kids of the well-to-do families went, starting in seventh grade. We’d all been in the same class since Eli had been skipped ahead two grades.

Gray and I had been on the swim team, and we’d immediately been pitted against each other, since our stats and skills were matched. Instead of encouraging us to work together, Coach had made us compete against each other for everything. He’d probably thought the created rivalry would make us work harder because we’d want to be number one.

Gray’s swim stats and Eli’s intelligence should have protected them from bullying and bullshit, but rich, entitled kids were nothing if not assholes. Gray might have been a star

athlete, and Eli might have dominated academically, but they'd never been accepted because they were scholarship kids from the wrong side of town.

“Do you remember when I started tutoring you?” he asked in that same blank and hollow tone.

“I remember. You're the only reason I was able to stay on the team in eighth grade.”

“Do you remember how you were nice to me before that? How you'd say hi to me in the hall and tell your stupid friends to leave me alone when they talked shit about me?”

“Yeah.”

“And how you'd sit with me at lunch when my brother couldn't?”

“I remember.”

“You were the only person other than Gray who was nice to me. He told me not to trust you. But I told him he was wrong about you and you were my friend.”

“I was your friend.”

“Maybe. But you being nice to me made people leave me alone. They still hated me, but they were quiet about it.”

“And then I left...”

“Then you left. And Gray left. And I was alone. You have no idea how hard it is to be different. How much shit you have to deal with when you're not like everyone else.”

He looked at me, his eyes unseeing and unfocused. “And I'm really different. Not only was I a poor kid from the east side, but my older brother was the reason Weston Daniels got kicked out of school and the swim team went from being state champions to barely making the regional semifinals.” He turned back to the fireplace. “I was also the weird kid who was two years younger than everyone in our class. The kid who didn't know how to talk to people and fucked up everyone's grades.”

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know the teachers at Hopewell graded on a curve?”

I nodded.

“You can’t grade on a curve when someone aces an assignment or test. A lot of people depended on that curve to inflate their grades, and that couldn’t happen if they were in my class. Parents put pressure on the school, the school put pressure on the teachers, and they hated me for it. The other kids tried to get me to stop trying so hard and get lower grades on purpose. They threatened me, taunted me. They pushed me around and shoved me in lockers and stole my books.”

I stared at his profile, my heart aching for him. Eli had been weeks away from turning fourteen when I’d left town. That meant our classmates had bullied a child because he was smarter than them.

“I lasted a year before I transferred to Lisgar.”

Why would he choose to go to the public school on the east side of town?

“You transferred?”

“I tried to stick it out, but I couldn’t. Not after what happened at the game.”

“What happened? What game?” My heart pounded in my chest. He sat there, staring at the fire. “Eli?”

“The last football game of the year. The team didn’t make the postseason, and people didn’t like that. I forgot a book in my locker and knew the school would be open because of the game, so I went to get it. I figured I’d avoid the stadium, get my book, and go home. A bunch of guys from the swim team saw me cutting across the quad to get to the main doors, and they swarmed me.”

His jaw worked as he clenched his teeth and swallowed. It wasn’t much, but it was the first show of emotion since he’d started talking about this.

“They were drunk. I could smell it on them. They were yelling about Gray and grades and a bunch of other stuff. They

pushed me around, shoved me back and forth between them. Like a game of hot potato. They laughed when I begged them to stop. They laughed harder when I started to cry.”

He drew in a shaky breath. “They weren’t exactly hurting me. I mean, it hurt every time one of them would shove me, but it was too much. The laughing and the smell of alcohol. They were so big, and there were so many of them. I was scared, but they wouldn’t stop. I fell, and they just kept laughing at me. One of them kicked dirt on me. Then they were all doing it and having a grand old time as they covered me with dirt and laughed. I was on the ground, sobbing and curled up, and they wouldn’t stop. I started hyperventilating and must have had a panic attack because I passed out. I guess they freaked out because I woke up alone.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but no words came.

No wonder what had happened last night had triggered such a strong reaction.

“And I can’t forget it. My stupid brain won’t let me forget even a second of it.”

“What happened after? Did you tell the school? Did they get in trouble?”

He snorted. “Yeah, right. Like the school gave a shit. I passed two teachers while I was walking to the back parking lot, and they just looked the other way.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. I called Kai to come get me and made him promise to never tell Gray because he would have lost his shit and hunted those guys down. I got cleaned up and pretended it never happened. I told my mom I wanted to transfer to Lisgar but couldn’t tell her why because she was pregnant and already stressed the fuck out.”

“Did things get better after you left?”

“Yeah.” He sighed. “But better is relative. I was still the weird smart kid who couldn’t talk to people. No one outright bullied me because I had Gray to protect me, but I didn’t have any friends. My teachers weren’t as bad, but they still hated

me. I thought things would be better when I got to college, but they weren't. Not until this year at least."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a townie with zero people skills. And I was still the youngest person in any given room, so I couldn't really relate to anyone. I went to class and kept my head down. The big difference was that my professors loved me, but that put a new target on my back because no one wants to be the professor's pet. And I threw off the bell curve again."

"What's different this year?"

"My roommates. Last year I lived with party kids, and I hated it. When I moved into this house, I thought it would be the same thing. I live with a baseball player and two former jocks. One of my roommates is a science nerd, and I thought maybe we could be friends, but every time I tried to talk to him, I ended up being weird. So I hid from all of them for months. But they're nice. They make a point to include me and treat me like I'm one of them. They're the first friends I've made since you adopted me back in seventh grade." He turned to me. "How sad is that?"

ELI

WEST LOOKED STRICKEN. His cheeks were flushed, but his eyes were wide and red-rimmed. He was clenching his hands on his knees, the knuckles white, and his shoulders were so tense his arms were shaking.

“That’s why I freaked out last night.” I dropped my eyes to the blanket. “I guess I’ve been stressed or whatever because the power failure and flood messed with me. I’m normally not such a flailing idiot, but I panicked. Then that guy grabbed me. They were laughing, and I could smell the alcohol on him, and it brought all that shit back from that night in the quad, and I... It was too much.”

“I’m so sorry, Eli. I’m so fucking sorry for all of it.”

“It’s not your fault.” I rolled my shoulders. My body finally relaxed, and the tension left me in a rush. “You made a mistake. But the ripple effect isn’t on you.”

“I’m still responsible for all of it. None of this would have happened if I hadn’t gotten caught.”

“You were the trigger, but you’re not responsible for how other people acted. You were the only person at school who tried to help me other than my brother. And who’s to say something else wouldn’t have happened and he wouldn’t have gotten himself kicked off the team? I love Gray, and he’s my best friend, but he’s not an easy person to get along with. He’s gotten himself in a lot of trouble because of his attitude. I know why he’s the way he is, but other people don’t, and they

write him off as being angry or confrontational or a jerk when he's only trying to protect himself.”

“But I still would have been there to protect you.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “But it's not like you wanted to leave. The school you got sent to sounds horrible. Abusive.”

He looked away.

“You didn't walk away from this either. You were punished for years, and it sounds like you're still punishing yourself. You were sixteen. You made a mistake. You don't deserve to pay for that mistake for the rest of your life.”

“I'm still being punished.” He scrubbed his hands over his face.

“What do you mean?”

“My father never let that night go. He had to spend a lot of money to make that situation go away. I was caught with enough weed for a trafficking charge.”

I widened my eyes. I hadn't realized it was that much.

“I made him lose face in the town, and his investors weren't happy when it came out. He's never forgiven me, and he's controlled every aspect of my life since. First through the school. Then it was college. He paid for my degree and living expenses, but only if I was a good little automaton and fell in line. I studied what he wanted me to study, got the degree he wanted, and took the classes he chose. I lived in the apartment he owned, and I did four years of unpaid internships at his companies to make sure I didn't have any free time to get into trouble.”

He tugged on his hair and let out a harsh laugh. “Even now. I work for him, and his company owns this house. He deducts the rent from my wages.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup.”

“Do you at least get a better rate than we do?”

“Fuck no. I’m paying what he’d get if he rented it out at market value. It’s double-dipping. He’s paying off the mortgage and making a profit.”

“That sounds super unethical.”

“You don’t get as rich as my dad while being ethical.” He snort-laughed. “My great-grandfather was the first asshole, but it’s been generations of assholes since.”

I didn’t know why I was shocked to hear West say that. I knew his family had made their money in manufacturing and had moved into land acquisition when the factories had closed and production had moved overseas.

His family made a fortune renting land to the college, and they also owned most of the buildings downtown and a good chunk of student housing. They didn’t even live here anymore, but they still controlled the town through their investments.

“I told myself I deserved it. But it’s been six and a half years.”

“You don’t deserve it. You don’t deserve any of it. That school, your dad being... how he is. None of it. I was so focused on what happened to Gray and me I didn’t think about how any of this affected you. I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize. Please. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I spent so many years hating you and thinking you didn’t give a shit about me. That Gray was right and you were only nice to me because I helped you get your grades up.”

“That never factored into things. I was friends with you because I liked you. You made me laugh and think about things. You were the one person I never had to pretend with. I didn’t have to be my father’s son around you. I could just be me.”

“I didn’t like you when you were being that other version of yourself. I saw it when you were with your friends—the walls and the attitude and the arrogance. But I also saw how you were pretending. For years I tried to convince myself I was wrong and that arrogant guy was the real you. That the

guy who was nice to me and wanted to spend time with me was the act.”

“I’m sorry. I never thought about how disappearing would hurt you.”

I dropped my eyes to the blanket and fought back the lump in my throat. “For a normal person, it wouldn’t have been a big deal. But I’m not normal. You were my only friend. The only person who wasn’t related to me or who I’d grown up with, who didn’t think I was a freak. I didn’t know how to handle it because I’d never had a friend to lose before.”

“You’re not a freak.”

“Yeah, I am.” He opened his mouth, but I held up my hand to cut him off. “I’m different. I don’t feel things the same way other people do. I don’t see the world the same way.”

“Different doesn’t mean freak.”

“In my case, it does. And I’m not discussing this anymore. I know what I am, and I’ve accepted it.”

“You said your brain won’t let you forget things. Do you have a photographic memory?”

“No. I had an eidetic memory as a child, but not anymore.”

“What’s the difference?”

“An eidetic memory is when you can recall an image with high precision for a brief period of time. It stays with you like an afterimage in your mind’s eye. A photographic memory is thought to be when you can recall an image with high precision long after the fact.”

“Thought to be?”

“There’s no proof photographic memories are real. There’s a condition called hyperthymesia, and it allows people to recall past events in detail, including the exact date it happened, but they still haven’t proven if true photographic memories exist.”

“Do you have that?”

“No. I don’t remember everything that’s ever happened to me. I can’t tell you where I was on a certain day at a specific time unless something significant happened then.

“I remember most of what I read, especially if I find it interesting, but I don’t remember the text like a photograph. And any sort of situation that causes high emotions or is stressful or traumatic gets burned into my brain like a movie, and I relive it, all of it. The sounds, smells, sensations. The emotions, everything.”

“That’s what happened last night?”

I nodded. “It was like I was back in the quad and it was happening all over again. I kept trying to ignore it and focus on other things. But it only works for so long.”

A loud click echoed in the room as the hum of appliances coming back online filled the air and the lamp above me sparked to life.

“Finally!” West exclaimed and fell back against the couch in a heap. “Hello, power. I missed you.”

I chuckled at his antics. Thank god he’d lightened the mood.

I didn’t talk to people about stuff. Mostly because I didn’t have anyone to talk to, but also because I couldn’t. Articulating what I was thinking or feeling was hard for me, but for some reason, talking to West had always been easy.

Even back in high school. We hadn’t had any deep or meaningful conversations because of how young we’d been, but we’d spent hours chatting about whatever random topic happened to catch our fancy while I’d tutored him.

And that easy camaraderie hadn’t faded. If anything, it had gotten stronger. He made me feel safe. And that scared the ever-loving crap out of me.

He wasn’t the villain in this story. He was a kid who’d made a mistake and could never have predicted the ripple effect it would have. He hadn’t hurt me on purpose, and he’d lost as much as my brother had, only in a different way. Why

would he have spared me a second thought while his life was falling apart? I was just a kid he'd befriended.

Gray would never forgive him, but I wasn't my brother. West was the only person I'd ever felt any sort of real connection with. Was I really willing to give that up because of what had happened between him and Gray?

"I'm going to make some coffee in case we lose power again. Do you want anything? I have tea." He stood and rubbed his hands on his thighs.

"I'm okay. I only like tea at night."

"Me too." He smiled. "This might be weird, but can I hug you? I really need a hug."

Another of those little adrenaline bursts exploded in my chest, and my stomach flip-flopped.

"Yeah." I scrambled out of the chair and ran into his arms, hitting him with enough force that he rocked on his heels. "I really need a hug too," I whispered and pressed my face into his soft sweater.

He wrapped his big arms around me and held me tight. The scent of sunshine and peppermint and something spicy but still a little sweet enveloped me as his body heat seeped into my chilled skin. I hadn't even realized I was cold.

Strong hands ran up and down my back in a soothing pattern as I held him as tight as I could. The adrenaline was back, and those strange flutters moved up my torso. They were... nice. Everything about the hug was nice, even though that felt like such an understatement.

"Mmmmm." West's chest rumbled against mine as he let out a soft sound. Not quite a moan, but not a sigh either.

My stomach swooped, and my dick twitched as blood rushed south.

What the hell? Was I getting *hard*?

West pressed his lips to my hair, then slowly let me go.

Had he felt my semi?

I stepped back and dropped my hands so they covered my crotch. My face flamed hot.

“Thanks.” He patted my arm, his voice soft and casual. “I really needed that.”

“Same,” I croaked.

If he’d noticed my weirdness, he didn’t say anything. He simply stepped around me and headed into the kitchen.

I looked down at my dick. It wasn’t tenting my sweats, but the bulge was obvious.

I didn’t get random erections. Not unless I was sleeping. I woke up with morning wood, and I’d had my share of wet dreams, but those were physiological responses. The body’s way of keeping the plumbing working, so to speak.

The only other times I’d gotten hard around another person was when I’d kissed someone, but even that had been different. With Taryn, it had been a gradual thing. Like the longer we’d kissed, the better it had felt and the more I had reacted. With Quinn, I’d gotten hard fast, but I’d chalked it up to anticipation and the fact that he was a really good kisser. I’d expected it to happen, so I hadn’t been shocked when it had.

But West had hugged me. A hug wasn’t sexual. I shouldn’t have reacted that way. But I had.

I thought about doing more. About feeling his big body against mine as he kissed me. I didn’t have the greatest imagination when it came to sexy times, and my lack of experience meant I didn’t have any real-world memories to rely on, so my fantasy was about as tame as it could get.

But my dick liked it, and I was rocking a full erection in only seconds.

What did any of this mean? When I’d realized I wasn’t like other people, I’d done a ton of research on sex and sexuality. But I’d never found a label that fit me. I found both women and men attractive, so I considered myself bi or maybe pan, but I didn’t feel actual attraction to many people.

One thing I hadn't told West, and never would, was how I'd come up with the stupid auction as a way to have sex and control the situation. I was so awkward and weird that the chances of finding someone who not only sparked any sort of attraction in me but who'd also *want* to be with me were slim.

I could have gone on Grindr, but the situation would have been too volatile with too many variables. At least with the auction, I'd know their real identity, and they would have agreed to my terms.

I hadn't expected to enjoy it. I'd just wanted to get it over with.

But West had been right. I couldn't account for human emotions.

West's big reveal about winning and the fight had triggered my stubborn side. In the moment, it had been too much, and I'd been dealing with all the emotions from the past on top of feeling like I'd been slapped with my stupidity. So I'd lashed out.

He hadn't mentioned anything about sex or the auction since that night. He might have wanted me then, but I'd been goading him. I'd tried to seduce him, and I'd epically failed. He'd said he wanted to be friends, and his actions since had proven that was true.

Did he still want me? Or had that been because of the circumstances? We were friends again, so was that it?

Friends with benefits was a thing other people did. Did he want that? Did I?

I looked down at my still-hard dick and nearly laughed. Apparently, I did.

He'd said I should enjoy my first time and be with someone who'd treat me properly. Did he mean him? Or was that more of a global statement and he thought I should wait until I found someone else who'd treat me right?

A floorboard creaked behind me, and I jumped.

Nearly tripping over my feet, I raced back to the chair and dove onto it, almost rolling right off in my haste to look like I wasn't having an existential crisis in the middle of his living room.

I grabbed the book I'd been reading and flipped it open to a random page.

"Books work better when you turn them the right side up."

"Huh?" I blinked up at West, who stood in front of me with a glass of water in one hand and a steaming mug in the other.

"You have the book upside down. Unless that's a thing you do because it's an extra challenge or something." He smirked. "Although I'd say French poetry is enough of a challenge without having to read it upside down."

"I was checking something," I mumbled and flipped the book the right way.

"Water?"

"Thanks." I took the glass.

"The hot water will be back in an hour or so if you want to take a shower." He moved back to the couch and sat down.

"You don't want to take one first?"

"Nah." He sipped his coffee. "Sweet, sweet nectar. I missed you more than the power."

I snickered despite the confusion still rolling around inside me. "You might need to talk to someone about your caffeine addiction."

"Then they'll try to take my coffee away. And I can't live without my magic wake-up juice."

I laughed, and more of the tension bled away. "Definitely not the kind of thing an addict would say."

"Shhh, don't listen to him," West said to his coffee in a hushed voice. "He doesn't understand our bond."

Still laughing, I settled on the chair.

“Can you read French?” he asked.

I wiggled the book at him.

“I mean, I know you’re reading French. But can you speak it and stuff?”

“No. I learned to read it by accident, same with Latin, but I can’t speak either of them because I never learned how to.”

“Wait. How do you learn to read a language by accident? Especially Latin?”

“The public library has a small section of French books. I’d already read everything else that interested me, so I checked out some French ones and figured it out as I went.”

“You figured it out as you went? You don’t think that’s impressive?”

“I started with kid’s books, so not really.”

“They have a lot of kid’s books in Latin?”

“No. But it’s not hard to figure out when you already know several romance languages. I can read French and Spanish and figured out basic Italian. Learning Latin was easy.”

He gaped at me.

“What?”

“You’re self-taught multilingual, and you’re acting like it’s no big deal.”

“It’s not. And I can’t speak any of them except Spanish. So I’m not really multilingual. More like bilingual with the ability to read a few others.”

“You downplay yourself a lot. I noticed that in school.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. You always have a reason why something isn’t impressive.”

“I guess because I don’t think it is.”

“You wouldn’t be impressed if I told you I’d learned to read Latin for funsies?”

“Well, yeah.”

“So why isn’t it impressive that you did it?”

“Because it was easy for me.”

“So because you’re good at something, it’s not an accomplishment?”

“Not for me.”

He hummed and sipped his coffee.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What?”

“I was wondering how many people took the time to tell you how amazing you are instead of pushing you to do more.”

My mouth went dry. “I’m not amazing. I’m just... different.”

“Doesn’t mean you’re not amazing.”

I shrugged, not liking the way my stomach was flip-flopping or how my cheeks warmed.

“You don’t think being a prodigy is amazing?”

“I’m not a prodigy.”

“You’re not?”

“Not even close. I’m gifted, but a prodigy is exceptional. I was fifteen when I graduated, and I’m twenty and still don’t have my undergrad. A prodigy would be on their second PhD at my age.”

“You don’t have to be the best to be special. There’s always going to be someone smarter or more accomplished than you, but that doesn’t take away from what you’ve done or what you can do. You’re special, Eli. I know you think it makes you a freak or weird, but it doesn’t. You’re exactly the way you’re supposed to be.”

“I don’t feel special or like I’m the way I should be.” My eyes burned as I blinked back tears.

“You are. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

I shrugged. He was wrong, but I didn’t want to argue with him. It felt good to hear him say so, even if it wasn’t true.

“Do you read French?” I needed to change the subject.

“No.”

“But this is your book. I found it on the bookshelf in your room.”

“It was a gift. An ex-girlfriend gave it to me. Look in the front cover.”

I flipped the book open and read the flowing script.

*West, for the lonely nights and lazy days. Love you forever,
Lisa*

My throat tightened and my stomach went sour. Was I *jealous?*

“Were you together a long time?” I asked, pushing past whatever the fuck that was.

“About six months.”

“You must have really loved her if you kept this.”

He chuckled. “Check the back cover.”

I did, my eyes burning for a whole different reason. A sheet of pink stationery was tucked between the cover and the back page.

“Read it.”

I flipped the paper open.

I’m sorry

“She gave me that note when she told me she’d been messing around with her ex-boyfriend for the entirety of our relationship and was going back to him. Just handed it to me and told me point blank that he was her true love and she hoped I found what she had one day.”

“That’s... wow.”

“I kept the book because it’s a first edition. I never loved her, and she definitely didn’t love me.”

“Then why were you with her for six months?”

“Because I liked her. I thought I could love her, but I was her backup plan in case things with her ex fizzled for good.”

“If it makes you feel any better, her taste in poetry sucks.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There are so many incredible French poets out there, and she gave you the equivalent of a compilation of Dr. Seuss wannabes. It’s like reading one fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish, but in French.”

He threw his head back and laughed, and the flutters came back along with more of those adrenaline bursts.

Friends. Just friends.

“I feel wildly better about that entire situation now.” He tipped the rest of the coffee into his mouth and swallowed.

I watched his throat work again, and my dick pulsed and throbbed.

“You okay?”

“Fine.” I snapped the book closed. “I should put my insulin in the fridge.”

He watched, an unreadable expression on his face as I jumped up off the chair and hurried out of the room.

What the fuck was going on with my dick suddenly waking up?

WEST

THE WATER RUNNING through the pipes was both soothing and arousing. It soothed me because it was a tangible reminder that someone was in the house with me. And it was arousing because my brain wouldn't stop picturing Eli naked and soapy in my shower.

I'd spent so much time alone over the years I'd forgotten what it was like to have someone around.

We'd had single rooms at boarding school, and I'd lived alone in whatever apartment my dad decided would be mine when I'd been in college. Then I'd moved in here.

The last time I'd lived with other people was before that night, but even then, I'd spent most of my time alone. My parents had been gone more than they'd been home, and even with staff wandering around, it had still felt empty and lonely in the huge house.

The house they lived in now was a modern monstrosity with too many windows and more rooms than a family of four could ever use. I'd spent my summers there while in school, and the marble walls and floors were about as welcoming as a dentist's office.

I liked the old-world feel of this house, and the architecture and craftsmanship were incredible. I wouldn't mind living in a house like this if it were mine, but it wasn't.

It was another way for my father to control me and make money, two of his favorite pastimes.

The *whooshing* water stopped. Eli was upstairs in my bathroom, naked and wet. Maybe with little rivulets of water trailing down his smooth skin, dipping into the little ridges of his muscles and making them pop.

Jesus, I needed to get a grip.

We were finally in a good place. Clearing the air between us had been an emotional roller coaster, and my heart still broke for him and what he'd gone through. I didn't understand how people could be so cruel, especially to a child. Unless things had drastically changed after I'd left, he'd never been in-your-face about his intelligence. He didn't brag about his grades or raise his hand to answer every question. He wasn't that kid who reminded teachers if they forgot to collect homework or give a quiz.

He'd done everything he could to be invisible. Never talked to anyone, barely made eye contact, and sat in the back row of every class we'd shared. He'd spent most of his free time in the library and always had his nose buried in a book.

The news about what had happened to Gray was also going to take some time to settle, and the guilt was crushing.

Gray and I had never been friends. The rivalry between us might have been fostered by Coach, but it had always been there.

At thirteen, I'd been an arrogant little shit. I was so used to being the best and people fawning over me that having Gray show up and be actual competition had lit a fire in my blood I hadn't known was there.

For two and half years, we'd battled it out for everything and smashed each other's records like it was a game.

And to me, it had been. Swimming was something I had a natural talent for and I enjoyed it, but I'd never had plans to swim in college or go to the Olympics. It had been a way to pass the time and keep my father off my back.

But for Gray, swimming would have been everything. He hadn't competed against me so fervently because it had been fun. He'd done it because he'd had to. Because being the best

was the only way for him to have what had always been a given for me.

I'd been such an asshole to him. Always taunting him and riling him up. Teasing him to get a rise out of him because it gave me a rush. I'd never been like that with anyone else other than Eli.

What was it about the Hawthorne brothers that they made me act like a completely different person with them?

“West?”

“Jesus!”

I whirled around, my heart in my throat.

“You look like how I imagine a serial killer would right before he lunges at his latest victim.” Eli smirked. “Should I run? Are you gonna chase me down?”

My dick twitched. I cleared my throat and lowered the knife I was holding. *What the actual fuck?* Why was the thought of chasing him through the house and tackling him to my bed so damn hot?

“Sorry. I was thinking, and you startled me.”

“Your shower is amazing.” He tucked a lock of wet hair behind his ear, a shy smile on his lips.

“It's pretty awesome.” I'd installed a rainfall showerhead and a separate system of body jets in the stand-up shower, and they were incredible after a long day at work. “Did you try the lights?”

“Lights?”

I focused on the green pepper I was slicing. “Yeah, the showerhead and jets have LED lights built into them. The remote next to the bathtub controls it. I like to set it so they're synched to the stereo.”

“Stereo?”

“Mmmm-hmmm.” Using the edge of my knife, I pushed the pepper slices to the side of the cutting board. “There's a

system you can control with the panel on the wall next to the mirror or with the other remote. The black one.”

“Your bathroom has more features than my mother’s car.” He propped one elbow on the counter and leaned against it. “My bathroom at the house doesn’t even have a fan.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Nope. No fan and no window.”

“That’s against regulation. You need one or the other in a bathroom.” I glanced up. “But you knew that.”

“I did.”

“So why didn’t you make a report?”

“Because I like having a place to live.” He shot me an unimpressed look. “Your dad didn’t bother fixing a water heater he knew was in danger of malfunctioning and potentially destroying one of his properties. Do you really think he’d care about breaking a ventilation code?”

“Is anything else in the house not up to code?”

He shrugged. “Probably.”

“You’re very unbothered about this.”

“I grew up in an apartment building with no working elevator and emergency doors that were locked on both sides. Not having a fan in my bathroom is annoying, but at least it’s not a fire hazard.”

“Are you working tonight?” I asked.

“If you don’t mind. I didn’t reach my goal last night before the power went out. I’m hoping people will be extra generous since they missed the money shot.”

“You were in the middle of a show when the power went off?” I grabbed the bowl of lettuce and veggies I’d already prepped.

“At the end.” He used the pad of his finger to pick up a pepper seed. “Fifty tokens from my goal after an hour of edging myself.”

“Do you like that? Edging for so long?” I dumped the vegetables I’d cut up on top of the lettuce.

“Not really. It’s okay for a little while, but then it gets uncomfortable. It’s hard to stay in the moment when it hurts.”

I couldn’t believe we were having this conversation. I’d assumed he’d be shy or bashful about his work, but I liked how he was so open and willing to talk about it. Did that mean he trusted me? Or was that just his nature?

“Do you like camming?”

“Sure.” He crossed his arms and leaned the small of his back against the counter. “I’m paid to jerk off, and I get to talk to people on the regular. It’s a pretty sweet job as far as work goes.”

“How did you start? It’s so... unusual.”

He smirked. “You interested in starting a channel?”

“Maybe.”

“What?” he squeaked.

I laughed. He looked like a shocked owl. “What? You don’t think I’d be good at it?”

“I didn’t say that.” He cleared his throat. “I just never thought you’d want to...”

“Jerk off in front of strangers?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I never really thought of it, but it could be fun. The idea of people watching and getting off while I do is hot. I’m not sure I’d like the whole interacting with people and doing shows part, but the other stuff is intriguing.”

“Do you watch a lot of cammers?” he asked, his cheeks bright pink.

I nodded. “You’ve obviously been able to deduce that voyeurism is a major kink of mine. I prefer camming to porn because it’s interactive. And I like tipping people.”

His eyes clouded for a moment, and I wanted to kick myself.

I didn't regret the tips I'd sent, but I could have worded *why* I'd sent them better. Part of it had been because I'd wanted to help. Having an autoimmune disease in this country was expensive, and I had no idea what his insurance situation was like, so I'd tipped him as a way to support his work without watching him or buying his content.

But that wasn't the only reason. I liked giving people gifts, and sending tips to models made me happy. Knowing Eli was spending money I'd given him was satisfying on a level I didn't quite understand and wasn't sure I wanted to look at too closely.

"Are you a gourmet or a gourmand when it comes to your cam preferences?" Some of the lightness was gone from his tone. I didn't like that.

"What's the difference?"

"A gourmet has a discerning palate while a gourmand enjoys a variety of things."

"Probably a cross, then. I'm a mood watcher and usually room-surf for a while before I settle on one."

"Do you watch more women than men?"

I pointed to the drawer he was leaning against. "Can you grab cutlery for us?"

He nodded.

"I don't keep track. I watch both. Sometimes solo, sometimes partnered or group stuff in all sorts of combos. It all depends on my mood."

He brought the cutlery to the island, where I'd already put out plates and glasses.

"I'll do a food run tomorrow if you want to give me a list of things to pick up. I was able to salvage these veggies for a salad, but pretty much everything in the fridge and freezer needed to be tossed."

“I’m not looking forward to cleaning out the fridge when the power comes back on in the house. Five guys share it, and Alex tends to forget about what he buys, and a bunch of stuff was already growing their own ecosystems on his shelf before he left.”

I handed him a bag of mixed nuts and seeds. “I don’t have any protein other than these. Not until I can go shopping.”

He flipped the bag over and scanned the nutritional information. “These are good.”

“Do you like dried cranberries? They go well with the balsamic vinaigrette. I cut some apple slices too. They give it a nice crunch and add some extra sweetness.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that sounds really good.”

We dressed our salads in silence and ate, sitting side by side, at the island.

“What time do you want to go to work?” I asked as he helped me clear the dishes.

“I usually log in around eight. Seems to be a sweet spot for viewers.”

I glanced at my watch. Just after seven.

Where had the day gone?

Eli and I had spent the afternoon in the living room. He’d had his nose buried in a book, and I’d brought my laptop down so I could catch up on paperwork. We hadn’t spoken much, but I’d liked having him there. Just feeling his presence and hearing the soft sounds of him flipping pages was comforting.

“You can set up in my room if you want.”

“I can’t take your room again. I’ll be fine in the spare room.”

“My bedroom has better lighting. The spare room doesn’t have an overhead light.”

He chewed on his upper lip. “That’s not ideal.”

“It’ll be more comfortable too.” Why was I fighting so hard to have him do his show in my room?

“I don’t want to get your bed... messy.” He looked away.

“Put a towel down if you’re worried. It’s not like I don’t do that in there.”

He widened his eyes, and his breathing hitched.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” I closed the dishwasher. “Do you mind if I grab a quick shower before you start?”

“Yeah, no problem.” He swallowed. “I’ll hang out down here until you’re done.”

“No need. You might as well get set up and make sure everything is good.”

“Okay.” He glanced around the kitchen.

Flustered Eli was cute as hell. Sassy Eli got my dick up, no question, but him, all shy and unsure, was arousing in a different way.

Both were dangerous. I needed to stop provoking him. I might like his reactions, but it wasn’t right to send him mixed messages when we were finally in a good place.

WEST

“YOU CAN BRING the lamp over if you need better light. And I have another I can get if you need more.” The monstrous chandelier hanging over the bed gave off decent light, but I had no idea if it would be enough for camming.

“I think this will be enough. A bit mysterious and dark, since I’m in a new location.”

“Do you want me to light a fire?”

“Really?”

“Sure, if you want. Might make for some nice atmosphere.”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind.” He grinned happily.

It didn’t take long to light a small fire, and when it was crackling, I turned to Eli. He was sitting on my bed with his phone in his hand and a serious expression on his face.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine.”

“Is that an actual fine or an automatic one?”

“Both.” He sighed and tossed his phone aside. “Just work stuff.”

“Like what?”

“There’s a cammer in Seattle who wants to film together. I’ve told him no, but he keeps sending me messages. It’s not a big deal, just annoying at this point.”

“You don’t want to make partnered content?”

“I’m not opposed to it, but not anytime soon. But I wouldn’t do it with him. He’s not my type.”

“No?” I tried to sound casual.

“No. And he’s into some stuff that’s not exactly appealing to me.”

“Like what?”

“Like tying people up and tickling them until they pee.”

“That’s... a pretty specific kink.”

“There’s an audience for everything.”

“Will this work?” I waved around the room.

“Yeah.” A smile tilted his lips. “It’s like being in a fancy hotel. Like a vacation from reality.”

I loved how something as simple as a fireplace and a big bed could make him so happy.

“I’ll take my shower so you can get to work on time.”

“Thanks, West. For being so cool about this.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Not everyone is okay with sex workers.”

“I’d be a hypocritical asshole if I had an issue with you camming, since most of my orgasms happen while I’m watching cammers.”

He squirmed, lifted his knees, and hugged them. “Fair enough.”

“I’ll be out in a bit.”

“Kay.”

I didn’t think about much as I scrubbed off the past few days. I definitely didn’t think about how Eli would be naked and jerking off on my bed in the near future. And I certainly didn’t think about how much I wanted to watch.

As I turned off the water, my dick was rock hard. I could have jerked to take the edge off, but I would have probably thought about Eli, and it felt wrong to fantasize about him when he was in the next room.

“Shit,” I muttered and wrapped a towel around my waist. I’d forgotten to bring clean clothes with me.

I scooped up my clothes, padded out of the bathroom, and tossed them into my closet hamper.

He looked up from his phone and made a strangled sound. “Why are you all wet and naked?”

“I’m not naked. I’m in a towel.” I grinned at his wide-eyed expression. “I forgot to bring clean clothes with me. And I’m wet because I was in the shower.” I went to my dresser and tugged open a drawer. “I’m about to drop the towel, so either avert your eyes or enjoy the view.”

He made a noise that was halfway between a squeak and a gasp. Laughing, I pulled off my towel and placed it on the dresser. Not bothering to hurry, I leisurely tugged on a pair of boxer briefs and sweatpants. When I turned around, Eli was staring at me.

“You didn’t avert your eyes.”

He tossed his phone to the side and stood. “Did you want me to?”

“No. Did you enjoy the view?” I asked huskily.

“I did.” He dragged his tongue over his bottom lip. I tracked the movement, and my dick throbbed.

I leaned back against the dresser and rested my hands on the wooden surface.

He dropped his gaze to my bulge. “Are you hard because of me?” he asked, his voice so soft it was barely above a whisper.

“Yes.”

He swallowed. “I feel weird.”

“Weird?”

“Just... weird. I want...”

“What do you want?” I asked, not daring to breathe as he raked his gaze up my frame.

He was so beautiful, and the wonder and longing on his face were doing things to my insides.

“Please don’t hate me.”

“Hate you—*oof*.”

My ass hit the dresser as Eli’s lithe body slammed into mine. He grabbed my cheeks in his slender hands and kissed me.

Before I could move to kiss him back, he jumped away, one hand over his mouth, his eyes wide in what looked like horror.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted.

“Don’t be sorry. Not unless you didn’t want that.”

“I wanted it,” he whispered.

“Do you want to try again?”

He nodded and stepped closer.

I was dizzy with need, and it took everything in me not to drag him into my arms and kiss the shit out of him.

As much as I wanted him, I needed to let him set the pace and go at his speed.

“West.” He leaned closer. His warm breath ghosted over my lips, and I shuddered at both the needy undertone of his voice and his closeness.

Everything about him turned me on, and knowing he’d initiated this, that he’d kissed *me*, made me feel ten feet tall.

He *wanted* me.

I closed my eyes as his soft hands cupped my cheeks, gentle this time.

The first brush of his lips over mine was soft and fleeting but so achingly perfect I had to bite back a groan.

I lightly gripped his hips and held him as he angled my face to the side and brushed another kiss against my mouth, then another.

He moaned and pressed his lips to mine harder, prolonging the contact as he pushed his hard dick against my thigh.

Taking a chance, I parted my lips and moved them against his. He mimicked what I was doing, letting out breathy little sighs and moans. He grew more confident, meeting my kisses and not just responding to them.

His tongue brushed mine, and a shockwave of need shot through me. The second touch tore a growl from deep in my throat.

Eli moaned eagerly and swept his tongue into my mouth. His technique was sloppy and unpracticed, but his enthusiasm was so damn hot I could barely think straight.

He whimpered in my arms, rubbing his tongue over mine in a way that was both eager and shy, like he was trying to let go but wasn't quite sure how to.

Unable to stay passive any longer, I cupped his chin with one hand and held him still so I could kiss him exactly how I wanted.

He moaned and clawed at my back, trying to get closer as I ravaged his mouth.

“Is it too much?” I panted against his lips.

“No.” He hitched one knee up and wrapped it around my hip. “More.”

“Fuck.” I slid my hands under his firm ass, lifting him as I spun us around.

He let out the cutest squeal, and I deposited him on the dresser. “This okay?”

He dragged me forward for another soul-searing kiss and wrapped his legs around my waist.

Holy shit. I wasn't going to survive this. His eagerness was such a turn-on. Knowing he not only wanted me but was also

enjoying my touch, my kiss was heady as fuck.

I could easily lose myself in him, but that wasn't what either of us needed. Holding him close, I slowed my movements until our kisses were deep and languid.

Fuck. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten lost in kissing without the pressure to do more.

I sank into it, letting my entire focus zero in on the man in my arms. The way his lean body fit against mine, how his strong hands ran over my back and gently scratched my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

The little moans and sighs he couldn't seem to control, the way he hooked his ankles together under my ass, locking us together.

His taste, his scent. Him.

Time and space melted away as we continued to kiss. My dick was so hard it ached, and zings of pleasure and a bone-deep feeling of satisfaction moved through my chest.

Kissing had always been the precursor to more. I liked doing it and was never stingy with my affection when I was with someone, but my mind had always been on what would happen next.

But with Eli, I didn't want more. Well, that wasn't true. I wanted everything, but in this moment, kissing him was enough. I wanted him to experience every moment of my attention, to be able to explore and learn and figure out what he liked.

I'd never been with a virgin before, and his complete lack of experience was at the forefront of my mind as I dragged my lips over his jaw and kissed his neck.

Even if this wasn't his first kiss, it was his first kiss with *me*. I refused to rush things or push him into more. And the caveman part of me loved how I was one of the few people who got to share this with him.

"West," he moaned and ran his fingers through my damp hair.

I licked and kissed and nibbled on his neck, relishing every little sound I coaxed out of him.

I sucked his earlobe into my mouth and gently worried the skin between my teeth.

“Shit!”

He froze, his body still and rigid.

I pulled back, my head spinning. “Eli?”

He flushed bright red, his eyes wide and crazed.

“What’s wrong?”

He shook his head and tried to scramble away from me.

“Wait.” I pressed my hands to the wall and caged him in with my arms, not touching him but not letting him get away until I knew what had triggered his reaction. “Did I hurt you?”

He shook his head and stopped trying to get away.

“Was it too much?” Had I spooked him? I should have stopped sooner.

He shook his head again.

“Eli. Talk to me. Please.”

“I...” His face was beet red. “I got a little too excited.”

I blinked as I processed his words. “You got close?” I asked carefully.

“Not just close.” He covered his crotch with his hand, his face flaming even brighter.

“You came?”

He squeezed his eyes closed and nodded.

He’d come from kissing me? His erection had pressed against my stomach while we’d been making out, but he hadn’t rubbed it on me or anything. He’d been that turned on by my kisses?

Fuck, that was hot.

“Did it feel good?” I asked, my voice husky and low.

He nodded, his eyes still closed.

“Look at me,” I said gently.

He shook his head.

“Please.”

He cracked one eye open. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.”

He peered up at me, his expression seeking and raw and so damn vulnerable.

“Do you have any idea how hot it is that you came from kissing me?”

“It is?” he asked in a small voice.

“So sexy.” I smoothed a lock of his silky hair back from where it had fallen over his eye and tucked it behind his ear. “I was close too.”

“You were?”

“Really close.”

“It was good for you too? Even if you didn’t...”

“So good. Every second was perfect.”

“Do you want me to...” He glanced down at my bulge.

“No.” I pressed a soft, chaste kiss to his lips. “I don’t need more. Kissing you was enough.”

“But you’re still hard.”

“It’ll go down on its own.”

“Are you sure? It doesn’t seem fair that I did and you didn’t.”

I tipped his chin up so I could look into his eyes. “Sex isn’t transactional. It’s not about making things fair or doing something that’s expected of you. I loved kissing you, and it’s so hot you came. I don’t need an orgasm to enjoy being with you. And I never want you to think you have to reciprocate or do something just because your partner did. Not with anyone, but especially not me. Okay?”

He nodded, his eyes never leaving mine.

“Have you ever kissed someone like that?” I asked softly.

I didn’t really want to hear about his past kissing partners, but I had a feeling he needed to talk things out so he could process everything he’d experienced.

“No.” He swallowed. “I’ve been kissed, but I’ve never been the one doing the kissing. It was nice before. I liked it. But it wasn’t anything like that.” He wet his lips with his tongue. “I had no idea it could feel like that.”

“Me either,” I said honestly.

He arched an eyebrow.

“I can’t remember the last time I enjoyed kissing that much. Maybe never.”

“You’ve probably kissed a ton of people.” His eyes clouded.

“Not a ton.” I dropped my other arm from the wall now that he wasn’t a flight risk. “Not a lot, actually.”

He scrunched up his face adorably. “No?”

“I spent most of high school at an all-boys school. Got really good at handies and BJs, but not a lot of kissing going on in the dorms.”

He bugged his eyes out, and I chuckled.

“You sequester a bunch of hormonal teenage boys together, and there’s going to be experimenting. Most of the guys weren’t even bi-curious, but a hand is a hand when you’re horny and desperate.”

“I guess it makes sense. What about college?”

“Long make-out sessions are more of a teenage thing, I guess. Most of my partners were eager to move on to the next thing. Or ghost me.”

“*You* got ghosted?”

“I did. It would seem not everyone agrees I’m good at kissing.”

“They’re idiots because you’re amazing.”

A tendril of pride shot through me at the matter-of-fact way he said it.

“Glad you think so.”

He snickered.

“What?”

“I’ve never come before going on cam.”

“Will it make it harder?”

He laughed at my unintended double entendre.

“I mean, will it make your job more difficult?”

He shot me a smile that was half-playful and half-shy. “Not more difficult, but definitely *harder*.”

I looked between us. He had a semi.

My dick throbbed, and I drew in a shaky breath. I’d meant it when I’d told him I didn’t need to come to be with him, but my dick was still ready and raring to go.

“I’ll let you get to work.” I stepped back to give him enough space to hop down off the dresser. “I’ll be in the living room if you want some company when you’re done.”

“Yeah?” He perked up. “I’d like that.”

Warmth and affection filled my chest. “Me too.”

We stared at each other for a few beats. I turned on my heel, strode away, and closed the door behind me.

Shit, I hadn’t put on a shirt or socks. Whatever. I had some clean clothes in the dryer I’d forgotten to put away before the power had gone out.

Heat prickled my cheeks as I made my way down the stairs and toward the laundry room, trying not to think about how Eli was getting naked on my bed. I liked knowing he was going on cam after I’d made him feel good. That the flush on his cheeks and the sparkle in his eyes were because of me. Like a little secret that was just between us.

Like tangible proof that I'd claimed him. His viewers got to see what he showed them. They knew his cam persona, but *I* was the only one who got to see the real him.

Shaking my head, I yanked the dryer door open and rummaged inside it. I was getting ahead of myself. A kiss between friends didn't have to mean anything. Time to dial back the lust before I said or did something that could tank our friendship.

We might not have been back in each other's lives for long, but he was special to me, and I refused to be one more person who let him down.

ELI

“THANKS FOR HANGING out with me tonight.” I smiled at the camera and rested my chin on my folded hands.

SuZaNnA: awesome show!

jayjay: pillow talk time!!

hotroddy: new place?

“Yup, pillow talk time. And yes. There were some issues at my place, so I’m staying with a friend for a bit.”

Usually, this was my favorite part of the show, where I could relax and chat and not have to worry about being sexy or getting tips. But I wasn’t feeling it tonight.

I wanted to go downstairs and hang out with West.

lilacsareblue: you should do a show with them!

pedrofan: are they a guy or a girl?

hisgirlfriday: is your friend hot?

“My friend is a guy, and he’s very hot.” I tried not to smile too wide as I thought about how hot West was. “But he’s not in the business, so no shows with him.”

hisgirlfriday: would you if he was?

“Maybe.”

bendmeover: do a show together and cut off his head!

I chuckled. “Sounds illegal and messy.”

bendmeover: you know what I mean! Don't show his face, just his dick

“Maybe one day I’ll do some partnered stuff, but not right now. Am I not enough for you?” I pouted at the camera.

Reassurances rolled through the chat, and warmth filled my chest. They might be strangers on a screen, but the validation was nice. Camming was the only time I felt wanted or like I mattered.

Well, camming and when I was with West.

“I have to get going,” I lied. “I’ll be back online tomorrow at eight. Be sure to subscribe here to get the notifications and check my Twitter for updates and show announcements. Have a great rest of your night.” I blew the camera a kiss, then logged off without waiting to read people’s good-byes.

Not thinking too hard about why I was so eager to get downstairs, I snuffed out the fire, put my camming stuff away, and hurried into the bathroom to take a quick shower.

When I was clean, I pulled on the nicest pair of sweatpants and long-sleeved tee I’d packed, ones that fit and weren’t three sizes too big.

Was this dressing up? Would West think it was weird or I was trying too hard?

Was I trying too hard? Hell, was I trying at all?

I’d spent my entire show thinking about our kiss. How safe and protected I’d felt in his arms. How hot I had gotten. How I’d lost myself in the moment and hadn’t even realized how close I was until I’d come in my pants like a loser.

But West had been so achingly perfect and hadn’t laughed or made fun of me.

Shaking those thoughts out of my head, I did a quick check of the room to make sure everything was in order, then went downstairs.

A flutter of nerves shot through me. West hadn’t logged on to watch my show. He’d left the room hard as steel. Had he jerked off to someone else?

Ugh. Why did I care? He was allowed to watch or think about whomever he wanted. One kiss didn't mean anything. Especially not to someone like him.

Pausing, I peered into the living room.

Creak.

Damn old house. I was used to being able to sneak around, but it was impossible when the floors were so freaking loud.

West looked up from the chair near the fireplace, a smile on his lips and a book in his hand. "Hey. All done?"

"Yeah. What are you reading?" I came into the room. Hopefully, he couldn't see how out of sorts I was.

He held up the book and showed me the cover.

"I, Robot? Is that a first edition?" I crossed the room and took a closer look at the artwork.

He nodded and handed it to me. I turned the book over in my hands. The spine was worn, and the pages were yellow with age.

"This would be worth a fortune if it was in better condition." I gave it back to him.

"How much?"

"At least seven grand. Maybe eight. You could probably get about half that from a hardcore collector."

"I found this in a box of old books in the attic."

"Really?" I sat on the edge of the chair.

"Yup. I had to throw most of them away because they were musty and had mold on them, but a few were salvageable. Have you read it?"

"It's good. And kind of fitting, considering how AI is becoming part of our reality."

"Do you think it's possible that robots could really take over? That they could develop the ability to think independently?"

“AI ‘teaches’ itself by continuously absorbing and processing information from large sets of data, but I don’t think we’re at the level where it will be able to surpass its coding and start ‘thinking’ on its own.”

“But you think it’s possible?”

“Maybe. Machines are limited by the technology of the time. Right now, we don’t have the tech to create cognitive thought or the ability for a machine to learn and not just replicate what it processes. That doesn’t mean we never will.”

“I used to have *Alexa* set up in my old apartment and would always say thank you to it whenever I asked it anything. I kind of hoped it would remember that I was one of the nice humans when the robots staged their uprising.”

I snickered. “You don’t have it here?”

“Didn’t bother setting it up. I figured it would piss the ghosts off.”

“Ghosts?” I laughed.

“What? You don’t believe in ghosts?”

“I will when someone can show me evidence they exist.”

“Where’s your sense of whimsy?”

“Must have gotten lost in the mail.”

He chuckled and put the book on the small table next to the chair.

I should go sit on the couch.

“I’ll move if you want the chair.”

“No. It’s fine. I’ll sit over there.”

“We could share it.” He shifted to one side and patted the empty space next to him. “Plenty of room.”

The flare of heat and hope shooting through my chest was as concerning as it was annoying. Sitting on the same chair wasn’t a big deal. It didn’t mean anything.

I scooted into the space and leaned back. “This chair is amazing. I could live here.”

“I love it. Got it on sale too.”

“You shop sales?”

“Sure do.”

“Huh.”

I settled on the cushion and tried to ignore the little flutters in my stomach as West’s arm pressed against mine.

It was his arm. His *arm!* I needed to get a grip.

“What did you study in college?” I tried not to sigh as the heat from his body warmed me from the inside.

“Business.”

“Did you like it?”

“I didn’t hate it. And it’s practical. What are you studying?”

“Biochem.”

“What do you want to do with that?”

“Medical research.”

“Is that because...”

“Because I have an autoimmune disease?” I arched my eyebrow.

He grimaced. “Was that a rude assumption to make?”

“It wasn’t rude. And it’s not like you’re the first to ask. It wasn’t the reason I chose the field, but it did factor into things when I was figuring out what I wanted to study.”

“Can I ask how old you were when you were diagnosed?”

“Fourteen.”

He pursed his lips.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Fourteen wasn’t a good year for me,” I said dryly.

“It doesn’t sound like it was,” he said softly. “Is that why you got into fitness?”

I smiled at his careful tone. “That was the reason I started, but after what happened at the game... I was tired of feeling weak, so I kind of dove headfirst into working out. It also gave Gray and me a chance to bond over one of his interests. He helped me figure out a routine and taught me about nutrition and cooking.”

“You’re not weak. You were a kid.”

“Kids get picked on all the time. They get bullied and abused. Age doesn’t protect you from the bad people out there.”

“That’s true. Sad, but true. How come you stayed here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why didn’t you end up at some Ivy League school?”

“Because it wasn’t possible.”

“Why not?”

“I got offers,” I said softly. “But I was too young to go.”

“Too young? Wouldn’t you being so young make you more appealing to them?”

“Sure. But most colleges won’t let you attend until you’re of legal age or close to it. No college is going to take on the liability of having a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old in their dorms. Rutherford let me start at sixteen because I’m local, and I turned seventeen before the official end of the first semester. The only way I could have gone earlier was if I had a parent or guardian attend with me.”

“So why didn’t your mom go to class with you?”

“Because I’m not the only person in my family. And because she has three other kids to take care of and couldn’t exactly quit her job and spend her days in lecture halls with me for a year.”

“I guess that was a pretty privileged thing to say.”

“A little, yeah.”

Silence stretched between us. I leaned my head against West’s shoulder.

“How was your show?” he asked softly.

“Good. Hit my goal in less than an hour, so I’m calling it a win.”

“Was the room okay?”

“It was great.”

Why were things awkward suddenly? Was it about the show? Had West changed his mind and now he regretted letting me use his room?

“I cleaned up,” I blurted. “And I was careful.”

“I’m not worried about that. It’s easy enough to change the sheets if something did happen.”

“I once knocked over a water bottle during a show. Almost a full liter of water spilled onto my bed.”

“Oh, man.” He laughed. “I bet that was a mood killer.”

“It was. I flailed around like a fish trying to stay out of the puddle and save my laptop.”

“Did you manage?”

“To save my laptop, yeah. But I was soaked. Ended up doing a shower show, since I was already wet.”

“Shower show?” His voice cracked.

“I don’t do them often because the moisture build-up in the bathroom and electronics don’t go well together, but they’re a nice way to get a break. All I have to do is soap myself up and jerk off. No talking or having to people.”

“I bet those are popular.”

“They can be. My shower content sells well too. Guess people like me wet.”

He shifted and pulled one knee up, blocking my view of his crotch. Was he hard? A thrill shot through me.

He cleared his throat. "I can see the appeal."

Grinning and not knowing where my confidence was coming from, I dug my phone out of my pocket. "I filmed this last week. I haven't posted it or anything. I'm not sure it's good."

He leaned over to see the screen as I went through the gallery in my hidden folder to find the clip.

I handed him my phone with the clip cued up. What was I doing?

I was flirting with West; that was obvious. But why? He hadn't given me any indication he wanted to kiss me again. And I'd bet money he'd taken care of himself while I was working and hadn't thought about me since.

Just because I'd spent the entire show reliving every moment of the kiss and had come with the memories of his mouth on mine and his hard body holding me close didn't mean he'd spared it a second thought.

Horror shot through me as he pressed Play on the clip.

What if he hadn't enjoyed the kiss? I'd been an eager, needy mess. It had probably been gross for him, since I had no idea what to do. And I'd come in my pants like a loser. He'd been hard, but I'd been rubbing up on him. Anyone would get hard from friction. It was a physiological response. It didn't mean he'd been turned on.

God. He probably felt sorry for me. He'd let me kiss him because he didn't want to hurt my feelings by rejecting me again.

"It's good." He shoved my phone at me and cleared his throat again. "You should post it. You'll get a lot of likes."

"Yeah. Thanks. Maybe next week."

"I need to get to bed. Are you tired? Or do you want to stay up for a bit?"

"I should go to bed too."

It wasn't late, but I was still a bit wiped from the craziness of the flood and power failure and could use an early night.

"Did the power come back at the house yet?" I asked.

"Yeah. While you were working. I'm meeting Phil at seven tomorrow to start cleaning up and figuring out what work needs to be done."

"Sounds like it'll be a long day."

"Probably. I'll take the truck and leave you the car so you're not stuck here."

"Thanks, but no need. I can't drive."

"You can't?" He gaped at me like I'd told him I sacrificed puppies and not that I didn't know how to drive.

"Never learned."

"I can't imagine not driving. I've spent hundreds of hours driving around on back roads to clear my head."

"I do that when I run."

He perked up. "You run? Did you bring your gear?"

"Yes, and yes."

"What's your usual distance?"

"Three miles."

"There's a nice trail a few blocks from here that's about that long for the loop. It's so much nicer than running the streets."

"Thanks. I'll check it out tomorrow if the weather holds up."

"It's supposed to be cloudy but no rain."

"What else is new, huh?"

He grinned. "Text me what you need for groceries too. I'll pick them up on my way home tomorrow."

"I can get my own groceries."

"How? You don't drive."

“I can walk.”

“The closest store is more than five miles away.”

“Fine. But save the receipt so I can pay you back.”

“I’m saving the receipt, but not for you.”

“I’m confused.”

“My father’s company is paying. You’re here because you can’t stay at the house. Trust me when I say I’m billing him every cent I can get away with. Maybe he’ll think twice about ignoring Phil’s recommendations when he sees how much it’s going to cost him to fix this mess.”

“Won’t insurance cover most of it?”

“Yeah, but there’s the deductible and what they don’t cover. And if I inflate his out-of-pocket costs to get his attention, then oh well.”

“You’re devious.”

“I can be. Now, will you text me your list tomorrow?”

“Yes. And I promise I won’t cheap out or try to cut corners.”

“I’m going to buy the most expensive version of whatever you put on the list, FYI, so have fun and fleece my father for all he’s worth. It’s the least of what he deserves.”

He climbed off the chair and held out his hand to help me.

“You can sleep in my room again.”

“No way. I’ll sleep in the spare room.”

“I have to get up at the ass crack of dawn. You get to sleep in, might as well do it in the big bed.”

“I can’t take your room again. There’s no reason to with the power on.”

“It’s not about power or heat. I... I can’t explain it, but I liked knowing you were in my bed last night. I’ll sleep better if you’re there.”

I chewed my lip as I studied him. He seemed both sincere and confused, like he truly didn't understand why this was important to him.

“Okay. Thanks.”

WEST

DRAWING IN A DEEP BREATH, I tried to will my dick to deflate so I could get some sleep. I'd been teetering on the edge of arousal since we'd kissed. I'd contemplated jerking off while he'd been working, but again, it hadn't felt right to be fantasizing about him when he was in the house.

Then he'd shown me that damn video, and my balls ached from how hard I was. The clip was less than ten seconds long, but every one of them had been hot as fuck.

He'd taken it in the bathroom at the house, in the stand-up shower. The water running down his tight body was hot in and of itself, but the video was next level. He'd given the camera a sexy smirk, then lowered it so the frame cut off just as his pubic hair popped into view. Then he'd rolled his hips, mimicking fucking someone, and thrown back his head like he was in the throes of passion as he'd gripped the metal frame of the shower doors. His muscled torso and tight pecs had been hot as fuck, but it was the way he moved that had been burned into my brain. Confidence and raw sexual energy had radiated off him.

It was so different from the sweet, needy man who'd been so turned on from kissing me that he'd come hands-free in my arms. Both sides of him were hot, but I loved how I was the only one who got to see his true reactions. He hadn't been acting or performing while he'd kissed me. He'd been in the moment, and I'd loved every second of it.

And it appeared he had to.

Groaning, I slid my hand into my boxers and gripped my cock.

“Fuck.” I was so hard that touch was nearly too much.

I hadn't been this turned on in... forever. I'd always had a healthy sex drive, but no one had ever gotten me hot enough that my control had been in danger of slipping.

No one except him.

The soft sounds he'd made echoed in my ears as I shoved my sheets and boxers down. I needed to come.

The chilly air seeped over my heated flesh, and I closed my eyes. I tried to conjure up a random fantasy, but the only thing I could think of was Eli. The way he'd clung to me, how eager he'd been. How he'd tried to get closer and had locked his arms and legs around me like a spider monkey.

No one had ever responded to me like that, and my arousal went beyond just liking how his kiss had felt or how he'd tasted.

How would he look spread out on my bed and staring up at me with those big, wide eyes? How would he taste if I went down on him? Would he squirm and wiggle and fuck my mouth? What if I slipped a finger inside him? Would he like having his spot played with while I blew him?

Would he want to do the same to me?

My dick pulsed. A vision of him kneeling over me, one finger screwed deep in my ass as he jerked me and that sassy smile on his lips, swam before my eyes.

Heat flooded my balls, and my lower body tightened. I clenched around nothing, feeling empty and so fucking close.

“Fuck,” I panted, my chest heaving. Pleasure coiled deep inside me, tightening my muscles until they were as taut as guitar strings and just as likely to snap.

Fantasy Eli bent and sucked my dick into his mouth, and I was *done*.

Every muscle in my body released and contracted in a dizzying flurry of pleasure and need as I shot over my hand and all over my chest.

Aftershocks quaked through me as I stroked the last of my orgasm out. My skin flushed hot, and my thighs ached as I lay there, spent and breathing like I'd just finished a five-mile run.

Wincing, I let go of my dick and looked down at the mess on my chest. Not wanting to get up, I yanked off my shirt and cleaned myself up with it. When I was done, I balled the shirt up and tossed it onto the floor. I'd deal with it in the morning.

Now that my body was finally sated, a happy, sleepy haze fell over me. I rolled over, pulled the blankets up, and snuggled into my pillow.

I needed to sleep. I could overthink about everything tomorrow.



“WEST?” ELI PEEKED HIS HEAD OUT OF THE LIVING ROOM AS I used my hip to shut the front door.

“Hey.” I put the bags I was holding down and sighed.

“Are you okay?” He hurried over, concern on his face. “It’s late.”

“Yeah. Just tired.” I rolled my shoulders.

“Let me get my shoes on, and I’ll bring in the rest of the groceries.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got it.”

“You just got home after a thirteen-hour day.” He gave me a stern look. “Take your boots off and go take a long shower.”

My chest tightened.

“Did you eat?” he asked.

“Not yet. But there’s a rotisserie chicken in one of the bags in the truck. It won’t take me long to make some sides.”

“Nope.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Your job is to go upstairs and take a shower. I’ll have dinner ready by the time you’re done.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind cooking.”

“I’ve done nothing except read and go for a run today. And explore the house. I hope that’s okay.” He bit his lip.

“Yeah, of course. I told you to make yourself at home.”

He grinned, his face lighting up in a way that nearly stole my breath. Goddamn, he was beautiful.

“The least I can do is cook, since you were nice enough to do the shopping. Now get your butt upstairs and take care of yourself. I might need to start without you because of the timing with my medication, but take your time. Dinner will be ready when you are.”

“Thanks.”

He scooped up the bags. “You don’t have to thank me for doing my part. Especially not after you put in a long day.” He nodded to the stairs. “Go.”

He carried the bags into the house. I unlaced my boots, kicked them off, and trudged up the stairs. It had been a long-ass day.

I walked into my room, stripping my clothes off as I did. I tossed them into the hamper, then made my way into the bathroom to take a shower.

I had no idea how long I stayed under the spray, but when I shut off the water and pulled a clean towel from the heated rack, I was more alert.

When I was dressed in sweats and a hoodie, I made my way to the kitchen.

“That smells good,” I said.

Eli was sitting at the island with what looked like a half-eaten plate of lettuce wraps in front of him.

“I forgot to ask if you like fajitas.” He smiled shyly.

“Love them.”

“I put some tortillas out for you in case you wanted something more substantial after working all day.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder at the counter next to the stove.

“Thanks.”

Bowls of seasoned chicken and veggies sat next to ones of chopped tomatoes, guacamole, and shredded cheese, along with lettuce leaves and the tortillas. I made two of each and brought them to the island. I slid into the seat next to him, where he’d already set out a plate, cutlery, and a tall glass of water.

“Did you have a good day?” I asked.

“I did. This house is amazing.”

“It is.” I picked up one of the wraps and took a big bite.

Flavor and spices exploded on my tongue. I didn’t bother biting back my groan of pleasure.

Eli flushed pink and turned back to his plate.

“These are incredible. The seasoning packets I buy are always so salty. What did you do to fix that?”

“I make my own. Cuts the sodium way down.”

“Really?”

“You had all the spices handy. It’s not hard.”

“I’ll have to get your recipe. And the recipe for the guac too.” I took another big bite.

He smiled and finished his food as I scarfed mine down. I was too hungry to pause long enough to talk, but Eli seemed amused by my enthusiasm.

“That was one of the best meals I’ve eaten in a long time.” I patted my stomach. “My mouth wants more, but my stomach is at its limit.”

He stood and gathered the plates. “I know the feeling. Gray makes these low-carb cheesecake bites, and they’re

incredible. I could eat a whole batch of them, but they're rich, so my stomach is always full before my mouth is done."

"Those sound good."

"They are. Not too hard to make, but time-consuming. They need to be chilled overnight."

I went to the cupboard and got some containers for the leftovers as he loaded the dishwasher.

"You explored the house?" I asked.

"A little. I was looking for the laundry and thought it might be through there." He motioned to the closed door to our left that led to the informal living room. "But every time I opened a door, I kept finding more rooms."

I chuckled at his bewildered expression. "I did the same thing when I moved in."

"This house is amazing. The rooms are all so unique, and the craftsmanship is incredibly detailed. I love the round room upstairs. The one in the turret."

"That's my favorite. If this were my house, I'd set up a library or some sort of study in there."

"Why didn't you make it your office?"

"Because offices are for work, and a room like that should be for fun."

"Makes sense. Do you use it for anything?"

"Sometimes I read or bring my computer in and watch something on the chair in front of the windows."

"I imagine the view is spectacular at sunset."

"It is." I rubbed a hand over my face.

"You look exhausted."

"Just tired. It was a busy day."

"It was?" He took a container from me and scooped the leftover chicken and vegetables into it.

“Yeah. We were able to set up fans and dehumidifiers now that the power is back. I spent most of today organizing crews to do the cleanup and repairs once it’s dried out. And dealing with the insurance company. Apparently, a two-day power failure with limited cell service isn’t a good enough reason to leave standing water on the floor overnight. Not according to them. I wasted hours talking to different departments and submitting forms and photos to get approval for the work that needs to be done.”

“How are you supposed to drain a flood with no power in the middle of a storm? Gravity is a thing. It’s not like you can stick a hose in it and will it to go out the window.”

“You and I both know that, but Kyle from the claims department doesn’t.”

“Kyle’s a dumbass.”

I snorted. “He is. But he signs the checks, so I had to play nice. The good news is it should be dry enough to start the cleanup process in the morning.”

“How bad is the damage?”

“The walls will be easy enough to fix, but the floors could be a problem. We don’t know how badly the subfloor was damaged, so we can’t start any work until an inspector comes in and declares it safe.”

“Sounds like it’s going to be a lot of work to get it fixed.” He carried a stack of containers to the fridge.

“It’ll probably take the whole week. At least it was contained to a small area.” I glanced at the clock on the stove. “Are you working tonight?”

“Yeah. I should probably get set up.”

“I have some forms I need to go over and emails to send while you do.”

“It’s almost eight on a Sunday night. Don’t you think you put in enough hours today?”

“They have to get done. No rest for the wicked, as they say.”

“You’re wicked?”

“Well, yeah. Have you met me? I’m intimidating and get shit done.”

He smirked. “That’s not what wicked means.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Nope. It means you’re evil or morally wrong.”

“Really?”

“Mmmm-hmmm. That’s not you. Even if you are a landlord.”

I grinned at his teasing tone. “Excuse you. I’m a property manager. I work for the evil landlord. Would that make me wicked adjacent?”

He snickered. “More like third-party wicked. But even that doesn’t fit. You’re about as unscrupulous as a puppy.”

“I’m not sure how to take that.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“If you say so.”

He bit his lip and toyed with the sleeve of his sweater.

“Eli?”

He crossed the room in four quick strides, gripped the front of my hoodie, and yanked me down. His kiss was hard and hot. Gone was the hesitant and unsure man from the night before. This Eli was filled with passion and confidence as he licked into my mouth and deepened the kiss.

Heat moved through my chest, and blood rushed to my junk. I wrapped my arms around his slender frame and tugged him closer, molding our bodies together and letting him explore my mouth.

Soft sighs and little moans filled the space between us, and I swallowed each one of them down. He pressed against me, his dick as hard as mine, and slid his hand through my hair. Goosebumps exploded on my skin.

Zzzzz. Zzzzz. Zzzzz.

I groaned.

“Do you need to get that?” He pulled away from our kiss.

“Not sure.” I dug my phone out of my pocket and checked the screen. “Fuck.”

“What?” He stepped back and touched his fingers to his lips, a wondrous expression on his face.

“It’s the company I hired to check the floor and walls tomorrow.”

“It’s probably important.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I’ll be in the living room when you’re done if you want some company later.”

He smiled, his cheeks flushed. “I’d like that.”

I answered the call before it could go to voicemail. “Hello?”

“Mr. Daniels? It’s Bobby from On-Site Restoration.”

“Hi, Bobby. How can I help you?”

Eli gave me a little wave and pointed to the ceiling.

I nodded and waved back.

With one more shy smile, he rushed out of the room.

“I heard from Curtis you’re needing a full crew tomorrow for water damage?”

I tore my eyes away from Eli’s retreating form.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Would it be okay if I came by for another assessment around eight so I know what you’ll need from us?”

“I went over everything with Curtis earlier when he did his assessment.”

“Some of the stuff in his report is confusing. I’d like to see what we’ll be working with for myself.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

He asked a few questions about what I was looking to have done and what kind of shape the area was in. I'd already gone over this with his business partner but answered them anyway.

It wasn't his fault he'd cockblocked me, but I couldn't help feeling a little salty toward the man for bothering me with this now.

The other half of my brain was stuck on how Eli had kissed me again.

All day, I'd tried not to think about what had happened between us last night. Not because I didn't want a repeat, but because I'd convinced myself it had been a spur-of-the-moment thing and he wouldn't want more.

Did he want more?

"Great. I'll see you in the morning," Bobby boomed in my ear.

I jumped. Shit. Hopefully, he hadn't said anything important while I'd zoned out. "See you then. Have a good night."

I ended the call and went to the fridge to get a beer. We needed to talk about whatever this was. Eli wasn't just some guy, and his lack of experience changed things.

We might have only reconnected a few weeks ago, but he meant something to me. I couldn't just wing it with him, especially with how his brain worked and he overthought and overanalyzed everything. The last thing I wanted to do was inadvertently hurt him or push him into doing something he wasn't ready for.

ELI

“ARE YOU STILL BUSY?”

West looked up from his phone. The smile he gave me was a bit tight.

Uh-oh. That couldn't be good.

“Nope. Was just scrolling.”

I hovered in the doorway. Maybe I should give him some space? Had he just been being polite when he'd said I should come down and hang out after I was done work?

He scooted over on the chair and waved me over.

“How was the show?” he asked as I sat next to him.

“Good. Sundays aren't my best days, not unless I'm doing something special. But I had decent numbers tonight.”

“That's good.”

Why did he sound so distant?

Shit. Had I misread things when I'd kissed him? He hadn't made any indication he'd wanted to kiss again. He'd kissed me back, but was he just being polite?

“Did you get what you needed to do done?” I asked lamely, fighting down the panic rising in my chest.

“I did.”

“Do you want me to go?” My voice cracked pathetically, and my cheeks flamed hot.

“No. But we need to talk,” he said softly.

“No, we don’t.”

The urge to flee grew stronger. This was a mistake. All of it. Kissing him, bothering him while he was tired from work, thinking he could ever want someone like me.

He was letting me stay with him because he was a nice guy and felt responsible for me because of the situation at the house. He hadn’t brought me here to keep accosting and bothering him.

“We don’t?”

“No.” I gripped the arm of the chair and forced myself to stay where I was and not run from the room and right out the front door. “It was a lapse.”

“A lapse?”

“Yes. I know you were just being nice to me—”

“You think I kissed you because I was being nice?” He turned to me, but I wouldn’t look at him.

“Obviously.”

“I kissed you because I wanted to. It had nothing to do with being nice.”

“But you didn’t kiss me. I kissed you.”

“Because I didn’t want to rush you or push you into something you didn’t want.”

“Because I’m a pathetic virgin you feel sorry for—*eep!*”

I landed on West’s outstretched legs. My belly fluttered. God, he was so strong, could move me around so easily.

It should have scared me. I hated feeling small and weak. But I didn’t feel that way with him. His size and strength were a turn-on.

“You’re not pathetic, so stop thinking that. Being a virgin isn’t anything to be ashamed of, so stop that too. And I don’t feel sorry for you. I’m sorry for what you’ve gone through, but I don’t feel sorry for you. Not one bit.”

“But you’re so much more experienced...”

“Not as experienced as you seem to think.” He slipped his hands under the bottom of my shirt and gently stroked the skin of my waist. “I didn’t lose my virginity until I was in college.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“But you’re *you*. How is that possible?”

“What do you mean, I’m me?” He quirked his eyebrow teasingly. “What’s so special about me?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re fishing for compliments.”

“Yes.”

“At least you’re honest about it.” I pretended to give him the evil eye. “You already know you’re hot. You don’t need me to stroke your ego.”

He wagged his eyebrows. “I’ll never say no to stroking.”

I snickered.

He rubbed his thumbs over my stomach, the slightly rough pads teasing my Adonis belt. Goosebumps erupted on my skin.

“Why didn’t you have a girlfriend at Hopewell? Or a boyfriend,” I added quickly.

“I didn’t have a boyfriend because I didn’t figure out I was bi until boarding school. I think a part of me always suspected I liked guys too, but I didn’t know for sure until I sucked a dick for the first time. Hard to deny that dudes do it for me when I got a boner while an upperclassmen face-fucked me in the stairwell.”

A vision of West on his knees for some big, buff guy floated in front of my eyes, and my stomach clenched, but not necessarily in a good way. Was that his type? Big and older and dominant?

“What about a girlfriend?” I pressed, ignoring the pangs of disappointment floating through me. “It wasn’t like you didn’t

have half the female population of our school vying for your attention.”

He shrugged. “I had other stuff to worry about and didn’t really have much interest in dating then. Still don’t.”

“No?”

“No. I’ve dated, but it was more for convenience and not because I saw a future with them or anything. Two out of four girlfriends and one of two boyfriends cheated on me. And the relationships that didn’t involve cheating ended badly too. Not exactly a ringing endorsement for coupledness.”

“What happened with the ones who didn’t cheat?”

“My ex-boyfriend ghosted me after two months together. One ex-girlfriend tried to seduce my father when I brought her home for a weekend.”

My jaw dropped.

He chuckled. “Yeah. Dad’s an asshole, but he loves my mom and immediately shut that down.”

“That’s... wow. What about the other?”

“She got pissy when I wouldn’t propose after three months together.”

“Three months!”

He sighed and traced his thumbs over my hips. “Having money has given me more advantages than I can count, but it also has its downsides. People see me as a way to get to my father. Or as an ATM. I like spoiling the people I care about, but I hate being used. Not everyone who’s befriended or pursued me has done it because they want *me*, and having to be constantly aware of people’s motivations makes getting close to people more trouble than it’s worth.”

“That sucks.”

“It does. But it is what it is.” He tilted his head and studied me. “Did you have a crush on me in high school?”

An involuntary bark of laughter bubbled out of my chest. “Um, no. Not a chance.”

He scrunched up his face. “I’m conflicted over your answer. On the one hand, I’m glad, but your amusement kinda hurts the old self-esteem.”

“It wasn’t a slight against you. I didn’t have a crush on anyone back then. I was seventeen the first time I felt more than surface attraction for someone.” I shrugged and dropped my eyes to his stomach. “Like I said, I’m not normal.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you. It makes sense if you think about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You were two, almost three years younger than your classmates, and it sounds like most of them were assholes to you. You were never around kids your age, and I’m guessing you were never allowed to act your age either. It’s not surprising you weren’t interested in dating or any of that crap when you had other things to focus on.”

Could he be right? Everything he’d said was true, but I’d been so convinced that something was wrong with me I’d never taken any of those factors into account.

“We need to talk about what’s going on between us.”

“Do we have to?” I ducked my head.

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I know. But if fooling around is confusing you, then we should stop.”

“What if it’s not confusing me? What if I like it?”

“Look at me while we talk about this, please.”

I lifted my eyes and met his gaze.

“What do you want?”

“What do *you* want?” I asked. “I’m not the only person in this equation.”

“I want whatever you do.”

“That’s a cop-out.”

He grinned. “Maybe.”

“What are the options? I can’t make a decision until I have all the facts.”

“We can be friends, or we can be friends who fool around.”

“Like fuck buddies?”

“I don’t like that term. Friends with benefits is better if we have to label it.”

“Labels help me understand things. I know what’s expected of me when the parameters are clearly defined.”

“I don’t expect anything from you. I don’t want you to try and play a part and fill a role. Just be you.”

“Being me is usually the best way to get someone to run in the opposite direction,” I said dryly.

“Yeah, well, those people weren’t worth your time.” He booped me on the nose.

I glared at him. “You realize I’m twenty and not twelve, right?”

“Yes. I’m well aware you’re an adult now.”

Guilt and confusion coursed through me in equal measure. This was the guy who’d ruined my brother’s life. I’d spent years hating him, but it wasn’t his fault. Even thinking that felt like a betrayal. Gray wasn’t just my older brother. He was my best friend and my protector.

We hadn’t had it easy growing up. Money had been tight, and our mother had worked multiple jobs just to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table. She’d done the best she could, and she was a good mother, but Gray was the one who’d raised me.

Now I was making friends with his rival, the guy he’d hated since they met a decade ago. The guy he’d sworn up and down that he would never forgive.

Knowing West and I were becoming friends again would destroy him. And he could never find out we were fooling

around. Gray was as overprotective as a big brother could get. He'd always struggled with rejection and feeling like he was being replaced. No one could ever replace him, but he'd see our friendship as me choosing West over him.

Why did it have to be so complicated? Why was West the only person I'd ever felt safe with? The only person who sparked any sort of desire or need in me?

Was this leftover from the flood? Had I imprinted on him or something while I'd been freaking out? We'd only been back in each other's lives for a few days. Or a few weeks if I counted that blowout when he'd told me he won the auction. A few conversations and some kissing didn't mean anything.

Was I really willing to risk my relationship with my brother just to get some action?

"You're thinking pretty hard over there."

I looked up and found West watching me, his expression carefully neutral.

Damn, he was handsome, and another of those flutters danced in my chest. I guessed that answered that question. Apparently, I *was* willing to risk my relationship with my brother to get some action.

"It's kind of what I do."

He chuckled. "And? What conclusions have you come to?"

"That this... whatever it is. Gray can never find out about any of it."

His smile dropped. "I understand."

"I don't really know how to do the friends-with-benefits thing. Hell, I barely know how to do the friends thing. But I want to try."

"Are you sure?"

I rolled my eyes. "You need to stop that."

"Stop what?"

“Acting like I’m made of glass. I’m inexperienced, but I know my own mind. If I say I want you to be my first, then I want you to be my first.”

His pupils dilated, and his breathing hitched. “You do?”

I nodded. “I mean, you did spend three grand. You should get your prize.”

Something I couldn’t interpret flashed in his eyes. He didn’t seem angry, but he didn’t laugh like I’d thought he would.

“Fine.” His expression melted into a teasing one, and I let out a little puff of relief. “But same terms as before. I get to decide if, and when, I fuck you.”

“I can live with that.” I licked my lips.

“And it’s not happening until I’m *sure* you want me.”

“I do want you,” I protested. “I just said I did.”

“I think I need to be convinced. The data set is too small right now.”

I narrowed my eyes. A now familiar adrenaline drop exploded in my chest. The challenge in his expression was clear.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” He smile-smirked, and my stomach swooped.

Why was that look so hot? I hated arrogance, but West’s bossy face lit a fire in me I’d never experienced.

“I thought about you while I was on cam,” I said casually.

The smirk dropped off his face and was replaced by a look of dark hunger. “Yeah?”

I nodded and ran one finger down his sternum. “Last night too. One of my viewers asked about the beard burn you left on me yesterday.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That I’d rubbed my face on a towel too hard after my shower.”

“Why did you say that?”

“Because what we do, how you make me feel, isn’t for them. It’s mine. It’s for me to think about when I’m alone. To remember when I’m jerking off.”

“Did you do that on cam? Think about me while you got off?” He gripped my hips hard enough that his fingers dug into my skin.

“Uh-huh.” I slipped my fingers under the hem of his shirt and rubbed his happy trail right above where it disappeared into the waistband of his sweats. “You were all I could think about.”

“Did it feel good when you came?”

“Not as good as when I was with you.”

He groaned and tightened his grip on my hips. The sparks of pain were incredible, like tangible proof that my words were affecting him.

“I thought about how you’d look when you come.”

His breathing hitched. “You want to see me come?”

“So bad.” Feeling bold, I loosely gripped his waistband and gave it a little tug. “I bet you have a really nice dick.”

He closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the chair.

Waves of confidence and a sensation of power rolled over me in equal measure. The fact that he was obviously enjoying my teasing was so heady. I wanted more of those hot looks and soft groans.

I’d thought fighting with him was fun, but it had nothing on *this*. Seeing big bad West losing control, knowing *I* was the reason for it, was *everything*.

“I bet it would feel really good in my hand. So big and hard.” I licked my bottom lip and met his heated gaze.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to pull your cock out and stroke it for me.”

A low growl grumbled deep in his chest. He shoved his hand into his sweats and pulled his cock free.

I stared at it, transfixed. He was long and thick with a flared head.

“Show me your balls.”

He made a sound that was a cross between a groan and a huff of laughter and used his other hand to tug his sweatpants lower.

They were big and full, already tight and high, hugging the base of his cock.

“Did you come while I was on cam?”

“No.”

“Do you want to come now?”

“Is that a trick question?” He groan-laughed again.

“Jerk for me. Let me see it.”

“Fuck.” He drew in a shaky breath and stroked his fist up and down his shaft.

“So hot.” My mouth watered. “I bet you taste good.”

He made a strangled sound and let go of his dick.

“Did I tell you to stop?” I arched an eyebrow.

“No. But I’m not a master edger like you.”

Heat flashed through my body and gathered low in my belly. “You’re close?”

“Really close.” He tucked himself away.

“Don’t do that.” I pouted and scooted closer to him. “I wanna see you come.”

“And why should I do that?” He smirked, but the deep flush on his cheeks and his fevered gaze told me he wasn’t as unaffected as he was pretending to be.

“Because I want it. But more importantly, because *you* want it.”

“Do I?” he asked, his tone deceptively mild.

“Yes.” I pressed my torso against his and wrapped my arms around his big shoulders. “You do.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Maybe this.” I rolled my hips. My cock dragged over his. A spark of fire exploded in my stomach and stole my breath.

“Fuck, sweetheart.”

I froze at the endearment, but West didn't seem to notice as he rubbed his hands over my back.

Wanting more of his touches and those pleasure explosions, I rocked my hips again, then again.

Need pulsed through me with each thrust, and soon my hips were moving of their own volition as I frotted against him.

“Does this feel good?” I asked hoarsely, hovering my mouth over his.

“Fuck, yes.” He grunted and gripped my ass, holding me tight as he helped me move faster, lifting and shifting me like I weighed nothing.

“Are you close?” I asked, injecting as much innocence into my voice as possible.

“So close.”

“Come for me, West.”

He slammed our mouths together, taking mine in a hard, deep kiss as he rutted against me.

The friction was on this side of painful. Nearly too much, but at the same time, not quite enough. Everything about him overwhelmed me. His taste, his heat, his smell. The way his mouth owned mine as he manhandled me.

I melted against him, letting him use me and loving every second of knowing I was making him feel good. That he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

He jerked under me, and his desperation and strength were so hot. I moaned. How would his cock feel in my mouth? So big and hard. What if he shoved it down my throat? Would he like it if I choked on it? Would I?

I pictured West standing over me, feeding me his cock as he held my hair and used my mouth to get off. Pleasure exploded deep in my body.

Was I kinky?

West yanked me down against his cock and shuddered, clinging to me like he never wanted to let go. Wetness seeped into my sweatpants.

He'd come. He'd come because of me.

My orgasm hit me out of nowhere, and I gasped into his kiss as the pressure inside me burst like a damn, and I came in my sweats.

West gentled our kisses, slowing them down. Strong hands cupped my jaw, and soft thumbs brushed over my cheeks.

I melted against him and sank into the bliss. He slid one hand to the back of my neck and held it in a way that felt proprietary and so perfect my entire being sang with happiness.

After what felt like a lifetime but was probably only about a minute, West pressed one last kiss against my lips and pulled away.

“Told you you wanted it.” I tucked my head under his chin and snuggled into his warm chest, breathing hard from both my orgasm and the realization that maybe I wasn't as vanilla as I'd always assumed.

He laughed and rubbed my back.

Closing my eyes, I pulled in a deep breath of his spicy scent.

“Was that okay?”

“More than okay,” I mumbled.

He sighed softly. “This feels nice.”

“It does.”

I wasn't ready to examine how nice or the myriad of emotions and thoughts bouncing around in my brain, but being in West's arms felt right.

He brushed another soft kiss against my temple. “Are you ready to go to bed, or do you want to stay up for a bit longer?”

“Another early day?”

“Yeah. I'm meeting Phil and the crew at seven again.”

“Gross.”

He chuckled. “My thoughts exactly.”

“Do you want me to go with you tomorrow? I can help with the cleanup.”

“You're on break.” He smoothed his hand through my hair. “Relax and do whatever you need to do here.”

“Are you sure? I don't mind helping.”

“I appreciate it, but it's not your responsibility.”

“I feel bad loafing around while you're working.”

“Loaf away guilt-free. This is your vacation. You do know how to take a vacation, right?” He smirked playfully.

“Yes.” I rolled my eyes dramatically. “I know how to take a vacation.”

“Good. Then that's your job this week.”

“You're doling out jobs now?”

“I am.” He grinned.

“And who made you the taskmaster?”

“No one.”

“So why should I listen to you?”

“Because good boys get rewarded.”

My chest squeezed tight at the heated look in his eyes.

“And what happens to bad boys?” I asked hoarsely.

“They get punished.”

“What if I want to be punished?”

His eyes darkened and filled with heat. “Trust me when I say my punishments won’t be something you want. If they were, they wouldn’t be punishments.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“Nope. A promise.”

“And what about your rewards? Will I like them?”

“Yes. And that’s another promise.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

He grinned. “Good.”

I scrambled off him.

He shot me a questioning look.

“I’m fine. Just removing myself from temptation before I jump you again.” I winced and pushed my semi down. “As much as I’d love a repeat, my dick is still mad from all that edging.”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine. A little raw, but it’s no big deal. And I need to wash up.”

He climbed off the chair with more grace than I had and adjusted himself. “Same. Dried cum isn’t exactly comfortable.”

“It isn’t.”

“You can sleep in my room again.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Thanks. Your bed is amazing. Like sleeping on a giant cloud.”

“Let’s get cleaned up and get to bed. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be another long day.”

I nodded and tried to ignore the little pings of happiness bouncing inside me.

It's been three days. He'll get sick of you soon enough.

He snapped off the lamp, then held out his hand, a small smile on his lips.

I took it and fell into step beside him, my heart heavy and my mind spinning.

I didn't think this was some sort of master plan to get in my pants or anything, but what if this was all part of his savior complex and he got tired of me once we had sex?

Maybe it was for the best. We were from different worlds, and the situation with him and Gray was a no-win for anyone. At least this way I'd get experience with someone I trusted and felt comfortable with.

Resolved, I squared my shoulders and followed him up the stairs. I'd enjoy this for however long it lasted. Then I'd go back to my life as a nonvirgin and focus on school and my future.

WEST

A PANG of happiness tinged with longing moved through me as I turned off my truck and looked up at the house. The living room window was aglow with light, as was the ornate stained-glass front door, giving the house a warm and welcoming feel.

Coming home when it was already dark wasn't anything new for me. Neither was leaving while the sun was still rising. Seeing signs of life in my house and knowing someone was waiting for me was.

Being alone was my default, and so was being lonely.

I climbed out of the truck and trudged up to the house, sadness and despair churning in my gut.

Eli was here because he couldn't stay at his place, not because he wanted to be. Hell, he'd hated me until a few days ago, and we could never be more than secret friends because of his brother.

Even that couldn't last. Eventually, this secret would wear him down. The pressure of lying to his brother would be too much, and he'd have no choice but to choose his family over me. He wasn't built to lie to the people he loved, and I hated how being with me meant he had to.

"West?" Eli appeared in the doorway to the living room, a smile on his face and a thick book in his hand.

"Hi." I unlaced my boots and winced as my back twinged.

"Are you okay?" A look of concern replaced the easy smile from a moment ago.

“Yeah. Just tired.”

He pursed his lips. “Are you sure that’s all it is?”

“I’m sure.” I kicked off my boots, managing to keep my face neutral as my back spasmed. “How are you? Did you have a good day?”

He clutched the book to his chest. “I spent the day loafing, so I can’t complain.”

I smiled and pulled off my jacket. “Good boy.”

He rolled his eyes. “Did you eat?”

I shook my head.

“Are you hungry? I made beef stew.”

“Is that what that is?” I sniffed the air. Spices and the tang of cooking meat tickled my nose. “I couldn’t place it, but it smells good.”

He pointed to the stairs. “Go take a shower. Dinner is ready when you are.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sir.” He quirked his eyebrow playfully. “I like that.”

“Don’t get any ideas, Sport.” I ruffled his hair. “I’m not calling you sir.”

He ducked out from under my hand with a laugh. “We’ll see. Now go shower.”

Thirty minutes later, I sat in the kitchen with a big bowl of stew and thick slices of crusty bread in front of me.

“This is amazing. Where did you get the bread?”

“I made it.”

“You made it?”

“My mom and I used to make bread every Sunday morning when I lived at home. It’s so much cheaper and has fewer preservatives and additives than store-bought. Eating healthy is expensive if you don’t cook from scratch.”

I chewed on another big bite of bread, too hungry to keep up a conversation.

Eli sipped a glass of water as I scarfed down my food, then had seconds.

“Hungry?” he commented when I was done.

“Starved. All I had was donuts and coffee today.”

“That’s not enough fuel for a day of physical labor. You didn’t bring lunch with you?”

“I usually pick something up.” I helped him clear the dishes from the table and put them in the dishwasher. “I forgot being on-site means I’m dependent on everyone else’s schedules, so breaks aren’t guaranteed.”

“You didn’t take a break today?”

“No time.” I pulled a container out of the cupboard and put the leftover stew in.

“Do you have any coworkers?” He took one of the containers from me.

“Nope. Just me.”

He frowned and scooped the leftover stew out of the crock pot. “How many properties do you manage?”

“Thirty-five.”

“That’s too much work for one person.”

“Tell my father that. To him, working yourself to the bone builds character and shows initiative.”

“You have enough character.”

“Not according to my dad.”

“Your dad is an asshole.”

I chuckled. “He is.”

“I’ll make you something to bring tomorrow.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t.” He snapped the lid on the container. “I always cook in bulk, so there are tons of leftovers. It’s no trouble to pack some up and put it aside for you to grab in the morning.”

My throat tightened.

No one had ever given a shit if I ate properly or didn’t get my breaks at work. His concern stirred something in me I wasn’t ready to unpack and examine.

“And before you say something about me not having to cook for you too, I like doing it. It would be stupid for you to come home after work and make your own food. It’s easier to cook big meals than it is to cook for one.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

He put the stew in the fridge and closed the door. “No need to thank me for being a decent human and not letting you starve.”

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I unplugged the crock pot and pulled the ceramic insert out.

“Shit.” My back screamed in protest. I winced and slipped it back into the metal base.

“Are you okay?” He rushed over. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“Just sore. A lot of heavy lifting today.”

He pursed his lips. “Do you need some painkillers or a muscle relaxer?”

“I’ll be fine.” I turned back to the crock pot.

“Nope. Get yourself something to drink and go sit down. I’ll finish cleaning up.”

“I don’t mind helping.”

“You’ve done enough today. Go relax. It won’t take long.”

“Is that an order?” I arched my eyebrow.

“It is.” He met my stare with a pointed one of his own.

I was about to protest when his expression melted into a playful one. My dick twitched.

“Good boys get rewarded,” he said, his tone full of teasing and promise.

“A reward, huh?”

“Yup.” He licked his lips.

“I thought I was the one who was doling out rewards?”

“Nope. It’s my turn.”

“So, what do I get if I go relax?”

“I’m really good at massages.”

“Really?” My voice cracked, and my dick chubbed up.

“Uh-huh.” He glanced at the bulge in my sweats, smiling coyly. “So what’s it going to be? Massage or clean up?”

“Not both?”

“Nope.” He popped the *p* and tilted his head. A lock of hair fell in his eyes.

Jesus. Confident and playful Eli was hot as fuck.

“I guess I’m grabbing a beer and going to relax.”

He grinned and patted me on the shoulder. “Good boy. There’s a time restriction on my offer. It expires in thirty seconds.”

“Can’t let that happen.” I crossed the room and pulled a beer out of the fridge.

“Eighteen seconds left,” he warned in a teasing tone.

“I’m gone.” I rushed out of the room, making a big show of hurrying. Eli’s laughter floated after me and warmed me from the inside.

I sat on the couch and sipped my beer, trying to get my dick to calm down. It was nice to sit and relax after today.

A creaking floor alerted me that Eli was done cleaning, and I turned toward the doorway.

“Are you working tonight?” I asked.

“No. I only work weekends.”

I finished my beer and put the bottle on the floor.

He looked at me, an impish grin on his lips. “Ready for your reward?”

“Definitely.”

He held out his hand. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Upstairs.” He motioned for me to follow him.

“Upstairs?”

“I don’t do anything half-assed. You should know that by now. If I’m giving you a massage, then you’re getting the full experience.”

“The full experience?” I trailed after him.

“Happy ending optional.” He winked at me over his shoulder.

I tripped on a step and grabbed the railing so I didn’t go sprawling.

He laughed, the melodic sound echoing in the cavernous foyer.

Stunned, I followed him up the stairs and into my room.

“Get the biggest, fluffiest towel you have and put it on the bed,” he instructed. “Then get naked and lie on your stomach.”

“Naked?” My heart skipped a beat.

“How else am I going to give you a full-body massage?” He arched an eyebrow. “You can put something over your waist if you’re shy.”

“I’m not shy.”

“You have no reason to be.” He looked me up and down, heat filling his eyes. “Get the towel and get your fine ass on the bed.”

“As you wish.”

He chuckled and unzipped his bag. “That’s one of my mom’s favorite movies. I’ve seen it so many times I still have

the entire script memorized.”

“One of my nannies loved it. I watched it every Sunday afternoon for an entire summer.”

“You’re not naked yet.” He shot me a pointed look.

“Better fix that.”

Ignoring the stiffness in my back, I hurried to get a towel and nearly swallowed my tongue as I came out of the bathroom. Eli stood next to my bed in nothing but a pair of thin boxers, a small brown bottle in his hand.

He glanced at the bulge in my sweats and smirked.

“You get comfy, and I’ll make a fire so we don’t freeze our nuts off.” He put the bottle on the bed.

Trying not to stare at his tight muscles and miles of smooth skin, I stripped off my clothes and spread the towel out. I lay on it and put my folded hands under my chin as he lit a fire with quick, efficient movements.

“Ready?” he asked when he was done.

“Ready.”

Moving slowly, deliberately, he came to stand next to the bed, his gaze roving over my body. My eyes were glued to his cock, which thickened and tented the front of his boxers.

“Your body is incredible,” he said.

“So is yours.”

He climbed onto the bed and knee-walked over to me. “Where does it hurt most?”

“Up near my shoulders.”

He straddled my lower back. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah.” My voice cracked, and my dick throbbed as he settled his weight on me.

“This might be cold.” He stroked slick hands over my skin.

“Holy shit,” I moaned. “What is that?”

“Sweet almond oil.” He rubbed his hands over my shoulders. “It’s a great moisturizer in the winter. Now hush and relax while I make you feel good.”

Eli’s strong, efficient hands were pure magic as he rubbed, squeezed, and kneaded my muscles. Every stroke sent a pulse of both relaxation and arousal through me.

No one had ever touched me like this. I’d gotten a few halfhearted massages from my ex-boyfriend, but those had been a hint he wanted sex, so the actual massage had been cursory at best.

Most of my partners had been happy to lie back and let me take control, and none had been especially nurturing when it came to activities outside the bedroom. That had worked for me, but this... this was everything I’d always wanted but never knew I could have.

Eli cared, even if it was only as a friend. He made me feel seen, like I was living and not just existing. I’d spent all day at work thinking about him. Wondering if he was relaxing, if he was having a good day, even what he was doing at any given moment.

But it couldn’t last. He’d go home in a few days, and I’d go back to being alone.

“Relax,” he whispered, rubbing the back of my neck and soothing the tightness with his incredible hands. “Let me make you feel good.”

Breathing out, I did as he said, sinking into the sensations and banishing all thoughts of the future or past out of my head.

Moans and sighs and low groans fell from my lips in a continuous chorus of pleasure. He worked my back and shoulders like he was in my head and knew exactly how and where I needed his skilled touch.

Every time he moved or leaned over me, his hard dick pressed into me, turning me into a puddle of need and bliss. When he was done with my back, he focused on my arms, rubbing and working every inch of them. He settled on my calves and ran his oil-slick hands over the backs of my thighs.

“Eli.” I sighed.

“Does it feel good?” he asked softly, working the tight muscles under my ass.

“Too good,” I choked out. I was so hard it hurt.

He chuckled and slid his hands lower. “You’re so hot like this. All spread out and helpless under me.”

“I’m only helpless because you’ve turned me into a puddle,” I mumbled. “Where did you learn how to give massages like this?”

“I read a few books. Seems I’m a quick study.”

I wasn’t sure what to do with the little pulse of happiness shooting through me at the knowledge that I was the first person he’d touched like this.

He slid his hands between my thighs and brushed my balls, then dragged his finger over my taint. A bolt of electric pleasure detonated deep in my body.

A moan tore from my chest. “Holy fuck.”

“Oopsie.” He pulled his hands from between my legs. “Gotta finish your massage before the fun stuff.”

“Tease,” I grumbled.

“Yup.” He climbed off me, kneeled next to me, and rubbed every inch of my legs.

When he finally pulled his hands off me, I was a barely conscious mess, my dick the only part of me that wasn’t liquid.

“You’re so gorgeous.”

I turned my head and found him staring at me hungrily, one hand clutching his erection through his boxers.

“And what are you going to do with me now that I’m all helpless?”

He met my gaze, his eyes flashing with lust and desire. “What am I allowed to do?”

“Anything you want.”

“Anything?” he asked, his voice dripping with vulnerability and a little fear.

“Anything,” I said softly. “Trust yourself and let go.”

He bit his lip.

“I’m yours to explore. I want whatever you’re ready to give me.”

“I want...” He got up on his knees and pushed his boxers down, then off.

He wasn’t big, but his cock was perfect. His girth was average, but he made up for it by being a little longer than I would have expected. His skin was flushed dark, and precum gathered on his tip. My mouth watered. He would feel so good pushing down my throat.

After a moment’s hesitation, he straddled my thighs and gripped my ass cheeks in his hands.

“Oh, fuck,” I moaned.

“Does this feel good?” He squeezed the globes and rubbed them, massaging them like he had the rest of me.

“So good.”

He worked me over, then gentled his touch until it was less clinical and more exploratory. He traced his fingertips over my skin, mapping out the curves of my ass and hips.

“Is this okay?” He slipped a finger between my cheeks and dragged it over my hole.

“Fuck!” I clenched around nothing, my body screaming for stimulation and the desire to have something inside me. “Yeah. I like it.”

“I want to...” He split me open with his hands, exposing my hole to the cool air.

“Do it. Whatever you want,” I panted, digging my face into the towel as I clenched involuntarily.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” His voice was tinged with wonder and laced with lust.

“Please.” I rocked my hips, desperate for some friction. “I need something. *Anything.*”

He made a strangled sound. Then his length was between my cheeks, and he was fucking my crack.

“Holy shit,” he panted, his pace fast and his thrusts hard.

His dick dragged over my hole, and bolts of need and pleasure shot through me with every catch of his cockhead on my rim. My cock leaked and throbbed beneath me.

“Yeah, that’s it. Get yourself off.” I squeezed my legs and ass cheeks together to not only force myself to stay still but also to create a tighter passage for him. I wanted to feel him come, to know he’d gotten off by using my body. “Pull me tight around you and pretend you’re fucking me.”

A loud cry echoed in the room, and his rhythm stuttered.

“You want to fuck me?” I glanced over my shoulder.

He was breathtaking. His lithe, strong body over mine, his intense look as he stared at where our bodies were joined. Everything about him turned me on.

He looked up, and our eyes met. “You’d let me?”

“Yeah. If you want it, my ass is yours.”

“I... holy fuck.” He gripped my cheeks and squeezed them around his cock. “West.”

“That’s it, sweetheart. Fuck me hard. I want to feel you come all over my hole.”

He gasped and shuddered over me, closing his eyes and throwing his head back in ecstasy. Wetness pooled in my crack as he came hard and used his release to slick the way as he fucked me through his orgasm.

I was barely holding on to my arousal when he finally stilled over me.

“Holy shit,” he muttered and pulled his dick out of my crack. “Get on your back.” He lifted himself off me.

I did, and the sight of him kneeling over me, his dick spent, his cheeks flushed pink, and that glassy, satisfied look he always got in his eyes when he came was too much.

I grasped my cock. I needed to come.

“No.” He batted my hand away. “I want to suck you.”

“What?” I gaped at him.

“I want to blow you.” He shoved one knee between my legs. “Wanna make you come.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to.” Using his other knee, he pushed my legs apart enough he could settle between them.

“You can just jerk me.” I gripped the towel in my hands. Bossy Eli was hot as fuck.

“Don’t want to jerk you.” He held the base of my cock and squeezed. “You said I could do anything I wanted. I want to blow you.”

I closed my eyes and nodded.

“Look at me.”

I did. No way in hell could I deny him anything. Not then, not ever.

“Do you not want me to?” he asked softly.

“It’s not that.”

“What?”

“I’m not used to being on the receiving end,” I said truthfully.

He frowned. “You don’t like it?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it. I just feel weird when I’m the focus. It’s easier to get myself off while I do my partner.”

He folded his lips inward, determination and maybe a little anger flashing in his eyes. “I’ll stop if you don’t want it. But I want to do this for you. I’ve fantasized about it.”

“About sucking dick?”

“About sucking *your* dick.” He stroked his hand up my length, swiped his thumb over my tip, and spread my precum. “I came home from my run today, and I was so horny. All I could think about while I jerked off in the shower was how much I wanted to taste you. How good you’d feel in my mouth.” He bent down and dropped a quick kiss on my tip.

A zing of white-hot fire shot through me. “Fuck!” I jerked.

He licked his lips and moaned softly. “You do taste good.”

“Sweetheart...”

“Can I suck you?” he asked, his voice whisper soft.

“Yeah.”

“I’m probably going to be bad at it.” He grimaced. “Sorry.”

“None of that.” I pushed up so I was sitting and pulled him up with me. “Everything you do to me feels incredible, and this will be no different.”

“But if you have trouble coming this way.” He bit his lip. “I might not be able to get you there.”

“You will.” I pressed my lips to his. Damn, we hadn’t kissed yet.

He sighed and parted his lips for me, meeting me kiss for kiss. When we finally pulled apart, he was smiling.

“Lie back down.”

I did. He gripped my base, then leaned down and swiped his tongue over my tip.

My sigh of pleasure seemed to embolden him. He licked around my head a few times, then gave it a sucking kiss.

“That’s it, sweetheart. Take your time and enjoy this.” I carded my fingers through his soft hair.

He moaned and pressed soft kisses up and down my shaft, then switched to licking every inch of my dick and balls.

“Fuck,” I muttered, fisting the towel in my hands so I didn’t grab his head and shove him down on my cock.

He lifted my balls with his fingers and jabbed his tongue against my taint.

“Fuck!” I nearly rocketed off the bed, my entire body jerking like he’d electrocuted me.

“So hot,” he whispered.

He drew my cockhead into his mouth and closed his lips around my shaft. His movements were sloppy and off-rhythm, and his suction was too soft, but knowing I was his first made every bob of his head and pull of his mouth incredible.

Pleasure and need pooled in my body, tightening my muscles and making my head fuzzy.

I had good control, but edging had never been my thing, and I was skirting close to the line.

“Fuck, that’s it,” I panted. “So good, sweetheart.”

He made a pleased sound and moved lower. As he moved back up, his teeth scraped over my shaft, pinching the sensitive skin hard enough that a stab of pain broke through the haze of pleasure.

I jerked away, and a soft cry tore from my lips before I could stop it.

“I’m so sorry.” He sat up, his eyes wide with panic, and tried to scramble off me.

“Wait.” I snagged his arm. “Stop.”

He froze.

“Look at me.”

He slid his gaze to mine, his eyes glassy with tears.

“Don’t feel bad, sweetheart.” I sat up and cupped his cheeks in my hands. “It happens.”

“I hurt you.”

“You surprised me more than anything. It hurt,” I admitted when he gave me a look. “But only for a few seconds. I’m fine. I promise.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” I pulled him close for another soul-searing kiss.

He melted against me.

“Do you want to keep going?” I asked against his lips.

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes.”

He pressed a quick kiss to my mouth. “I want to.”

I lay back. He tentatively gripped me and leaned down.

It took him a moment to find his confidence again, but soon he was bobbing over me, his suction a shade too light to get me there.

“That’s it.” I slid my fingers through his hair. “You don’t have to go deep. Just like that is perfect.”

He moaned and sucked a bit harder.

“So good. You feel so good.” I groaned and fought to keep my hips still as he stroked his hand in time with his mouth. “You’re going to make me come so hard.”

He sped up.

“You want that?” I let go of his hair before I could pull on it or yank him down. “You want me to come?”

He moaned, the vibrations moving up my shaft. A bolt of pleasure shot through me.

“A little harder. Fuck, yeah. That’s it, sweetheart. Now twist your hand a bit. Fuck. Holy fuck.” My thighs quaked with the effort of holding still.

Every nerve ending in my body was on fire as pleasure coursed through me. I didn’t want it to end, but I was powerless to stop my impending release, which sliced closer and closer.

“Fuck!”

As my orgasm slammed into me, I pulled him off my cock. He made a noise of protest. A rope of cum landed on his cheek, and he bent back down. His hot mouth closed around

my cockhead, and my cry echoed in the room as he drank me down.

“Holy shit,” I panted when the pleasure finally passed and my brain was working again.

“Why did you pull me off?” He leaned over me, his hands on either side of my shoulders.

“Huh?” I blinked up at him.

“You didn’t want me to finish you?”

“I didn’t think you’d want to.”

“I did. Next time I want it all. Got it?”

“Next time?”

He grinned. “Oh yeah. We’re so doing that again.”

I let out a huff of laughter. “No arguments here.”

He kissed me, and something wet dragged over my thigh. He was hard again.

“On your back. It’s my turn,” I said when he pulled away.

“Are you sure?”

“Fuck yeah. Remember how you said you’ve thought about sucking me? I’ve been dreaming about sucking you too.”

Smiling shyly, he gripped his length and gave it a slow, lazy stroke. “You want it?”

I grabbed his hips, flipped him off me and onto his back, and knelt over him, caging him in with my arms.

“Holy shit. Why was that so hot?” He blinked up at me.

“Spread your legs so I can get between them.”

He did, and the sight of him under me, his eyes full of trust and anticipation, was just as hot as his dick, which stood straight up, flushed and ready.

“You can pull my hair, fuck my mouth. Whatever you want. I’ve got good control over my gag reflex, so you won’t hurt me.”

“I might not last long enough to do anything but lie here.”
He laughed softly.

“That’s fine too. Do whatever feels natural. Ready?”

He nodded.

Not wanting to go too fast, I held his base and kissed his tip. He gasped and bucked up into my touch. Going slow, I sucked on his cockhead, coaxing more of those soft gasps and little thrusts out of him, and teased him with the tip of my tongue.

“West,” he whispered.

I loved sucking cock, but going down on Eli was next level. Something about the stretch of my lips around his girth, the weight of his shaft against my tongue, the taste of his precum just did it for me. And I wasn’t ashamed to admit I enjoyed the feeling of power it gave me.

Doing this for Eli, being his first, was everything.

“West, please. Need more,” he begged softly as I tongued the little notch under his head. “Want you to make me come.”

Taking that as my cue he was ready for more, I sucked him as deep as I could and swallowed around his head.

As much fun as it would be to tease his orgasm out of him, I didn’t want to draw it out too long. He spent so much of his time edging himself when he was working, and I didn’t want to do that to him now. I wanted to overwhelm him with pleasure so he could let go and shut his big brain down for a few minutes.

“*Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.*” He gripped my hair with both hands and thrust up into my mouth. I held still and let him, swallowing and using my tongue to tease him.

“So close,” he bit out.

I shoved his hips down and held him in place. I wanted to be the one to make him come.

I went to town on him, moving hard and fast as I sucked him like my life depended on it. He yanked on my hair, my

name falling from his lips over and over like a prayer.

“Fuck. West. I’m coming!”

I let go of his hips, and he thrust down my throat as his dick pulsed and his release filled my mouth. I swallowed it all. He continued to fuck my mouth, his cries of pleasure filling the room.

When he was finally still, I pulled off his softening cock.

He grabbed me around the waist and yanked me on top of him, his kisses hard and needy. Taking care not to crush him with my bulk, I kissed him back, letting him set the pace and take whatever he needed from me.

Soft hands ran over my back. He slowed our kisses and languidly sucked on my tongue. When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathing heavily and slicked with sweat.

“Holy crap, you’ve got skills. I had no idea it could feel so good.”

“You liked it?” I rolled us over so he was tucked up against my side.

“Liked is an understatement.” He laughed and snuggled into me. “That was... I have no words. That *never* happens. I think you broke my brain.”

Laughing, I pulled him closer and kissed the top of his head.

“How’s your back?” He propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at me.

“It’s fine.” I tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. “All cured.”

He dropped a kiss against my lips. “Do you have another day of physical labor tomorrow?”

“Shouldn’t be too bad.”

“That’s good. You need to take another shower. You’re covered in oil.”

I pulled him back down and held him close. “I will. But cuddles first.”

“You’re a cuddler?”

“I am. Are you?”

“I think so.” He threw one leg over my hips and snuggled as close as possible. “I’ll need a bigger data set before I can come to any conclusions.”

“Feel free to cuddle me anytime you want. I like holding you.”

I didn’t tell him I was only a cuddler for him. Not because I wanted to keep it a secret but because I wasn’t sure what it meant. I liked a little contact after sex while I was coming down, but I’d never been one to lie in bed and snuggle like I was craving now.

“I like it too,” he whispered and kissed my chest, right over my heart.

This was dangerous. It was stupid to get used to having him like this. Even knowing that, I found it hard to care and focused on how good he felt in my arms and how perfect the moment was.

ELI

MOM: are you sure you're okay?

Eli: I'm fine

Mom: this friend you're staying with...

I rolled my eyes. My mother was about as subtle as an anvil.

Eli: just a friend

Mom: are you sure? You know you can tell me if he's more

Eli: I know. But he's just a friend

I'd told my parents I was bi when I was eighteen, and they'd seamlessly accepted it. The only downside to being out in my family was that my mother saw every person in my life as a potential partner.

Eli: are you coming back tonight?

Mom: we are. Should be home around 7

The click of the front door opening startled me, and I looked up from my phone.

"West?" I called.

"It's me," he called back.

Eli: drive safe

Mom: we will. Come see us soon?

Eli: will do. Love you

Mom: Love you too

“Shit, sorry.”

West stood in the door, looking sheepish. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nope.” I tucked my phone into my hoodie pocket. “You’re home early. Is something wrong?”

He leaned against the doorjamb, a soft smile on his perfect lips.

Flutters of happiness and something I couldn’t identify moved through my chest.

“The floors are in worse shape than we thought.” He raked a hand through his hair. “We had to pause the work to dry them out more.”

“That’s not good. But it’s good you get a break. You’ve been working nonstop.”

“Yeah. That part is nice. Are your parents home?”

“Funny you should ask.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket and wiggled it at him. “I was just texting Mom. She said they’ll be home tonight. Why?”

“The power should be coming back on in the east side within the hour. I thought we could go over and clean out their fridge for them. Give them a break when they get home.”

“How do you know the power is coming on?” I frowned. “I checked the outage map ten minutes ago, and it was still saying tomorrow.”

“I have a contact,” he said evasively.

“Of course you do,” I said, affection creeping into my tone.

He unzipped his work jacket. “Let me grab a shower, and we’ll head over.”

I nodded, not trusting my voice. He smiled and pushed off from the door. It meant a lot he’d thought of my family and wanted to help them.

Forty minutes later, West had parked his work truck in the back lot of my parents' building, and we were on our way to their apartment with our hands full of cleaning supplies.

A heavy feeling settled in my chest as I led West over to the stairwell and up to the third floor. I wasn't ashamed of my family or where we lived, but I couldn't help shooting little glances at him. This was the guy who'd grown up in a mansion. He had to be judging, right?

"This it?" he asked as we stopped in front of their door.

"Yup." I unlocked it and pushed it open.

He followed me inside. The apartment was clean but messy. Toys and random objects were piled in corners and crammed on most surfaces. They'd left the blinds open, and enough light filtered in that we could make our way to the small galley kitchen without needing to use the lanterns we'd brought.

"Don't mind the mess." My cheeks flamed hot.

"This isn't messy. It's lived in." He put the tub of supplies on the floor and dug around in it. "Here." He handed me an N95 respirator, a pair of latex gloves, and safety goggles. "Put this on too." He pulled a long-sleeved shirt out of the tub.

I was doing up the last button on the shirt when a soft click echoed in the room. The hum of the fridge coming back online was a welcome sound.

"Oh good." West finished buttoning up his overshirt. "That will make things easier." He dug an electric kettle out of the bin.

"Did that come from the same place as Mary Poppins' purse?" I flipped on the overhead light. "What else do you have in there?"

He chuckled and handed me the kettle. "I took notes when the crew was cleaning out your fridge."

"What do you mean?"

"The cleaning crew I had come in. I got them to do the fridge when they were finished with the laundry area."

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“It was no trouble.” He motioned to the sink. “They weren’t able to salvage all the containers, but I put in an order to replace the ones they had to throw out.”

“That was really nice of you.” I went to the sink and filled the kettle.

“Least I could do after all this crap.”

I plugged the kettle in and set it to boil as West pulled the fridge from the wall and unplugged it.

We donned the rest of our PPE. Then West handed me a garbage bag, and we carefully opened the fridge.

It wasn’t as bad as it could have been. Most of the fresh food had been emptied before they’d left.

West went through the condiments and tossed everything that had spoiled, while I made a cleaning solution with the hot water from the kettle.

Working in companionable silence, we scrubbed down every nook and cranny of the fridge, then put everything we’d been able to salvage back.

The freezer was a different story, and I couldn’t help keeping a mental tally as we emptied it. So much waste, and the cost to replace everything was way outside what my parents could afford.

When all the spoiled food was in the trash bags, we scrubbed it clean and double-checked to make sure we hadn’t missed any spots.

“It’s not too bad.” West peeled off his gloves and threw them into the trash. “I have some charcoal we can put inside while we go shopping.”

“Shopping?” I tossed my gloves into the trash and pulled off my mask.

“So they have food when they come home. We can’t do a full restock because the fridge needs to air out, but I have an electric cooler at home we can fill so they’ll at least have

enough for a few days. I should have thought of this sooner, but things with the house have been so crazy it slipped my mind.”

My chest squeezed, and my throat burned. He was so thoughtful, so kind. How had I ever thought he was an asshole?

“Eli?” he asked.

Unable to answer, I launched myself into his arms and clung to him. He held me tight as I buried my face in his neck and breathed him in.

“You okay, sweetheart?” he asked softly.

“Yeah. Just needed to hug you.”

He kissed my temple and held me tighter, giving me space to process the maelstrom of thoughts rushing through my head.

Why did he have to be so perfect? Why was he the only person I was truly comfortable with? Who not only saw me but accepted me exactly how I was?

Needing to show him how much this meant to me, how much *he* meant to me, I tilted my face up for a kiss.

He brushed his mouth over mine, the contact fleeting and gentle. I stood still and soaked in every moment, every sensation, as he sipped at my lips.

“We should get to the store,” he said, his voice husky and his lips tickling mine.

“We should.” I pressed one more kiss to his lips.

Groaning, he stepped back. “A kitchen next to a bag of spoiled food and cleaning supplies isn’t a place I would have thought I could get a boner, but here we are.” He waved at the bulge in his jeans.

I laughed, the last of my bad mood dissipating, and waved at my semi. “Hard same.”

“It certainly is hard.” He grinned lasciviously.

“Behave before I jump you in my mother’s kitchen.” I scolded.

“I’ll get this double-bagged. Can you get the other stuff packed up?”

Working quickly, we packed everything up and headed out of the apartment.

We made a stop at the house to grab the cooler and change into clean clothes, then drove to a market nearby.

Shopping with West was fun. We made our way through the aisles, laughing and joking. He’d asked me what kinds of things my brother and sisters liked and were allowed to have, and he kept adding treats to the shopping cart for them.

At one point, he put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close to kiss my cheek. He didn’t even look around to see who could be nearby. He just did it.

The rush from being claimed in public and having someone so unashamed to be with me wasn’t something I was used to.

Usually, when I was around other people, I spent the whole time in my head second-guessing everything I said or did. The constant loop of self-criticism and doubt was exhausting, and it meant I never truly relaxed or was myself.

But West was different. I never felt the need to hide from him. He didn’t get angry at me for being weird. Never told me to shut up when I compulsively shared the random knowledge I’d acquired over the years. He encouraged me to play and have fun, and bantered with me when I was in a silly mood.

He let me be... me.

Friends did all that, right? Friends cared about each other and shared things and had fun.

So why did it feel like more with West? Was it because we were fooling around? Biologically, shared orgasms created a sense of bonding with your partner. Was that what this was?

Thankfully, my ability to mentally multitask meant I was able to hide my inner turmoil and enjoy our shopping trip.

West didn't need to be dragged into my issues.

"Hungry?" He asked when we'd set up the cooler and stocked my parents' small kitchen with food. It was just after six.

"Yeah. We could have stew again. Or are you sick of that after having it for lunch?"

"Do you want to eat out tonight?"

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Heating leftovers is easier."

"Maybe. But I think we deserve a treat after the week we've had."

"Yeah. Okay." I tamped down my flare of happiness.

Hanging out in his house in secret was one thing, but going out together was something. Or was it? It was just dinner. It didn't have to mean anything. It wasn't like it was a date.

"I just have to take my insulin."

He nodded and leaned against the wall.

I ducked into the bathroom, checked my sugar, and gave myself my shot. All the while telling myself that we were just two friends going to get some food, nothing more.

As he drove to a restaurant, West kept up a steady stream of chatter, and I was finally over my weirdness as he pulled into the lot of a colorfully painted building on the outskirts of the west side.

The place reminded me of one of the more artsy coffee shops near school, only more sophisticated. The prices on the menu board certainly reflected where the café was, and I nearly choked as I scanned our options.

"See anything you like?" he asked as we stood in front of the counter.

"What do you usually get?"

“Their soup and sandwich combos are good if you want something lighter. The protein bowls are my usual go-to when I’m hungry.”

I checked the section of protein bowls. “Is that what you’re getting?”

“Yeah. Do you need a few more minutes?”

“No. I’m good.”

We stepped up to the till, and the older woman behind the counter came to us, a big smile on her face. “Well, hello, stranger. We’ve missed you this week,” she said to West.

He grinned ruefully and pulled his wallet out of his pocket. “I’ve missed you guys too. It’s been a crazy few days.”

“What can I get for you tonight?” she flicked her gaze at me. Her eyes softened.

That was... strange. Two guys getting dinner together didn’t necessarily mean a date. Did she think we were on a date?

“I’ll get the southwest steak bowl and a water.” He lightly elbowed me in the side.

“The Mediterranean chicken bowl and a water, please.”

She rang up our orders, and West waved off my offer to split the bill. Did friends buy dinner for their friends?

My fingers itched to text Gray and ask. He was used to my random questions when I was confused about social etiquette. But I couldn’t ask without him wanting to know who I was having dinner with. I couldn’t lie to him, so I was on my own. Or was I?

West slipped his arm around my waist, leaned in, and spoke in my ear.

“How about you grab a table, and I’ll bring the food when it’s ready?”

His hot breath ghosted over my skin. I shivered. My ears were a major erogenous zone, something I hadn’t realized until West started playing with them.

“Yeah. Okay,” I said shakily.

He deliberately brushed his nose against my ear.

“Tease,” I muttered so the nice lady behind the counter didn’t hear.

“Maybe.” He squeezed my butt in a way that was both totally casual and completely sensual. “Go put your fine ass in a chair before I grope you some more.”

My jaw dropped at the mental image, and West laughed. “You’re so much fun to tease.”

“Not my fault you’re easily amused,” I grouched.

He winked, and my stomach fluttered and flip-flopped.

Not wanting to embarrass myself any further, I spun away from him and hurried over to a table in the back corner of the café. When I was settled, I checked on West. He was chatting animatedly with the woman behind the counter. Good.

I pulled out my phone and brought up my text thread with Kai.

Eli: what does it mean when the person you’re fooling around with buys you dinner?

The message was read before I could put my phone away. The dots appeared, then disappeared.

Eli: are you too busy to talk?

Kai: no, but I have so many questions

Eli: I have a friend with benefits, and he brought me to a café and is buying me dinner. What does that mean?

Kai: it depends

Eli: not helpful

Kai: I know. I wish I could tell you exactly what’s going on, but I can’t without being in his head

Eli: do friends do this kind of thing?

Kai: some do

Eli: have you?

Kai: no

Kai: hi, this is Alex. I stole Kai's phone

My chest clenched, but I forced out a breath to stop myself from panicking. Alex was a great guy, and he'd been nothing but welcoming and friendly toward me. We'd spent hours chatting about books, and he and Kai constantly extended invitations to hang out. I didn't take them up on them often, but Alex was a good person, and he cared about me.

Kai: so your fwb took you out to dinner?

Eli: this is still Alex, right?

Kai: yeah. Kai can have his phone back after we figure this out

I glanced at the counter. West was still immersed in his conversation.

Eli: yeah. He said we deserved a treat after the week we've had and brought me to a café he likes. He paid for dinner. And he grabbed my ass

Kai: the dinner part could be a friends thing. But the ass-grabbing thing makes it tricky

Eli: tricky?

Kai: yeah. Some people are flirty, and it doesn't mean anything but others aren't

Kai: you should text Beck. He's the dating expert

Eli: I don't want to bother him

Kai: you won't. He likes solving things for people. He's a fixer

Kai: kai again

Kai: This guy, is he good to you? Does he know he'll have to deal with me and your brother if he hurts you?

Kai: alex here. I also need this info in case he's a dick and I need to rally the guys

Kai: it's kai again. Does Gray know about this?

Eli: no, and he can't find out

Eli: it's complicated

Kai: do you trust this guy?

Eli: yes

Kai: promise me you'll tell me if he hurts you

Kai: alex here. And us too. Your big bros got your back

My eyes burned as I reread their messages. My roommates had made a joke a few months ago about how they were all unofficially my big brothers, but it still hit hard that they cared enough to *want* to protect me.

Eli: I promise

Kai: text beck

Kai: he'll have a better idea

Eli: I will

I waited to see if either one would respond, and I was about to put my phone away when a voice message appeared in the thread. That was strange.

I tapped it and pressed the phone to my ear.

“What happens to bad boys when they take my phone without permission?” Kai's voice came over the line, his tone low and growly.

“And what are you going to do about it, old man?” Alex taunted.

The sounds of footsteps and low growls filled the line. A door slammed, a series of thuds, rustling material, and creaking bed springs. A low moan, another deep growl. Scuffling, grunts and groans, and huffs of air.

“Oh fuck,” Alex said, his voice pleasure-drunk but still holding a note of challenge. “That all you got, gramps?”

The message cut out, and a tray landed on the table in front of me.

“You look like you got caught watching porn.” West slid into the seat across from me.

“I kinda did.” I cleared my throat and shut down my phone. “Only I wasn’t watching it.”

“I’m going to need some context.” West set our bowls in front of us.

“I was texting with Kai and Alex, and they accidentally made and sent me a voice message of them getting their sexy on.”

“What was on it?” He unrolled his cutlery from a cloth napkin.

“Pretty sure I heard Kai chase Alex through his apartment and throw him on the bed so they could fight it out. And the start of one of Kai’s marathon edging sessions.”

West’s hand stilled on the cap of his water bottle. “I’m sorry, what?”

“They’re kinky as fuck.” I smirked and freed my cutlery. “And loud. You can hear everything they do through the walls. None of my roommates are shy. Beck’s room is under mine, and he and Finn are always going at it in there. They haven’t closed the vent that connects our rooms, even though I told them about it and they know I can hear them. They’re exhibitionists, though. So it makes sense.”

“Exhibitionists?”

“Oh, yeah. They hook up all over campus. They have this spot in the library they like. I’ve heard them talking about it.”

“Do you like listening to them?” he asked carefully.

“Sometimes. It’s not so much them I enjoy, more the live sex show. Listening to people who love each other making love is hot, and it doesn’t hurt that they both have filthy mouths.”

West cleared his throat and stabbed his fork into his food.

“Matt and Jax are so oblivious it’s funny. I’ve seen them on the couch a few times, in Matt’s room when they’ve left the

door open, and the bathroom is one of their favorites. They think the water covers up their sex sounds, but spoiler alert, it doesn't. And the kitchen once. That was quite the surprise, walking in there to get a drink and seeing Jax with his face in Matt's ass while he was bent over the counter."

West slowly chewed a bite of food, his eyes wide.

"And Alex and Kai have no shame. Half the time it sounds like they're trying to slam each other through the walls. A few weeks ago, Alex asked me to grab his hoodie from his room one night after Kai left. The pile of straps and the giant dildo on the bed explained all the noise I'd heard earlier."

"This conversation is both incredibly arousing and a little concerning."

"Concerning how?" I asked.

"Because I have to look your roommates in the face and try not to picture them doing all those things if there's ever another issue at the house."

I snickered. "Sorry, not sorry."

He shifted in his chair.

"This place is nice." I moved the conversation away from sex. If this was only a friends thing, then maybe flirting with him wasn't the best idea.

"It's my favorite place in town. The food is incredible, and I like that they have no idea who I am."

"They don't?"

"Marilyn, that's who you met, and her wife, Tabitha, aren't local. They inherited Tabby's great-aunt's house about six months ago and moved here on a whim to open the café. It's nice to talk to people who treat me like any other regular and know nothing about my past."

"You don't want people to recognize you?"

He sighed and stabbed at his food. "It's easier if they don't. People either see me as my father's son or as the kid who

fucked up and left town. I'd rather be anonymous than have to deal with the gossip and questions."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. West seemed more subdued than usual, and I felt bad for killing the fun vibe we'd had going on. But his mood didn't last long, and soon we were joking and laughing as we finished our food.

"That was fun," I said when we were in his truck and on the way back to the house. "I've never been to a restaurant like that before."

"You've never been to a café?" He flicked a curious look at me, then returned his eyes to the road.

"No." I flushed hot and toyed with the strap of my seat belt. "It's different from the coffee shops around campus," I finished lamely.

I meant I'd never been to a restaurant with anyone who wasn't family before.

"There's this molecular gastronomy place I like in Seattle. They have a taster's package you can order ahead of time, and they'll develop a fully custom menu for you based on your food preferences and restrictions. They assign you a private server who preps the food in front of you and breaks down the science while you eat. It's an incredible experience for someone with only a basic understanding of chemistry. I imagine it would be even better for a scientist."

"That sounds fun."

He patted my knee. "I'll take you there sometime."

My stomach flip-flopped. Taking me to the city to go to a specific restaurant didn't sound like a friends thing. But maybe it was?

West pulled the truck into the driveway of his house. When had we gotten here? I must have zoned out for a few minutes.

Zzzzz. Zzzzz. Zzzzz.

West pulled his phone out of his pocket and groaned. "Sorry. I have to get this. Hello?"

I sat quietly as he talked to whoever was on the other end of the line about construction stuff.

“I haven’t had a chance to check my email.” West rolled his eyes and motioned for me to get out of the truck.

His answer was muffled as I closed the door.

He came around the side of the truck and put his hand on the small of my back. “I understand. I’ll get this sorted out for you tonight.”

Feeling more than a little off-balance, I let West lead me up the steps to the house. He handed me the keys, and I unlocked the door while he finished his call. He closed the door behind us.

“You need to work now?” I slipped the keys into his pocket.

“Looks like.” He rolled his neck and let out a weary sigh. “Apparently, I have a half dozen emails sitting in my inbox that need to be addressed immediately.”

“That sucks.” I tried to hide my disappointment. I’d hoped we could hang out now that we were home, but he probably wanted some time alone after spending half the day with me.

“Big-time.” He kicked off his shoes. “Shouldn’t take too long. I give you permission to drag me out of my office if I’m not done in thirty minutes.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. It would be nice to spend the evening hanging out and not working. God knows I do enough of that already.”

“Okay. I’ll come get you in half an hour if you’re not already done.”

He kissed my cheek and lightly patted my shoulder. “Thanks.” He headed up the stairs, his feet dragging and his shoulders stooped.

My mouth went dry. He wanted to hang out when he was done. Was that code for he wanted to mess around? Did I want to mess around?

Memories of last night came flooding back to me. I glanced down at my dick, which was in the process of chubbing up. Gussed that answered that.

Tamping down the nerves and excitement rushing through me in equal measure, I checked the time on my phone. I'd get my answers in thirty minutes.

WEST

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK.

I looked up from my laptop screen. Eli stood in the doorway, a smile on his lips and wearing one of my sweaters. The worn hoodie hung off him, but something about seeing him in my clothes was so damn sexy my cock perked up.

“Time?” I asked.

He nodded.

I pushed my chair back and waved him over. He darted across the room and sat on my lap. I wrapped one arm around his waist, pressing my nose into his neck. He leaned back against me. He smelled like an intoxicating mix of my laundry soap and body wash. Possessive desire rolled through me, and I hugged him tighter.

He let out a happy sigh and absently rubbed my arm where it circled his waist. “Did you forget your passcode?”

“Huh?”

He waved at my laptop with his other hand. “You’re on a login screen.”

“How do you know I didn’t open it right before you showed up?”

“Because you have a pad of paper with what looks like passcode attempts next to it.”

“I didn’t forget my login. I’m trying to... access some files that happen to be behind a passcode.”

He snickered. "I see."

"Those files could answer a lot of questions about... stuff."

"Stuff, huh?" He turned, a huge grin on his face. "Sounds important."

"Super important. How many possibilities are there in a six-digit code? Hypothetically speaking, of course."

"A million."

I rubbed my hand over his stomach. "How long would it take to manually enter one million combinations?"

"Twelve days of continuous attempts if you could maintain a pace of one code per second. But there are tools that could do it in less time."

"Oh yeah?"

His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Yeah. Like a lot less time."

"But those tools are illegal."

"Totally illegal."

"Too bad I don't know any hackers. I bet they'd have the tools handy."

"They probably would." He glanced around my office. "But hacking is wrong."

"Very wrong. And bad."

"So bad." He shifted his head so his lips were next to my ear. "I'll be right back."

He scrambled off my lap and darted out of the room. Smiling, I leaned back in my chair.

A moment later, he reappeared in the doorway, his cheeks flushed pink and his eyes bright.

"That was fast."

Grinning, he straddled my lap. He leaned close and put his lips next to my ear.

“I know we’re only playing around, but it’s fun to pretend like this is a covert mission and we’re being watched.”

“Yeah?” I wrapped my arms around him.

“Yeah.” He pressed closer. “Like the room is bugged and we have to find a way to get the code cracked without whoever is watching figuring it out.”

“I like that idea.” I nuzzled his neck.

“Really?” He pulled away and looked into my eyes. “You don’t think it’s silly or childish to play pretend?”

“Not at all.”

He chewed his bottom lip.

I’d noticed how Eli always held a piece of himself back when he was having fun. Almost as though he was waiting to be scolded or told to stop enjoying himself. How many people in his life had encouraged him to play when he’d been a kid?

“We don’t have to. But it sounds fun. I want to if you do.”

He stopped chewing his lip and grinned. “I want to.”

I leaned in and trailed my lips over his earlobe. “So, how can we distract our watchers?”

“I may have some ideas.”

“Like what?”

He draped his arms over my shoulders and leaned in. He brushed his soft lips over mine, then nipped at my chin.

“What else?” I asked huskily.

Chuckling softly, he nibbled at my jaw, moving closer to my ear with each teasing bite.

Needing more, I turned my face and caught his mouth. I meant for the kiss to be slow and sweet, but Eli had other ideas and sucked on my tongue, taking greedy draws off it.

Gripping his hips hard, I yanked him against me and ground our cocks together.

“Think they’re distracted?” I asked in a husky whisper when he pulled back to gulp in a breath. I’d almost forgotten we’d started this as part of a role-play game.

“I think so.” He shivered and ran one hand down my chest. What was that slight protrusion under his palm? Was he holding something?

I nibbled on his earlobe, which I knew was one of his hotspots, and was rewarded with a low moan as he squirmed in my lap. He slid his hand down my stomach, then gently stroked my cock.

I was already rock hard, and a flurry of tingles exploded deep in my body at the gentle friction of his touch.

“This will crack the code in no time,” he said softly, his voice breathy and broken.

It took a moment for my brain to register that he’d dropped something on my lap.

“What do I do with it?” I reached between us and closed my hand over something hard and flat. A USB stick?

“Put it in the slot and execute the program.” He rocked his hips and dragged his hard cock against mine.

“I don’t think we’ve distracted our watchers enough.”

“No?”

“No.” I slipped the USB stick into the pocket of my hoodie. “Not at all.” I gripped his ass and kneaded the full globes.

He moaned low and deep.

“Kiss me,” I ordered.

Eagerly he captured my lips in a hungry kiss.

I loved how much more confident he was now. How he was able to fully let go and be in the moment with me. Feeling his arousal, his hard cock and needy kisses, was so sexy, and my dick throbbed with desire.

He ran his hands through my hair and down my back, grabbing and tugging at my sweater.

I slipped my fingers under the waistband of his sweats and stroked the top of his ass.

“West,” he whined and popped his ass out, trying to force my hands down.

“Yeah?” I asked teasingly, not giving in and keeping my hands where they were.

“I want more.”

“What do you want?”

“Touch me.”

“Here?” I pulled one hand free and placed it on his hip.

He let out a frustrated sound and sucked hard on my jaw.

I put my other hand on the small of his back. “Here?”

“Lower,” he said, his voice a low, needy moan.

“Here?” I traced my finger over the waistband of his sweats.

He bit my bottom lip and tugged on it with his teeth.

A full-body shudder ripped through me. He let go of my lip and grinned wickedly as he jammed his hand between us and gripped my cock. “You like that?”

“Fuck.”

“You want me to touch you like this?” He let go of my cock and trailed one finger over my shaft, then pressed the heel of his slim hand against my cockhead.

“Eli.” I panted and looked between us.

“Or maybe like this?” He rubbed me once.

“You’re driving me crazy,” I muttered.

“Payback. Maybe this is what you want?” He slipped his hand under the waistband of my sweats and stroked my dick through my boxers.

A low growl tore from my throat. I plunged both hands into the back of his sweatpants and held his ass hard.

“Yes!” He threw his head back, arching into my touch.

“What do you want?” I asked gruffly.

“Make me come. Then I wanna make you come.”

“Fucking hell. You want my tongue? Want me to spread you out on my desk and eat your sweet ass until you come all over me?”

“Oh god. Yes. Want it.” He squeezed my cock so hard I saw stars.

My entire being was screaming at me to toss Eli onto my desk and get my tongue into him, but I held back.

This was new for us, and I wanted him to enjoy it beyond the role play and desperation. I wanted him to experience every moment of getting rimmed for the first time.

“I can’t wait to get my tongue in you,” I purred against his lips. “Let go of my dick, sweetheart. It’s my turn to take care of you.”

Moaning, he did as I said and pressed his forehead to mine.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered and spread his ass cheeks apart. “So fucking beautiful.” Gently I traced one finger down his crease and over his hole.

He shuddered and pushed back against my finger.

“Not yet, sweetheart. Soon.”

He whined and settled in my lap.

“That’s it. So good.” I rubbed slow circles over his hole, giving him a chance to get used to my touch.

“It feels so...”

“So what?”

“Good.” He pressed his face into my neck. “So good.”

“Yeah?” I lifted my hand. “Suck.”

He pulled his face from my neck, his eyes wide.

I ran the tip of my finger over his bottom lip. His tongue darted out and swiped at my digit.

“There you go. Get it nice and wet for me.”

Not breaking eye contact, he sucked my finger into his mouth and swirled his tongue around it.

My dick pulsed, and my balls drew up tighter.

“That’s good.” I tugged my finger free, and it fell from his mouth with a soft *pop*. “Keep looking at me, okay? I want to see you while I make you feel good.”

“Kay.”

I lowered my hand and slipped it back under his sweats. I rubbed his hole, and his mouth dropped open in a silent cry. “Keep looking at me and relax. I’m not going to push in. Not yet.”

His eyes clouded over with pleasure. “West,” he whimpered.

“I’ve got you.” I pressed a soft kiss against his mouth. “I’m just opening you up a bit for my tongue.”

“I want both.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. Want your finger and your tongue.”

“Fuck, sweetheart. I’m going to come before I get you on my desk.”

He chuckled softly. “That would be hot. But then I won’t get to suck you again.”

“You want to?”

“So bad. You taste good.”

“Your dirty talk is killing me.”

“It’s not dirty talk. It’s the truth. I need more.”

“You want my finger?”

He whined and rocked his hips, forcing my finger to move harder over his hole. “Give it to me.”

“Let me get some lube.”

“Spit is fine.”

“No, it’s not.” I let go of his ass and pulled my desk drawer open. “I’m not going to risk hurting you. Especially not when I have lube right here.”

He laid his head on my shoulder.

“Can you work your pants down a bit?” My hand closed over the small bottle.

He wiggled and shifted and pushed his pants down so they were tucked under his balls. “Can’t get them any lower than this without getting up.”

“That’s fine. Arch your back and pop out your ass for me.”

He did, snuggling into my neck and letting out the cutest sigh.

“Remember to breathe out and bear down.”

“I’ve used toys before.”

“I know. But it’s different when someone else does it for you. Tell me if it doesn’t feel good.”

I flipped the cap to the lube open and poured some onto my finger, working by feel behind his back.

“I will. But I know it’ll be amazing because it’s you.”

My heart clenched at both his words and his soft tone. He trusted me, and that meant just as much as what we were about to do.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I tossed the lube onto my desk and traced my finger over his hole.

“That feels good.”

“Hold me closer. Relax, and let me take care of you.”

He melted against me, and I pushed the tip of my finger inside him.

“Oh!”

“Good?”

“Yeah. More.”

Gently I pushed in a little farther, moving in tiny pulses to help open him up.

He moaned against my throat.

“Feel good?” I asked when I’d sunk in to the first knuckle.

“So good.”

I twisted my finger.

“Fuck!” He lurched in my arms like he’d been electrocuted.

“There it is.” I moved deeper, making sure to rub his spot with every gentle thrust.

“So good, West. So good,” he panted against my neck.

A rush of pride shot through me at his wrecked voice. *I’d* done that. I’d made him feel good.

I held him closer, whispering every dirty thought that popped into my head. How hot he was, how good he felt. How I couldn’t wait to feel him around my tongue.

“Do it.” He ground down on my finger, forcing it deep inside him. “Want it. Want you.”

“You want my tongue?”

“Yes!”

Groaning, I slipped my finger out of him, wrapped my arms around him, and put him on the desk.

He squealed softly. He wasn’t tiny by any means, but he was lean enough that I could easily lift and move him around.

I loved it, and apparently, so did he.

As I pulled away, he looked a bit unsure. I kissed him long and deep. Hopefully, that would help him get back into his happy place.

When I broke the kiss, his eyes were glazed and his cheeks flushed.

“Lie back, sweetheart.”

With a goofy little smile, he did.

Gripping his hips, I tugged him down so his ass was on the edge of the desk. “Let’s get these off you.”

I pulled his sweats and underwear off and dropped them onto the floor.

“God, I wish there really were cameras in here.” I pushed his sweater up so I could see his tight stomach.

“You do?”

“Oh yeah. You’re so sexy all spread out like this. I wish you could see what I do.” I stroked his cock loosely.

“That would be hot.” He shivered. “I wish you could see how you look too.”

I sat back down in my chair and scooted closer. “Are you ready for me?”

“Yeah.”

“Relax, sweetheart. I’ve got you.” I stroked one hand up his tense inner thigh.

“It’s just... it feels weird.”

“Weird?” I stroked his other thigh.

“Yeah... you don’t have to.”

I stilled my hand and looked down at him. “You don’t want it?”

“I... no?”

“Be honest with me. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t want you to do this because you think I want it.”

I pressed a soft kiss against his lips. “I want to. I like it.”

Indecision clouded his features.

“Do you want it?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Then lie back and relax for me. We’re both going to enjoy every second of this.”

“Okay.” He blew out a breath, but his legs were still stiff, and his stomach was taut as I settled back in my chair.

I kissed the inside of one thigh, then the other.

He let out a shaky breath and relaxed, but only marginally.

Slowly I slid my palms up his inner thighs and cupped just under the back of his knees. As I pushed his legs up and held him open, he didn’t resist.

“This okay?” I blew a deliberate breath over his hole.

His answer was a low moan.

Chuckling, I lowered my head and ran the flat of my tongue over his pleated skin.

The taste of lube invaded my senses, but I ignored it and swirled my tongue over him, taking my time to tease every inch of his crease, hole, and balls.

He moaned and cried out. I enjoyed going down on my partners, but Eli’s reactions were the sexiest thing I’d ever seen. He shook and wiggled and panted, trying to force me deeper inside him. I’d noticed how he was loud and a bit theatrical on cam. Not faking it, exactly, but exaggerating things for the sake of his audience.

When it was just the two of us, he was all breathy moans and soft sighs. I loved that I was the only one who got to see this side of him, where he was able to be in the moment and enjoy every sensation without worrying about how he looked or who was watching.

His hole finally relaxed and softened under my teasing. I licked and lapped at it, then gently pressed as deep inside him as I could get.

He gasped and rocked on the desk, clenching around my tongue. I fucked him with it the same way I wanted to fuck

him with my cock. He was moaning up a storm, mumbling my name and babbling nonsensically.

“West,” he said with a gasp. “I need more.”

“Hold your legs.”

He grabbed his knees, wrenched them higher, and angled his hips up. Christ, he was flexible.

“Do you want to come?”

“Yes.”

I shoved my chair back and stood. He stared up at me with glazed, needy eyes. His cheeks were flushed, his neck tinged with pink, and his mouth was slack with pleasure.

He looked like mine.

I swallowed his dick and sucked him to the back of my throat. He cried out and bucked up into my mouth, pushing his perfect dick deeper.

I managed to keep control of my gag reflex and let him fuck my face as I ran my finger over his hole. He was loose from my teasing, and the leftover lube let me slide right in. I crooked my finger and ran it over his spot.

Soft gasps and little groans fell from his lips. He slammed down on my finger, then shoved his cock deep down my throat.

Yes. I closed my eyes and sank into the sensation of being used, letting the sounds of his soft pleasure wash over me as his ass gripped my finger. He was so tight, so hot. I couldn't even fathom how good he'd feel wrapped around my cock.

A hand slid through my hair and gripped the strands. He yanked and tugged on them. The sting of pain only added to my arousal, and I groaned around his cock.

He tightened around my finger, then came with a soft cry as he lurched and shook and clenched around me, emptying down my throat as I sucked him through his orgasm.

I waited until his cock stopped spurting and he relaxed, then gently pulled off him.

He lay on the desk in a boneless heap, his chest heaving as he stared up at the ceiling.

“Sweetheart?” I slipped my finger out of him.

“Holy. Shit.” He blinked and met my eyes. “Wow.”

“Good?” I chuckled, even as a wave of desire pulsed through me and my junk throbbed like I’d been kicked. I’d been so into making him feel good I’d forgotten about my arousal.

“So good.” He sucked in a deep breath and pushed himself up on shaky arms. “My turn.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I *want* to. I know I don’t have to reciprocate, but I want to feel you, see you. Make you feel as good as you’ve made me feel.”

“How do you want me?” I swallowed hard and tried not to blow like an overeager teenager before he touched me.

“On your chair.” He slid off the desk. “Get your phone.”

“My phone?”

He grinned wickedly. “Yes, your phone.”

Confused but not questioning him, I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

“I want you to record me going down on you.”

My brain stuttered. “You do?”

He nodded and pulled his sweatpants back on. “So you can watch it later.” He sank to his knees in front of me.

“Does that turn you on?” I ran my hand through his long hair and smoothed it back from his face. “Thinking about me jerking off while watching it?”

He nodded and licked his lips. “I don’t like that you watch other cammers.” He flushed but didn’t break eye contact. “I know you don’t like watching me when I’m on cam—”

“Who said I don’t?”

“You did.”

“Did I?”

“Well, no. But you never have. Not outside those two shows.”

“I didn’t watch you before because it felt wrong.”

“Because I’m just a kid you used to know?” His face fell.

“No.” I stroked his cheek. “Because of what happened. I knew you’d be angry at me. I didn’t feel like I had the right to watch you.”

“You wanted to?”

“I did.”

“But not anymore?”

“I still do.” I ran my thumb over his bottom lip. “But I didn’t know if I should. It felt like a violation because we’re... friends.”

My heart clenched at the word. He was so much more than that, but we could only ever be friends.

“I like the idea of you watching me.” His eyes fluttered closed, and he licked my thumb with the tip of his tongue.

“You do?”

“Yeah.” He opened his eyes and sucked on my thumb.

“Fuck,” I muttered, unable to look away as he teased my skin with his naughty tongue. I gently tugged it free, then wiped it over his lip, leaving behind an alluring shine.

“I think knowing you’re watching and getting off with me would be really hot. Make it so much better. Like a little secret just between us.”

“I think so too.”

He grinned. “Get your phone ready and watch me suck your cock.”

ELI

WEST'S EYES DARKENED, and his nostrils flared. I ran my hands over his thighs and scratched my nails over the material of his sweats.

He blew out a shaky breath and fiddled with his phone. His cock was rock hard and tenting his pants, and I couldn't wait to taste him again.

"Ready?" I asked when he stopped tapping on the screen and angled the phone toward me.

"Yeah."

I gave the camera my best smolder and licked my bottom lip. My viewers loved that move.

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Perform." He ran one hand through my hair and tucked a lock behind my ear. "I want to see you, not Bailey."

A lump formed in my throat, and I swallowed hard. No one had ever been able to read me like he could. No one had ever tried, and he did it so seamlessly, so perfectly.

"Okay," I croaked.

He smiled and let go of my hair. "Let's erase that and start over."

I nodded and tried to pull myself together as he tapped on the screen a few times.

I felt stripped bare, even more so than when he'd had me all spread out and writhing on his tongue like a crazed cat in heat. Like he could see all of me. The parts I worked so hard to hide and the parts I'd reluctantly accepted. He saw me, and he still wanted me.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.” I gripped the waistband of his sweats. “Can you help me get these off?”

He lifted his hips. I slid the sweatpants down until they puddled around his ankles. He kicked them off and spread his knees wide. I fit myself between them.

His cock was rock hard and dusky red. The head was almost purple, and his balls were high and tight.

“That’s all from you,” he said softly. “You were so hot I nearly came just from rimming you.”

I leaned in and swiped my tongue over his tip. He tasted exactly how I remembered: tangy and sweet and musky.

“That’s it. Take your time and have fun.” He shifted so he was sitting lower on the chair and his hips were tilted up.

“You have a really nice dick.” I wrapped my hand around his base. “It’s different from a toy.”

He chuckled, but the sound was strained. “I’d hope so.”

“I just mean that toys are cold and feel strange. I like how hard and warm you are. How touching it makes you react.” I stroked my hand up to his head and squeezed.

He moaned and spread his legs wider.

The thought that this man, this beautiful, perfect, and wonderful man, enjoyed my touch and wanted more was almost as hot as having his cock in my hand.

“I like that I can make you feel good,” I said.

“You do. And you don’t have to be touching my dick for it to happen.”

My chest squeezed, and my heart dropped. Why did he have to say all this perfect stuff? Was it sex talk? Did he mean it?

Shoving those thoughts out of my head, I focused on the cock in my hand. I could overthink everything later.

Slowly I pressed the flat of my tongue against the underside of his shaft and dragged it up his length.

He moaned again and fisted his free hand.

Wanting more of those little moans, I licked all around his head like it was a lollipop, teasing and tasting and enjoying the slide of hot skin against my tongue.

“You’re driving me crazy.”

I grinned up at him and drew the head into my mouth, making sure to cover my teeth after what had happened last time.

I sucked hard and stroked my hand up and down his shaft.

“That’s it. So good.” He panted.

I popped off him and pulled one of his balls into my mouth.

“Holy shit.” He jerked his hips, and the globe fell out of my mouth.

“Good?” I asked cheekily.

“Too good.” He cleared his throat, staring down at me with lust-glazed eyes.

A rush of confidence moved through me. Feeling bold, I tongued his sac.

“Fuck,” he growled and bucked up out of my reach.

“You’re not behaving.” I pouted and licked a sexy-as-hell vein running the length of his shaft.

“Brat.” His voice was heavy with affection. “I’m trying to last more than a few seconds.”

“What if I don’t want you to last?” I stroked him a few times. “What if I want you to lose control?”

I'd noticed that while West was a generous and involved lover, he held a piece of himself back. Like he couldn't completely let go.

"Trust me when I say you don't want that."

"Why not?" I flicked my tongue against the notch under his head.

"*Fuck*. Because."

"Because why?" I dipped my tongue into his slit.

"*Goddamn, fuck*. Because I might hurt you."

"You won't hurt me." I kissed his tip, then licked his precum off my lips.

"I could."

"So hurt me."

"You don't want that."

"Don't I?" Gently I bounced his balls with my fingers.

"No. You don't."

"You keep telling me to let go and trust you, but you won't do the same with me."

"I trust you."

"Then trust yourself with me. A little pain isn't the end of the world. I think I might like it."

"Eli..." A hint of warning.

"Let's test."

I swallowed him as far down as I could, pushing past my gag reflex until I choked on him, my throat flexing around his head as I fought the urge to pull off.

"Holy *shit!*" He pulled me off him. "Eli."

The wrecked way he said my name spurred me on. I dragged in a breath, then swallowed him down again.

His girth stretched my lips, and my jaw ached from how I had to keep my mouth open. His cockhead hurt as it pushed in

too deep, and the spasms in my chest and throat as my body fought the invasion should have made me panic.

They didn't.

For reasons I wasn't ready to look at, I loved it. The pain, the sensation of being used, even choking, and feeling like I couldn't breathe were hot as fuck.

"Fuck!" He snapped his hips up and drove his cock as deep as it could go.

I had to pull off to take another breath. Then I was right back on him.

He rolled his hips, moving in slow thrusts. Not too deep, but deep enough that I felt them. Deep enough to drive me wild.

He spread his legs wider and tilted his hips up. Did he want my finger?

Gingerly I touched his taint.

"Yeah, that's it," he purred. "Lower."

Holy shit, he wanted me to touch his hole?

Still not believing this was happening, I slid my finger between his cheeks. He shifted lower on the chair, and my fingertip dragged over his entrance.

"Lube," he grunted and pulled me off his dick.

"You want me to finger you?" I asked, unable to keep the shock out of my voice.

"Yeah. I like it." He rocked his hips. His dick slapped against his abs. "You want me to lose control? That's the quickest way to make it happen."

Grinning, I turned and searched the desk for the bottle. I found it near his forgotten laptop and nearly swallowed my tongue when I turned back to him.

He sat in the chair with a smirk on his perfect lips. His legs were spread wide as he lazily stroked himself with one hand and held his phone with the other. He looked like a sex god.

“You don’t have to go slow. Just be gentle until you’re in. I like it hard.”

“Fuck.” My hands shook as I flipped open the cap and slicked up one finger.

“Two will get me there faster.”

“Fuuuuuuck.” I slicked up a second one. “This is so hot.”

He slid down a bit farther in the chair and lifted his knees, spreading his ass wide open for me. “Ready to make me come?”

“Fuck yeah.” I got up on my knees. “And you’d better not try to pull out like last time. I want all of it.”

His grin melted into a look of pure, primal need.

Not waiting for his answer, I drew his cockhead into my mouth and gave it a few lazy sucks.

Keeping half my attention on his cock, I pushed my finger between his cheeks and felt around until I found my destination.

He kept still as I circled his hole. I looked up at him to make sure he was still into it. He was staring at his phone screen.

Keeping my eyes on the camera, I pushed against his hole. It gave a bit, but I wasn’t able to breach him.

“Go harder. It won’t hurt.”

I did and popped through the ring of muscles and right down to the first knuckle.

He grunted and rocked his hips, fucking himself on my finger as he fucked my mouth.

I pushed deeper, then crooked my finger the way he had. The pad of it ran over something strange. Were those ridges?

“Fuck!” He snapped his hips up. “Fuck me. Give it to me hard.”

Holy shit, his dirty talk was going to be the end of me. I obeyed, thrusting my finger inside him as I kept searching for

that spot. His cock was as hard as steel in my mouth, and the continuous stream of precum told me he was getting closer.

“Another,” he growled and carded his fingers through my hair. “Give me two.”

I worked the second one in, unable to take my eyes off him. He was so big and powerful over me, his face obscured by the camera as he filmed me. For some reason, that was hot as hell.

“You ready for me to lose control?” he snarled.

I couldn't talk or nod with his cock in my mouth, so I moaned.

He gripped my hair tight and moved me over his dick. It didn't hurt, but the force of him using me like a sex sleeve was so hot my cock throbbed and heat pooled in my balls.

I thrust my fingers into him as hard as I dared, nailing his prostate. He fucked my mouth like a man possessed. He had the wherewithal to keep pulling me off him so I could breathe before it became too much, and I was able to sink into the moment and focus all my attention on how much I wanted this. Wanted him.

“You ready for it?” he rasped.

I moaned again, and he yanked my head down at the same moment he ground down on my fingers.

“Keep fucking me.” He clenched and squeezed around me. “Fuck. Eli. God!”

The sound of my name in that lust-drenched voice was everything. He dropped his head back and let out the sexiest roar I'd ever heard. He pumped shot after shot of cum down my throat, and I eagerly swallowed him down. His ass ripped around my fingers, trying to hold me in place as I kept thrusting them, hitting his spot. He shook and shuddered in his chair.

Pleasure exploded deep in my body as I came, shooting in my pants like I had the night of our first kiss. Determined to

make this as good as possible, I ignored my pleasure and focused on him, not wanting the moment to end.

“Too much.” He winced.

Carefully I pulled my fingers free and let his dick fall from my mouth.

“Wow.”

“Did I hurt you?” He stared down at me, his eyes wide and his cheeks flushed.

“Fuck no. That was the hottest thing ever.”

He laughed and flopped back in his chair.

My chest tightened at his euphoric reaction. West was always so in control, even after an orgasm. Seeing him let go and laugh touched something deep inside me. How many people did he show that side of himself to?

“Come up here.” He sat up and shimmied back into his chair. “I need my Eli cuddles.”

Trying not to think about how perfect the moment was, I climbed onto his lap and wrapped my arms around him.

“Did you enjoy that?” He pressed a kiss against my neck.

“Yeah. All of it was amazing. Fingering you was so hot.”

He slid one hand between us and cupped my soft cock.

“Did you come while you were blowing me?”

I nodded and pressed my face into his neck.

“You weren’t jerking off...”

I shook my head. Why was I so embarrassed? He’d liked it when I’d come while kissing him.

“God, that’s hot.” He hugged me tight.

We stayed locked together as the haze of our orgasms faded. Eventually, he pulled my face out of his neck and gave me a soft kiss. “I need to put my pants back on. The house is drafty, and my balls are getting a little frosty.”

I slid off him and shamelessly watched as he pulled his sweats on. His legs were incredible, with thick thighs and sculpted calves, and his ass was full and tight. Even after all these years, he still had a swimmer's body.

“So, the passcode.”

He blinked, then laughed. “Shit. I forgot all about it.” He pulled the USB stick out of his pocket. “How illegal is this?”

“Depends.”

“That sounds ominous.” He sat down and pulled me on his lap again.

“It's illegal, but if you're not trying to hack into something big like the Federal Reserve, then you'll be fine.”

“Can this hack into the Federal Reserve?” He sounded incredulous.

“No, you'd need more than that for a hack that complex.”

“Do I have to worry about the NSA busting in here and taking us down if I use it?”

I snickered. “Nope.”

“Good.” He scooted us closer to the desk and reached around me to wake up his laptop. The screen flared to life, and he stuck the stick into one of the USB slots.

“The FBI, maybe, since the NSA is an intelligence agency. The FBI handles cyber threats and does the raids.”

He stilled. “Not. Reassuring.”

“I'm kidding.” I rubbed his arm. “It's a simple cracking program. It won't leave any sort of footprint or digital residue.”

“Are you a hacker?” He dropped a kiss on my shoulder.

“No. I taught myself code, and I like to play around with stuff, but that's as far as it goes. I coded this program to see if I could. This will be the first time I use it for anything nefarious.”

“Probably a good thing. I don’t think the world is ready for Eli the hacker.”

I chuckled and typed in the execute sequence. “Done.”

“Seriously?” He rested his chin on my shoulder.

“This program can crack any code that’s eleven digits or fewer instantly. Twelve or more take time, but it doesn’t get challenging until you hit seventeen.”

“I’m not feeling all that confident about my passwords now,” he mused and clicked a few keys as he navigated through what looked like a cloud storage program.

“That’s for a numbers-only code. Letters, numbers, and symbols really drive up the cracking times, especially when you throw in upper and lower case letters.”

“That’s slightly more reassuring. How long should my passwords be if I want to make it hard for someone to crack them?”

“Nine is good, but ten is better. Anything more is overkill if you’re not a high-value target.”

“How long would it take your program to crack eight? That seems to be the standard minimum.”

“Thirty-nine minutes.”

“That’s oddly specific and not at all scary. What’s the difference when you use nine or ten?”

“Nine would take approximately three weeks. Ten would be a minimum of five years. Eleven jumps things up to over four hundred years.”

“Looks like I’m changing all my passwords and upping them to ten characters.”

“Might be prudent. Are these the files for your father’s properties?” I asked.

“They are. Do the names make sense to you? They seem to be in some sort of code.”

“Yeah. He used a Caesar Cipher. That’s where you assign new values to the alphabet by shifting the letters by a set number.” I pointed to the screen. “He used a backward shift of three, which is harder to catch, but he messed up by using the word ‘house’ over and over. See how ELRPB is repeated? H is E, O is L, U is R, S is P, and E is B. Once you find the pattern, the rest is easy.”

“Your definition of easy is not the same as mine.” He pressed his lips against my shoulder. “Will he know if I access the files? I was going to download them to go over later, but if he coded the file names, then I wonder what else he’s using to protect them.”

“Give me a minute, and I’ll let you know.”

West rubbed his big hand over my stomach distractedly as I checked for added security.

“He’s protecting them, but it’s half-assed.” I clicked a few keys. “The code is ridiculously simple, especially for anyone with any sort of interest in ciphers or cryptography. He has a keylogger program running, but all it does is alert him that someone opened the files and records which ones. It doesn’t even track when someone accesses the program or looks around. It’s only on the files.”

“Is there a way around that?”

“Yup.” I set up a couple of workarounds, my fingers flying over the keys. “There. Now you can save any files you want.”

“Can you copy everything?”

“Sure. Just need to... There. Let me undo what I did, and I’ll show you where I stored them.”

“Your brain is incredible. Want to know interesting facts about narwhals? Ask Eli. Need a passcode cracked, a code broken, and some files cloned? Eli’s got you covered.”

“Did you know narwhals can live as long as fifty years and their tusk is actually a tooth?”

He chuckled and slipped one hand under my hoodie to stroke my stomach. “I did not. And I’ll never look at one the

same now that I know that thing is a tooth and not a unicorn horn.”

“All the files are here.” I clicked on the link I’d added to a buried folder on his desktop. “I’ve also created a second storage, sort of a cloud in cloud if you will, where you can copy things you want to save and organize them. It’s best not to keep ill-gotten files on your laptop or a hard drive.”

“Another point I didn’t think of. You decoded them too? Awesome. I wasn’t looking forward to trying to figure out what each one meant.”

“It doesn’t look like the actual files are coded. Whatever is in here is important enough to hide, but it’s all surface-level stuff. Either his security team needs to be fired, or he didn’t think anyone would bother digging deeper once they saw the coded titles.”

“Probably the second one. My father is paranoid when it comes to security, and his team is the best of the best. I knew something was going on. I’m the property manager, yet I don’t have access to any of the property files beyond the repair logs and floor plans. And the files he does have are hidden behind a passcode and have all these random security layers meant to scare people away. That’s suspicious as fuck.”

“What do you think he’s hiding?”

“Not sure. I figured I’d find evidence of a shit ton of building code violations, but now I’m wondering what else there is.”

I hummed and snuggled back into his warmth.

“But enough about that for now.” He closed the laptop. “What do you think about watching something? We could use the big TV in the back living room.”

“That sounds fun.”

“Have you seen *Wednesday*?”

“I haven’t, but my roommates raved about it for months.”

“Want to watch a few episodes? I have another early day tomorrow, but I think some couch cuddles is exactly what we

need.”

“Yeah. That sounds nice.”

He rubbed my hip, and I slid off his lap.

“My mom and stepdad say thank you for the groceries and cleaning their fridge.”

“Do they know I’m the one they’re thanking?” His voice was careful as he stood.

“No.” I flushed hot. “I told them my friend helped me.”

“I get it.” He stroked his hand through my hair. “I’m just glad I could help.”

“You do.” I swallowed down the lump rising in my throat.

“How about you put some clean pants on and I’ll get the show cued up?” He tilted my face up. “I imagine things are getting a little crusty down there.”

I snickered. As usual, he’d lightened the mood before I could get lost in my head. “Little bit.”

He pressed a quick kiss to my lips and patted my ass. “See you downstairs.”

I hurried out of his office and down the hall to his room. This would be the first time I watched a movie or show with someone where cuddles were involved. Was this an invitation for Netflix and chill? Did people still do that?

A part of me hoped it was, but another part of me loved that he wanted to cuddle with me at all. One thing about West I appreciated was how he never pushed for more. Touching, cuddling, even kissing was enough for him. He didn’t equate physical intimacy with sex like so many people did.

I’d never had someone I could touch or have any sort of casual intimacy with, and I hadn’t realized how much I’d love it. West was awakening all these sides of me I hadn’t known I had. Hopefully, I’d be able to shut them down when I didn’t have him anymore.

ELI

“THAT WAS AMAZING. THANK YOU.” West rubbed his stomach and leaned back in his chair.

“Glad you enjoyed it.” I gathered up his bowl and cutlery and put them in the dishwasher. “You work too much.”

He chuckled. “Hello, pot, I’m kettle.”

“I’m serious. When was the last time you got a day off? Like a full day off where you didn’t have to do any work stuff?”

“It’s been a while.” He sighed and stretched his arms over his head.

The bottom of his shirt rode up, exposing a strip of his stomach. I traced my eyes over the hard ridges of his muscles and the dark hair of his happy trail.

“See something you like?”

I lifted my gaze to his face. That sexy-as-hell smile-smirk tilted one side of his mouth.

“I see a whole lot I like.”

His smirk melted into a soft smile. “Me too.”

The entire day, I’d been out of sorts, and it was all his fault.

Last night we’d watched two episodes of *Wednesday* together before West had called it a night. The show was

entertaining, but I'd focused on West the whole time and how good it felt to cuddle him.

We'd started sitting side by side on the couch like two preteens on their first movie date. It had taken me almost five minutes to screw up the courage to lean against him and another ten to lean my head on his chest.

He'd put his arm around my shoulders, and I'd slowly inched closer until I'd ended the episode wrapped around him like a baby koala.

For the second episode, West had urged me to lie down. He'd fit his bigger body behind me on the couch, one leg thrown over mine and his arms tight around my middle.

Every moment of the closeness had fed an empty part of myself I'd ignored for years. I was touch starved but hadn't realized it because I'd always assumed I didn't need physical touch the same as other people.

I did. And now that I'd had a taste of it, my entire being craved more.

I craved everything.

"Tonight."

West blinked. "Tonight?"

"I... want it to be tonight. I'm ready."

His eyes darkened, and his breath caught. "Ready for what?"

"To be with you."

"You want to have sex?"

I nodded.

Talking about sex was easy for me unless I was talking about my own desires or needs. I trusted West, but it was still hard for me to say some things out loud.

"How do you want it?"

"In your bed?"

He smirked. “A good choice. But I meant do you want to top or bottom?”

I widened my eyes. “You’d bottom for me?”

He’d said as much while we’d been fooling around, but I hadn’t thought he’d meant it.

“Yeah. I don’t do it often, but I like it.”

Visions of him spread out under me while I’d fucked his crease flashed before my eyes. My pulse raced as I imagined sliding inside his perfect body.

The vision flipped, and I was the one on the bed with him over me. His hands on my hips holding me down, his cockhead sliding over my hole the way his tongue and finger had. His soft voice in my ear as he made me his.

“You. I want you to top.”

I’d assumed he’d want that too and had prepped before he’d come home from work.

“Are you sure?”

I rolled my eyes. “Remember we talked about how I know my own mind? I’m not saying I don’t want to fuck you because I think I do. But not tonight. Not for our first time.”

“I don’t want you to bottom because you think you have to.”

“I’m not. I want it. Want you.” I put my hands on my hips. “Do I need to prove it to you?”

“Maybe you do.” He grinned.

I narrowed my eyes at him. A flare of adrenaline and desire exploded in my stomach and chest.

“Or maybe you need to prove it to me.” I dragged my tongue over my lip.

The smile dropped off his face, and his eyes darkened as he tracked the movement.

“Maybe you need to prove how much you want me.”

“I want you.” His voice was deep and husky.

“Actions speak louder than words.” An idea popped into my head. “If you can catch me, then you can have me.”

“Catch you?”

Taking advantage of his confusion, I darted around him and raced out of the kitchen.

“Oh, it’s *on!*” West’s shout and his pounding footsteps rang out behind me as he gave chase.

I sprinted through the living room and to the stairs, adrenaline pouring into my nervous system. Every iota of my being zeroed in until all I could think about was getting to the bedroom first. The usual din of my thoughts faded into the background, and my world narrowed down to what was happening in that moment.

The hard floor under my feet, the smooth wood of the banister as I used it to propel myself up the stairs. The exhilaration of being chased and the anticipation of what would happen when he did catch me flowed through me in a euphoric rush of emotions.

The door to West’s room was closed, and he caught me as I threw it open.

Strong arms wrapped around my waist, lifted me right off the floor, and carried me into the room. I squealed in both delight and defeat. I didn’t fight or try to get away because I’d wanted him to catch me. Wanted him to take what was his.

He tossed me onto the bed from a good three feet away. Tingles exploded deep in my body at the sensation of being airborne. I bounced on the mattress and let out a strangled cry.

West stood beside the bed, his chest heaving and his body tight and hard, like a predator about to strike, staring down at me with dark, lust-glazed eyes.

“Get naked.”

Grinning, I sat up and tore my clothes off. He did the same, his eyes never leaving my body.

I loved how he looked at me. The desire and need made my pulse quicken, but the dark possession set my blood on

fire. He wanted me as much as I wanted him.

When he was naked, West descended, covering me with his bigger body and claiming my mouth in a bruising kiss. I wrapped my arms and legs around him, not caring how desperate or needy I was being.

He moaned and ran his hand down my side greedily. I sucked on his tongue and ground our dicks together.

“We need to slow down,” he panted.

“Don’t want slow.” I tried to tug him down for another kiss, but he resisted.

“Sweetheart, we need to go slow.”

“No.” I pushed up on one elbow and kissed him as hard as he’d kissed me. “Don’t. Want. Slow,” I said, kissing him between each word.

He pulled away and opened his mouth to say something, but I wasn’t having it.

“We’ve done slow. I know you’re worried about hurting me or going too fast, but I want this. I want you. I don’t want you to hold back and try to be what you think I want or need.”

“I don’t do that with you.”

“Yes, you do.” I stroked one hand down his cheek. “I love how caring and gentle you’ve been. How you’ve let me set the pace and initiate things. But you’re still holding back because you think you’ll be too much for me.”

“I am too much for you.”

“You’re not. I want the West who came apart on my fingers. The one who let me choke on his dick and topped from the bottom.”

“You noticed, huh?” He smirked and relaxed over me.

“I noticed, and I loved it. Topy West is hot. I want that guy to be my first.”

He chewed on his lip, his eyes uncertain.

“I trust you,” I whispered. “You’re the only person I could do this with. Let me see you like you see me.”

He growled low in his throat and kissed me hard. Our teeth clicked, and his stubble burned as it dragged over my skin. He swiped and twirled his tongue against mine, driving every thought out of my head. He owned my mouth, my body, and my soul.

“Fuck.” He peppered my jaw and throat with hot, openmouthed kisses, then sucked hard on my neck.

I gasped. The sting of pain and gathering heat under his lips told me he was leaving a mark.

Yes! I arched into his mouth. I wanted the marks, to see the evidence of his desire, of him losing control.

“Tell me what you want. Use your words.”

The growly tone of his voice was so different from the usual soft and sweet one he used during sex. Shivers and tremors racked my body as he overwhelmed my senses.

“Want you to fuck me,” I managed to say between moans. “Want you in me.”

“Fuck.” He snarled against my neck. “Fuck. Eli.”

The sound of my name on his lips only added to the plethora of sensations taking over my consciousness.

He dragged his lips down my throat and over my collarbone, nipping and biting at my skin as he worked his way lower.

I melted against the bed and ran my fingers through his hair, needing a connection to help ground myself.

He swallowed my dick with no pretense or preamble, taking me as deep as possible as his throat spasmed and worked around my cockhead.

“Holy shit.” I gripped his hair tight. My legs shook, and my stomach muscles ached from holding still. “West.”

He sucked his way up my length, swirling and rubbing his tongue over my shaft. I shuddered and spread my legs wide,

needing more.

He shoved my legs up so my knees were in my armpits. I held them tight and angled my hips, opening to him as he continued to suck my dick like it owed him money.

“Fuck, West. Need you,” I babbled and rocked my hips, desperate to feel more of him.

He popped off my cock, slid his hands under my ass, and lifted me off the bed.

“Holy shit!”

I let go of my legs and lay back on the bed as gravity held me open for him. His strength, the half-crazed way he was eating me out, the little snarls and growls he let out. All of it blended together until my entire body felt like one giant exposed nerve.

“Fuck me!” I gasped and shuddered as he stabbed his tongue deep inside me. “Now. Need you now.”

He pulled his face from my ass, wiped his chin with the back of one hand, and lowered me to the bed with the other. A look I couldn't decipher flashed over his features, but it was gone before I could ask what was wrong.

He bent over me and wrapped one arm around my body. “Hold on to me.”

I did, and he sat back on his heels, then lay on his back, pulling me so I was on top of him.

“Get the lube and a condom.” He kissed my neck. “In the drawer.”

Shivering, I leaned over and tugged the drawer to the bedside table open. My hand closed around a bottle and a strip of condoms.

Leaving the condoms, I pulled out the lube and sat back on his hips, his hard dick digging into my ass.

“Condom, sweetheart.” He rubbed my thighs.

“Do you need to wear one?” I flicked the lube bottle open. “I'm negative.”

“This isn’t something you decide in the moment.” He tried to grab the lube.

I moved it out of his reach. “Why not?”

“Because it’s a big deal.”

“I know.”

He reached for the lube again.

I held it against my chest and shook my head. “Nope. I want to prep myself while you watch.”

“Fuck.” He shuddered, his abs tensing and his dick pulsing against my ass.

“And you didn’t answer me. Are you negative?”

“Yes, but—”

“Do you want to wear a condom?”

“No.”

“There.” I smiled serenely and poured some lube onto my fingers. “Was that so hard?”

“It’s definitely *hard*.” He chuckled, the sound strained.

“It is.” I got up on my knees. “Ready to watch me prep myself for you?”

He groaned and nodded.

I loved being able to affect him like this. Topy, dominant West was hot as hell, but reducing him to a groaning, half-delirious mess was not only erotic but also made me feel powerful.

We were equals in this, and we trusted each other enough to let go and just feel.

Not wanting him to see the jumble of sappy and mushy emotions that had to be written all over my face, I turned so I was straddling his stomach and facing his feet.

“Fuck, Eli.” Big, hot hands gripped my ass cheeks and kneaded them. “Your ass is amazing. So big and bouncy and full.”

“I’ll bet it’s tight too.” Reaching behind me, I pressed my lube-slicked fingers against my hole. “All hot and ready for you.”

His grip tightened to the point of pain. I sank into it, loving both the show of strength and the evidence of him losing control.

Bearing down, I pushed one finger inside myself.

“Do you like that?” he asked in a husky voice.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me how it feels,” he rasped.

“It’s so good.” I moaned and finger fucked myself, welcoming the burn and stretch as I moved deeper and harder. “But not enough. I want more.”

“Do it. Fuck yourself with two.”

I slipped a second finger in and clenched around them, loosening myself up. As much as this was to tease him, it was driving me nuts too.

“That’s it. Finger yourself the way you want me to fuck you. Show me how you want it.”

Moans and sighs fell from my lips, my breaths coming out in staccato bursts as I did what he said. I fucked myself as hard and fast as I could, bouncing on my fingers. My leaking cock alternately slapped my abs and his groin.

“Fuck.” I pulled my fingers out of my body and looked over my shoulder.

West was staring at me with wide eyes. His cheeks were flushed, his chest slick with a thin layer of sweat. A single lock of hair fell over his forehead. He was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen.

“How do you want me?” I asked.

“Turn around.”

West helped me spin so I was facing him. One hand pressed against my stomach, and the other gripped my hip. He

held me still, his eyes searching mine like he was trying to find answers to whatever questions were in his head.

“Come here.” He sat up and pulled me close for a kiss.

I’d expected it to be hot and hard, but it was achingly sweet and soft.

“Hold me tight,” he whispered.

I did, moving with him as he shifted and shimmied so I was on my back and he lay over me, still kissing me like we had all the time in the world.

When he finally pulled away, my heart was pounding, and my head spun from the overwhelming perfection of the moment.

“I know you said you didn’t want slow. But this part needs to be.” He grabbed a pillow from the head of the bed. “Lift your hips.”

“I don’t need slow.”

He slid the pillow under me and looked into my eyes. “Maybe not. But I do.”

I lay there, confused and off-balance, as he picked up the forgotten lube.

“You do?” I whispered. He lazily stroked his dick and roved his eyes over my body.

“Yes.” He scooted closer. “This isn’t just your first time. It’s *our* first time. I need to do it right. To feel you, see you.” He pulled my legs over his spread thighs. “Can I do that? Can I take you slow?” He ran his hand over my stomach and sifted his fingers through my happy trail.

“Yes,” I croaked.

He leaned over me, using one hand to hold himself up and gripping his cock with the other.

“Look at me while I push inside you. Don’t think about anything other than how it feels. Just be in the moment with me.”

“I will. I trust you.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I’m really glad it’s you.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “I’m happy it’s me too. Ready?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“Hook your ankles together and wrap your legs around my waist. There you go. Now remember what I said. Focus on me and the moment.”

“I will.”

“Breathe in and clench as hard as you can. Good. Now hold it, keep holding it. Breathe out and let go.”

Something broad and smooth pressed against my entrance.

“Do it again.”

This time, when he prompted me to let go, he pushed the head of his cock inside me.

Pain sliced through me, and I winced.

“It’s okay,” he said softly. “Do it again, but not tight. Just enough so I can feel it.”

The strangled groan he let out when I did as he said helped soothe the last of my nerves as he pushed in on my exhale.

“Holy shit,” I whispered. A strange tingle moved through me. It wasn’t so much pleasure but awareness.

West was inside me.

I’d lost my virginity to the person I was falling in love with.

The truth hit me hard and fast. Like a thunderclap.

I was falling for West. I gulped in a gasping breath.

“Shhhhhh,” he soothed. “It’s okay, sweetheart. I’ve got you. Take your time and process.”

I closed my eyes, terrified he’d see how much this moment meant to me. How much he meant to me.

“Open your eyes. You don’t need to hide. Not from me.”

I did, unable to disobey. A fuzzy haze coated the world as my vision shimmered.

Fuck. I was crying. Why was I crying?

“Does it hurt? Do you need to stop?”

I shook my head.

“Can you take more?”

“Yes.”

He pushed in with another low, sexy groan. “That’s half of me.”

The burn was fading, but the sting of being stretched intensified, and a feeling of fullness took over.

I’d used toys before, but this was different. This was everything.

“More,” I whispered, blinking rapidly to clear my eyes.

“Keep looking at me.” He rolled his hips, slowly pushing into me until his thighs brushed my ass. “There, sweetheart. That’s all of me.”

I clenched and shifted my hips, my body craving more.

“That’s it. Make yourself feel good.” He rocked with me, our movements slow and sensual and perfectly in sync.

This wasn’t fucking. This was making love.

A tear spilled from the corner of my eye as the gravity of the moment hit. Somehow West had known this was what we both needed.

He used the pad of his thumb to wipe away my tear.

“I’m sorry.” I squeezed my eyes closed.

Fuck. I was ruining everything. He was probably disgusted with me. He’d said hate sex did nothing for him. Crying sex was probably worse.

“Look at me.”

His demanding tone snapped me out of the spiral of self-loathing I’d been about to fall into, and I obeyed.

“Don’t do that.” He reached between us and gripped my cock. “Don’t be sorry or give in to whatever your big brain is saying. This is perfect. *You’re perfect.*”

He stroked my dick in time with the rolls of his hips. The dual sensations of being filled and jerked off hit like lightning, exploding deep inside me. I cried out and arched into him, clenching around his length as pleasure zinged through me.

“That’s it.” He grinned, his smile possessive and proud. “Let go, and let me love you.”

Love.

The word echoed in my ears as he sped up, thrusting inside me long and deep as he worked me over with his skilled hand.

West didn’t love me, but he cared. What we had might not be love, but it was something, and I clung to that.

We moved together, each moment more perfect and wonderful than the last. The softness in his eyes faded and was replaced with dark desire.

“Kiss me,” I begged, lifting my hips to force him deeper.

The pain and fullness were gone, and the white-hot zings of pleasure from his thrusts lit me up from the inside.

His mouth crashed down on mine, his kiss hard and messy and desperate. He grunted into my mouth as he jerked me, fucking me hard enough that the echoing of slapping skin reverberated in the room, the bed creaked, and the headboard hit the wall.

Every slide of his cock and glide of his hand pushed me higher until my orgasm hovered just out of reach. His cock dragged over my prostate, but it wasn’t enough.

I clenched around him and shifted my hips, desperate to feel more. To find whatever I needed to come.

He planted his knees on the bed, driving down into me, nailing my prostate, and stroking my aching, leaking cock.

I sobbed in both frustration and pleasure as the need inside me kept building, refusing to crest.

“Let go, sweetheart,” he whispered against my lips. “Come for me.”

My body released in a dizzying flurry of pulses, and I shot over his fist. Pleasure washed over me in a blissful, perfect moment as I came hard around him.

West slammed into me with a feral growl, grinding his cock as deep inside me as it could possibly go. He pulsed and kicked inside me, then filled me with his warm load.

The knowledge he’d left a piece of himself inside me and I’d get to carry it around long after we cleaned up triggered another less powerful orgasm.

My cock pulsed and throbbed as it tried to shoot. The sounds I was making were barely human, but I didn’t care. I focused on West. On his big body crushing mine, his sweaty skin under my hands. The loud pants and satisfied sounds he made as he slowed our kisses. One hand was fisted in my hair, holding me in place as he took what he wanted.

I loved it.

Eventually, he tore his mouth from mine. I blinked my eyes open, and his smile, so soft and full of affection, made my heart clench.

I opened my mouth to say something, anything, to break the moment, but he didn’t let me. He kissed my parted lips and rolled us so he was on his back and I lay over him.

Not quite with it, I rested my head against his pecs. His heartbeat, steady and a bit fast, filled my ear. Strong hands rubbed my back. And we lay there in silence.

“Thank you,” I said.

“For what?”

“For being you. For winning the stupid auction.”

He stilled his hands.

“You said you were afraid I’d make a mistake I’d regret for the rest of my life. You were right.”

Silently he smoothed my hair back from my face and gently stroked my cheek.

“For so many years, I was convinced there was something wrong with me. That I was broken and I couldn’t feel what other people did. If I’d gone through with it and had sex with a stranger, I would never have known *this* was possible.”

West tipped my face up, and I let him. I’d never felt more vulnerable or raw in my entire life, but I was done hiding from him. He’d helped me discover this side of myself. He deserved to see it.

“I had no idea sex could be like this, that *I* could feel any of this. I knew it could feel good, but I hadn’t understood it went beyond the physical.”

West tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear but thankfully stayed quiet. I needed to get this out while it was fresh, while I was still processing.

“I’d thought of it like a physiological need. Stimulation creates pleasure. Pleasure leads to orgasm. Orgasms feel good. The end. But it can be so much more than that. Sleeping with a stranger would have been empty and cold. It would have broken me, and the sad part is I don’t think I would have understood why.”

I pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “But you did. You knew that would happen.”

He smoothed his hands over my shoulders. “I didn’t want you to have the same regrets I do.”

“You regret your first time?”

He nodded. “Both of them.”

I put my chin on his chest and let him decide if he wanted to tell me more.

“Boarding school skewed my views on sex and myself for a long time.” He rubbed my back, a faraway look in his eyes. “I got a lot of action because I was willing, but it was all empty. I was just a mouth or a hand, the same as they were to

me. Sex was a release, a way to feel good for a few seconds, to pretend I wasn't alone.

“Then I got to college, and I had the kind of freedom I'd only dreamed of. I didn't handle the transition well. I ended up fucking the first guy I messed around with. He wasn't really my type, but he was willing. I figured I'd do it and get it over with. After, I felt empty and hollow. I'd had sex with a guy for the first time, but I didn't know his last name, and we hadn't even kissed.

“A week later, I met a girl, and she came on to me hard. She was cute and flirty, and we started fooling around. I should have told her I'd never been with a girl before, but I was ashamed. So I tried to fake it. The whole experience was awkward and uncomfortable, and neither of us enjoyed it. Again, I felt empty and hollow. I thought there was something wrong with me.”

He gripped my back and shook his head like he was breaking free from the memories. “It took a long time to figure out that empty sex does nothing for me. I'm not built for hooking up. I need a connection to enjoy it.”

He smiled, but his eyes were still sad. “And my gut told me you might be the same and you needed more than a faceless stranger fuck in a damn hotel room. That you deserved more.”

“I feel so stupid,” I whispered.

“You're not. And I'm sorry I said the idea was stupid. I'm guessing you didn't talk to anyone about it? Just got the idea and ran with it?”

I nodded.

“Your thought process makes sense. And given what you believed and what was going on in your life, I get why it was so appealing.”

I smiled, but it felt forced. The idea had been stupid, and it was only sheer dumb luck West had been able to stop it.

“How about we see if we can cram two people into the stand-up shower and clean up?” he suggested. “Then we

should call it a night. I have another early-as-fuck day tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

I shifted off him, and we both sat up. Moving around made my ass twinge, and I winced.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.”

“Are you sure I didn’t hurt you?”

“You were perfect. And a little pain isn’t the end of the world. I kinda like it. Reminds me of how good you felt.”

He groaned and climbed off the bed. “You’re killing me.”

I grinned. “Good.”

“Brat.” He tugged me close and planted a kiss on my lips.

“Can you sleep in here tonight?” I asked when he pulled away.

“Yeah. I’m not done with my Eli cuddles.”

Flushing hot, I slid my hand into West’s and dragged him into the bathroom.

We had two more days before this would be over and we’d have to go back to our regular lives. I could be sad about that later. Right now, I wanted to enjoy every second we had left.

WEST

THE TRANSFORMATION in Eli over the past week was stark. Gone was the angry, sullen guy who'd glared at me like he was plotting my demise. In his stead was a happy, playful guy who lit up when I came into the room and went out of his way to make sure I was taking care of myself.

He'd also turned into the world's biggest cuddlebug and snuggled up to me at every opportunity. I'd never had that, not even in my failed relationships.

I was used to physical touch being the kickoff for more. My exes had used touch to tell me they wanted sex. A cuddle was never just a cuddle, and I hadn't realized how much I'd craved closeness and emotional intimacy, and not just sex or physical pleasure. Now I knew I needed more, and there was no turning back.

Eli was special. He stirred things in me no one ever had. The silly, snarky part of me that loved sparring with him. The arrogant and bossy part that loved reducing him to a mess of whimpering need. The overwhelmed and lonely part that felt recharged and rejuvenated after snuggles and casual conversation. The possessive part that loved seeing him in my clothes and wanted to pamper and spoil him so he knew how much I cared.

Things between us were complicated, and now that the repairs were done, our time hiding away in my house together was over.

Zzzzz. Zzzzz. Zzzzz.

I dug my phone out of my pocket and sighed.

“Hello, Lilian,” I greeted my father’s secretary.

“Good evening, Weston.” Her familiar voice was all business.

I’d known Lilian since she started working for my father almost fifteen years ago, and she still wouldn’t use my preferred name, even though I’d told her I didn’t like being called Weston dozens of times.

“Your father wants to schedule a meeting with you.”

“He does?”

“He has some matters he wishes to discuss with you.”

“I see.” That was code for he wanted to lecture me.

“He has an opening in his schedule on Sunday.”

“Sunday?” This time I didn’t bother hiding my frustration.

“Yes, Sunday at ten in the morning. He’ll meet you at his New York office.”

“He wants me to travel to New York for a discussion?”

“His schedule is very busy for the next month. That is the most convenient for him.”

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Wonderful,” she said absently. “And he needs you to represent him at a function on Saturday.”

“What kind of function?”

“A dinner. The McMahon group is hosting, and your father is unable to attend.”

Wearily I rubbed my eyes. This was the real reason my father wanted me to travel to New York, to gather intel at some stuffy dinner and report everything to him at our meeting the next day.

“And if I can’t go?”

I didn’t have any plans for the weekend, but I’d just come off twelve straight days of work and a week of dealing with

the flood. The last thing I wanted was to waste my weekend meeting with my father or any of his associates.

“Your contract states you must make yourself available for all functions and meetings your father wishes for you to attend.” Her crisp tone was both condescending and professional. “I’ve sent your travel arrangements and accommodations, along with the pertinent details, to your email.”

I repressed a groan and dropped my head back against the seat of my truck. I was twenty-three, and my father still didn’t trust me to book a few flights or pick my own hotel.

“Thanks, Lilian.”

“Have a good evening, Weston.”

I opened my work email. Lilian’s was right there at the top. “Just fucking perfect.”

I didn’t want to deal with this right now. I’d planned on going inside and having some cuddle time with Eli before I had to drop him back off at the house.

At least my flight didn’t leave until tomorrow morning, but the fact that they’d booked me on a six a.m. flight when I didn’t have to be in the city until eight in the evening was one more example of my father’s micromanaging.

Feeling like the weight of the world was on my shoulders, I got out of the truck and headed into the house.

“Hey.” Eli frowned as I kicked off my boots. “What’s wrong?”

“Work stuff. I just found out I have to go out of town this weekend.”

“Oh.” Sadness flickered over his features. “That sucks.”

“Yeah. I was hoping to have a few days off for once. But my father says jump, so I say how high.”

“When do you leave?”

“I’m flying out at six tomorrow.”

“In the morning?” He grimaced. “Gross.”

“Yeah. The car is coming to take me to the airport at three.”

“How long are you going to be there?”

“I come back Sunday night.”

“And go right back to work on Monday?”

“Yup.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s not okay. You need a break.”

“Breaks are for people who don’t screw up at sixteen and have to spend the rest of their lives proving they’re not a fuckup.”

He pursed his lips. “I really don’t like your dad.”

“Not many people do.” I stripped off my jacket. “I talked to one of your roommates today. Matt, or was it Jax? The blond one.”

Eli snickered. “That’s Matt. Jax is his boyfriend.”

“Those two have no shame. I was doing a final check of the work site when they came home. My truck was in the driveway, and they parked beside it, so it’s not like they didn’t know someone was there.”

He laughed. “Let me guess. You came upstairs, and they were either dry humping on the couch or slamming each other against the walls and making out like they hadn’t seen each other in a decade.”

“The couch one.”

“They do love that couch. I imagine a black light would be very revealing.”

“Trust me when I say the last thing you want to do is use a black light in a house rented out to five college guys.”

“I bet every room would look like a crime scene.” He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around my middle.

I hugged him tight as he nuzzled his cheek into my neck.

His closeness helped settle the anger and leftover shock of finding out about my new weekend plans. I kissed his hair, and he sighed in contentment.

“Did you eat?” I asked.

He nodded against me. “Are you hungry?”

“I had a late lunch.” I kissed his hair again. “What time do you want me to take you back to the house?”

He untangled himself from me and looked at the floor. “I can text Matt to pick me up.”

“I don’t mind driving you. And you don’t have to leave now.”

“I should get back. I have a show scheduled in a few hours that I need to get ready for.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him to stay and do his show here like last weekend, but I held back. I was exhausted, and not only did I have an impromptu business trip to get organized for, but I also needed to get to sleep early so I wouldn’t be a zombie while traveling.

“Okay. But I’ll drive you whenever you want. You don’t need to bother your roommate.”

“I’ll go pack up my stuff. Might as well go now.”

“I’ll change while you do that.”

He nodded, his eyes sad and his features drawn, and as he turned and headed up the stairs, his steps slow and his shoulders stooped, something inside me broke.

We might have only been back in each other’s lives for a few weeks, but I refused to go back to a life without him in it. I’d felt more alive and happier this past week than I had in... ever, and he was the reason.

I was in love with him. It was as simple and obvious as that.

We’d had sex a few times since our first coming together, and every time with him was just as meaningful and joyous as the last. Sex had never been like that for me. The laughter and

teasing, the back-and-forth as he pushed my buttons, the way he melted under me as he got out of his head and trusted me to make him feel good.

The first time, two nights ago, had been the most profound sexual experience of my life, and it had nothing to do with “taking” Eli’s virginity. It had been the way he’d looked at me. How he’d allowed himself to be vulnerable and hadn’t held back his tears. He’d let me see him, and he hadn’t let me hide myself from him. He’d trusted me, and that meant everything.

The protective instincts I had for him now were a far cry from the brotherly ones I’d felt six months ago when I’d found his cam channel. Now I wanted to protect him because he was mine.

I’d gone into this knowing any sort of relationship with him would be temporary. The situation with Gray complicated things, but Eli also had plans to go to grad school in California in a few months. I’d never imagined falling for him, but now that I had, I was determined to hold on to it for as long as possible.

An idea popped into my head, and I nearly laughed in the middle of my foyer. Eli wasn’t the type who did well with being confronted by things or given ultimatums. He responded better when he figured them out for himself.

Telling him about my feelings or asking him to be my boyfriend would create a power imbalance in our relationship. Eli’s inexperience with both dating and friendships made him vulnerable. He was the smartest person I’d ever met, but he wasn’t good with people. I wanted him to be with me because it made him happy, because he chose to spend time with me.

Labeling our relationship would make it difficult for him to say no to things. At his core, Eli was a people pleaser, and he had trouble standing up for himself or articulating his needs. Confronting him with my feelings if he didn’t share them would put him on the spot, and the last thing I wanted was to make him uncomfortable or feel like he had to reciprocate when he didn’t.

A few nights ago, we'd been talking about movies we liked, and he'd mentioned that the premise behind *Inception*, the idea of planting thoughts in people's subconscious to make them believe they were their own, was the reason it was one of his favorites.

Maybe I couldn't deep dive into his subconscious and leave clues I wanted more with him, but I could show him and wait for him to figure it out.

Time to kick operation *wait until Eli figures out he's my boyfriend* into high gear.

ELI

ELI: when do you have to leave for that work thing?

West: the car is coming in an hour

Eli: do you have to wear a suit?

West: why?

Eli: no reason

West: no reason, huh?

Eli: I bet you'd look good in a suit

West: how about I send you a picture when I'm ready and you can see for yourself?

Eli: I'd like that

West: and maybe you could send me one when you're getting ready for your show?

Eli: you want one?

West: yeah. I don't have any pics of you on my phone. I need to fix that

Eli: you have that video...

West: I do

West: I watched it again this afternoon

Eli: you did?

West: I did. And I came so hard

Eli: maybe you could send me a pic of that too?

West: next time

West: ugh

West: brb. Lilian is calling

He added a line of eye roll emojis.

I bit back a laugh as my ears throbbed with heat. Maybe sitting in the middle of the living room with three out of four roommates wasn't the best choice when having a flirty text conversation.

West and I had been texting nonstop since he'd dropped me off at the house yesterday. I'd expected him to be too busy to want to talk, but he'd kept me updated while he'd been traveling, including a real-time transcript of the hilarious fight a man and his mistress had in the seats behind him on the plane. He'd also sent me photos of his hotel room, as well as random snaps of the city and a few selfies.

I hadn't sent him any photos yet. It wasn't that I didn't want to, but I was at home with my roommates. I had nothing interesting to share, and a part of me worried that sending him pics of me would be crossing some sort of line.

Ding-dong.

"I got it!"

Footsteps thundered down the stairs. Seconds later, Matt came skidding into the living room. He grabbed the back of the couch to slow his momentum and slingshotted himself down the hallway leading to the front door.

SLAM.

"Ow!"

"Something tells me he doesn't got it." Alex snickered, not looking up from his phone.

"Or he got a face full of wall." Beck kicked Alex's foot, where it rested on the coffee table. "Are you done sexting?"

"How do you know I'm sexting?" He waggled his eyebrows at Beck.

“Because you’ve got that dopey look you always get when Kai’s whispering dirty talk and you think no one notices.”

“You figured out he does that, huh?” He smirked at Beck.

“Kinda hard to miss when you’re rocking a boner and practically melting into a puddle while he does it.” Beck kicked his foot again.

“And perhaps you can mention to him that some people have good hearing, so he might want to take it down a decibel when you’re not in your room,” Finn said dryly.

“Where’s the fun in that?” Alex asked with a grin. “Besides, it’s not like you two can talk. At least we’re not fucking all over campus.”

Finn’s cheeks flamed red, and Beck winked cheekily.

“Package for you, Eli.” Matt came into the living room with a large box in his arms.

“For me?”

“Is there a Matt-shaped hole in the wall we need to tell the property manager about?” Alex asked.

“Nope. But have you met the property manager?” Matt unceremoniously dropped the box on my lap and flopped onto the couch next to me.

“Yeah,” Alex said, and he and Beck exchanged a look. “He’s, like, sixty and bald.”

“Not him.” Matt waved dismissively. “The new one. I talked to him yesterday, and holy shit, he’s hot. Serious eye candy.”

“Yeah?” Finn perked up.

“Hey, eyes on the prize, Science Boy.” Beck nudged him with his shoulder.

“You know you’re the only one I want.” Finn patted Beck on the knee.

“Didn’t you deal with him over spring break?” Alex asked me. “Is he as hot as Matt is making him out to be? ‘Cause if

so, I might need to be around next time something in the house shits the bed.”

“Um.” My cheeks flamed with heat. “Yeah. He’s attractive.”

“Awww, does our little brother have a crush?” Matt knocked his knee against mine.

I cleared my throat. “I kind of know him.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. We went to school together for a few years.”

“Must have been nice to catch up with an old friend, even if you did have to deal with a flood by yourself,” Beck said.

“He’s... we weren’t... it’s complicated.”

Alex tucked his phone into his pocket and gave me an appraising look.

“What did you get?” Matt pointed to the box in my lap.

“I have no idea.”

“Ooooh, a mystery package.” Matt grinned. “New house rule, all mystery packages must be opened in the presence of whoever is around when it’s delivered.”

“Really?” Beck gave him a flat look. “You *really* want to make that a rule after the mystery package you got a few months ago?”

“That wasn’t a mystery package because I knew it was from Jax, and all you fuckers could see what it was.” Matt grinned. “Totally different.”

“Coming home and finding *that* sitting on our coffee table is still one of the best things that’s ever happened to me.” Alex laughed.

“We’re getting off topic.” Matt tapped the box. “I think we need to see what’s in this mystery package.”

“Yeah, okay.”

All four of my roommates gaped at me, and I had to laugh at their shocked faces.

“Does anyone have anything sharp?”

“Here.” Alex dug his keys out of his pocket and handed them to me.

I flipped open the blade of the small knife he had hanging off the keyring and sliced the packing tape.

“I feel like we need a drumroll or something,” Matt mused.

I handed Alex back his keys, then opened the box. Inside lay a faded maroon hoodie. I’d worn it at West’s last week after he’d told me he liked seeing me in his clothes. I pushed the hoodie aside and found two more, as well as two white dress shirts.

“What’s in it?” Beck asked from the loveseat.

“Clothes.” Matt scrunched his face up. “Used clothes.”

“Who’s the mystery sender?” Beck asked. “Is there a note?”

I shook my head and closed the flaps of the box, my ears so hot they hurt.

“Looks like a box of boyfriend clothes.” Alex grinned like the Cheshire Cat.

“Boyfriend clothes?” Matt asked.

“Yeah. Like the clothes you steal from your boyfriend.”

“Eli has a boyfriend?” Matt turned to me. “You have a boyfriend?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Is that from the person you were talking about when you texted Kai?” Alex asked.

I nodded.

“Did you ever figure it out?” he asked.

I shook my head and glanced around. My roommates were all looking at me, but with concern and not exasperation.

“Dating issues?” Beck asked, his voice gentle. “You’ve got an entire focus group here if you need help figuring something

out.”

“You don’t mind hearing about my problems?”

“Of course not.” Matt crossed his big arms over his chest. “Lay it on us.”

“I started messing around with someone.” I ran my finger over the smooth cardboard of the box, too embarrassed to meet anyone’s eyes. “I’ve never had a friend with benefits, so I’m not sure if I’m reading into things.”

“What’s confusing you?” Beck asked. “Are those his clothes?”

“Yeah. I wore them when I was at his place.”

“Anything else confusing?” Matt asked.

“He took me out to dinner last week. And he’s been flirty over text.”

“Hmmm.” Beck pursed his lips. “How close are you? Like, is he a good friend, or is he just a casual acquaintance?”

“A good friend, but it’s complicated. We used to be close. Then some shit happened, and I didn’t see him for six and a half years.” Nerves fluttered through me. “We’ve only really been talking again for a week.”

That part was making me question everything. It was too soon to be feeling any of what I did for him.

It had to be the sex. I’d bonded to him because he was the first person I’d been with. I already felt a connection with him, and I trusted him, so it made sense I’d confuse those feelings for more.

“A week?” Matt asked.

“Yeah.”

“The friend you stayed with last week... that was him?” Alex tilted his head.

I nodded.

“But before you didn’t have any contact with him? Like whatever happened six years ago was the last time you saw

him. Then you crashed with him during spring break?”

“Sort of.” I swallowed. “It’s... he’s...”

“Holy shit. Eli’s banging the property manager.” Matt sat up straight.

I buried my face in my hands.

“You’re as subtle as a pie to the face,” Alex said dryly.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to make it sound like that.” Matt patted my knee. “I just got excited that I figured it out.”

“It’s fine.” I pushed my embarrassment aside and lifted my head. “But yeah, it’s him.”

“It’s hard when you hook up with friends.” Beck slung his arm over Finn’s shoulder. “What you’re describing could be his personality. Some people are flirty and like to treat their friends to dinner.”

“The clothes are definitely a sex thing. Nothing gets Kai’s motor running faster than seeing me in his clothes.”

“Not even stealing his phone like a bad boy?” I made sure to keep my voice as innocent as possible as I turned to Alex.

“Wait, what?” Beck and Finn both leaned forward.

Alex’s ears went pink. “I was pretending you didn’t listen to that. Guess that fantasy is officially dead.”

“Listened to what?” Matt looked between us. “We need story time.”

“Eli was texting Kai, and I kept stealing his phone to answer. I accidentally recorded Kai and me... having some fun and sent it to him.” Alex blushed bright pink.

The guys howled with laughter.

“Don’t worry. It wasn’t anything shocking. I live here, remember? I’ve heard worse walking past your room.” I gave him a bright smile.

“You’re a shit disturber, you know that, right?” Alex smirked. “You seem so sweet and innocent, but you’re really waiting for your chance to stir the pot.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I blinked innocently.

He chuckled. “Like hell, you don’t.”

“Back to your property manager.” Matt tapped his chin like he was deep in thought. “Do you like the guy as more than a friend?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want more? Like an actual relationship?” Beck asked.

“I... it’s complicated.”

“How is it complicated?” Finn asked. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“He and my brother have a history. They were rivals, and that thing that happened six years ago? It was a really big thing, and it kind of ruined both my brother’s life and his. I hated him for years. Then I got his side of the story. But Gray... he’ll never forgive him.”

“That does make it complicated.” Finn smiled sympathetically. “You and your brother are close?”

“Really close. He’s so much more than my big brother. But West...” I groaned and raked a hand through my hair. “I can’t have both of them.”

“I’m sorry.” Matt clasped my shoulder in his big hand and squeezed gently. “That’s a hell of a position to be in.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I whispered. “I’m not ready to let West go. Even without the crap between him and my brother, I’m leaving to go to grad school in a few months. I thought he’d slowly pull away now that I’m not staying with him, but he isn’t.” I looked at each of my roommates in turn. Could I tell them the whole story?

They were my friends, and they cared. They’d trusted me with their secrets. Maybe it was time I trusted them with mine.

“So Matt already knows this.” I pushed down the panic clawing at my chest and powered through. “But I can.”

“Cam?” Finn asked.

“Really?” Beck gaped at me.

“That’s... not as shocking as it probably should have been.” Alex rolled his lips inward like he was biting back a smile.

“I’m still confused.” Finn glanced between Beck and me.

Beck leaned close and whispered something in Finn’s ear.

“Oh. *Oh!*” Finn blinked. “Wow.”

“If you think that’s bending your brain, wait until you hear the rest.” I snort-laughed, still not completely believing I was about to lay it all on the line like this.

By the time I finished telling them everything that had happened between announcing the auction and calling West about the flood, they were sitting wide-eyed and shocked.

“Holy shit.” Matt rubbed his hand over his face. “That’s crazy.”

“I already know the auction was a bad idea. And I’m grateful he stepped in,” I said quickly before anyone could potentially lecture me. “I made a mistake, and I’ll never do anything like it again. But it’s one more layer of complication on an already messed-up situation. Are you guys mad?”

I braced for some sort of backlash.

“Why would we be mad?” Finn asked.

“Because I’m doing... that... in the house.”

“We’re all doing *that* in the house.” Alex grinned. “You’re just the only one smart enough to capitalize on it. The rest of us have been doing it for free.”

The guys laughed, breaking the tension from my impromptu infodumping.

“You said you’re texting with your guy. Ask him about the clothes,” Matt suggested.

“Really?”

He shrugged. “Why not? We can guess all night, but he’s the only one who can tell you the truth.”

“I suppose.” I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

Eli: I got the package

Eli: thanks

West: I like knowing you’re wearing my clothes when I can’t be there with you

Eli: I don’t know how many chances I’ll get to wear the dress shirts

West: those are for when it’s just you and me

Eli: really?

West: yeah

West: I can’t think of anything sexier than you in one of those and nothing else

West: I’m just finishing up getting ready. I’ll text you when I’m in the car

Eli: okay

I looked up from my phone. Everyone was staring at me.

“He said he sent them because he likes knowing I’m wearing them when he’s not around. And he said seeing me in one of his dress shirts would be sexy.”

“Sounds flirty over friendly to me.” Matt glanced around. “But not exactly definitive.”

“No,” Beck agreed. “But you said it’s still early. The only way you’ll know where his head is at for sure is if you ask.”

“I’m not ready to do that,” I said.

“Then my advice is to roll with it. Have fun while you figure out what you want, what you can have with him.”

The other guys nodded in agreement.

“Thanks. I guess that’s all I can do.”

Even though nothing had been solved, I felt better. I hadn't realized how heavy the secrets had been, how much they'd weighed me down. I'd told my roommates, my friends, the truth, and the world hadn't imploded. They hadn't turned on me or thought less of me for being a sex worker. They accepted me.

The conversation switched topics, and Matt started teasing Alex about the voice clip he'd sent me. I settled in my seat as everyone laughed and joked.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out and checked our text thread.

A photo of West in a black suit, a white dress shirt, and an emerald-green tie stared back at me. Two more loaded: one where he was in only the black pants with his white shirt open and his incredible abs on display, and one of him lying in a big bed, looking sleepy, like he'd just woken up from a nap.

Eli: you look good in a suit

West: you think so?

Eli: totally get why suit porn is a thing now

West: lol maybe you can see it in person soon

Eli: and maybe I can help you take it off soon too?

West: that can definitely be arranged

West: gotta go. Think of me while you're on cam tonight

Eli: I always do

I added a kissy face emoji, then instantly regretted all of my life's choices when it popped up in the thread.

West texted back three kissy faces.

Yeah, this not overthinking thing wasn't going to be as easy as I'd hoped.

WEST

I DRUMMED my fingers on the arm of the plush leather chair and stared at the painting on the wall across from me. I knew it was by some big-shot trendy artist. I vaguely remembered my father boasting about buying it, but I hadn't cared enough to remember anything more than the ridiculous price tag.

Art was subjective, and beauty was in the eye of the beholder, but the thick black paint slashes and hunks of what looked like crumpled parchment paper glued to the canvas just looked messy.

“Weston!”

My father's voice boomed over the speaker on the empty reception desk outside the door to his office. I jumped.

At least he'd given his support staff the day off. It wasn't unusual for the office to be bustling all weekend when my father was in town.

Not wanting to drag this out any longer than it had to be, I strode into my father's office, making sure to look confident but not arrogant.

“Weston.” He looked me up and down with a critical eye.

“Dad.” I resisted the urge to fiddle with my tie. I'd spent most of last night watching a bunch of middle-aged men drink themselves stupid and boast about their money and try to one-up each other. The last thing I'd wanted to do this morning was put on a suit to have a “discussion” with my father about it.

He motioned for me to sit in the chair across from his desk. Looked like I passed inspection. Go me.

“What did you learn at the dinner?” He steepled his fingers, looking every bit the part of the corporate villain.

“I emailed you my report this morning.”

He made a *hrmph* sound. “Summarize it for me.”

I launched into a retelling of the evening, making sure to mention all the points I’d written in my report. I told him everything I’d managed to overhear, including the few bits of gossip about him I’d caught.

“Nothing new, unfortunately.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “You’re dismissed, Weston.”

“We need to talk about more than the dinner.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What could we possibly need to discuss?”

“A lot of things. But let’s start with what I learned while going through the files for your student properties.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “And what do you think you’ve found in the files?”

“Evidence of building code violations, neglect, and you knowingly putting your tenants in danger.”

His glare intensified.

“I also found proof you’ve been artificially inflating the market for years.”

“And? It’s common practice with investment properties.”

“Maybe, but how do you think the public will feel once they find out you’re not only putting the lives of children in danger, but that you’ve also been manipulating the market in a town that’s already unaffordable for more than half the people who live there?”

“They’re not children.”

“They’re students. They’re somebody’s child. Parents send their kids to the school trusting they’re going to be living in

safe housing. How do you think the school will feel when parents realize they've been paying out the ass for subpar accommodations?"

"And what makes you think the school doesn't know?" He arched an eyebrow coldly.

"They might, but the parents don't. Do you really think the school wants that getting out?"

"You disappoint me, Weston. I gave you this job because it's easy. Because not even *you* could screw it up. But you had to go and dig into things that are none of your business." He rested his hands on the shiny surface of his giant, ornate desk.

"If I'm in charge of these properties, then it *is* my business. Why didn't you replace the water heater in the house on Nightingale? Why did you let it get to the point where the pipe burst and created tens of thousands of dollars of damage that *I* had to spend last week dealing with?"

"Because it was more cost effective to wait for a problem than fix it pre-emptively," he said simply.

"More cost effective?" I gaped at him.

He shrugged. "There's a reason I have insurance."

"The unit could have exploded. Do you understand that? Five college kids could be dead right now because of *your* negligence."

"But it didn't." Another shrug. "I took a calculated risk, and it paid off."

"A calculated risk?"

"Yes. And don't think I don't see why you suddenly care about my properties."

"It's my job to care about them, especially when I spend a week cleaning up a mess that never should have happened."

"Or is it because of the Hawthorne kid?"

"What?"

“Do you really think you can do anything in that town without me knowing about it?”

“No.”

The revelation that my father had been keeping tabs on me wasn't a shock. I'd hoped he'd trust me enough to do my job, but he'd never trust me.

“So that's how you repay everything I've done for you? You run around town with the kid brother of the boy who ruined your life? Who nearly destroyed everything I've worked for?”

“He didn't ruin anyone's life. *I* did. *I* made a mistake, and you've been holding it over my head ever since.”

“You proved I couldn't trust you, and you've done nothing to earn my trust back.”

“I've done *everything* you've ever wanted of me. I fucked up, but why does one mistake have to define me for the rest of my life?”

“Getting arrested is more than a mistake.”

“It was only a mistake when Lexi and her friends were arrested for shoplifting. You made her 'mistake' go away and instead of punishing her, you upped her allowance.”

“Everyone shoplifts.” He snorted. “She just made the mistake of getting caught.”

“What about when she got a DIU at sixteen? You made that go away. Are you going to argue that everyone drives drunk underage and her only mistake was getting caught?”

“It's not the same, and you know it.”

“I'd say operating a vehicle while intoxicated is worse than getting caught at a party with a few joints in your pocket. We were both sixteen when we made these *mistakes*, but it's only a problem when I step out of line?”

“Your sister isn't going to be taking over my company.” He narrowed his eyes and glared daggers at me.

“So she gets a free pass to do whatever she wants, and I have to spend the rest of my life under your thumb just to prove I’m not that sixteen-year-old kid anymore?”

“It’s about trust,” he snapped. “How can I trust you with my life’s work if I can’t even trust you not to drag my name through the mud with your stupid teenage antics?”

“What makes you think I want your life’s work?”

He blinked, opening and closing his mouth like a fish.

“You don’t trust me. You don’t give a damn about me unless you’re micromanaging every aspect of my life, and you won’t even give me enough freedom to do the job you put me in.”

“What are you saying?” he asked tightly.

“I’m saying I’m done with all of it.” I stood and crossed my arms, needing to move before I lost my shit. “I can’t keep living like this, and I refuse to play this game anymore. It’s been six and a half years, and I’ve done everything you’ve ever asked. I haven’t stepped one toe out of line, but I’m over it.”

“You’re over it?” he bit out. “Sit down.”

“No. We’re having this discussion now.”

“What do you want? What do you possibly think you have to gain from any of this?”

“Give me a chance to prove myself.”

He rolled his lips inward and glared at me.

“Give me full control over the student properties. Let me clean up the mess you let happen because you were more worried about your bottom line than the PR fallout if any of the information I have gets out.”

“And what will that prove?”

“That I can do my damn job without having every move I make scrutinized. That I’m a trustworthy employee when I’m given all the information I need to succeed.”

His jaw ticked, but he stayed quiet.

“We both know the revenue you make from the student properties is a drop in the bucket for the company. Is it worth risking your reputation if the information you’ve been hiding gets out?”

“Are you threatening to leak my private files?” His eyes flashed with anger, and his face twisted into a sneer. That look could bring entire board rooms of subordinates to their knees. I’d become immune to it years ago.

“No. I’m not threatening anything. I’m asking you to consider what would happen if the information did get out.”

“What exactly do you want?”

“Let me do my job. Give me until the end of the school year to fix this mess before it becomes a problem.”

“You think I don’t know you’re doing this because your little boy toy batted his eyelashes at you? You’ve always been a bleeding heart.”

“First of all, do *not* talk about him. Not ever. Who I’m friends with or have a relationship with is none of your damn business.”

“It’s my business when he’s making my only son turn on me.”

“He has nothing to do with this. I’m ‘turning’ on you because of you. Because of what *you’ve* done, how *you’ve* treated me. And I want to fix the properties because it’s the right thing to do. You got lucky it was only a pipe that burst on that water heater. These aren’t just investments. People live in these buildings, and it’s our responsibility to make sure they’re safe.”

He scoffed.

“How much do you think the families would have sued for if the unit had exploded? Five dead students would tug on anyone’s heartstrings. How many millions do you think a judge would have awarded each of them? Not to mention the publicity. What do you think would happen to your reputation

or stocks if the country knew you'd allowed a bunch of kids to die because you didn't want to spend a couple grand replacing a defective water heater? Do you *really* think your investors and shareholders would stick around after that?"

"And if I go along with this asinine plan? What's the endgame for you?"

"Freedom. No more deciding where I live. No more using me to pay off properties or expecting me to do the jobs of multiple people. You'll pay me a fair salary, let me do my job without interference, and stay out of my personal life. That's it. That's all I want."

"Fine." He stood and met my stare with his cold one. "You have until the end of the school year to prove yourself. But there will be no more ultimatums when you fail."

I gritted my teeth at his dig.

"No more demands or pushback. You'll do what you're told until I decide you're trustworthy."

"Fine. But I'm not going to fail."

"You say that, but we both know you will."

"Have a good rest of your weekend, Father." I made sure to keep my voice neutral.

He didn't return the sentiment, didn't even blink. I turned and calmly walked out of his office.

Today was a win, but the hollow, empty feeling in my chest didn't make me feel like I'd won anything.

I'd hoped working for him would show him I wasn't that stupid kid anymore, but now I understood his anger and treatment of me had nothing to do with my mistake and everything to do with him being a controlling asshole.

I'd always gone along with the assumption that I'd work for my father and eventually take over his business, but I was done with the bullshit. If he couldn't respect me as a person or think of me as a valuable employee, then I'd never be good enough to be treated like his son.

My mental health mattered, and so did my happiness. The thought of not working for my father was terrifying, but it was time for me to decide what I wanted my future to look like and start working to make it happen.

The car was waiting for me outside the main doors, and I slid into the luxe back seat with a deep sigh.

“Where to, Mr. Daniels?” the driver asked through the partition.

“The hotel so I can get out of this monkey suit and pack up. Then the airport.”

“Yes, sir.”

He lifted the partition, and I slumped in my seat. Exhaustion rolled over me in waves as we drove through Manhattan.

Zzzzz. Zzzzz. Zzzzz.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and smiled at the photo on my screen. Eli had sent it to me last night before his show. He’d put on one of my dress shirts and was smiling sweetly at the camera.

He’d also sent me a full-body photo with the shirt hanging off him. I didn’t know what it said about me that our size difference turned me on, but seeing him in my clothes satisfied both the horn dog and caveman sides of me.

The other photo was relatively tame. He’d taken it while sitting on his bed. The shirt was open except for the bottom button, and his chest, stomach, and legs were on full display while his hard cock pushed at the fabric of the shirt.

The pose was sexy as hell, but it was his bashful smile that made it all the more special. It was playful and cute with a hint of challenge. That was the real Eli. His viewers saw the persona he’d perfected, but I got all of him.

“Hey,” I answered his call.

“Hi. Is this a bad time?”

“No. I’m just in the car. I’m glad you called.”

“You are?” The hope and happiness in his voice both broke my heart and made me smile. I was looking forward to the day when he didn’t think of himself as a burden or like he had to try and fit himself into my life or schedule. I’d always make time for him, no matter what was going on.

“Yeah. I’m always happy to hear from you, but your timing is extra perfect today.”

“What happened? Did the meeting with your dad go badly?”

I sighed. “It went better than I expected.”

“You don’t sound like that’s a good thing.”

“I gave him an ultimatum.”

“What? Wow.”

“Yeah. Remember those files you cloned for me? I found a lot of incriminating shit in them. Your house isn’t the only one with code violations, and the maintenance logs are concerning. I also found out he’s been artificially inflating the market for years.”

“I’m glad you have proof, but nothing you said is all that surprising. Especially about inflating the market.”

“You knew?”

“It’s not hard to figure out when blocks of student properties go up for sale every few years, but there are never any listings and different shell corporations quietly buy them for ridiculously high prices. It’s been going on for decades.”

“It’s not right.”

“No, it’s not. But back to your ultimatum. How do you feel about it?”

“Terrified and relieved.” I sighed. “I’m done living like this, but the thought of not living like this is scaring the fuck out of me.”

“That makes sense. You’ve spent your entire life living by his rules. You’ve essentially been conditioned and programmed into exactly what he wanted you to be. He’s

made you completely dependent on him. Any sort of freedom would be scary.”

“You make it sound like I’ve been brainwashed.”

“Haven’t you? When was the last time you got to make a decision that was just for you? Have you ever had any control over where you lived or what you were allowed to do on any given day?”

“No. Never.”

“Exactly. And breaking that conditioning isn’t going to be easy. Your entire life you’ve been told you’re not good enough. Not smart or capable enough. That you’re a bad person and you don’t deserve the same respect or freedom other people do. He’s convinced you there’s something wrong with you, but it’s him. *He’s* the megalomaniac. *He’s* the asshole who treats his son like a business asset and not a person.”

“The worst part is I can’t even hate him. I hate what he’s done, and I hate that he’s not a good person, but I can’t hate him.”

“I have a lifetime of dealing with a toxic father, and it’s not easy to cut a parent out of your life. Not even when they do nothing but hurt you.”

Eli never talked about his father. I was curious, but I didn’t want to pry.

“Your dad sounds like he’s even worse than mine,” I said carefully.

“I’d say they’re on par. Mine is just a different kind of asshole.” He sighed. “My dad never wanted to be a dad. He was seventeen, and our mom was sixteen when they got pregnant with Gray. He never forgave her for having him and ‘destroying’ his life. Two years later, she had me, and he made our lives miserable until the day he finally left and didn’t come back.”

“How old were you?”

“Three, and because of the way my brain works, I remember everything. The fighting, the things he said about our mom, about us. The abuse, the affairs, and the drinking. All of it.”

“You said your stepfather has been good to you?”

“He’s wonderful. We really lucked out when he married our mom. He loves us, and he’s always treated us like his own kids. But he’s not our dad. He’s our siblings’ dad. Gray and I were teenagers when he came into our lives, and our siblings got the childhood we didn’t. It’s not their fault, and I’m glad they don’t have to go through what we did. But not having a father in our lives really messed Gray up.”

“Not you?”

“No, because I had him. He stepped up and filled the father role for me when we were kids. But he didn’t have anyone to do the same for him. Glenn tries, and they get along, but he’s not our dad, so Gray still holds on to the hope that one day our father will change and he’ll have the relationship he’s been craving his whole life. But even after all that and seeing what he keeps doing to Gray every time he reappears in his life, only to leave him broken and disappointed again, I still can’t hate him.”

“Your dad sounds a million times worse than mine.”

“Mine’s an absent asshole, but yours is a controlling asshole. Not having a dad sucks, but having one like yours is just as bad. And I have my mom and Glenn and my siblings. My dad might suck donkey balls, but the rest of my family is awesome.”

I huffed out a laugh. How he could be so incredibly insightful but also hilarious was one of the reasons I loved talking with him so much. You never knew what was going to come out of his mouth.

“Do you have that?” he asked softly. “I got the impression you and your sister don’t get along. What about your mom? You never talk about her.”

“Because there’s not much to talk about.” I sighed and glanced out the window. “Lexi and I were raised differently. My mom is... I don’t really know how to describe her. She’s not a bad person, but she’s a product of her environment. She goes along with whatever my father says or wants because that’s how she was raised. She and Lexi are close. They’re basically clones of each other, but she’s always been hands-off with me.”

“Sounds lonely.”

“It is. But even with all that, I still can’t cut the cord. Even after he sat there and told me he expects me to fail at everything and has no remorse for how he’s treated me.”

“You said you gave him an ultimatum. What was it?”

“I asked him to give me control of the student properties and let me fix the mess he’s made of them.”

“And what happens if you do what you set out to do?”

“He stops micromanaging my life and lets me live the way I want.”

“Do you think he’ll hold up his end of the deal if you succeed?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“What do you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“Out of life. You haven’t been allowed to make any of your own decisions for years. What would you do tomorrow if you were able to snap your fingers and completely change your reality?”

“I’m not sure. I never really let myself think too hard about it. I guess have my own place. A job that doesn’t take over my entire life. Friends.”

I didn’t add someone to come home to, but I wanted that more than anything.

“All that sounds achievable.”

“Yeah. It does.”

“How long do you have before your ultimatum deadline?”

“The end of the school year.”

“That gives you a few months to figure out what you want and to start making it happen.”

“It sounds so easy when you say it like that.”

“It’s not. And it won’t be, but you’re so much more than your father has let you believe. You’re smart, capable, kind, resourceful, and driven. You have the power within yourself to decide your own future. You just need someone to remind you that you can do it.”

“Are you that person?” I asked softly.

“I am. I’m proud of you, West. Standing up to him was a huge step. Giving him an ultimatum was an even bigger one. You’ve started a new path, and I’ll be right here to nudge you back onto it when it gets tough.”

My chest squeezed with both love and admiration. This man, this incredible, beautiful man, was everything I’d never allowed myself to want. And I was so grateful fate had brought us back together.

“You’re pretty amazing yourself.”

He made a soft sound like he was brushing off the compliment.

I glanced out the window and sighed again. We were only a few blocks from the hotel now.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just not looking forward to the rest of my day. Are you going to be free in a few hours? I have to get packed up and get my ass to the airport, but maybe we can talk again while I’m waiting to board?”

“Yeah. Definitely,” he said brightly.

“Miss you.”

“Miss you too. And safe travels.”

“Thanks.”

He ended the call, and I was putting my phone back into my pocket when we pulled up in front of the hotel.

Nothing had been solved, and I wasn't even sure if I'd truly won today, but I felt better after talking things out with Eli. Just having someone to share the burden with made everything a little less daunting and overwhelming.

Hopefully, I'd helped him as much as he'd helped me.

ELI

THE BOX SITTING on West's bed was like The Tell-Tale Heart calling to me the entire time we were snuggled up on the couch watching another episode of the show we were currently bingeing.

The past month had been as awesome as it was confusing.

West hadn't pulled away at all. We texted constantly, and we'd started doing parallel work in the evenings. We'd do a video call but focused on our own work. West had suggested it as a way to spend time together when my schedule picked up with tests and labs and assignments, and I loved it more than I'd ever admit. The click of his keyboard and the soft noises he made when he was writing emails or doing paperwork were soothing. It helped me concentrate on my homework and stopped the nearly constant loop of thoughts steamrolling through my head at any given moment.

We'd also spent every weekend together, and we slept in the same bed every night we were together. West was a cuddler, and I loved falling asleep with him wrapped around me. We usually rolled apart during the night, but he was always up for snuggles and morning sex when we woke up.

Last weekend, he'd taken me to Seattle, saying I needed a break because of how stressed I'd been lately, and we'd stayed in the fanciest hotel I'd ever seen. He'd treated me to a spa day, taken me to an art exhibit, and we'd had dinner at the molecular gastronomy restaurant he'd told me about.

I'd kept my roommates updated on our situation, and they were all in agreement that this wasn't friends-with-benefits behavior.

Zzzzz. Zzzzz. Zzzzz.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and checked the notifications.

Matt: did you ask him?

“I have to answer this.”

“Sure.” He didn't take his eyes off the screen or pull his arm from around my shoulders.

Eli: not yet

Matt: you need to talk to him

Eli: I'm scared I'll ruin things if I'm wrong

Matt: but what about if you're right?

Matt: do you want me to ask him? You know me. I have no shame

Eli: probably isn't the most mature thing to have my friend ask the guy I'm sleeping with if we're more than friends who fuck

Matt: I know you're a fully functional adult

Matt: like more functional than I'll ever be

Matt: but it's still weird to hear my little bro swear

Eli: my bad. Ask the guy I'm sleeping with if we're more than buddies who bone

Matt: snort

Matt: I'm so stealing that

Matt: just think about it. Asking someone what they're thinking is hard, especially when so much is riding on things

Matt: *snicker* riding hard

Matt: but back to your crisis

Eli: it's not a crisis. It's a situation

Matt: fine. Your situation

Matt: you'll never know what's in his head unless you ask

Eli: true

Matt: are you sure I can't ask him? Is he there? Pass him the phone

Eli: uh-oh. Connection issues

Matt: I'm serious. I'm way too invested in this to let it rest. Pass him the phone

Eli: the number you're texting is out of service range. Please try again later

Matt: you're a brat

Eli: so I've been told

Matt: that sounded... sexual

Eli: maybe

Matt: ugh

Matt: not something I need to picture

I sent the angel emoji, and he sent back a GIF of some guy yelling "just do it" and looking way too intense.

I tucked my phone away and glanced up at West, whose attention was still on the TV screen.

"Are we dating?" I blurted before I could stop myself.

A slow smile slid across his lips. He turned to face me, soft affection shining in his eyes. "You figured it out, huh?"

My cheeks flushed hot. A dozen emotions swirled through me, the biggest of them being relief and elation.

"How long have we been together?"

He chuckled. "It'll be a month on Tuesday."

"So when we went to dinner that night, it was a date?"

"It was a date."

“You must think I’m so dense.” I dropped my forehead onto his shoulder.

“Nah.” He stroked his fingers through my hair. “I wanted to let you figure it out on your own time with no pressure from me.”

“What about Gray?” I asked softly.

“That’s the other reason I didn’t want to put pressure on you. I care about you a lot. I want to be with you, but I don’t want to cause trouble or come between you and your brother.”

“It’s not fair.” I smushed my face into his arm.

“I know, sweetheart.” He kissed the top of my head. “I wish things were different. I hate how I’m making your life more difficult.”

“You’ve made my life amazing.”

He gently pulled my face out of his arm and tipped my chin up, his eyes serious.

“The situation with my brother is complicated, but outside of that... this has been the best month of my life. I know it sounds dramatic—”

He pressed his thumb against my lips to silence me. “It’s not dramatic, because I feel the same way.”

“I’ll talk to him. But later.” I shifted uncomfortably. “I’ve kind of been ignoring him since the flood. Now’s not the right time to dump this on him.”

“I’m okay with keeping this as secret as it needs to be. I’m proud to be with you, but I get it’s not that simple. I need to earn not only Gray’s trust but also your parents’. I bet they hate me as much as he does.”

“They blame you for a lot of stuff that wasn’t your fault. But they’re only working with part of the truth, so they have all the same assumptions I had. But I never told them about how hard you leaving was for me or how your friends bullied me, so all their anger is over what happened with Gray.”

“I suppose that’s good at least.” He tucked me up against his side again. “But no rush, okay? I know how important your family is to you. I hate that you have to lie to them to be with me.”

“I hate it too. But you’re important to me too. I’ll figure this out.”

He gave me a little squeeze.

“Do you want me to quit?” I asked.

“Quit what?”

“Camming and selling content.”

“Why would I want you to quit?”

“Because we’re together?”

“No, sweetheart. I don’t want you to quit.”

“Are you sure? I’m going to eventually stop anyway. I like what I do but—”

“Your job is separate from us, and I kind of love how your viewers thirst over you but I’m the only one who gets to have all of you.” He booped my nose.

I glared at him, then rolled my eyes as an involuntary smile tilted my lips. He loved doing that because he knew it got a reaction out of me.

“In fact, I’ve been thinking about ways I can be involved in your work without being on cam,” he said.

“You have?”

West and I had made some videos together, mostly POV ones of me going down on him, and discussed if I should sell them. He’d said it was my choice, but I didn’t feel right sharing them or any of the collection of homemade porn we’d amassed over the weeks.

Those moments were private, something just for us to enjoy.

He tuned into my shows now, and I loved knowing he was down the hall and jerking off as he watched me. But the best

part was when he'd come into the room after I signed off, horny and desperate. Some days he wanted to ravish me. Others he needed deep kisses and lots of cuddles. Then there were the nights he lay back and let me have my fun.

"I had an idea for your show tonight."

"And?" I prompted when he fell silent.

"And I want you to go get the package on my bed and bring it downstairs without opening it."

I jumped up and scurried up the stairs.

He'd told me about the package after picking me up at the house, but he'd made a big deal about how I wasn't allowed to open it until he said so. He knew how much being told I couldn't do something set off my bratty side, and I'd spent the past few hours trying to cajole and bribe him into letting me open it early.

"Can I open it now?" I threw myself onto the couch next to him and gave him my best puppy eyes.

"You want to open it?"

"Duh." I shook the box. Something flopped around inside, but I couldn't even begin to guess what it was. The last time he'd given me a mystery package, it had been filled with bath bombs to use in his amazing clawfoot bathtub.

West's gifts ranged from simple and sweet, like the bath bombs, to extravagant and expensive, like our weekend in Seattle. Accepting things from him hadn't been easy at first, but buying me gifts was one of his love languages, and I'd gotten over my issues about our difference in wealth because I knew it made him happy to give me things.

One of mine was acts of service, something I hadn't realized until West. I liked cooking for him and making sure he took his breaks and had a healthy lunch to bring to work. We both had ways of showing the other we cared, and seeing West smile was the best gift ever.

Eagerly I pulled off the thick satin ribbon holding the box closed and tossed it aside. I peeked inside, pushing a few

layers of sparkly tissue paper out of the way.

On the bottom of the box lay a clear plastic case with a silicone dildo.

I pulled the toy out of the box. The construction was a bit crude, but the shape made me pause.

“What do you think?”

“I think this looks exactly like your dick.”

“You think so?” His wide grin told me I wasn’t imagining things.

“I know so.” I licked my lips. Heat pooled deep in my body. “Did you use one of those cloning kits and make this for me?”

“I did. Do you like it?”

“Um, yeah.” I dropped the toy in the box and put it on the couch next to me. “Best. Gift. Ever.” I launched myself onto his lap.

He laughed. “Best gift ever, huh?”

“Yup.” I pecked a kiss against his lips. “Wait. Did you give it to me because you’re going away and I won’t be able to get the real thing?”

“No.” He smoothed my hair off my forehead. “Not going anywhere. I want you to use it on cam.”

My pulse sped up. “Really?”

He nodded, his grin dark and filled with promise and lust. “Start tonight.”

I pouted. “But my show is more than two hours away. What if I want to use it now?”

His pupils dilated.

“But,” I continued before he could say anything. “I guess it would be silly to play with a toy when I have the real thing right in front of me.”

“Fuck, sweetheart,” he murmured as I shimmied off his lap and shoved his legs apart so I could kneel between them.

“Are you in the mood for a little extra?” I pulled a bottle of lube out of my hoodie pocket.

He nodded, his look dark and possessive.

“Hands on the back of the couch.” I rubbed his thick thighs, making sure to scratch my nails over the muscle the way he loved.

He gripped the cushion behind his head and shifted lower on the couch to give me better access.

“Now close your eyes and relax. Don’t think about anything other than how I make you feel.”

He sighed and closed his eyes.

I pressed a kiss to the head of his hard cock through his sweats.

It had taken a few weeks, but now West had no trouble letting go and being fully in the moment. He didn’t try to hide his bossy or dominant sides anymore, and I loved it when he got a bit rough or manhandled me.

And I really loved when he let me do the same to him.

“Ready?” I asked softly.

“Ready.” He spread his legs wider and sank into the couch.

Joy and heat moved through me as I slowly stroked my boyfriend’s cock. West was mine. He not only wanted me, but he’d chosen me.

Things were still precarious because of the situation with Gray, but in this moment, all I could think about was how much West meant to me. How much brighter and better my life was with him in it.

WEST

“ARE you ready for the special surprise I told you about?” Eli grinned at the camera, his eyes bright with genuine happiness.

The chat was filled with messages, but I kept my attention on my boyfriend.

He was sitting on my bed, wearing one of my old dress shirts. The material was worn, and the thing was big on me, so it hung off him like a dress.

I loved how he always made a point to wear something of mine while he was working. We’d never discussed it, but I kept my dresser stocked with options when he came over on the weekends.

He also had quite the collection of my shirts and sweaters in his room, and knowing he was wearing my clothes when I wasn’t around was way more arousing than it should have been.

“Today is going to be a bit different.” Eli tilted his head so a lock of his hair fell over one eye. “Once I hit my strip goal, I’m going to use my new toy.” He chuckled as his eyes flicked over the screen, reading the comments. “No, not the tentacle dick. Girthy is good, but that thing is more than I can handle on a regular Friday night.”

He reached for something off cam. “This is what I’m going to be using.” He brandished the dildo I’d made for him, waving it like a sword so the silicone flopped back and forth comically.

“I got it today and haven’t had a chance to use it yet, but something tells me it’s going to be amazing.” He shot the camera a secret smile that warmed my chest.

Ding.

The soft chime alerted the cammer they’d received a tip. I kept the option on so I didn’t have to watch the chat to know when someone tipped him.

“Thank you, Suzanna.” He put the toy down and got up on his knees. “You want to know about the auction, huh?” He slipped the top button free.

Someone asked this every show without fail. Until now, Eli had been vague and said he and the winner were still working out the details. I’d opened a new account I only used with him so I could watch anonymously and hadn’t touched my old account since the flood. He was the only one I wanted to watch.

Ding.

“Thank you, Gerryberry.” He slipped the second button free and shot the camera a crooked grin. “Yes, I’m back at my friend’s house this weekend.”

Ding.

“Thank you, Jayjay. No issues at my place anymore. I just like spending my weekends here.” He undid another button.

Ding.

“Thank you, Jolene, love your song.” He winked.

Ding.

He chuckled and undid two more buttons. “Trust me when I say you don’t want me to sing it to you. My little brother puts his hand over my mouth when we sing ‘Happy Birthday’ at home. I can’t carry a tune to save my life.”

Ding.

“Thank you, Suzanna. Right, the auction.” He slipped the last button free and stripped off the shirt, revealing a tiny pair of sheer boy shorts that barely contained his dick.

He sat back on his heels. “The winner and I came to an agreement.”

Ding.

“Thank you, Suzanna. The agreement is between us, but I can tell you I’m not a virgin anymore.”

Pride surged through me at his announcement, and even I couldn’t ignore the wall of messages filling his chat as people expressed both curiosity and outrage.

“I’m dating someone.”

Eli had asked what he should share about our relationship with his viewers after the epic blow job that had ended with me bent over the couch while he ate me out like it was his job to make me come as hard and fast as possible.

When my brain had come back online, I’d told him it was up to him. I didn’t want to interfere with his work, and I trusted him not to share anything that could identify me.

“It’s new, and I really like him. So yeah, not a virgin anymore.”

Ding.

“Thanks, Farmerbobby.” He got up on his knees again and stroked his dick through the shorts. “But my partner isn’t in the business, so any personal details about him or our relationship is off-limits.”

Ding.

“Thank you, Oddball. And no, partnered content isn’t something I’m interested in doing.”

Ding.

“Thanks, Oddball. But you’re wrong. My partner didn’t forbid me from doing it. I’ve chosen not to.” He sat back on his heels, a serious look clouding his features.

“I know this is like breaking the fourth wall and ruining the fantasy, but I also think it’s important to share information because it can help people. I’ve decided not to do partnered content because I’ve learned I don’t enjoy anonymous sex. For

years I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn't feel attraction the way I thought I should." He paused, his eyes moving quickly as he scanned the screen. "I'm not sure if demi is the right label for me. I'm not sure if any label fits, to be honest. But I do know there's nothing wrong with me. Everyone is built differently, and everyone likes and wants different things."

He bit the corner of his lip, his telltale gesture that he was holding a comeback in, and I flicked my gaze to the chat.

uniquecorn: a camboy who doesn't like sex? So you're just a big faker stealing money from people???

Anger simmered under the surface of my skin, but Eli grinned cheekily.

"I never said anything about not liking sex." He ran one hand down the center of his chest in a slow, languid move. "In fact, I've discovered I *love* sex with the right person. And you've never tipped anyone, so even if what you said was true, it wouldn't affect your cheap ass." He winked, tapped his mouse pad, and booted the viewer from his room.

"Go, Eli," I cheered in my silent office. "Bold words for a gray user."

"Anyone else have issues with my relationship? Or do you want to see me fuck myself with a dildo?"

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Eli spent the next few minutes sassing his viewers and posing as the tips trickled in and inched him closer to his goal.

"Thank you, Suzanna." He blew the camera a kiss. Her tip had pushed him past his goal. "That means a lot to hear."

"Ready for the good stuff?" He stroked himself through his shorts, teasing his dick into full hardness.

"No cum goal tonight. I don't think I can hold out if I'm using my new toy." He picked it up and lovingly stroked it.

“It’s so perfect. I know I’ll come in no time.”

My dick, which had been rock hard since he’d gone to set up for his show, pulsed and throbbed.

Time for part two of my plan.

I sent him a small tip, just enough so I could add a private message.

cynner: run your tongue over it

He widened his eyes and let out a little gasp. “Thank you, Cynner.”

I didn’t particularly like hearing him use my handle, but I loved seeing his soft pink tongue sliding up and down the length of the toy.

I’d thought of this the other day. Watching Eli on cam never failed to get me hot, but being part of his show and using tips to send him secret messages was next-level sexy.

cynner: suck on the tip the way you do when you’re driving me crazy

“Thanks, Cynner.” He sucked the tip into his mouth and moaned softly.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

“Thanks, Suzanna, Bunny, Hammer, and Hotroddy.”

cynner: finger yourself nice and slow while you suck it

The tips poured in as Eli sucked and licked the toy, his hand behind his back. I knew he’d already stretched and lubed himself up, but I loved seeing him tease himself.

cynner: on your hands and knees and show me your hole

His eyes flashed with amusement and heat as he turned so his ass was facing the camera.

“Fuck.” I pressed the heel of my hand against my erection.

He pulled his cheeks apart and let me see all of him.

cynner: imagine my tongue is on you, licking and teasing that perfect hole while you moan for me

His cheeks flushed pink, and he clenched around nothing.

Fuck, that was sexy.

cynner: on your back, legs spread wide

“Thank you, Cynner.” He flipped onto his back and did as I said.

cynner: stroke yourself for me

His breathing picked up as he gripped his cock and slowly ran his hand up his length.

Cynner: taste yourself

The tip chime was going nuts, which gave him the excuse of not having to thank anyone unless they dropped a huge tip.

He swiped his finger over his slit, pressed it to his mouth, and licked, swirling his tongue around the digit.

cynner: now use your finger to play with your hole. Pretend it's mine and I'm there with you. I'm sucking your perfect dick while I tease you

Moaning, he pulled his finger free of his mouth and reached under his leg so he didn't obscure the view as he toyed with himself.

Ding.

“Thank you, Juniper. Glad you think so because I'm really feeling it tonight.”

cynner: push your finger inside yourself. Nice and slow. I want to see how good it feels

His eyes glazed over, and he dropped his head back with a loud groan as his finger disappeared into his hole.

cynner: now two

cynner: we both know you can take it

A second finger joined the first.

cynner: now rock your hips and fuck yourself on them. Get yourself nice and ready for my cock, sweetheart

“Fuuuuuuck.” He shifted, his hard cock bouncing as it stood straight up.

Eli’s token counter kept climbing as the tips poured in. Most were small, but they added up. It would seem people were enjoying the show.

“I need more,” he whispered, his eyes on the camera.

Fuck, he was beautiful. All spread out with his skin flushed and his eyes glazed. His legs shook slightly, and his stomach was taut as he clenched around his fingers.

cynner: use the dildo. Get it ready

He had to sit up to slick it with lube, then looked at the camera for my next instruction. My already neglected dick screamed with the need for friction.

cynner: keep your eyes on the camera for this part. Let me see how good it feels to have my cock in you while everyone watches

cynner: nice and slow, just like I would if I were there

Eli slowly pushed the toy inside himself, his low pants and soft moans filtering through the room.

Fuck, that was hot.

cynner: tell everyone how my cock feels

“It’s so good.” He let out a shuddering breath. “So big. It’s stretching me so good.”

cynner: now give your fans a good show while you fuck yourself

cynner: do it exactly how you’d want me to fuck you

cynner: let everyone see you come apart on my dick

Eli slipped back into cam mode and played up his reactions, moaning and grunting and rolling his hips as he fucked himself on the toy. The chat and tips went nuts.

The only part of him he couldn't fake were his eyes, and the soft affection mixed with lust and need was exactly what I saw when we made love. That part was just for me, and I fucking loved it.

cynner: you look so hot, sweetheart

cynner: I'm so hard, but I don't want to come yet

cynner: I want to watch you, see you come apart on my cock

"I'm close," he whimpered and reached for his dick.

cynner: no

cynner: hands off

cynner: that's mine

cynner: all of you is mine

cynner: come on my cock, sweetheart

"Holy shit." He shuddered and closed his eyes, his rhythm faltering. "I can't..."

I waited until he'd opened his eyes again. So many tips were coming in I didn't want him to miss a single message.

cynner: you can

cynner: and you will

cynner: come for me, sweetheart

cynner: come so you can feel the real thing

He cried out, his entire body shaking like he'd been electrocuted as he shot over his tight stomach.

Coming hands-free when it was just the two of us wasn't anything new, but he'd told me he couldn't do it on cam because he had to think about too many things and couldn't let go enough to get in the right headspace.

Knowing he'd been able to during a show because I'd told him to almost pushed me over the edge, but I kept my hands off my dick and focused on my boyfriend.

The tips kept rolling in as Eli fucked himself through his orgasm, being as theatrical and over the top as usual.

A smirk tugged at the corner of my mouth. I was the only one who knew it was fake and he was playing a part for them.

“Holy shit.” He winced and shifted so he could pull the toy out without it being on cam. “Holy. Shit.” A laugh bubbled up from his chest. He tossed the toy aside and sat cross-legged on the bed.

The chat was filled with people commenting on how awesome the show had been, and the tips kept coming. He smiled and answered questions, but I could see the impatience in his eyes.

“Sorry, Danger, no pillow talk time tonight. I have a busy night ahead of me.”

I snort-laughed at how dejected and tired he sounded. We didn’t have anything planned, but he made it seem like he had a mountain of chores to get to.

“No show tomorrow night either. I have a date.” He blushed, a real one that stained his neck pink. “But I’ll be back online on Sunday. Thanks to everyone who tipped. Be sure to subscribe to get the notifications and check my Twitter for updates.” He blew the camera a kiss. “Have a wonderful rest of your evening.”

I exited out of the site and slammed my laptop closed.

When I strode into the room, Eli was on his hands and knees, already positioned at the edge of the mattress.

“Fuck me.” He spread his legs wider. “Need you.”

“Jesus fuck.” I shoved my sweatpants and briefs down and tore off my hoodie and shirt.

He licked his lips and stroked his half-hard cock.

I positioned myself behind him, gripped one hip, and rubbed my cockhead over his hole.

“Hard,” he demanded.

“Nope.” I pushed just the tip inside.

He tried to move back, but I held him in place.

“West.” He dropped his chest to the bed and fisted the comforter. “Need you.”

“You have me.” I pushed in until his body had swallowed my cockhead, then pulled right back out. “When I say so.”

He got back up on his hands and looked over his shoulder, his eyes bright with challenge and fire.

“Are you saying you don’t want to fuck me?” He blinked innocently. “You don’t want to fuck me with your big, hard cock? You don’t want to come inside me and fill me up?”

“Brat.”

He knew how much his dirty talk affected me, and unlike him, I hadn’t come yet, so my control was precarious.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” he said serenely. “I can always get myself off while thinking about how much I want you to fuck me.”

“God, sweetheart.” I tightened my grip on his hip, and my dick throbbed.

Fuck. At this point, I’d be lucky to get all the way inside him before I blew.

“I pictured it. You on top of me as I fucked myself with your cock. I wanted it so bad. I wanted everyone to see how good you make me feel. How hard you make me come. But I love that they have no idea.”

“Jesus.” I gulped in a breath and slowly pushed my cockhead into him.

“I love how no one knew I was performing for you. How they thought that was for them. But you know what? It wasn’t. Not a single second of it was for them. It was all for you.”

With a loud cry, I slammed inside him.

“Fuck!” Eli’s body rocked on the bed as I buried myself in his tight hole.

Needing more contact, I pulled out of him and gently slapped his ass. “On your back so I can see you.”

He rolled over, his arms and legs spread wide and a knowing grin on his face.

“Brat.” I lay over him and shoved inside. Velvet heat encased my cock, and I gave in to the lust and need swirling inside me and fucked him hard and fast. I wasn’t going to last long.

He arched into me. “Yes!”

“Do you want to come?” I asked between brutal thrusts. He didn’t always want another orgasm after a show.

“No. Want you to fill me.” He raked his nails over my back, leaving trails of fire in their wake that pushed me over the edge.

I came hard, shuddering and shaking over him. He wrapped his lithe body around mine, clinging tight. The pleasure rushed out of me like a broken damn.

When we were finally breathing normally, my soft dick fell out of him.

“We have a date tomorrow?” I asked dazedly as he pressed soft kisses into my neck.

“Do you like baseball?”

“I do. Do you?”

“In theory.” He pulled his face out of my neck. “The game seems interesting, but I’ve stayed away from any kind of sporting event since... that night. But Matt and Jax invited me to come watch their game. Then they want to go to some trivia night thing at The Blue Door. Do you want to go?”

I rolled us over so he was lying on my chest and stomach the way he liked.

“Yeah. Sounds fun.” I pressed a kiss against his lips.

He melted against me and he took over the kiss.

“I’m really happy you’re my boyfriend,” he said softly, brushing his mouth over mine.

“I’m really happy you’re my boyfriend too.” I smoothed his hair back from his face and tucked the wayward strands behind his ears.

I wanted to say so much more, but he wasn’t ready to hear it yet.

“So, what’s this busy night we have ahead of us?” I asked when he finally pulled away from our kiss with a smile and laid his head on my chest.

“Lots and lots of snuggles and gearing up for a busy weekend of peopling.”

“I’m down. What other peopling do we have to do?”

“I promised Kai I’d bring you to meet him if you ever became my boyfriend.”

“Is he going to tell me not to hurt you and promise to kick my ass if I do?”

“Yes.”

I chuckled and rubbed his back.

“And Alex will be there too. He’ll probably say the same thing. So will Matt and Jax, and Beck and Finn when they meet you as my boyfriend and not the property manager.”

The way he kept repeating it and the little inflection he put on *boyfriend* gave away how much he loved saying it. Perfect, because I loved hearing it.

“I like that you have so many people looking out for you. I promise I’ll never hurt you, but I’m happy you have them.”

“If only I could have my brother too.”

The sadness in his voice broke my heart. I hated that this thing with Gray still hung between us.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

He shrugged and nuzzled into my chest.

“So, what are we doing with Kai and Alex?”

“Lunch on Sunday, if that’s okay.”

“Sounds good.”

“There’s something I should tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“Kai and Gray work together. And we all grew up together, so he knows everything about what happened back then.”

“Oh.”

“I told him it wasn’t your fault and we didn’t know the whole story. But he was around for all of it, so he might be in overprotective mode.”

“I’d be surprised if he wasn’t. Does he know about the auction?”

I knew he’d told his roommates. Who else knew?

“Yeah.”

A pit of dread formed in my stomach. “He probably has lots of thoughts on that.”

“Nothing as dark as you’re thinking. Kai’s about as sex-positive as they come. He’s one of the only people outside my family who knew I camed before I told my roommates.”

“Your family knows?” I couldn’t hold back my surprise.

“Gray and my parents do.”

Something niggled at the back of my mind. “Sweetheart.”

“Hmmm?”

“You told me the guy you kissed was a coworker of your brother’s. Was it Kai?”

“What?” He popped his head up and stared down at me in shock. “No. Ew. Kai’s like a brother to me. I’ve never thought of him that way. But one thing you should know because it might come up is that Kai and Gray work at a club in the city.”

“Oh. Okay.” I rubbed his back while he traced his fingers over my cheek, toying with my stubble.

“It’s a strip club.”

“Oh... and they’re...”

“Strippers, yes.”

My brain stuttered at the blunt way he said it.

I cleared my throat. “That’s an interesting career choice.”

He grinned. “Figured I’d tell you beforehand so you didn’t do a spit take or choke on your food if it came up.”

“I appreciate it.” I huffed out a laugh at his impish grin. “Anything else I need to know about your friends before I meet them?”

“Nope.” He rolled off me and sat up. “Let me grab a quick shower and get dressed. You give off a lot of body heat, but my butt is freezing.”

“Hurry back.” I slipped one hand under my head and stroked my dick with the other.

“Behave.” He shot me a stern look. “Otherwise, we’re going to find out how you like getting fucked by my new toy.”

My jaw dropped, and he laughed.

“What? You’re telling me you’re not curious? How many people get to literally fuck themselves?”

“Keep talking like that, and I’m ordering another kit so we can make one of you.”

His eyes sparkled. “What? You don’t think it would be hot to fuck yourself with a toy of me? Or maybe we could do it together next time I use it on cam.” He licked his bottom lip, and his cock chubbed up the slightest bit. “That would be so hot. Knowing you’re using a toy shaped like me while I’m using one of you.”

“Get my phone out of my pants. I have an order to place.”

Laughing, he scurried over to where I’d dropped my sweats and dug through the pocket.

Life with Eli was never boring, and I’d never laughed more than when I was with him.

WEST

I LEANED back in my chair and spun in a slow circle as my accountant droned on about the last batch of receipts and expenses I'd submitted to her. I had to present my report to my father in five days, on the last day of finals, and her perfectionism was both a blessing and a curse.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Sorry, Shirley. I have someone at my door."

"Okay," she said brightly. "I'll call you later if I have any more questions."

"Sounds good." I resisted the urge to sigh. "Have a great day."

"You too."

Tucking my phone in my pocket, I left my small office and cut through the main room, which would have been a reception area if I had any staff or got visitors.

The fact that anyone was at my door was strange. I preferred to meet people on-site, and the office was in the same building as a self-storage lot outside the town's limits. It wasn't exactly convenient, and I liked that no one ever bothered me here.

"How can I..."

Six and a half years might have passed, but there was no mistaking the man on my doorstep.

His blond hair was longer than the last time I'd seen him. It brushed the top of his ears in a messy style that accentuated his straight nose, full lips, and sharp jawline. His eyes, however, were exactly the same: dark and intense and flashing with both anger and disgust.

Gray Hawthorne. My former rival and my boyfriend's older brother.

Back in school, we'd been nearly the same size. Now he was at least two inches taller than me, and not only bulkier but also fucking ripped under his tight T-shirt and even tighter jeans.

"Can I come in, or do you want to do this out here?" he asked, his voice silky smooth with a slight rasp that had made all the girls at school gush. It was deeper now, and the anger dripping off every word was obvious.

Wordlessly I stepped back.

He came into the office and closed the door behind him.

"Go ahead." I braced myself.

"Go ahead?" He tilted his head, his dark eyes filled with challenge and disdain.

"Take your shot. We both know I deserve it."

"Take my shot for what? For you ruining my life six years ago? Or for fucking my little brother?"

My jaw dropped, and my blood went ice cold in my veins. "You know?"

"I know." He drew himself up to his full height.

"Did Eli talk to you?"

"No. And that's the problem." He glowered at me. "He's been radio silent for months because of you. He went from texting me constantly and wanting to hang out whenever I had a break from work to ignoring me and barely answering my texts."

"I'm sorr—"

“Don’t,” he snapped. “Don’t just throw around a meaningless apology and expect it to make this go away.”

I bit my lip and forced myself to let him talk.

“Why? Why him?” His voice was measured and even, but his eyes blazed with fury. “Why *my* little brother?”

“I...”

“What? No answers? You’ve had two months to prepare for this conversation. Unless you’ve only been fucking with him and never intended for it to get out.”

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s not it.”

“Then what is it? Are you sticking it to your old man and slumming it with a poor kid from the east side? Is he one more notch on the old bedpost? Another virgin trophy for your collection?”

“No!”

“Then why him? Of all the people in the world, why *him*?”

“Because I love him.”

I snapped my mouth closed. Shock reverberated through me. I hadn’t meant to say that. Fuck, I hadn’t even told Eli how I felt, and I’d blurted it out to the one person who hated me more than anything.

“You love him?” He let out a humorless laugh. “You expect me to believe you’re capable of loving anyone but yourself?”

“I don’t expect you to believe anything I say.”

“At least you’re not as dumb as you were when we were kids.”

“Eli and I are together. We’re dating. We just... happened. I never expected to fall for him, but now that I have...”

He snorted and crossed his big arms over his broad chest. “You’re going to ruin his life like you ruined mine?”

“No. I would never do anything to hurt him.”

“And you think isolating him from his family isn’t hurting him? I’m not the only one he’s been ghosting. He’s been avoiding our parents, our siblings, and lying to everyone he cares about because of you.”

I clenched my jaw so I didn’t interrupt. He was right, and this conversation had been a long time coming.

“You claim you love him, but you won’t give him a real relationship. You’re perfectly happy to fuck him in private while he puts his life on hold for you.”

“I’ve never asked him to put anything on hold.”

“No? You didn’t ask him not to go to Stanford next year?”

My jaw dropped as shock rolled over me.

“What?” I whispered.

Eli had been accepted to every graduate school he’d applied to and had settled on Stanford because it was on the West Coast and had a phenomenal science program. They’d also offered him a full-ride scholarship, a TA position, and a monthly stipend to cover his living expenses.

What he didn’t know was I’d been looking into ways to move with him in the fall.

The last few months of cleaning up my father’s mess had shown me I didn’t want to work for him. Even if he stopped micromanaging my life, I didn’t want anything to do with him or his shady practices.

“Like you didn’t know.” He took a step closer, but I held my ground. If he was going to hit me, backing up wouldn’t do anything to soften the blow. “I had to hear it from my mother, who called me sobbing because he’d told her he wasn’t sure if going to Stanford was what he wanted and maybe he’d defer for a year and go to UW or even stay at Rutherford.”

“I... I had no idea.”

“The fuck you didn’t. You already ruined my chance of getting out of this shithole, and now you’re taking my baby brother down too? The fuck? Do you hate me and my family that much? What did we ever do to you?”

“I never asked him to stay. I swear. I want him to go to the best school he can, to have all the opportunities he deserves. I’d never stand in the way of his dreams.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You expect me to believe that after you derailed mine?”

“That was different. It was a mistake—”

“Funny how it was *your* mistake, but *I’m* the one who paid for it,” he sneered.

“I know you hate me.”

He snorted again.

“And I know you’ll never forgive me—”

“We’re not talking about that. This is about my brother.”

I stayed quiet as he took another half step closer to me.

“You’re a selfish asshole. It doesn’t matter what happens to anyone else as long as you get what you want.”

“I know how it must look, but I swear to you, I never asked him to stay. *I* don’t even want to stay here.”

“Then why would he give up his dreams right when they’re about to come true?”

“I don’t know. Things between me and Eli are real. I love him. I want a future with him. I know it’s hard to believe, but I didn’t get with him for any reason other than that. I know our history complicates things.”

The sound he let out was halfway between a growl and a snort.

“But he’s it for me. You can beat the fuck out of me. We both know I deserve it, but I’m not going to walk away from him unless he wants me to.”

“Do you have any idea how crushed he was when you left? How your asshole friends treated him after they kicked me out of school? They made his life miserable just for existing. Because he’s smarter than all of them put together and they got their rocks off by abusing a child.”

“I had no idea. Not until he told me.”

“Of course you didn’t. God forbid you give a shit about anyone but yourself.”

“Are you going to make him break up with me?”

The glare he leveled at me could have turned Medusa to stone.

“Unlike you, I don’t *make* my brother do anything. He’s an adult and the smartest person I’ll ever know. If he chooses to be with you, then that’s his decision. I don’t agree with it, and it’s taking everything in me not to knock you on your ass for even daring to touch him, but I respect him too much to try and tell him what he can and can’t do with his life.”

“So you’re not going to tell him you know?”

“I am. And if you care even one iota about him, you’ll keep your damn trap shut until I do.”

“When?”

“Today. We’re supposed to go out to dinner as a family to celebrate his graduation when he finishes his last exam on Monday, but the last time our mom heard from him he was trying to weasel out of it.”

“He was?”

I’d known about the dinner, but he’d never mentioned not wanting to go.

“My brother has a kind soul, and he hates lying. The fact that he’s been doing it for months has to be eating him up inside. And if you’re telling the truth and he’s doing this because he’s afraid of the consequences and not because of you, then it needs to end now. The constant stress he’s under, the way his mind works, isn’t good for him. Even you should have been able to pick up that living a double life would destroy him. Not to mention how all this could be affecting his health and his blood sugar. Did you even think about that?”

I nodded, my throat tight with guilt and shame.

Eli had been struggling a bit with his sugar levels, especially the past few weeks. He'd assured me it was from the stress of his exams, but I knew our secret was contributing to it.

Fuck. Was Gray right? Should I have pushed him to talk to his brother? I'd thought letting him handle the situation his way was best, but maybe he'd needed more from me.

"I'm going to talk to him," Gray continued. "And he and I are going to figure out a way to fix things the way we always do. This is between us. You might be his *boyfriend*"—he almost spit the word out—"but this is a family issue, and it doesn't concern you."

I wanted to argue, but Gray was right. Eli needed his brother, and it wouldn't be fair to anyone if I tried to insert myself into their relationship. His happiness meant everything to me, and if he'd be better off without me, then I'd find a way to deal.

"Okay."

"I wasn't asking for your permission." He smirked, and the family resemblance between the brothers was so stark it hit me like a brick to the face.

"How did you find out?" I asked.

"The night the power came back after the storm." His tone was sad and soft. "I went over to see if my parents needed help and saw you coming out of the building with him. I thought maybe it was a one-off, but it's amazing how oblivious you both are."

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen you a few times since then. The grocery store, the library. At Cravings."

He'd seen us at the café? "Why were you at Cravings?"

His nostrils flared, and he drew in a quick breath. Shit. That had been the wrong thing to say.

"I worked on the crew Marilyn and Tabby hired before they opened. I go there when I'm in town to say hi and grab a

coffee. Sorry if that's not all right with you. I know how you rich fucks don't like it when the poors invade your turf."

"I didn't mean it like—"

"Whatever. The point is I've known for months. I figured if it was real, if you two were serious, then he'd eventually tell me the truth. But the only thing he's done is shut me out. This is the kid who tells me everything. Who's never lied to me or hidden anything because he's not capable of deception. And now he's talking about putting his future in jeopardy on top of ghosting us? What the fuck was I supposed to think about you two?"

"Anyone who claims to love someone wouldn't want them to lie to their family or be the reason they're stressed the fuck out. So that leaves the conclusion you're using him and he's just a shiny new toy for you to play with. That you don't give a shit about his feelings or future as long as you get to put your dick in him."

"Is that what this is all about? You're pissed he likes dick?"

"Fuck. *You*." He clenched his fists so tight his arms shook. "I know he's bi. He told me as soon as he figured it out. You having a dick isn't the problem. You *being* a dick is."

"So what happens now?" I asked, the fight leaving me in a rush.

"I talk to my brother and let him know I love him and nothing, not even dating you, could change that. Then I help him figure out what's going on and why he's thinking about not going to California."

I nodded. As much as I wanted to help Eli through this, he needed his brother. He needed them to be okay, and I'd do whatever I could to make it happen.

"You know that us fighting is going to keep destroying him," I said softly.

"I know." Gray sighed and looked at the ceiling for a moment.

“So what do we do?”

“Right now, nothing.” He scrubbed one hand over his face. “We can work on this”—he motioned between us—“once I know he’s okay.”

“You think we can fix this?”

“My brother is a strong person, way stronger than he thinks he is, but he’s got so much going on in his head he’s never truly been happy. Not since he was little. He used to light up every room he walked into. His endless questions, the way he’d fixate on every little thing that caught his interest like it was a game. He loved learning, and every day was an adventure for him.

“Then people discovered what he’s capable of, and they beat that out of him with their expectations and demands. Then they showed him how cruel people can be toward anyone who’s different. For years, he’s been convinced there’s something wrong with him. But it’s not him. It’s *them*. They destroyed the spark of life that made him who he was. I’ve tried to help him find it again. Our mother and stepdad did everything they could, but we couldn’t protect him from the assholes and the harsh realities of life when you’re different.

“But when I saw him with you, the spark was back. He looked happy. And not just happy but radiant. Like the kid I used to know. I saw it back in high school with how he looked at you. I thought you were using him to get your grades up. I was convinced the nice guy who sat with him at lunch when I couldn’t or told his asshole friends to leave him the fuck alone was an act. He told me over and over how you were friends and you were a good person. How the asshat who made my life miserable in the pool and in the halls was the act.”

Shame and regret rolled through me as the memories of how badly I’d treated Gray filtered through my mind. How I’d taunted him about everything from his grades to his swim times to his out-of-date clothes. I’d gone along with the stupid rivalry and let my friends talk shit about him because he was big and strong and I’d figured he could take it.

I hadn't hated him. I'd never hated him, but I'd done everything in my power to make him hate me.

"But then I saw you with him, and he wasn't the only happy one. The way you two looked at each other... *that's* why I've been waiting for someone to tell me what the fuck is going on. My brother is happy for the first time in *years*, but he wasn't telling me anything, and was actively avoiding me. And the longer you kept it a secret, the more I thought it was an act and you were using him."

"I'm not."

"I know." He sighed. "But I can't deal with the shit between us right now. Not until I know he's okay."

I nodded, too shocked to speak.

"All I want is for him to be happy." He sighed again. "That's all I've ever wanted for him."

"I want him to be happy too." My voice cracked embarrassingly, but Gray didn't make fun of me.

"If my brother sees something in you that's worth loving, then that tells me you're not the asshole I thought you were. But this is a lot, and it's going to take time to get over almost ten years of hate and anger.

"The best I can offer is a truce. We both want him to be happy and to have the life he deserves. I'm willing to work with you, to work on forgiving you, but you need to understand it can't be an instant thing. I've had two months to process that not only are you the reason my brother stopped talking to me, but you've also been hooking up with him. And I've only known you actually care about him for like, two minutes."

"It is a lot. And I know it doesn't mean shit, but I truly am sorry."

"I'm sure you are." He scuffed the toe of his shoe against the floor.

"Truce?" I put out my hand.

Grudgingly he took it and gave it a hard shake. "Truce."

He dropped my hand, and we stared at each other.

Gray's eyes were dark brown, unlike Eli's bright green ones, and they were shaped differently, but the vulnerability and hurt in them were achingly familiar.

It was the same look I'd seen in Eli's eyes for weeks until he'd finally realized I wasn't going anywhere and I cared.

Wordlessly Gray turned on his heel and strode out of my office. He still had the same walk: quick and purposeful, like he was trying to look confident and self-assured, but his stooped shoulders and dropped chin gave away he wasn't.

The door closed behind him, and I hobbled over to the wall as dizziness washed over me.

For months, I'd dreaded this conversation and assumed it would end with me having a broken nose or worse. But it hadn't, and all the things Gray had told me, like Eli not wanting to go away to school and how he hadn't been happy since he was a kid, hit hard. My knees gave out, and I sank down the wall and rested my head against the cold plaster, breathing deeply and trying not to pass the fuck out.

Maybe things would be okay. Maybe Eli and I could have the future I'd always dreamed of. But that couldn't happen until things were right with his family. Gray might have accepted us, but his parents were a different story.

I'd never be the guy who made him choose, and it would destroy me if my mistake was the wedge that permanently drove us apart.

ELI

“HOW THE FUCK are you so good at this game?” Jax demanded.

“What, like it’s hard?” I keyed a combo into the controller and wasted both his and Matt’s characters in rapid succession.

“Fuck!” Matt slapped his thigh and flopped back against the couch. “You’re a ringer. Like at trivia night when you said you’d never played pool, then cleared the table on your first turn.”

“Pool is simply geometry and physics.” I shrugged. Their characters respawned. “Angles, velocity, friction.”

“Don’t mind Matt. He’s just salty you won twenty bucks off him,” Jax said, his eyes on the TV as we kept playing.

“I’m salty at both of you,” Matt grumbled. “Why didn’t you stop me from making that bet?”

“Because you’re the moron who challenged a math and physics nerd to pool in the first place.” Jax snickered. “Even I could see that one coming.”

“I still don’t believe it was your first game.” Matt’s tone was light and teasing. “Like when you said you’d never touched a controller until Beck showed you, and ten minutes later you basically did a speed run of the entire game.”

“And every game since,” Beck piped up from where he was sprawled on the loveseat, his nose in his phone. “Remember when Finn challenged him to chess?”

Matt and Jax burst out laughing.

“I had no idea Finn could turn that shade of red,” Matt guffawed. “I thought we were going to have a nerd battle royale after you smoked him in nine moves.”

“Eight,” Beck corrected with a chuckle. “He still bitches about that. And how you did it in less than four minutes.”

“Chess isn’t just strategy. It’s also a mind game.” I didn’t take my eyes off the screen, even though my chest was warm with pride at their praise. “Finn’s one of the better players I’ve gone up against, but he let me get in his head and second-guessed himself. The more time he took, the more time I had to come up with all the possible moves I could do next.”

Ding dong.

“I’ll get it.” Beck rolled off the couch and disappeared into the hallway, then reappeared a moment later.

“Visitor, Eli.”

I glanced up and dropped the controller.

Gray stood behind Beck.

“Do you know that guy?” Matt asked as the silence stretched. “Is this going to be a problem?” His tone went cold.

“It’s fine.” I shook my head and picked up the controller. “You can turn off big brother mode.”

“Are you sure?” Jax asked.

“Considering I’m his actual big brother, I’d say you can dial it down there, killer.” Gray gave my couchmates a flat look.

“*You’re* his brother?” Matt exclaimed. “I mean, I see it now, but you’re huge compared to—ow.”

I glanced at Matt, who was rubbing his side and looking sheepish, while Jax was shooting me an apologetic look.

“We get that a lot.” Gray kept his attention on me. “Can we talk?”

Gray and I had inherited our mother's blond hair, but his was light like hers, while mine was dark. He'd taken after our father with his large build and impressive height, while I was the male version of our shorter, slender mother.

People usually mistook me for being younger than I was, but Gray had dealt with the opposite, and he'd spent his childhood being scolded or punished for acting his age because everyone assumed he was years older than he was.

"Eli?"

His soft voice startled me back to the present. I motioned for him to follow me.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Why was he here?

Did something happen?

Was he mad at me for ignoring him?

"Relax." He put a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "I'm not mad, okay? We're just going to talk about some stuff."

"Okay." I steeled myself and shoved all the intrusive thoughts out of my head. If he said he wasn't mad, then he wasn't.

"I'm sorry!" I blurted out as soon as he'd closed the door to my room. "I'm so sorry. Please don't hate me—"

He yanked me into a tight hug. "Don't be sorry. You haven't done anything wrong."

I pressed my face into his chest and breathed in the familiar scents of his body wash and deodorant.

"It's okay." He rubbed my back the way he always did when things were too much. When he talked me down and helped me process when I was on the verge of freaking out. "You're okay. Just breathe and relax."

He held me until I let go, the same as he always did.

Fuck. I didn't deserve him.

I'd lied to him for months. I'd avoided him and ignored his efforts to reach out. All because I'd fallen for his rival.

"I know about you and West." He shoved his hands into his pockets, his face carefully neutral.

Gray was one of those people who could go from zero to one thousand in the span of seconds. People assumed he had anger issues or was volatile, but he and I were two sides of the same coin.

I didn't feel things deeply until they boiled over and forced me to process them all at once, which usually triggered a meltdown. Gray felt and internalized everything until he also reached his tipping point, and the only way he knew how to deal was to lash out or react with anger.

But right now, he wasn't angry. He was hurt, which was a million times worse.

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't." He sighed. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"But... I lied to you."

"You did." He swallowed. "But you didn't exactly have a choice."

"I never wanted to hurt you," I whispered. "I tried to hate him—"

"I need you to listen now, okay?" He met my eyes, and the heartbreak in them made my chest ache.

"Okay."

"You're my favorite person in the whole world, and it kills me that you couldn't talk to me about what's been going on because I was blind with anger and hatred over something that happened years ago."

I blinked back tears. He wasn't the bad guy here, but he'd found a way to blame himself, the same as he always did.

"You had good reasons."

“Maybe.” He shifted uncomfortably. “But my rivalry isn’t yours. What happened that night, and everything after, had nothing to do with you. I shouldn’t have put you in the middle of things, but I was so angry and hurt and...”

“You don’t hate me?” I asked, my voice so small it was barely audible.

“Never.” He gripped my arms, anticipating my flight instincts were kicking in. “I could never hate you, not for anything. But especially not for falling in love.”

Tears spilled down my cheeks. The damn inside me broke, and all the stress and pressure from the past few months came tumbling out.

He hugged me tight as I sobbed and ugly cried into his shirt.

I wasn’t only crying about the situation with West but also about how my entire life was about to change. All the things I’d worked for, wanted for so long, were happening, but instead of being excited, I was terrified.

And I’d had no one to talk to about any of it.

“It’s okay,” he soothed. “Just let it out. I’m right here, and we’re going to figure it out. You’re not alone. You’ll never be alone.”

I had no idea how long we stood there, but the longer he held me, the more settled I felt.

Gray was here. I hadn’t lost my brother.

“I love you, kiddo. You’ll always be my little buddy.” He kissed the top of my head. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy.”

“I am happy.” I hiccuped. “And it scares me so much.”

“I know.” He sighed and rubbed my back in slow circles. “I know it feels temporary, like it’ll all be pulled away at any moment, but it won’t. You’ve worked so hard for this, all of it, and I’m so fucking proud of you. Not just for school but for everything. For putting yourself out there and making friends after all the shit you went through. For taking a chance on

someone and falling in love. For always putting one foot in front of the other and moving forward when the world was so determined to shove you back. You're becoming the person you're meant to be, and I'm so damn honored I get to see it."

The pride and emotion in his voice sent me into another round of sobs. I'd hurt him, and here he was, comforting me and making *me* feel better when I was the asshole.

"How do you know I love him?" I pulled away and wiped my eyes.

"I saw you together." He smiled sadly. "I saw the way you looked at him."

"When did you see us?"

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that you're happy. He makes you happy."

"He does." I blinked back a fresh round of tears. "But what if he doesn't love me?"

Guilt slammed into me, and I snapped my mouth shut. I shouldn't be laying this on Gray, but he was my person. He was the one I went to when I needed help. West had also fallen into that role, but he couldn't replace my brother, and I didn't want him to.

I needed both of them, just in different ways.

"What if he does?" he countered softly.

"He told me he's never loved anyone. I know he likes me, and we're together, but he said his past relationships have been about convenience. He liked them, but he never saw a future with them. Why would I be different?"

"People change." He sighed heavily. "As much as I don't want to admit it, they do. The guy I saw you with isn't the same little shit I knew six years ago. Maybe he didn't want anything serious with them because they weren't right for him."

"But how do I know if I'm the right person for him? How do I know if what I feel is real?"

“Does he make you happy?”

“Yes.”

“Are you able to be yourself with him?”

I nodded.

“When you think about your future, do you want him there with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s real.” He smiled, that same sad smile from before. “I know it’s scary. Caring about someone makes you vulnerable, and I imagine loving them is that feeling on crack. But you need to trust yourself and what you’re feeling. And you need to trust him.”

“I do trust him.”

“Then you need to talk to him. Telling someone how you feel is terrifying, but you’re the smartest, strongest, and most capable person I’ve ever known. You know your own mind, and if you’ve found someone who not only makes you happy but you can also trust and be yourself with, then it’s worth the risk.”

“Is it?” I wrapped my arms around my middle. All the fears about the future I’d been holding in came crashing down on me. “What if I let myself love him and I lose him?”

“Is this why you told Mom you weren’t sure you wanted to go to California?”

“It’s not the only reason.”

“Come here.” He tugged me toward the bed and gently pushed me down. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on in your head.” He sat next to me and angled his body toward mine.

“I’ve never been alone,” I whispered. “I didn’t even have my own room until last year. How am I supposed to move across the country and live by myself?”

“It’s normal to be scared of change, and this is a huge thing.”

“But I’m an adult.”

“Adults are allowed to be scared.”

“You weren’t. You left when you were seventeen. You’ve been on your own for years.”

“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t hard.” He sighed. “I left for the wrong reasons. I was angry and thought everyone would be better off without me.”

“What?”

“I was a fuckup. I went from being something to losing everything. And I was a stupid teenager. I thought Mom was replacing us with the family she’d always wanted. I didn’t feel like I had a place there.”

“But—”

“I know that’s not true now, but the point is I was scared too. Leaving home is always scary. It doesn’t matter if you’re seventeen or twenty or forty.”

“What if I can’t do it? What if I can’t ever find this again? For the first time in my life, I feel like I belong. I have friends, a boyfriend... but now I have to leave and start over, and I’m so scared it’ll be like it was before and I’ll be alone again.”

“You’re not the same person you were at the beginning of the year. You’ve learned to put yourself out there, to risk getting hurt, but you’ve also learned how to stand up for yourself. I can’t promise you’ll be able to recreate what you have here, but I can promise you’ll never be alone. Your family will always be there for you. I don’t care if you’re down the hall, in the next town, or across the world. If you need me, I’ll be there. Same with Mom and Glenn and the kids. We love you. We will always love you.

“And I think you need to give your friends more credit. Just because you’re not around every day doesn’t mean they’ll forget about you or stop being there for you.”

“I suppose.”

He blew out a breath. “I went to see West before I came here.”

“You did?” I gaped at him.

“Yeah. And he’s fine. I didn’t break your boyfriend.”

I snickered. Gray could be an asshole, but he wasn’t a violent person. “I know. But I’m guessing he didn’t.”

He snorted. “He told me to take a free shot.”

“Bet it was a little tempting.”

“Maybe for a second.” He smirked. “But after talking to him, I trust he cares about you. I’m still wrapping my head around all this, and I’m not ready to hear details about how he came back into your life or what happened that night. Not yet. But if you see something in him worth loving, if you believe he’s a good person, then you need to talk to him. See what he wants, how he feels.” He grinned crookedly. “You remember what I’ve told you about worrying?”

“That worrying is a down payment on a debt I may never owe.” I sighed. “It’s hard to shut that part of my brain down.”

“I know. But that’s why you have us. When that part of your brain gets loud and makes you doubt yourself and the people in your life, talk to us. Let us help you.”

“I don’t want to be a burden.” A burst of annoyance shot through me. “I’m always the one taking, and I hate it.”

“You think you don’t help me?” He knocked his knee against mine. “Look at me.”

I did.

“You help me every day. When I was spiraling after that shit at the party, when my entire world was imploding, you were the only reason I got through it with my sanity. The same when Dad left and every time he’s come back and fucked up our lives. You’ve always been there for me, even when I didn’t tell you I was struggling. Just having you in my life has helped me.”

“I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t tell you because I’m the big brother. It’s not your job to protect or help me, but you do.”

“But I haven’t been there for you. You were dealing with so much, and I cut you off.”

“You needed to take care of yourself. I understand, and I don’t blame you for it.”

“I still should have done more.”

“You did the best you could. And I could have made more of an effort too. The phone works both ways. Sending a few texts isn’t exactly trying hard.”

“I guess we both suck at talking.”

He chuckled. “We do. But you have a chance to break the cycle. You need to talk to him. Soon.”

“I know.” I sighed.

“And don’t worry about the past or my feelings or Mom and Glenn. The only thing you need to focus on is the future, *your* future.”

“But how can I ask everyone to forgive him? There’s a lot more to the story—”

“I know. But I’m not ready to hear it, not yet. I... I have a lot going on right now. A lot of shit I need to deal with. I’m not in the right place to forgive him, but we have a truce. And I’ll talk to Mom. I’m not saying we’re going to be besties or that things will be easy for either of us, but your happiness is worth it.”

“I love you.” I launched myself into his arms.

“Love you too, kiddo.” He squeezed me tight and kissed my hair.

“Do you have to leave?” I asked when I’d finally untangled myself from him.

“Yeah. I have to work tonight, and I have a feeling my talk with Mom will last a while. You’re not the only one who’s been ignoring the family lately.”

I grimaced. “I’m not looking forward to talking to her when it’s my turn.”

“Can you make me a promise?”

“Anything.”

“Don’t hide from me again. I meant it when I said there’s nothing you could ever do that would change how I feel about you. You’re not just my brother. You’re my best friend.”

“I promise. And you’re my best friend too.” I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I’ll always be here for you too.”

“I know.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Walk me down so your giant roommates don’t think I broke you?”

I laughed and stood. “They’re teddy bears.”

“Maybe to you, but I’d rather not risk it.”

As we headed down the stairs, Gray teased me about random things like he always did.

I hadn’t lost my brother, and now I knew I never would. I still couldn’t believe he and West were on speaking terms or he was so willing to accept him and even forgive him, but that just proved how lucky I was.

My brother loved me.

Hopefully, my boyfriend did too.

WEST

THE LAST SIX hours had been the most productive ones I'd had in a long time. I'd cleaned out my email inbox, scrubbed my fridge, washed all my sheets and towels, and put in a half dozen online orders for things I didn't need.

I'd done all this to avoid thinking about Gray and Eli and the clusterfuck that was my life. Had it worked? No. Not even a little.

The same thoughts kept echoing in my mind as nervous energy simmered under the surface of my skin.

Had Gray talked to Eli? Had they worked things out? Was Eli angry at me? Had hiding things been the wrong call?

Were we still together?

Knowing he'd been thinking about not going to school next year also weighed heavily on me. I'd noticed how he'd always change the subject when I asked about his plans. I should have pushed to find out why, but I hadn't.

Fuck. I needed to see him. To hug him and make sure he was okay.

But I'd made a promise, and if Gray was willing to fix things between us, then the least I could do was honor my word and wait for Eli to come to me.

The low, Gothic-sounding tones of the designer doorbell the previous owners had installed chimed through the house, and my head snapped up like a Pavlovian response.

I didn't get many visitors. Mostly kids fundraising or the occasional Realtor asking if I was interested in selling.

But it was Friday night, not the typical time for fundraising or soliciting.

Hope flared in my chest, and I ran to the door. Before I could completely push the screen door open, Eli was in my arms.

"Sweetheart?" I hugged him tight, fear lancing through me as he clung to me. Shit, he was shaking. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

He shook his head and clung to me.

Breathing out, I willed my mind and heart rate to calm down. He was here, and he obviously needed me. He'd tell me what was going on when he was ready.

We stood there for a long time, and when he finally pulled away, I looked down into his face. He looked haunted.

"Come inside," I said softly, leading him into the house and closing the door behind us. "Do you want to lie down? Maybe light a fire?"

He shook his head but let me bring him into the living room.

"Sweetheart, you're scaring me. Please talk to me." I gently pushed him onto our chair and sat next to him. "Just tell me if you're okay."

"I'm okay." He bit his lip, his eyes flashing with so many emotions I couldn't pinpoint them all. "I talked to Gray. And he said he talked to you." He swallowed and blinked rapidly like he was trying to stop himself from crying. "I hurt him so badly."

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"But he doesn't hate me." He let out a humorless laugh. "He blamed himself for how I acted."

I kept quiet and let him talk, knowing this was him processing everything and he wasn't looking for a discussion.

“He said it was his fault and he should never have put me in the middle of what happened back then. And he’s been going through some stuff, but I wasn’t there for him because I was too busy hiding.” He pushed his hair back from his face. “For months, I’ve been freaking out about this. I’ve been lying to the people I love most in the world, and I didn’t have to. I could have just talked to him. This, us, hurt him, but me lying hurt him more.

“Then my mom called, and she was crushed that I’d lied to her too. That I’ve been avoiding everyone. She said she loves me and all she’s ever wanted was for me to be happy. And Gray talked to her and told her I’m happy, and he said the shit that happened between you two is in the past and he doesn’t blame you for your mistake. He doesn’t even know what happened, any of it, but he still told her that.”

I slipped my hand into his and squeezed it, hoping to give him some comfort and ground him.

“I put my family through hell for the last two months because I was too afraid to face the consequences. I hurt everyone because I was a coward.”

He shifted his gaze to mine, his eyes liquid and unfocused. “I almost gave up my future because I’m afraid, and instead of leaning on the people who’ve always been there for me, I shut them out and almost screwed everything up.

“And do you know what the worst part of it is? I didn’t even tell you how much you mean to me. I’ve been so scared of everything that I stuck my head in the sand and pretended like I was the only person in the world. It was all about me. My fears, my feelings, how *I* was dealing with things.

“Even after everything, they still love me. They still want the best for me. They forgave me without a second thought, even though I’m the asshole here. I’m the bad guy.”

“You’re not the bad guy.”

He finally looked me in the eyes. “I feel like I am.”

“You’re not. There are no bad guys here.” I wanted to say that if anyone was the villain, it was me for putting him in this

situation, but this conversation wasn't about me. "Your family loves you, and they support you. You were in a difficult position, and you made the best decision you could based on the information you had. It might not have been the right one in the long run, but you didn't set out to hurt anyone."

"But I still did." He squeezed my hand. "After Mom and I finished talking, Henry wanted to get on the phone. He told me all about school and his friends and all the stuff I'd missed by avoiding him. He said he missed me, and he was proud of me for graduating, and he was telling all his friends about how his big brother was moving to California and was going to be a doctor."

My heart broke at the anguish in his eyes.

"And I almost gave all of it up because I'm scared."

"What are you scared of?"

"Of being alone. Of losing what I have here. I'm finally happy, and now I have to give it all up in a few months and start over."

"It's not because of me, is it? Because you thought I didn't want you to go?" My stomach soured at the thought.

"No. But I lied to you too." His lip trembled.

"What did you lie about?"

"I didn't tell you the truth about how I feel because I was scared."

"Not telling the truth isn't the same as lying," I said softly, not daring to hope he felt the same way I did about him.

"It is. A lie of omission is still a lie. But I can't do it anymore. I can't keep letting fear control my life. Gray told me to lean on the people who care about me when my brain is telling me I'm not good enough or smart enough or strong enough." He drew in a shuddering breath, and a single tear slid down his smooth cheek. "That I'm unlovable."

"Sweetheart—"

“I need to say this before I can’t.” He swiped the tear away. “For the longest time, I didn’t think I could feel what other people could. I thought there was something wrong with me and I was wired wrong or lacking the part of my brain that could feel the good emotions. I love my family, and I know they love me, but no one else has ever made me feel worthy. Like a person. Like I’m someone who matters. My father called me a mistake and said he wished I’d never been born. My teachers said I was a burden and a nuisance. Kids at school called me a freak. And I believed it all.”

I squeezed his hand with both of mine and bit my tongue so I didn’t blurt out that he was perfect and I loved him exactly the way he was.

“But then you came along, and for the first time in my life, someone saw me. I didn’t have to play a part with you. I was myself, and you still liked me. And my roommates too. I stopped hiding from them and stopped trying to be someone I’m not, and they still like me. They’re my friends.”

He sucked in a deep breath and looked me right in the eyes. “I think I love you.”

My heart exploded into a thousand tiny pieces, and happiness flowed through me like a living thing.

“And I know it’s too soon and you’re not looking for forever, but I need to tell you how I feel because you’re the only person in the whole world who—”

I cut him off with a gentle kiss.

“I love you too,” I said softly, making sure he was looking at me so he could see how much I meant it. “You’re everything, sweetheart. The only one I want, the only one I’ll ever want.”

Another tear slipped down his cheek and his lips trembled. “Really?”

“Really.” I wiped the tear away with the pad of my thumb, then kissed the wet trail it had left behind. “I never thought I’d find someone who saw me either. You’re not the only one

who's been playing a part for years, who thought they were unlovable or there was something wrong with them."

He widened his eyes, his mouth forming a little *o*.

"My family doesn't love me. My father sees me as some sort of asset to control, my mother has made it clear she only loves one of her kids, and my sister and I are basically strangers who share DNA."

He squeezed my hand, his eyes soft and encouraging.

"No one has ever seen me as West. I've always been Warren Daniels's son. So I played the part. I acted the role of the rich asshole because it was easier than being myself." I sighed as the truth came tumbling out. "I've been someone else for so long I forgot who I was. And I've been alone for so long I thought this was how it would always be. That no one could ever love me because no one ever has."

"I do," he whispered.

"I know. And I'm fucking thankful I found you."

He scrambled onto my lap and threw his arms around me, clinging to me so tight the air was forced from my lungs with an audible *whoosh*. I held him just as tight, drinking in everything about him from his warm body to his sweet scent.

"I want to come to California with you," I said into his neck.

"You do?" He squeezed me tighter.

"Yes. I'm not going to work for my father. I want to make my own life, find my own path. And I want to do it with you."

"I want that too." He kissed my cheek. "I love you, West."

"I love you, Eli."

He shuddered and held me even tighter.

"And I want to make things right with your family. I need to earn their trust. To show them I'm serious about you and good enough for you."

He pulled back so he could look into my eyes. “You are good enough for me.”

“Not yet I’m not. Your family means everything to you, and I won’t be the wedge between you. I refuse to hurt you again.”

“You didn’t hurt me—”

“I did. Us being together hurt you, and it hurt them. I need to spend the next few months proving to them I’m not that kid anymore.”

“My mom invited you to come to dinner with us on Monday.” He ran his fingers through the hairs at the back of my neck. “It’s not going to be anything fancy, but—”

“I’d love to come.”

His smile was so bright it lit up his entire face, and my heart swelled with both love and pride. He was gorgeous, inside and out, but he was stunning when he smiled.

“Do you need to get ready for work?”

He shook his head. “Nope. I’m taking the weekend off.”

“Yeah?” I rubbed his back.

“Yup. I need a full weekend of relaxing, snuggling, and making love with my boyfriend.”

“Well, that works out perfectly because I need that too. But what about your exam on Monday? Don’t you need to study?”

He laughed, his shoulders shaking as the melodic sound echoed in the room. “I brought my books and computer, but I was so nervous when Matt dropped me off I left them on the stoop.”

He scrambled off my lap and grinned, his hands on his hips and his head cocked to the side, as he gave me a coy grin.

“How about I go grab my bag, and you get your fine ass upstairs and start a fire?”

I stood as well, catching him around the waist before he could dart off. “Sounds perfect.”

His eyes softened, and he leaned up and brushed a soft kiss against my lips. “You know your family are morons, right? You’re not only totally lovable, but you’re also kind and sweet and the best person I know.”

My chest squeezed.

“And my family will love you once they get to know the real you.” His eyes darkened slightly. “Be patient with Gray. You both only knew the worst sides of each other back then.”

“I will. He’s important to you, so he’s important to me. I know it won’t be easy, and it’ll take time, but I’m willing to put the work in until I can earn not only his forgiveness but also his trust.”

Eli pressed another kiss to my lips, then slapped my ass hard enough to sting.

“Brat.”

He shot me a sweet smile. “Get this sexy butt upstairs so I can do dirty things to it before you fuck me into the mattress.”

I let out a little growl and reached for him.

He danced out of my grasp and ran toward the door, then disappeared into the hall, his laughter floating behind him.

I stood there, basking in the knowledge that Eli loved me. Of all the people in the world, he’d chosen me.

Life wasn’t going to be easy, but it would be worth it to spend it with him. Eli wasn’t just my boyfriend. He was my partner, my best friend, and the man I loved more than anything in the world.

How the fuck did I ever get this lucky?

EPILOGUE

Eight years later

Eli

I GLANCED around the empty living room. The house looked the same, even after all these years.

“It’s kind of strange to be back here.”

West wrapped his arm around my waist and tugged me close. “And probably even weirder knowing you own it.”

“I don’t own it. You do.” I turned and draped my arms over his shoulders.

“We do.” He pressed a soft kiss against my lips. “That’s what happens when you’re married.”

Flutters of happiness exploded in my stomach, and I grinned at my husband.

West pulled my left hand off his shoulder and kissed the thin gold band on my ring finger.

Four years ago, West had surprised me with a night at a fancy hotel under the guise of helping me relax before presenting my dissertation. When we’d arrived, the room had been filled with candles, and rose petals had spelled out “will you marry me” on the king-sized bed. It had been the most perfect and romantic night of my life.

We'd gotten married a few months later in a small ceremony surrounded by our family and friends, and every day I fell a little bit more in love.

We'd weathered our share of bumps in the eight years we'd been together, but each one had only brought us closer.

Unfortunately, things with West's family hadn't gotten any better. His father had disowned him less than a year after we'd moved to California. West had put on a brave face, but I knew how much it had hurt him.

Luckily, my parents had welcomed him into the family with open arms, and my little siblings loved their uncle West.

Things with Gray hadn't been as smooth. A part of me still felt guilty for what I'd put Gray through and how much he'd sacrificed for my happiness, but he'd found his own in an unexpected place as well. It would seem we Hawthornes didn't do anything the easy way.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked.

"Not yet."

I shot him a curious look, but before I could say anything, the front door opened with a loud *thud*.

"Get a room!" a loud, familiar voice boomed from the hall.

"Technically, we are in a room," West said.

I spun in his arms, barely containing my squeal of happiness when Matt and Jax walked into the living room.

"Hey, little bro." Matt held out his arms.

I detangled myself from West, raced across the room, and launched myself at him.

He caught me with a laugh. He gave me a huge bear hug and spun me around, lifting me right off the floor. He passed me to Jax, who hugged me tight, then put me down.

"What are you doing here?" I looked between the two men.

Almost a year had passed since I'd seen them. Jax had retired from playing professional baseball last year, and they'd settled in Canada, close to Jax's family.

"We came to celebrate your graduation. Duh." Matt ruffled my hair, a huge grin on his handsome face.

"Really?" I glanced at West, who grinned at us. "Did you set this up?"

"Maybe."

"When did you guys get in?" I turned back to my friends.

"About the same time as we did," another familiar voice said from the open front door.

Alex and Kai stepped into the house, their smiles as wide as mine.

"Get your ass over here," Kai said.

I hurried over and threw my arms around them. They lived in Seattle, and we tried to get together a couple of times a year, but it had been months since we'd last seen them.

"It's so good to see you guys." I stepped back from our group hug. "Are Beck and Finn coming too?" I peeked around them just as the men in question came bounding up the steps and into the house.

Alex and Kai greeted Matt, Jax, and West with hugs and handshakes as Beck scooped me up and hugged me tight.

When he let me go, Finn stepped forward with a shy smile and hugged me, albeit less dramatically than the others.

Beck and Finn lived in Massachusetts, but they visited Beck's family in Seattle often, and we got together with them and Alex and Kai whenever we were all in town together. The last time had been almost six months ago, and I'd missed everyone.

"This is..." I looked around the room as the others greeted Beck and Finn. "Wow."

"What, you thought we'd miss your big celebration?" Kai slung his arm over Alex's shoulder. "You're lucky West called

us. You can't come to town and not hang out with us."

Alex grinned and leaned against Kai. "Jesus. When was the last time we were all together like this?"

"When this guy retired." Matt slapped his husband's stomach.

"Oof." Jax elbowed Matt in the side. "Watch it."

"You're getting soft now that you're an old man."

"You're two months older than me, jackass." Jax shot him an unimpressed look.

"Maybe, but which one of us is retired?"

"You two are like giant toddlers." Beck smiled fondly.

"Keeps life interesting." Jax grinned.

West came to stand next to me and kissed my temple. "Happy graduation, sweetheart. I figured it was the perfect time to get everyone together again."

"Thanks. But it's not like this is a big deal or anything."

"Dude, you just got your second PhD." Matt gave me an incredulous look. "Of course that's a reason to celebrate. Do we call you Dr. Hawthorne or Dr. Doctor?"

"Just one doctor." I snickered, even as my face flushed.

"There's a fuck ton of doctors in this room." Jax looked around. "Finn, Kai, Eli with the double credentials. Then there's us."

Matt chuckled. "We really are the dumb jocks of the group."

"You really are." Alex grinned. "But we love you guys anyway."

"Don't be so uppity, Mr. Alexander. Your hubby's the one with the title, not you." Matt lightly punched Alex in the shoulder.

"Is it just me, or is it weird to be back here?" Beck looked around the living room.

“It’s not just you,” Alex and Matt said.

“To think this is where it all began. How we all lived here when we figured out who we are and who we were meant to be with.”

Finn wrapped his arm around Beck’s waist. “Feels like a lifetime ago but also like it was yesterday.”

“Want to do a tour, for old time’s sake?” West asked the group.

“Before we do that, we have an announcement.” Finn blushed bright pink.

“Holy fucking shit.” Matt clapped excitedly. “You guys are getting—”

Jax covered Matt’s mouth with his hand. “How about we let them announce it?”

Beck smiled affectionately at Matt, who looked properly abashed, even with Jax’s hand still over his mouth. “Good to see you haven’t changed.”

Matt winked.

“But yeah.” Beck looked at Finn, who was staring back at him adorably. “I asked Finn to marry me, and he said yes.”

The room erupted in cheers, and everyone rushed forward to congratulate and hug them.

“Thank you,” I said to West as the others peppered Beck and Finn with questions about their engagement and upcoming wedding.

“Of course.” He kissed my hair.

We might all live in different places and lead different lives, but we were family, and it meant the world that everyone had come to celebrate my graduation.

When the group calmed, we wandered through the house that had been our home eight years ago. We laughed and joked and reminisced, mostly about all the places we’d caught each other fucking and the times when Beck and Finn, and Matt and

Jax hadn't realized that the rest of us had front-row seats to their sexcapades because they'd forgotten that sound travels.

The room I'd lived in had been converted back into an attic, and was used for storage now. It was one of the first things West had done when he'd bought out his father and taken over ownership of student housing two years ago.

The acquisition had been a bittersweet moment. West had followed in his father's footsteps and had gotten into real estate. Only he focused on building and maintaining affordable housing. He had properties all over California and a few here in Washington state.

One of the reasons we'd come back, outside of celebrating completing my program, was so West could check in on his properties.

His father's shady practices had finally caught up with him, and after news of his more illegal activities had hit the media, he'd been forced to liquidate most of his assets. The school had bought the land they currently used, and a good number of his downtown properties were now owned by locals. West had bought out his share of student housing, the house he'd lived in when we'd first met, a block of apartment buildings on the east side, and their family home on the hill. Things had changed drastically, and West's father no longer had a stranglehold on the town.

West had spent the past few years fixing up the properties, and he'd demolished the house on the hill. In its place was brand-new housing for teen mothers and youths who found themselves displaced while they got back on their feet.

My family lived in the Queen Anne house, and my parents managed the student housing properties.

We'd both felt strongly about trying to right the wrongs of his father, and I loved how we were able to work with our family and give them the life they should have had all along.

While West had been busy setting up his businesses, I'd gotten my master's, then my first PhD. I'd spent a year working at a pharmaceutical company but had taken a research

position at Stanford after getting burned out. I hadn't become a medical researcher to push pills on people, and on a whim, I'd decided to get another PhD in physics.

Now that I'd finished my program, I'd accepted another research position at Stanford, this time as the head of my own team.

"Does The Blue Door still do trivia nights?" Matt asked as we left the house. "We should totally enter one of their tournaments and clean up on prize money. For old time's sake."

"The Blue Door doesn't exist anymore." West locked the door. "It's changed hands a few times since they closed. I think it's a sports bar now."

"Too bad," Matt said. "Could have been fun."

"We could always play pool again." I made sure to keep my expression innocent. "I haven't touched a pool stick since the last time we played."

"Yeah." Matt chuckled. "Like I'm going to believe that again."

Kai snickered. "Still a little shit stirrer." He ruffled my hair. I batted his hand away playfully. "I seem to recall you hustling that group of bikers when we went out last time you visited."

"Not my fault they underestimated me."

West slipped his hand into my back pocket. "And they were the ones who demanded they go double or nothing."

"That was a good night," Alex said. "Nothing like watching a bunch of bikers in leather chaps crying into their beers because they got their asses kicked by a science nerd."

I smiled serenely.

"So we were promised dinner." Matt looked between me and West. "You can't invite athletes for dinner and not deliver the goods."

"Dinner?" I asked West.

He grinned. “I rented out Cravings for the night. Figured we’d have some dinner and catch up. And I have it on good authority that Tabby has been busy trying out new diabetic-friendly cake recipes, so you’d better save room for dessert.”

“Cake?” Matt and Alex perked up.

“You had me at dinner.” Beck grinned.

“Same.” Jax pulled a set of keys out of his pocket. “Everyone got a ride?”

We all nodded.

Matt took off toward the street. “Last one there gets the check!”

“Think again, fucker!” Jax raced after him.

“They really are giant toddlers,” Alex said.

“Still got that golden retriever energy,” Beck said. “I think Matt’s rubbed off on Jax. He’s a little more enthusiastic than usual.”

Alex and I snickered.

“I’m sure Matt’s rubbed off on Jax plenty over the years,” Kai drawled and dug a set of keys out of Alex’s pocket.

“Just say you wanna touch my dick, Dr. Alexander.” Alex waggled his eyebrows at his husband. “No need to pretend to go for the keys.”

“You guys do the doctor role-play thing too?” Beck asked.

“Oh my god.” Finn covered his face with his hands.

“Hell, yeah.” Alex grinned, and Kai twirled the keys around his finger.

“Us too. Only West is usually the one playing the doctor role.”

“You can take the boys out of college, but you can’t take the college out of the boys.” Finn dropped his hands. “You realize we’re thirty or close to it?”

“Some of us are way older than that. I mean, Kai here is almost forty.”

“You’re going to pay for that one later,” Kai said to Alex, his voice dripping with heat. “I’m thirty-three.”

“Don’t worry, Kai,” I said sweetly. “Age is only a number. And forty is the new thirty.”

“You’re lucky I’ve known you since you were born.” He slipped his hand into Alex’s. “Come on, children. Let’s go have some dinner and try to behave like adults.”

“Yeah, right.” Alex snickered.

“Have you met us?” Beck grinned.

“We’ll see you there?” Kai turned to West, who nodded.

“Where’d you guys park?” Beck asked Alex.

“Down the block.” He pointed to the left.

“Us too.” Beck took Finn’s hand in his. “See you there?” He glanced at us.

We nodded, and the four of them took off down the street.

“Thanks for this.” I wrapped my arms around West’s waist.

“Of course.” He held me close. “And this is only part one of my surprise.”

“Part one?”

“Yup. I rented a cabin for a few days, and we’re all going to head up there tomorrow and have an unplugged weekend of catching up and relaxing. I made sure there’s a telescope for Beck and Finn to geek out over and a poker set so we can watch Matt and Jax battle it out while Alex and Kai try to outbluff each other. I also packed our noise-canceling headphones for after because I remember what happened last time we riled everyone up, then went to bed on the same floor.”

I laughed as the memories of my friends loudly and enthusiastically enjoying their nights came back to me. “And what about us? Is there something special for us too?”

“I may or may not have packed our remote-controlled plug.”

“Really?” I licked my lips. “And which one of us is going to be wearing it?”

“I thought you should get that honor the first night. Then I’ll take my turn the next.”

“A fine plan if I’ve ever heard one.” I leaned up and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “I love you.”

“Love you too.” He smiled at me. “And I’m so proud of you.”

I flushed hot.

“Come on, we should get going.” He brushed another kiss against my lips. “We don’t want to leave Matt and Jax unsupervised for too long. Especially around food.”

“Good call.”

West took my hand and led me down the street toward where we’d parked.

If someone had asked me eight years ago where I thought I’d be today, I would have said I’d be a lonely workaholic trying to fit into a world I didn’t feel a part of.

Now, I was a happily married man with a family, friends, and a whole community of people. I embraced the parts of me that were different, and I’d figured out that the world was what you made of it.

Things weren’t perfect, and there would be plenty more bumps in the road, but knowing that I’d be facing them with West made every day an adventure.

Not only did I have the love of my life, my biggest cheerleader, and my best friend by my side, but we’d built the life we wanted and were making a difference in the world, one step at a time.

Eight years ago, I’d fallen in love with my brother’s rival, and I couldn’t be happier.



INTERESTED IN READING A BONUS CHAPTER WHERE ELI AND West have some fun in the shower? Click [here](#) to be taken to Prolific Works and download your copy today.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

What can I say about myself? It's kind of like being the new kid in school and being asked to tell everyone a bit about yourself. Anyone else forget everything they've ever liked, thought of, and even their name in those moments?

A few facts about me; I'm Canadian, and I love books! I've been writing my own stories since I was eight and wrote my first novel at sixteen. I'm the first to admit those attempts weren't my best work, but they started me on a journey of creating stories that has led me to fulfilling my dream of becoming an author, and I'm so happy to be able to share my stories with people today.

I currently live on Canada's east coast with my kiddo and my cats. I have a shoe collecting addiction, and I enjoy taking long walks, discussions with friends, and reading anything and everything I can get my hands on.



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